The IDSF on security challenges in the Middle East

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We are having an interview now with three different pillars, so we will start with some questions about your person, then would follow up with some institutional related questions and then current issues. So understanding that the military service is mandatory in Israel, how did you end up in your respective positions, within the military, and what was your intrinsic motivation to get into those positions?

Yaron Buskila

So first of all, I started 24 years in the IDF, and I finished as a lieutenant colonel, and I'm still living [in the] reserves. So when you ask, how did I end up? I mean, how did it influence my opinions? Right?

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Specifically your motivations.

Yaron Buskila

First of all. You know that generally, serving in [the army] in Israel is mandatory. You know, we don't need the law in Israel [to force us to do this] – we have the willingness to serve in the IDF, because we are all aware of the threats against Israel. Everybody [is] growing up in Israel to understand that there is a threat around Israel, [that], the existence is not obvious. You have to serve in the IDF to ensure your security, of you, personally, your family and this nation. So for me, and I think for us, the people in Israel, they see serving in the IDF, first of all, as something that you are required or obligated to do... and a moral thing to do, to keep life and safety and prosperity ... you can't be successful economically or in education without the basic needs of security. And that's what motivates most of the Israelis to go into serving the army without serving by mandatory [enforcement].

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And then specifically, we don't know the name of your unit, but specifically the decision to serve in the West Bank and your unit. Why did you choose this, as opposed to going into intelligence or the Paratrooper unit?

Yaron Buskila

First of all, I chose to be a warrior, to go to [an] infantry unit because I felt that I had the ability to do that physically and mentally. And during my 24 years, I found myself in, usually in the combat units. I started as a combat soldier, and I finished as Secondary Lieutenant Colonel Battalion Commander and a Deputy of Brigade Commander. And I was involved in many intelligence units. So the question is not why I chose to be a combat soldier but really what motivated me to stay in the army as a career. For me, it never felt like a career. In Israel, the army is not for the money and ... every time I felt that I have the opportunity to bring more impact – to the security of Israel. So if it's good for Israel, it's good for me to do that and I will take it.

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And for you Eran – why did you choose your respective path within the military?

Eran Lahav

Well, as Yaron said, it's actually mandatory and I didn't know what I wanted to do in the military service before joining the IDF. I was majoring in Arabic in school ... I had a very, very good teacher. He was a former Shin Bet [officer]. He was an old old man, but he was a very, very impressive guy, and he really taught us, not only the language, but also to understand that there is a story behind every word. You have it also in Hebrew as well and in German. And when you learn a language like this, it opens your mind, also for other things. At this time, I was already doing tests for the intelligence service for over a year.

It was also with his recommendation I should do so ... and I joined the Intelligence force. I was an analyst for three years. I always remembered his words. He taught me the mindset of looking behind what is being said. So we were monitoring and checking and analyzing lots of very classified

information. But it's not only just to understand what is the threat and how to stop it, but also to understand where it comes from. And I'm so grateful to this day, to this teacher.

For me, it was also the ground [motivation] to continue in this field... I was working for a research institute, also as an analyst, about social media and I was monitoring radical jihadi forms. Back then, it was less on tiktok and Instagram but more on online forums, and it was just like two, three years after September 11. You understand how effective open source intelligence is. And this led me to other things I did afterwards. I was analyzing social media in Arabic and also how it's affecting their society but also Western society.

And I kept on doing this, I opened my own initiative about monitoring terrorism but also from open sources. It's called MabaTerror. I was also working on public diplomacy to do Hasbara [Public Diplomacy] for Israel. I did it as a student. I was volunteering. I went with a delegation. It was very important to me that not just saying, okay, we are for Israel, and we believe in this cause. But why should you also believe in this cause? Because you need to understand what is going on on the other side. And this is like...it starts from when I was 16. I joined IDSF because I liked their values and what they were doing. So I took all my experience with monitoring [tracking] terrorism, and became a senior researcher. I am now leading the Middle East department, and we are doing lots of research papers, but I always remember my teacher in high school who told me to check the story behind every word that you read.

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But how do you deal with the feelings of failure within the military? Because your feelings of failure are existential. It's not just about yourself, it's about the people you protect.

Yaron Buskila

It's a good question. You can deal with part of that. I mean... you really feel, even if it's small responsibility, or even if it's big.. To be responsible for a person's life. This is the biggest responsibility a person can have. But part of that is to know how to deal with that in the right way, to understand that there are things you can do and things you can't do and to understand that sometimes the situation is much more complicated than what you hoped and you can't control everything in life.

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So this is a slightly different topic, but we wanted to also ask you about the tech sector in Israel. Israel is often referred to as the startup nation, and also for the military, it plays a crucial role. From your perspective, which technological developments within the NBIC technologies like neuroscience, technologies, biotechnology, information technology and cognitive science, do you consider the most relevant in the next generation warfare?

Yaron Buskila

I'm [an] expert about military, not about general high tech, but I can tell you, first, that Israel became a high tech society after the Jewish people came to Israel in the early 90s. Jewish people from Ukraine and Russia, who were strong in engineering, contributed to the biggest changes in Israel, when it comes to high tech. Secondly, sometimes the military's security needs are developed from solutions from private needs or example, in Gaza. You need technology that can find underground tunnel but originally its goal was to find oil or if you need satellites for communication. Or if you need satellite information to help in Africa – you use it next time in Africa for communications, where it's also needed. So because military needs are... you need very fast and very accurate technology to support human life. So usually all the best minds try to find a solution, and then you use it for another needs, for the private needs and companies and high tech and so on.

And by the way, I saw that personally, because I was there in Gaza, the medical technology which is saving lives. Some of the people that I met after they get injured, they said, unfortunately, the medical high tech was so that it saved my life. Why do they say that? Because the technology is so effective that stay alive, but without [their] legs or hands. They have very bad life right now but they're still alive. They're suffering. So the medical technology, (i.e. the high tech) is very good... I met so many doctors that came from all over the world to take it back to their hospitals. And that's again... why we need bring a good solution.

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Just a follow up question, in military terms, as you both are also well connected with respective personnel within the military, which technological innovations, apart from the medical sector, do you think are very crucial for a successful military. Let's talk about nanotechnology, for example.

Yaron Buskila

[Even if civilians and terrorists might be distinguishable from each other, both have been killed in joint bombing operations, highlighting the entanglement of close living proximities between civilians and Hamas operatives in the densely populated area of Gaza.]

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Can I just ask also for this, because we read your paper on Iran and Sudan, the influence within this of how to influence the global discourse on colonization, occupation and energy security as well. Do you see patterns in the way that Iranian forces seek to polarize society to other great powers, or to other powers who also, let's say, exist within a great power competition with the West? Because China has been accused of something similar.

Eran Lahav

China, Russia as well and they are cooperating with this. I can tell you the first one I found with Iranian activity. It was also used by the Russians for example. I am not an expert on China. So for example, the Iranians were making a fake news website. Like a whole new website that resembles

a news website in the US. And the Russians did it as well, also within the US. Normally it will be like one year before elections. And what was funny that the Iranians did 2024. They were making a new website, and they were kind of like spreading different kind of articles about Trump and also about Kamala Harris before the elections. So you have also other countries doing this, and also that in Germany as well, and other European countries, Iran is very vividly, unfortunately, also in the UK. So this is kind of this activity, is not only Iranian. By the way, if we compare it to Hamas again, Hamas was trying to do this also with Israel. Hamas created a website that looked exactly like the Jerusalem Post. It was six months ago or a little bit more, and they were writing there as if the government didn't care about the hostages, and they [Israeli government] allowed troops to get into Gaza and to bomb [Gaza] without caring about it. They wrote it. People thought it was the Jerusalem Post, but then they found out that it was a different kind of website.

[Even though this is discussed within misinformation and cyber-warfare tactics between Israel, Hamas, and Iranian-proxies, it is important to note that criticism of Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza, as indiscriminate towards Palestinian civilians and perilous to Israeli-hostage life, has been made by Israeli and international media.]

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We know that under the reconstruction of Gaza, the idea is, you have part of this technocratic government that Yaron alluded to or mentioned. Much of the funders are Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, and the states of which you say, have these forces. How do you think this plays into education and narrative and state strategy and weakening of a society at its most macro and micro perspective? if these are the countries that are supposed to be financing this, and there they are. You mentioned that there is a quiet aspect of the quiet aspect of jihad, and they are supposed to be financing Gaza's reconstruction, and they are supposed to be viewing for a moderate, two state solution. Where are they? What is the nuance around this?

Eran Lahav

Just to clarify we use the term Jihadi, there are different levels. I cannot go too deep in this, but Erdogan is not to be compared to. It's not Bin Laden, okay? It's not the same. So they believe in a certain kind of jihad, but jihad is a different kind of term to different kind of groups. So the thing is, it's not only Turkey, not only Qatar, which I think are too radical and will not be really good in order to eradicate their radicalization within the Palestinian society, but we also have countries that were part of Abraham accords. You take the Emirates, for instance, Bahrain – or Saudi Arabia, which is not part of Abraham Accords, – but we were about to establish normalization. These countries, they are opposed to Muslim Brotherhood. So they are non radical countries as for today, and they can help and besides finances, they can change the education system. It's a long process. It's not going to be

flipped in one day, not even two years or whatever, or a decade. I think we lost a generation there. We need to aim for the next one.

But it's a beginning, because if you think about this, you remember there was an Arab Spring in 2011 and they were trying to build like democratic structures into countries that were not used to it. And we saw what happened. So if I'm trying to push on them with my values, my principles, with democratic principles and structure, it wouldn't work. Obviously, this needs to be someone it needs to be in Arabic. It needs to be someone which is closer to the ties than Israel or the international community. So it cannot be, let's say, an international force that will control it. It cannot be a European force. That's my perspective. It should be an Emirati Organization, any kind of board cooperated with Saudi Arabian. Maybe this would be to make the first round in order to make the basics to start eradicating the localization anti-semitism from the system. But it's a long process.

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Thank you so much.

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