Retired Generals in Israeli Politics: Concerning Backstep or Status Quo?

Ian Westerman

Concern over the political rise of former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz is misplaced. The military’s role in Israeli politics has always served to reinforce democratic values, not erode them.

Before Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu finally called his oft-heralded general election last December, the possibility that there might be a realistic challenger to his long-running hold on power in Israel seemed remote. Traditional left-wing opposition parties have been in disarray for some time, and whenever a genuine rival has arisen from within Netanyahu’s coalition of right-wing and religious parties, he has systematically and effectively neutralised them the moment they appeared threatening. His announcement that the election would be called seven months earlier than required by law came about ostensibly because of the coalition’s failure to reconcile serious disagreements over a number of issues, the most high-profile being the law requiring ultra-orthodox Jews to take part in compulsory military service. However, with Netanyahu at that time easily heading the polls, most commentators saw the move as a cynical attempt to avert his imminent appearance by retired generals onto the Israeli political scene in the late 1960s was brought about by a fear that the civilian government would be weak on security.

On the face of it, this sudden appearance of a credible opposition to Netanyahu should have been – and may yet prove to be – the political centre’s big moment. At last they have a genuine possibility of breaking the extended dominance of Netanyahu’s Likud-led coalition governments. Yet, one of Israel’s most senior and well-respected left-leaning journalists privately articulated the view that the situation constituted ‘a setback in Israeli politics’, and expressed ‘great personal dismay’ at this turn of events. In her view, the appearance of Gantz and his fellow retired generals onto the political stage is a serious backstep, potentially heralding the re-emergence of the days when security dominated every dispute and the military were seen as the only ones trusted with Israel’s affairs. In her view, a relatively brief period of political normality, since the end of the Second Intifada and the end of Ariel Sharon’s premiership in 2006, could be coming to an untimely end – a period where issues such as economics and education, rather than defence and security, were at the forefront of debates in the Israeli parliament. But is this really the case?

In the past, Israeli politics was often dominated by retired generals – two of the country’s most well-known prime ministers, Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, had previously held the position of chief of staff, and another, one of the country’s most colourful leaders, Sharon, had also held a very prominent position in the IDF. Even more notably, as the only ones trusted with Israel’s power for the first time in nearly a decade. Despite failed attempts to gain sufficient cross-party support to form a new government, Netanyahu took unprecedented measures to ensure that, rather than Gantz being offered the chance to form a working coalition himself (admittedly an unlikely possibility), Israel would be forced to return to the ballot box in September. This extraordinary set of events is something unique even in Israel’s turbulent political history.

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For almost the first 20 years of the state’s existence, the military actually exerted very little direct control over the government, not even in the areas of defence and security decision-making. The Israeli general staff, the supreme command of the IDF, has always exercised a much greater degree of indirect influence over the cabinet than would be considered acceptable in most established liberal democratic states; nevertheless, neither they nor the retired military community were directly involved in critical decision-making in the government prior to the 1967 war. It was when Levi Eshkol, a civilian with virtually no practical military experience, took over from David Ben-Gurion as prime minister and defense minister in 1963 that things began to change. The IDF general staff, led by Rabin, believed that the new regime would not be prepared to make a timely enough commitment to initiate conflict if and when the moment came. On the eve of war, as it became clear that their fears were justified, Eshkol was finally forced to stand aside as defence minister, and to permit Dayan to take over. From
that point on, the era of the ex-military men in Israeli politics began in earnest. Dayan remained in his highly influential post as defense minister until his poor performance in the Yom Kippur War of 1973 brought about his downfall the following year, along with that of Prime Minister Golda Meir. Immediately, another hero of the Six Day War who was untainted by the near-disaster of 1973 and who had now moved into politics, Rabin, stepped straight into the prime minister’s office and the military procession continued. The question is: when, if at all, did it come to end?

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At the 35th Conference of the Association for Israel Studies in June 2019, the distinguished Israeli civil–military relations commentator Yoram Peri took the opportunity to highlight a growing trend. In his view, Gantz’s step into the political arena, in which he has openly used his military service as an electoral rallying cry, was just the latest in a series of efforts by the military to increase their influence on Israel’s political process. For Peri, this trend has its beginning in ‘Israel’s democratic putsch’: running up to the 1999 election, more than two years of acrimonious disputes between the IDF’s senior officers and Prime Minister Netanjahu came to a climax when a number of high-ranking retired and reserve officers entered the political arena and actively campaigned against the prime minister. The victory of the Israeli Labor Party’s Ehud Barak was certainly assisted by their highly vocal and public opposition.

Among the other key indicators of the rise of military involvement in politics that Peri identifies are a series of events involving not only retired but also serving IDF generals. He cites several occasions when the IDF effectively vetoed the government’s demands for specific military action, including two calls to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities and, more recently, an increase in the tempo of activity against Hamas in Gaza. This latter power struggle led directly to the resignation of Avigdor Lieberman as defense minister in 2018. That these events occurred is undeniable, but the question remains as to whether they constitute a significant change in the nature of Israel’s civil–military relations.

To an extent, the answer depends on how one views the place of the military in politics generally. The conventional stance suggests the healthiest approach is to ensure that the military are totally isolated from politics – what Eliot Cohen in his book _Supreme Command_ has described as the ‘normal theory of civil-military relations’. If that is true, yes, this increasing involvement of the military in Israeli politics must be seen a backwards step. However, taking the less absolutist view that military involvement in politics is neither intrinsically sinister in every circumstance, nor is it something that must inevitably damage the democratic nature of the state, then the answer may be no.

As a democracy, Israel is, in a great many respects, a singular case. One aspect of this is apparent in the way that, throughout its existence, the military has been seen as the champions of the Israeli societal identity. This is not because of their robust nationalist attitudes or their indomitable military strengths – the average Israeli surely has no interest in seeing an authoritarian, military-style government running the country. Rather, what commends these retired warriors to their fellow Israelis is that they are perceived as being honest and trustworthy, leaders who can be relied upon to always put the best interest of the country before their own and who act in a proper and morally upright fashion. Whether such confidence is justified or not is immaterial; the fact is that the electorate believe it is so. Those who support Gantz and his party of ex-generals have not turned from civil to military as such, but as they see it, from self-serving to self-sacrificing, away from the stench of corruption and towards the sweeter smell of honesty and integrity.

The Israeli general staff has always exercised a much greater degree of indirect influence over the cabinet than would be considered acceptable in most established liberal democratic states

For this reason, Israel’s resurgent interest in the possibility of having another ex-general in the prime minister’s office should not offer any great anxiety to those concerned that the country might be taking a lurch towards militarism. On the contrary, it demonstrates the Israeli public’s desire to see the democratic principle of accountability maintained. The first significant appearance by retired generals onto the Israeli political scene in the late 1960s was brought about by a fear that the civilian government would be weak on security – that is not the case with Netanjahu who has taken on the mantle of ‘Mr Security’ for his own. Rather, the current re-emergence of the military can be seen as a call to those who have traditionally been regarded as the ultimate guardians of the country’s democratic nature and the natural choice to turn to when this is perceived as being under threat. Whether or not the current situation is in fact dire enough to warrant such a recall from arms into politics for the country’s generals or, even if it is, if they are capable of delivering the salvation demanded of them, remains to be seen. What is more certain is that Israel’s strangest election year to date is not yet done, and there are very likely to be further, and even more unexpected, twists and turns to come.

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