

GENERALS in the CABINET ROOM

GENERALS in the CABINET ROOM

How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy

Yoram Peri



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE PRESS
Washington, D.C.

The views expressed in this book are those of the author alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
1200 17th Street NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20036-3011

© 2006 by the Endowment of the United States Institute of Peace. All rights reserved.

First published 2006

Printed in the United States of America

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standards for Information Science—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Peri, Yoram.

Generals in the cabinet room : how the military shapes Israeli policy /
Yoram Peri.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-929223-81-7 (softcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-929223-81-1 (softcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-13: 978-1-929223-82-4 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-929223-82-X (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Civil-military relations—Israel. 2. Israel—Politics and government—
1993- 3. Israel. Tseva haganah le-Yisra'el—Political activity. I. Title.

JQ1830.A38.C5855 2006

322'.5095694--dc22

2005035175

To my beloved wife and closest friend, Pnina

Contents

Foreword, <i>by Samuel W. Lewis</i>	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	3
1. Civil-Military Relations in Israel	17
2. The Geostrategic Transformation of the 1990s	33
3. The Political Arm of the Military	47
4. The Modus Operandi of the Military	63
5. The “Democratic Putsch” of 1999	77
6. The IDF Confronts a New Intifada	91
7. Sharon’s Double-Headed Government	109
8. Political-Military Relations in Low-Intensity Conflict	123
9. The Tragedy of CGS Ya’alon	137
10. The Chief of Staff as a Political Actor	155
11. Is It a Just War?	171
12. Conscientious Objection	185

13. Who Won the Intifada?	197
14. Israel's Security Culture	213
15. Camp David and the Intifada—What Went Wrong?	233
16. Conclusion: The IDF—Sword or Olive Branch?	251
Appendix 1: Glossary	265
Appendix 2: Chronological List of Key Events	267
Appendix 3: Interviews	271
Notes	273
Works Cited	297
Index	307
About the Author	328

Foreword

Israel's political system frequently baffles foreigners and sometimes Israelis as well. A raucous, multiparty parliamentary democracy operates without a written constitution but under partial constraint from several individual "Basic Laws" and a respected Supreme Court, which, speaking as the High Court of Justice, has often intervened in recent years to block or modify actions by either the Knesset or the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

A small, besieged nation, Israel is surrounded by hostile and often aggressive neighbors and has fought eight wars in its fifty-eight years—and yet it has managed to maintain its democratic system. Dogged with security threats, it has not fallen victim, as have so many other new states, to military coups or authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the powerful IDF remains subject to civilian control by the prime minister, the cabinet, and the Knesset (and increasingly, since 1996, the Supreme Court). But how has the military's power been kept in check? This is but one of the important questions addressed by Yoram Peri in *Generals in the Cabinet Room*. Building on and carrying forward his 1983 seminal work, *Between Battles and Ballots: Israeli Military in Politics*, Peri draws on extensive firsthand research to lay bare the labyrinthine relationships that have evolved between Israel's military professionals and civilian political leaders and institutions. While he focuses mainly on events from the early 1990s to the present, he includes some fascinating examples of the military-civilian relationship that are drawn from earlier eras to illustrate that conflicts between Israel's military and political leaders have been part of the country's political history since its earliest days.

As Peri aptly demonstrates, Israel's history is suffused with the overriding theme of national security, which has always given the IDF's chief of general staff (CGS) a strong voice in the nation's political councils and a permanent public stage. It is no accident, of course, that only three of the

sixteen men who have served as CGS have *not* later entered politics after retirement and that of the last four prime ministers elected, three have been former senior generals. To underscore the nature of this interplay between Israel's military and political elites, Peri describes some fascinating encounters between IDF leaders and their civilian "superiors" that not only reflect large egos but also fundamental political and strategic disagreements. But he stresses that in those moments when the military voice overwhelmed the civilian, determined military leaders were only filling a vacuum of indecisiveness created by divided, weak political leadership. One poignant example of this casts a long shadow over the present-day dilemma of Israeli settlement in the West Bank. It took place during Yitzhak Rabin's first stint as prime minister, when an essential member of his fragile coalition government was the National Religious Party, which advocated Jewish settlement in the West Bank. As Peri states,

In the "Sebastia Affair" of 1975 . . . members of the Gush Emunim settlers group founded—for the first time and in an illegal manner—a settlement in Samaria. . . . Rabin, who saw this as a challenge to his government, demanded that CGS Gur disperse the settlers. But Gur objected on the grounds that doing so either would require the use of force and likely lead to bloodshed, or would result in soldiers refusing to follow their orders. Rabin yielded, the settlers won, and the incident is now considered a watershed moment, establishing an important precedent for future Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. It exposed the government's weakness and made clear to the settlers that through the use of force they would be able to impose their own will on the government. This is, in fact, what they have done ever since. . . . Rabin candidly admitted to me that he never forgave himself for having yielded to Gur on that day.

This passage is not only indicative of the type of information and insight Peri offers in this work, but it is also indicative of why Peri has long been regarded as the foremost scholar on the evolving role of the military in Israeli society. As the passage demonstrates, his close association with key players within Israel's military establishment and political elite has enabled him to draw extensively on their private views in analyzing the history and issues that lie behind the headlines. Elsewhere, for example, through his interviews and conversations with decision makers, he is able to provide unique insight into the role played by military intelligence assessments and senior military officers in setting Israel's foreign and defense policy,

tracing the military's shift from being a proponent of the peace process to being an advocate of the hard line. In particular, Peri details how the military's changing view of Yasser Arafat and his true intentions affected the decisions of Israel's political leaders, helping push Israel away from negotiations after the failure of the Camp David Summit in 2000 and the outbreak of Israel's "eighth war," the al-Aqsa intifada.

Just as the IDF's policy preferences have changed with Israel's internal and external environment, so too have many of its revered strategic doctrines that were long held unassailable. Faced with a conflict that is not amenable to purely military solutions, the IDF—as Peri explains—has been forced to revise how it relates to the enemy. Throughout the book, he touches on the impact that Israel's struggle—or low-intensity conflict (LIC)—with the Palestinians has had on the IDF and Israel's political system. While the country's old military doctrines had been designed to cope with threats from regular armies from surrounding states and to avoid wars of attrition by ensuring quick, overwhelming victories, LICs by definition last a long time, which means that political, economic, and social factors are as important as military ones in determining the outcome of such a conflict. This reality of Israel's ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, in Peri's analysis, has served only to draw the IDF leaders more and more into the domestic political arena. Without "a clear strategic directive," he states, "the military is sometimes forced to determine its own . . . and the policy it adopts does not always correspond to the wishes of the elected government." Indeed, Peri is convinced that "the ongoing occupation and counterinsurgency warfare will increase friction between the military and civilian society, and the IDF will sink deeper into the political mire." He concludes that as long as "a democratic Israel rules over the Palestinian people, Israeli civilian society will remain split over the future of the territories."

Peri's analysis of how this "military-political partnership"—or "symbiotic pattern of joint responsibility"—has evolved in a democratic state offers a fascinating piece of history, as well as a real contribution to a better understanding of how Israeli policymaking actually occurs. His final chapter offers recommendations for reforms in the Israeli system that might help stem the flow of influence from politicians to officers and that merit close attention by Israeli policymakers, although he himself admits he is pessimistic that they will be adopted while Israel remains in a permanent

state of war. He also states that many of his conclusions have relevance beyond Israel, which is a view I share. After all, we are currently in a new era in which LICs are being fought around the world. One way or another, the United States is and will be involved in many of them. Although the American and Israeli political systems are light years apart and our military establishments are vastly different, some of Peri's observations about this new era shed light on trends in our own society. While his thoughts about certain parallels between what is happening in Israel and what is happening in the United States are only delicately implied, we should read some things between the lines. As long as we are engaged in an endless, worldwide war against terror, Peri's account of the way endless warfare has affected Israel's democracy provides a cautionary tale for us as well.

Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis

Acknowledgments

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL to many people who helped me in this research. First I would like to thank the fine people at the United States Institute of Peace, in particular Joseph Klaitz and John Crist of the Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace, where I was a fellow researcher in 2001. I would also like to thank other members of the Institute with whom I shared ideas and examined facts, especially the Institute's experts on Middle East affairs, Judy Barsalou and Steven Riskin, as well as my editor, Nigel Quinney, my translator, Hazel Arieli, and my research assistant, Gur Hirshberg. I owe a debt to my colleagues, who share with me long years of research on civil-military relations: Charles C. Moskos, Eliot A. Cohen, Louis Goodman, and others in the United States; and a group of Israeli researchers, led by the father of military sociology in Israel, Moshe Lissak, and two bright scholars of civil-military relations, Kobi Michael and Yagil Levy. My gratitude also extends to the Fulbright Fund, of which I was a senior member in 2000, and to my colleagues at the Chaim Herzog Institute for Media, Politics and Society at Tel Aviv University.

GENERALS in the CABINET ROOM

