



Why National Leaders Can Go Against Expert Advice

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In making decisions, the national leadership has not only the legal authority to ignore expert recommendations but also a solid conceptual basis for doing so based on broader considerations that transcend advanced knowledge.

The decision by PM Netanyahu and the Israeli cabinet to adopt the police recommendation for the installation of metal detectors at the gates to the Temple Mount following the murder of two police officers at the holy site sparked a wave of media criticism, which gained rapid momentum as the Palestinians responded to the decision with violent protests. The question heard more and more was how the prime minister could have ignored the warnings of the Shabak (Israel Security Agency) and the IDF against the detectors' placement. It was as if a contractor had ignored an engineer's recommendation for the quantity of iron that was needed for the casting of a roof.

It is of course quite natural for concerned citizens to demand to know how government decisions are made. This is a basic issue in managing state affairs, as is the tension between the political echelon – which has the legal authority to make decisions – and the professional echelon. The fundamental question is to what extent national leaders are obligated to follow the recommendations of their professional advisers.

Member of Knesset Tzipi Livni likened the government's ignoring of the Shabak's recommendation to ignoring a physician's advice. But what does one do when one has to decide between opposing medical opinions? Even in relatively simple medical situations, like, for example, a slipped disc, a patient can be torn between one doctor who recommends an operation and another who warns against one.

Sometimes, though, the vacillation has to do with a range of considerations far beyond the clear-cut domain of medical science. One quickly discovers that, while there are indeed technical questions that are entirely within the authority of experts, when formulating a decision and managing risks, not everything falls under the experts' aegis.

When it comes to managing policy in conflict situations, leaders have a unique role in that they bear the burden of responsibility. If they did not have to make decisions that go beyond what their professional advisers recommend, they would be reduced to little more than their experts' puppets. Israeli history is fraught with tests of leadership, and in many cases, decisions were made that flew in the face of expert opinion.

It was David Ben-Gurion who time and again stressed that experts were only experts about what had already happened, not about what was going to happen. As early as April 1948, a few weeks before the state of Israel was proclaimed, Ben-Gurion briefed his political colleagues on tensions with the military leadership concerning the battle for Jerusalem:

A question has arisen about giving experts a role in managing the war. Although, on the technical matters, we will heed their advice, it is not they who will have the final say on each issue but, rather, the civilian representatives of the people. ... Decisions are made not only based on technical opinions on professional questions but on the basis of an overall assessment of the circumstances of the time and the place, that is, on the basis of diplomatic assessment, for which the government is responsible.

Indeed, when he decided to focus the main effort on Jerusalem, issuing a directive of "Jerusalem at any price" to the commanders of Operation Nahshon, Ben-Gurion had not only professional military considerations in mind. As he explained: "If the country has a soul, Jerusalem is its soul. ... That oath by the waters of Babylon [If I forget thee, O Jerusalem] obligates us today just as it did back then; otherwise we will not deserve to be called the people of Israel."

Similarly, in the Second Lebanon War (2006), the decision about a preemptive strike on Hezbollah's medium-range rockets was made by Defense Minister Peretz against Chief of Staff Halutz's recommendation. In hindsight, it was unquestionably a correct decision at the opening of the war; but Lt. Gen. Halutz's considerations in not recommending an attack were also formulated with proper professionalism. Moreover, as part of the deliberations, a detailed plan was considered that had been prepared by the air force in the years preceding the war. It was Halutz who, as air force commander in his previous post, had initiated and shepherded the planning.

After the defense minister made his decision, the plan was brought to the cabinet and approved. This is an example of proper dynamics between the professional and the

political echelons. The defense minister, in exercising his authority beyond the sphere of professional knowledge, exemplified how leadership decisions take into account a full range of considerations. He also gave a role to his personal intuition, the value of which should not be dismissed for decision-making.

Essentially, at least from a legal standpoint, the issue is clear-cut. In democratic societies, political leaderships are elected by the public, and that is the source of their authority to decide and to lead. While the professional echelon must harness its expertise to the decision-making process, it does not have final say. When all is said and done, in making decisions the leadership has the legal authority to ignore expert recommendations.

The public criticism, then, has no legal grounds on which to demand a clarification. Nor, for that matter, does it have procedural justification. It is of course legitimate to demand to know whether the steering wheel is in the hands of a leader whom the people can trust to act competently and wisely. In that regard, leaders' reliance on expert opinion helps give the impression that their decisions are being made properly.

Ostensibly, experts can predict what will happen a few steps ahead and can warn leaders about what seems to them a "chronicle foretold." Except that no such chronicle ever really exists, and one cannot know what will emerge until friction is created.

National leaders are expected to engage in responsible risk management. But risk management in a closed and defined system – like administering a school and having to list safety hazards, such as a rickety banister – is not the same as risk management in an open strategic space where one faces the potential for risks that have not yet taken shape.

Therein lies a widespread modern delusion: the belief that professional, scientific expertise has a remedy for the anxiety of confronting the unknown. The modern person tends to believe that the right experts have the power of foresight and can thus prepare for the unexpected. The problem is that until one actually carries out measures and they generate friction, as with the installation of metal detectors on the Temple Mount, there is no way to gauge the potential for risks and opportunities that will emerge in the course of taking the measures.

Thus, while experts can warn about the risks entailed by anticipated friction, it is the prerogative, indeed the duty, of the national leadership to decide how to confront that friction and make the most of its strategic potential. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," David sang in Psalm 23. This is the test of leaders, who make a conscious choice to enter the valley of the shadow of death even when their advisers warn against it. Of course, because it is they who bear the ultimate responsibility, their people and history will judge them by the outcomes of their actions.

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