



## Religion in the IDF: The Struggle over Israeli Public Space

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**Executive Summary:** Recent years have seen a notable increase in *kippa*-wearers among IDF combat soldiers and commanders. The growing opposition to the presence of *kippot*, however, is not what drives the struggle against religionization. It is, rather, the fear of losing the military's character as a national public space that is secular or at least neutral with regard to religion.

There has been a notable increase in *kippa*-wearers among IDF combat soldiers and commanders in recent years, a phenomenon that is considerably affecting the atmosphere in the units. The growing opposition to the *kippot* is not, however, what drives the struggle against religionization. It is, rather, the fear of losing the military's character as a national public space.

According to the liberal outlook of those leading the struggle, a national space means a secular space, or at least one that is neutral with regard to religion. A public expression of "religious-Jewish" themes in the "professional" military conversation, and in the space that is supposed to contain a multicultural variety of opinion, is considered a violation of rules. Here, in a nutshell, is the explanation for the wave of criticism that arose when, during Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, Givati brigade commander Ofer Winter sent a dispatch to his subordinates that included religious motifs.

In his book *The Divine Commander* (in Hebrew), Yagil Levy clarified the complaint by comparing two *kippa*-wearers who commanded elite combat brigades: Winter, the Givati brigade commander, and Eliezer Toledano, commander of the paratroopers' brigade. Winter is a *kippa*-wearer who brings his God to his professional work; Toledano is a *kippa*-wearer who maintains a separation between his religious and professional identities. Levy interprets Winter's statements as "an attempt to give

religious meaning to the military task...and particularly an attempt to impart this meaning to all of the soldiers." Conversely, he presents Toledano as exemplary: "He gave the campaign a broad meaning of protecting the lives of the citizens, a meaning that is not religious and comports with the military's significance as a state institution."

For Levy, these two commanders exemplify "the distinction between an officer for whom religion shapes his professional identity, and an officer who is a *kippa*-wearer but for whom religion plays a secondary role in shaping his professional identity."

Winter and Toledano may not in fact be so different from each other. Certainly the difference could be limited to the fact that Toledano, unlike Winter, was sufficiently attentive to the code of Levy and his friends. Nevertheless, Levy's distinction is essentially correct and important: more than between *kippa*-wearing officers and secular officers, it is a distinction between officers – or public servants – who bring their God to work with them and those who supposedly manage to keep their God and their faith inside the private sphere or the synagogue.

The criticism leveled by Levy obeys dictates that have prevailed since the French Revolution: a public servant must maintain a strict separation between his professional expertise and his religion and faith; otherwise, he will be suspected of a conflict of interest and dual loyalty. And indeed, since the Emancipation of Western Europe, even religious Jews have managed to adjust to this demand. Many *kippa*-wearers agree with Levy's criticism of Winter's breach of the rules.

Interestingly, it was none other than Israel's founding father David Ben-Gurion, who did not wear a *kippa*, and who took all of his Jewish faith with him into his public, governmental work. For example, in April 1948, as the War of Independence raged, he explained in a speech to the Zionist Executive Committee why he was focusing the main military effort on Jerusalem: "That oath by the rivers of Babylon is as binding today as it was in those days; otherwise we will not be worthy of the name *Am Yisrael* [the people of Israel]." "That oath," as everyone then understood, was, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning." Responsible for running a war at that fateful hour, Ben-Gurion as a Jewish leader dared to link four dimensions: the national, the religious, the military, and the political. It appears that nowadays, with his biblical rhetoric and operational approach, Ben-Gurion would be denounced along with Winter as an instigator of religionization.

From this perspective, Winter's refusal to comply with the fundamental tenets of the modern order is defensible. French sociologist Bruno Latour's far-reaching critique of modernity and its governmental practices (*We Have Never Been Modern*) exposes these practices as a baseless illusion.

Beyond the claim that the liberal order is required for proper political functioning, it is argued that, in Israel, most of the population is secular and wants a public space with a secular character. Soldiers' participation in prayer before a battle is then seen as a religionization ploy that exploits the soldiers' anxiety. It is difficult, however, to deny the existence of an authentic need for prayer even among soldiers who are not "standard religious people" when prayer is familiar to them from their homes.

Israeli sociologists agree that "secular Jews are the majority of Israeli society." They classify the large group defined as "traditional" as a kind of secular Jewish group – "secular lite." Yet, based on the same data, one can draw a contrasting conclusion. If we merely change the point of departure for the religious-secular distinction – if we agree that not everyone who drives on Shabbat is necessarily secular – we can assert that the majority of Israeli Jewish society is religious and traditional. It is then those who are strongly secular who are the minority group.

A plethora of intensifying struggles converge in one main struggle: namely, over the nature of the public space in Israel as a Jewish state. That is precisely the controversy: not only who constitutes the majority and what characterizes its identity, but also what sort of public space it wants.

This is the context within which to understand, for example, the struggle over the curricula in state schools. The state school in Israel, however, is first of all a Jewish school and not necessarily a secular one. The fact that parents choose to send their child to a state school does not warrant an assumption that they desire a secular education for that child. It appears that Labor party's new leader Avi Gabbay, with his sensitivity to the Israeli majority that is characterized as traditional, grasps these points. Hence it may be that those leading the struggle against religionization represent a minority view – one that has weight, but is marginal compared to the desire of the majority, which is at least partially obscured from view.

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