



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Leaders Are Not Obligated to Obey Their Advisors

by Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoheh

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 767, March 14, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The multidimensional complexity with which national leaders must contend is a necessary condition for effective strategic decision-making. On many occasions, it requires that those leaders ignore, or even act in contravention of, the advice of the professional echelon.

Perhaps the oddest of the many leaks about the looming charges against Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu is the reported accusation by former-confidant-turned-state's-witness Nir Hefetz that the prime minister recently ignored the professional echelon's recommendations when making an important security decision.

Netanyahu's personal conduct notwithstanding, the leak raises two important questions about the nature of strategic decision-making. One concerns the role of national leaders and the extent to which they are obligated to follow their advisers' recommendations. The second relates to the extent to which close, or even intimate, advisers are fully apprised of their leaders' inner thoughts, motives, and considerations as they grapple with hard decisions.

In essence, the two questions are interrelated. If one expects national leaders to make important decisions in a manner befitting heads of expert committees, then the deliberations, as a matter of professional procedure, must be transparent and must openly address all considerations. This in turn means that whoever has taken part in such deliberations does indeed know, and can testify about, what took place during them. In real life, however, no high level decision-making process – let alone one at the national level – can be conducted entirely out in the open.

When decision-making defies experts' recommendations

So long as decisions do not involve situations that are without precedent, we can put our fate in the hands of skilled managers. A country's railroad system,

for example, can be overseen by professional experts. But not everything in the life of society and the state runs along neat railroad tracks. Leadership as a unique trait is required precisely when there are no familiar causeways and no continuity between what has occurred before and what is occurring now.

In an emergency situation, which, by its very nature, falls outside any prior framework, the authority of experts meets its limit. It was just such a situation that Winston Churchill, as dramatically portrayed in the recent movie *The Darkest Hour*, had to confront. In the face of the German Blitzkrieg, the British generals – with all their professionalism – turned out to be helpless. At the fateful hour in Dunkirk it was Churchill's leadership that enabled the heroic rescue of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were trapped on the beach.

The leadership of David Ben-Gurion manifested a similar understanding, throughout his political career, of the limitations of expert knowledge. An especially well known case is his insistence, during the War of Independence, on concentrating the main war effort on Jerusalem against the view of the General Staff. The deliberations of the "committee of five" that he headed were notable for Ben-Gurion's courageous openness to criticism. Amidst heated controversy in the wake of the Battle of Latrun, Gen. Yigal Yadin, head of the Operations Directorate, had harsh words for Ben-Gurion's role:

The only brigade that was available for the battle was the 7th Brigade...Here Ben-Gurion carried out his most blatant intervention, which in my opinion ran counter to all his powers as someone who saw himself as authorized to give orders to the army. All the soldiers were new recruits and needed another seven or eight days before they could be sent into battle; to do otherwise was suicide...I tried to explain that it was impossible from a technical standpoint, but all my words were in vain. Ben-Gurion demanded that I summon the brigade commander, as he wanted to hear what he had to say... I am sharply critical of the brigade commander for carrying out the order... In light of all the military considerations, such an operation could not be permitted, and it ended in a terrible catastrophe.

Ben-Gurion responded without mincing words: "In my opinion [it ended] in a big victory, though not a cheap one."

The Battle of Latrun was indeed a complete failure from a tactical standpoint, and yet it was an important victory at the systemic level. And while one can ponder the wisdom of the decision in hindsight, there is no doubt that it was not only completely legitimate but also an exemplary case of a national leader's

resolute decision-making of a kind that is indispensable when defying the prescriptions of experts.

Ben-Gurion behaved similarly in bringing Iraqi Jewry to Israel in a lightning operation in 1950. Shlomo Hillel, who was sent to oversee the mission, recalled how Levi Eshkol, who was in charge of immigrant absorption, summoned him before he left for Iraq and told him: "Young man, don't bring all of them at once. We have no ability to absorb them. There is not enough food, there are no tents, there is no work to give them." When Ben-Gurion heard of this, he summoned Hillel and said: "Whatever Levi Eshkol told you is true. However, tell all of them to come immediately; the opportunity is now and who knows how long it will last." And indeed, less than a year later the Iraqi authorities closed the borders.

Therein lies the uniqueness of the leadership phenomenon under conditions of uncertainty. It entails seeing beyond what experts can discern and steadfastly making decisions whose success they cannot ensure.

Not even close advisers are authorities on the motives for decisions

Leadership must inevitably contend with complex and multifaceted situations. When the environment is not complex, an efficient administrator will suffice. But when the system becomes tension-fraught and intricate, it cannot be managed with full transparency, and true leadership takes a turn for the enigmatic. As Hagana commander-in-chief Israel Galili observed about Ben-Gurion:

He had the talent to keep quiet and withdraw into himself. That is, to keep others out of his thoughts, considerations, and aims. He did not pour out his heart to his diary, either. From the time of Berl Katznelson's death, Ben-Gurion apparently did not consult with anyone, but he would listen and decide. The inner world of his ruminations remained obscure, open to interpretation.

Likewise, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol's astute leadership, as evident in his management of the Six-Day War, remained enigmatic in a way that confounded his close advisers. On the fateful night of June 5, in which the cabinet decided to conquer eastern Jerusalem, Eshkol's military secretary, Brig. Gen. Israel Lior, wrote: "The discussion lasted longer than expected... The ministers argued about the long-term future of Jerusalem. They did so without prior preparation, without working papers, without knowing anything about the political or military plans." Eshkol capped off the discussion by stating: "We will leave military matters to the military"; he knew that Minister of

Defense Moshe Dayan, who did not take part in the meeting, had already given orders to conquer Jerusalem.

In the eyes of his military secretary, Eshkol showed weakness here. In fact, Lior completely missed Eshkol's inner thinking: from his standpoint, Dayan's absence from the cabinet meeting afforded an opportunity for constructive ambiguity. If things developed as planned, well and good; but if an unexpected international complication emerged, the ambiguity would enable the government to attribute the Israeli move to misunderstandings between the prime minister and the defense minister. In other words, Eshkol's wily approach provided a safety net for the risks of venturing into the unknown. At such moments, even close advisers are not privy to the leader's real calculations.

In short, the multidimensional complexity with which a national leader must contend is a necessary condition for effective strategic decision-making. The enigma that surrounds such decision-making poses a daunting challenge not only for the historian but also for investigative teams that base themselves on expertise.

This article was first published in Hebrew in Israel Hayom on February 8, 2018.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Gershon Hacoen is a senior research fellow at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. He served in the IDF for forty-two years. He commanded troops in battles with Egypt and Syria. He was formerly a corps commander and commander of the IDF Military Colleges.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family