



The New IDF Chief of Staff Faces an Array of Challenges

by Yaakov Lappin

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,187, March 16, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The IDF's 23rd Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, will need to safely and swiftly maneuver through a domestic minefield without entangling the military in politics. He will likely seek to prioritize the Iranian and northern arenas over the Palestinian arenas - provided the domestic political situation allows him to do so.

On January 16, 2023, the 23rd IDF Chief of Staff, Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, was officially sworn in, replacing Lt. Gen. Aviv Kochavi. Halevi was originally appointed by former Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who overrode claims by the then opposition Likud party that a transition government during an election season cannot appoint the next Chief of Staff. This claim was dismissed by Israeli Attorney General Gali Baharav-Miara.

Gantz chose Halevi over two other leading candidates: Maj. Gen. (res.) Yoel Strick, former Head of Ground Forces and ex-IDF Northern Command chief; and Maj. Gen. (res.) Eyal Zamir, former IDF Deputy Chief of Staff and head of the IDF's Southern Command, who is today the Director General of the Defense Ministry.

Halevi, a deep strategic thinker who incorporates long-term historical trends into his world view, possesses extensive operational and command experience in dealing with Israel's adversaries. He assumes his position at a time when multiple major strategic defense concerns will necessitate precise and resolute decision-making.

But some of Halevi's most immediate challenges won't come from Iran or Hamas, but rather from within Israel itself.

Halevi will need to navigate a political minefield created by unprecedented decisions by the new Israeli government. These include a new ministerial position within the Defense Ministry responsible for key aspects of the policies of the IDF Civil Administration, which governs a range of civilian matters in Area C of the West Bank. Those include the regulation of housing permits for both Jews and Palestinians and the enforcement of the demolition of illegal construction.

This new ministerial position was given to Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich as part of the coalition-forming agreement reached between Smotrich's Religious Zionism party and the Likud party. The coalition agreement also reportedly gave Smotrich appointment powers over future commanders of the Unit for the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories, which implements the government's and the military's civilian policies in Area C.

The new ministerial position theoretically represents a challenge to the clear chain of command that has existed until now in Area C. Up to this point, Area C has been under the control of the IDF's Central Command chief, who is the area's legal sovereign.

Already, sparks have flown over this confusing arrangement, when Smotrich said an "order" he gave to the IDF Civil Administration to avoid evacuating an authorized settlement outpost in the West Bank was ignored by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and the military command. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly backed Gallant in the dispute, providing a glimpse into how the creation of alternative chains of command can lead to chaotic situations.

Meanwhile, National Security Minister and Jewish Strength party chief Itamar Ben Gvir has been granted, at least in theory, new degrees of power over the Israeli Border Police, some of which operates in Area C under the IDF Central Command's chain of command. This creates an additional potential challenge to the unified IDF chain of command in a highly sensitive arena.

Halevi will have his work cut out for him navigating these new arrangements and defending the IDF's unity of command in the West Bank while keeping himself and the Israeli military out of the political arena.

Born in 1967, Halevi grew up in Jerusalem and enlisted in the IDF in 1985, joining the Nahal infantry brigade's parachute battalion. He has committed his entire life to military service. Halevi served as Commander of the elite clandestine Sayeret Matkal Unit from 2001 to 2004 and as Commander of the Paratroopers Brigade from 2007 until 2009. He later commanded the Galilee (91st) Territorial Division from 2011 to 2013, where he

oversaw security on the Lebanese border. He became Commander of the Military Intelligence Directorate in 2014, serving in that position until 2018. He was Commander of IDF Southern Command from 2018 until 2021, presiding over the Gazan arena and all its frequent challenges. In 2021, he became IDF Deputy Chief of Staff, managing the IDF's force build-up process. He served in that position until 2022.

Halevi's predecessor, Lt. Gen. Kochavi, left a significant legacy based on his Victory Concept and Momentum multi-year programs. These are designed to turn the IDF into a network-based war machine capable of rapidly detecting enemy targets embedded in built-up areas, and to match that intelligence with rapid, precise firepower in any relevant arena.

Halevi will likely work to shape and continue this force build-up process with his own emphases. At the same time, when it comes to force activation, he will need to try to prioritize the multiple arenas "competing" for Israel's attention. The most urgent arenas are often not the most strategically threatening.

The Palestinian arena and its two sub-arenas, the West Bank and Gaza, are the least stable and most prone to volcanic eruptions of escalation, and each can trigger the other. Yet the holistic threat posed by the Iranian-led axis, which includes Tehran's creeping nuclear program, its conventional missile and UAV weapons centers, and the proliferation of these capabilities to Iran's proxies -- foremost among them, Hezbollah in Lebanon -- collectively represent a strategic security threat of the first order.

The defense establishment will likely prefer, where it can, to prioritize readiness to face the Iranian-led axis over being drawn into a fresh Palestinian escalation, though the IDF must of course be ready to deal with multi-arena flare-ups simultaneously if necessary.

Recent reports of an alleged explosive drone strike on January 28 on an Iranian weapons production center in Isfahan, as well as reported air strikes on Iranian weapons convoys traversing the Iraqi-Syrian border, could suggest that the Israeli defense establishment is relying on an expanded version of its low-profile campaign to disrupt the build-up of threatening Iranian axis military capabilities throughout the Middle East.

While this campaign is undoubtedly important, as it serves as a useful and precise tool for identifying and selectively mowing down force build-up and entrenchment efforts by the Iranian axis, the IDF will need to continue fast-tracking the preparation of multiple operational plans and capabilities for a range of conflict scenarios. These scenarios include a full-scale regional war with the radical Iranian axis, which could involve a simultaneous conflict with Palestinian terror factions in the Gaza Strip.

Yaakov Lappin is an Israel-based military affairs correspondent and analyst. He provides insight and analysis for a number of media outlets, including Jane's Defense Weekly, and JNS.org. He holds an MA in the History of International Relations from the London School of Economics.