

Expert charts military's weight in Israeli society



Israeli political expert Yoram Peri spoke of the influence of the military establishment on Israeli society Sept. 14 at Rutgers University.

Photo by Debra Rubin

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In wartorn Israel, the influence of the military is seen in many aspects of society. Nowhere is this more evident than in the political arena, where many leaders have been former Israel Defense Forces officers.

However, said a top Israeli analyst, the war-weary Israel public may be looking for a change, a phenomenon supported by Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's rise to become one of two contenders to win the chair of Kadima in party elections this week — and perhaps to become prime minister.

(The Kadima Party elections were scheduled after the *NJNN* went to press.)

Yoram Peri, head of the Rothschild Caesarea School of Communication and the Chaim Herzog Institute for Media, Politics and Society at Tel Aviv University, explored the new turn in “Israeli Politics: the Military and Civil Society,” a talk he gave at Rutgers University on Sept. 14.

The annual Ruth and Alvin Rockoff lecture of the university’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life was held at the student center on Rutgers’ main campus in New Brunswick.

“Unlike in the American case, it is not an issue of breaking the glass ceiling,” Peri said of Livni’s political rise. “The glass ceiling is not an issue in Israel because the ceiling has already been broken by Golda Meir. But it is very important because of the different approaches to Israeli policies on how to deal with Syria, Iran.”

Peri, a political adviser to the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, described Livni’s opponent, Shaul Mofaz, a former IDF chief of staff and minister of defense, as a hardliner who has advocated the invasion of Gaza and holding onto the Golan Heights and has favored an attack on Iran if necessary.

Livni, on the other hand, believes in diplomacy and supports the concept of entering into negotiations with Israel’s foes.

“One reason Tzipi Livni is so popular is because people think enough is enough,” said Peri, former editor-in-chief of the Israeli daily *Davar* and a political commentator who has published extensively on Israeli society, media, and politics. The latest of his books, *Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy*, was published by the U.S. Institute of Peace in Washington.

Peri said it has been common practice to have generals sit in on weekly cabinet meetings to offer advice. These military leaders, he said, exert influence over all spheres of Israeli life, from education to economic policy.

Yet although it is the military establishment wielding such influence, it has at times been the moderate voice on security. Peri said the military was “the driving force” behind the Israeli peace initiatives in the 1990s — although it later pushed for war against the Palestinians when the Oslo process collapsed.

The military leaders “knew first you had to make peace with the inner circle,” said Peri, in reference to Israel’s immediate Arab neighbors.

Negotiating self-identity

This convergence of military and secular is largely due to Israel’s own unsettled identity, according to Peri, which was further fueled after the 1967 Six-Day War and the capture of the territories.

“What are we? What do we want to be?” he asked. “Are the Israeli Arabs a part of us or part of the Middle East? Are we part of the Middle East or part of Europe in the Middle East? We have no borders. We are still negotiating our borders along with our self-identity.”

Israeli society is “split right down the middle” about whether the territories acquired in '67 should be exchanged for peace agreements or retained for security or in keeping with religious beliefs.

Politicians often can't or won't take stands, leaving “the military to be dragged into a vacuum created when politicians aren't strong enough,” said Peri.

Israel remains a vibrant democracy whose majority yearns for peace, but its residents are caught up in historical reality.

“The public impression is that we want to give back land for peace, but many people say, ‘Maybe not in this generation because there's no one to negotiate with.’”

And given all of this, the contest between Mofaz and Livni may not be the most important in determining Israel's future.

“At the end of the day it will not be the election there, but the elections here,” said Peri of the upcoming American presidential contest.

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