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The Dilemmas of Combining Military and Academic Studies - The Israeli Experience

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Like any professional military in a democratic country, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), and especially the Colleges, have to train officers who can meet challenges successfully.

At the Military Colleges, we consider the military profession as a vocation in the full sense of the word. The profession's uniqueness is expressed in its definition as an art and a science. The two - art and science - exist in a state of mutual tension between the intuitive and the analytic, between understanding and knowledge, between conceptual development and its translation to a concrete goal. This dialectic unity

is moulded into the concept of the officer's training.

The Colleges' mission is to train senior officers for the tasks they will have to perform - to create a conceptual infrastructure, to broaden their horizons, to nurture their intellectual curiosity while focusing on military and defence issues in the specific context of the IDF and the state of Israel. The Israeli Defence Forces is a military organisation which operates in a most complicated environment, defending the country minute-by-minute, day-by-day, against conventional and non-conventional threats, including, of course, the threat of terror.

For a long time now, the military profession has been perceived as interdisciplinary in essence, and this is surely the case in times like these, which are characterised by many changes, complex threats, conflicts and warfare, and in which there is an ongoing dialogue between the military and society. Such a profession demands an interdisciplinary understanding of different knowledge structures, including history, education, science, culture, ethics, psychology, philosophy, strategy, and tactics. It is a profession that demands thought, vision and application, team leading, historical and moral consciousness, abstract thinking together with

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performance, planning and organisation, self-inquiry and criticism.

This perception constitutes a major influence on the way in which curricula are constructed in the Colleges, and the way the trainee's command concept is developed. The task is not at all simple. How can such a diverse person be designed? How do you raise such a soldier? What sort of education will be appropriate and will manage to do it all?

In this article, I will briefly try to portray our dilemmas, as well as some of the answers. However, it is necessary to start with a short introduction which will describe the special professional training of commanders in the IDF; I will then go on to describe the interaction of the Colleges Command with the academic world in Israel, and then discuss the way we perceive the worth and the value of academic studies. The heart of this article will present the embedded contradictions between military and academic studies in our view, refer to the commander's role in this process, and finally portray our campus vision.

First of all, let us have a look at the 5 IDF Colleges, and the way they interact with the officer's career.

Seeing and analysing the professional growth of the Israeli officer will make it clearer. Let us examine the growth of an army officer as an example. Recruitment to the army takes place at the age of 18. A soldier becomes a commander - goes to a cadet school - approximately at the age of 20, after which he acquires his first commissioned officer's rank and becomes a platoon leader. From then on, all the major professional turning points in his career will involve one institution or another of the Colleges Command. He will study two years in the Tactical Command College and become a company leader. Then he will come back to us at the age of approx. 30 to the CGSC, where he can study in one of our three institutions: the Joint Staff Course, the Air Squadron Course and the General Command and Staff Course for Land Brigade Leaders. Then he will go on to the National Defence College. Senior managerial training is part of another course,

which will eventually become part of the IDF Colleges.

Division Commanders will learn the operational level in another course. It should be pointed out, by the way, that most of the professional staff officers (engineers, lawyers and the like) acquire their BA degrees on their own time outside the college.

As we can see, current military-academic interaction is characterised by dependency on two universities: Haifa and Jerusalem. We still do not give our own academic degrees, although we plan to do so in the future.

Academic studies, in our eyes possess three important advantages: they develop certain competences and abilities; they provide some highly important instrumental values, and, last but not least, they truly support the military profession. Any army wishes to promote officers intellectually: by encouraging their spirit of inquiry, by encouraging them to explore their surroundings, by providing them with research skills - the ability to collect and analyse data wisely, they enhance and develop their systematic approach to in-

interpreting reality and learning to understand interactions between realms of knowledge or disciplines. In addition, they learn more about the complex world they live in, broaden their horizons, and develop the ability to ask, not only to answer. And no less important- a soldier has to be integrated into his own society. We attach great importance to maintaining dialogue between the military and civilian society in every aspect, including by mutual study.

However, we are not naïve: academic degrees also provide extrinsic benefits. They mean higher salaries, better social mobility, especially when officers begin a second career (after the age of 50) By sending better educated officers into the civil service and the business world, we indirectly contribute to an improved society, and nation.

But the most crucial benefit of them all is their real contribution to the military profession, which is multidisciplinary. Academic subjects shed light on implicit dimensions and add validity and depth to the military profession.

However, at this point, we should ask ourselves: can we really separate between military and academic studies? Is a course on Military Ethics, a seminar in Military Psychology or Military History merely academic? Is it not rather at the heart of our profession? And conversely: Is a course in Tactics, Command and Control or Military Law given by our staff and colonels, that gives full academic credit, not to be considered academic? Sometimes the line between the two is not so clear-cut.

Having said all that, we can now proceed to an analysis of our eight dilemmas, pointing out some embedded contradictions between military and academic studies.

1. The Dilemma Between Academic Scepticism and Military Discipline

Is it right to educate toward self-reliance and “undermining” the system, or toward discipline and obedience?

A leader must possess, among other things, the ability to critically examine

his own moves and those of the environment, to be able to change and to be changed. Perhaps in the armed forces more than anywhere else a leader should know how to walk against the current, to be doubtful, not to conform, to search for a new order, to ask questions about the benefits of a course of action, to “drill” alternative models in his mind for analysing reality – that of his unit as well as the enemy’s. In a complex and dynamic world, this ability is vital for success, to be able to anticipate the enemy’s moves, thoughts and performance. Nevertheless, military command structure is based on the idea of cohesion, continuity, unified language, discipline and a unified goal. Only so can a human being find the strength to rise up and act against its own nature and endanger its life. Both a commander and subordinate must obey orders, otherwise anarchy would ensue. Discipline is, among other things, the professional reasoning for performing one’s tasks. It makes it possible to rely on a hierarchical authority structure contained in

orders and a systematic comprehension of the superior echelon's intentions. The question is, what is the role of the Colleges in this? How does one build an officer to function in the tension between these poles?

The solution to this dilemma is found in setting a proper mix of clear external normative rules and a common professional base. These are based on the idea of a military command structure vis-à-vis an intellectual dialogue and academic culture.

In the Colleges, we attempt to develop a sceptical attitude; to encourage creative and independent thought, listening to other opinions in the group and being tolerant; to carry out research which elicits new questions; to examine the officer's performance in exercises; and to encourage analysis and professional acts which rely on stratagems and professional thought on the one hand, and on "subversive" ideas on the other.

We encourage enterprise, autonomy, non-simplistic thinking and critical exami-

nation, and reward each of these. A student's appraisal is not based on narrow questions, having a single right answer, but on a diverse and rich vision of reality. All this is done without making any concessions on normative military codes: dress, schedule, reporting, honouring high-ranking commanders and systematic explanations of different professional opinions.

2. The Dilemma Between Choices in Curriculum and Obligatory Courses

The whole idea of an academic curriculum is the freedom given to the students to choose among courses according to their own will, taste, interest and curiosity. However, the military profession demands control over specific subjects. For example, officers must take courses on terrorism and guerrilla warfare, the 1973 War, technology and so on, so that together with the core courses, we leave them less choice to follow their own way. So, what is the

solution? We try to build "subject clusters". The cluster itself is obligatory (for example, World War II); however students can focus and choose within it. We also enable our students to do research on topics that appeal to and suit their interest. But, as mentioned above, most of the courses cannot be omitted from our college curriculum.

3. Time Consumed by Academic Studies vs. Time Consumed by Military Subjects

The academic courses can be very demanding and require a vast amount of reading and writing. However, military studies are also very demanding: reading, war-games, simulations, drills, case studies. How can we guarantee that our officers will dedicate time to their core profession? We do it by constantly emphasising commands, by putting an effort into building a reasonable curriculum, keeping our promises and offering students a full day off dedicated to self-directed study.

4. Mixed Classes with Civilians vs. Secluded Classes

Our students usually study one day a week at the university, while other courses take place in our military college. While studying in the civilian university, we encourage our students to feel the "campus atmosphere", to mingle among the other students, to hear other opinions, and to actually contribute to the discourse between civilians and army commanders. Learning in secluded military classes encourages the same common, limited rationality of the dominant military culture. However, not all the courses can be shared with the general public, for a number of reasons: first of all, there is confidentiality; sometimes also because we wish to promote advanced, relevant professional interactions among members of the group.

5. Academic, Classic Knowledge vs. Existing, New Experience

The current conflict and the rapid changes in the battlefield have laid a new dilemma at our doorstep. New knowledge needs to be taught, some of which has not yet been formalised by the universities, or canonised by the Army's Doctrine Department, but it is nevertheless crucial, legitimate and relevant. Are all the classical paradigms still effective? What should be taken out? As mature students, holding the rank of Major or Lieutenant Colonel, our trainees have rich combat and command experience. So, learning from them is crucial. However, we must balance between classics and innovation and the right course must be checked constantly.

6. Broader Approach vs. Job-related Studies

Is it right to prepare a trainee for a specific assignment or rather for a func-

tional environment? Hence: Is it right to invest time in practical procedures or should the study of broad theories be emphasised?

Acquiring a solid theoretical basis together with a broad vision is necessary for any senior position. But all positions require experience and practical vision.

The role we aim for is generic - senior commanders and officers in HQs and general staff. It is not our purpose to train for flight professions, naval or electronic warfare, gunnery or intelligence. For these purposes there are the service schools which develop specific expertise.

The trainees, as adult learners, are particularly motivated to master the use of practical tools which will assist them in their duties as soon as they return to the field. They sometimes do not appreciate that for most of them the Colleges are the last station of acquiring military education for the years to come. They therefore often believe that it is more important for them to be trained as future "best battalion commander" or "best squadron commander".

Our insistence on a broad education for a functional environment derives from our will to advance our officers' familiarity with the organisation, the IDF as a whole included, and to create for them the ability to best participate in the design of processes and outcomes in their units. Hence, they must learn theories of command and control, force design, technology, history, management, military psychology and many other subjects. An officer must understand reality "several levels higher" than his current specific position, and also understand the needs that might occur in the battlefield, whether his commanders' or those of the military units he must support.

That is why theory is integrated into practice, academic courses together with workshops, simulations along with theoretical conceptualisation. On top of that, we stress that sometimes the theoretical context builds a talented commander, who knows how to consider substantial aspects in different situations. Usually, only when on duty after the studies, the true value of theory is realised. As a well-known say-

ing goes: "There's nothing as practical as a good theory."

7. Attractive to the Officer vs. Serving the System

An adult learner wants to have control over the course he pursues. He expects the system to offer him an attractive academic degree, for example, a programme that combines many management courses, cyber technology, economics, law and so on. However, the military profession, broad as it may seem, must focus on specific domains, and therefore the proportion of these other topics is smaller than the officer would wish. How do we balance between the two poles? This is a very complex question, and I will stress this complexity even further in my summary.

8. Academic Independence vs. Military Influence on the Curriculum

A university, by definition, grants the degrees and has the final say on the cur-

riculum. However, can't we also have a say? Is it not our right to ask for specific emphases, to point out the importance of learning certain subjects, to propose new courses, and to ask for improved teaching techniques? The answer is yes, but very carefully; this has something to do with the next point.

The military-academic education process must not be the realm of an academic professor, but of the instructors'-commanders' staff. The commander is an object of identification, an example for soldiers, and creates stimuli and learning experiences. He integrates the topics of study in the student's mind, coaches research, and is expected to follow the officer's development in the academic world as well. Our staff, as mentioned before, also teach many courses that are integrated within the academic programme. So, the staff itself must become more professional in the military realm, study and complete their PhD's, so that they can teach in the MA programmes as well.

To summarize: Our vision is to establish an independent military university

focusing on Security and Defence Studies. This university will grant BA & MA degrees, and will also have research facilities. For example, this year we have opened the "Combat Studies Institute", the main purpose of which is to serve as a military and academic think-tank for combat environment tactics, the tactical context and operational art. Its tasks will be: to examine IDF doctrines and theories, then confirm or refute them as the case may be; to develop theoretical concepts and products and answer needs in the domains of training, leadership and organisation; and to create and maintain contacts with similar organisations in other armies as well as with relevant civilian research institutes around the world.

Some of the institute's products were developed by trainees at the Colleges, mainly candidates for the position of battalion commander or staff officer in a formation. Thus some excellent studies have been made which shed new light on combat inside tunnels, on learning processes in a changing environment, on combat inside refugee camps, on coping with

a civilian population in low-intensity warfare, on the legal aspects of the fight against terrorism, on the negotiating skills required in this kind of action, and many others. Some of these studies were presented at the international conference held this year by the Ground Forces Command on the subject of low-intensity combat.

Our vision here, at the Colleges Command, is to develop an independent college for military and security studies the degrees of which will be widely respected and which will possess chairs for a variety of specifically security-oriented subjects such as military ethics, military law, military geography, military history, and more. This college would have advanced research capabilities, provided by the best minds in the State of Israel and by up-to-date facilities. The college would be attended by military officers studying full-time, before or during their service, as well as members of other security organisations in Israel and even civilians. This vision already guides our actions today and we believe it will become reality within the coming decade.

In conclusion: The challenges facing Israeli officers are enormous. The Israeli military colleges have to check themselves constantly, while building a multi-dimensional commander: a commander who is able to deal with various threats, a commander who is both philosopher and practitioner, a commander who understands the complexities, but also knows how to give simple solutions. We hope we see this mission accomplished.