

# COMMENT & FEATURES

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## Protect our soldiers

The ultra-Orthodox, the Arab population and other groups in Israeli society will perform either military or national service in increasingly larger numbers in coming years, if a special ministerial committee's recommendations are implemented.

Numerous hurdles must be overcome before members of the Peri Committee, headed by Science, Technology and Space Minister Yaakov Peri (Yesh Atid), reach a consensus. Bayit Yehudi and Yisrael Beytenu ministers are insisting that the Arab population, not just the haredim, be obligated to serve. Some ministers oppose using criminal sanctions against objectors; others are fighting a proposed extension of the military service performed by religious-Zionist soldiers in the hesder program.

Even if the ministers manage to overcome their differences and the legislation is finally passed, implementation will be no easy matter. The ultra-Orthodox and Arab communities both have strong and vocal opponents to the draft.

Regardless of the final version of the legislation, however, it is imperative that those among the haredi and Arab populations who do choose to serve their country receive the full backing – and protection – of the State of Israel.

In recent months, as the public debate over “sharing the burden” has heated up, there has been a worrying rise in incitement, intimidation and, sometimes, violence against those in the ultra-Orthodox and Arab populations who choose to enlist in the IDF.

Last October, the Christian community in Nazareth, in cooperation with the Defense Ministry, organized a conference that provided information on enlisting in the army. Several priests who support Christian youth interested in joining the IDF were in attendance as were dozens of Christian teenagers.

Video footage and pictures showing hundreds of Arab-speaking Christians participating in the conference with Israeli flags in the background sparked intense outrage in Nazareth. The Arab press launched a campaign bashing the participants; one priest who participated was banned from his church by leaders of the Christian community in the city; another had the tires of his car punctured and a blood-soaked rag left on his doorstep.

The Communist Movement in Nazareth, one of the strongest political parties in the town, has spearheaded the campaign. Hadash MKs Muhammad Barakei and Hanna Swaid participated in an anti-draft protest. Anti-draft activists have forced high school students to sign a petition declaring their opposition to the draft. Christians who serve in the IDF dare not return home in uniform for fear they will be attacked.

A similar “reign of terror” atmosphere dominates many haredi neighborhoods. “Yossi,” a resident of El Ad, told Army Radio on Sunday that after he joined the air force at the age of 30, his children were ostracized at school. He refrained from returning home in uniform because he felt uncomfortable. Speaking to Radio Kol Hai recently, Rabbi Mordechai Bloi, a veteran activist and member of the Guardians of Sanctity and Education (Mishmeret Hakodesh Vehahinuch), an organization that enforces what it sees as normative haredi behavior, likened the IDF uniform to the work clothes of a garbage collector. “Do they come to the synagogue with that terrible smell? People should feel embarrassed of wearing an IDF uniform.” Though Bloi rejected violence, he advised haredi men not to wear their uniforms in haredi neighborhoods.

The dynamic of closed, undemocratic societies, whether Arab or haredi, is such that vocal extremists, who might only represent a minority, dominate the discourse of religious and political extremism while proponents of moderation are perceived as weak. Dissent requires courage and a readiness for self-sacrifice.

The State of Israel and its law enforcers have an obligation to protect those who choose to enlist in the IDF. Too often, clashes over the issue of military service are perceived by the police as just another “internal matter” that is none of their business. This non-interventionist approach welcomes pockets of lawlessness and the free reign of the bullies.

Politicians received a mandate from voters to promote a more equal sharing of the burden of military service. But if we truly want to bring about a situation in which more haredim and non-Jews enlist, we must ensure that those who do opt to serve are protected from extremists.

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# The Kurdish momentum in the Middle East

• By OFRA BENGIO

Writing in the aftermath of the 1990 Gulf war about the Kurds of Iraq, Turkey and Iran, David McDowall was quite pessimistic about the prospects of Kurdish nationalism, saying: “One must doubt whether Kurdish nationalism can ever prevail against three hostile governments willing to apply ruthless methods to contain the challenge.”

Paradoxically enough, McDowall's assumptions were based on his intimate knowledge of Kurdish history, which taught him that the 20th century was indeed one of the worst periods in the Kurdish people's annals. However, events at the turn of the 21st century tell a different story: The convergence of regional and international transformations together with the crystallization of a strong national movement in Greater Kurdistan made the crucial difference between the two eras.

To evaluate these tectonic changes one should examine them against the background of the changing paradigms among the Kurdish, regional and international players and to highlight the causes for these changes.

## CHANGING PARADIGMS

The image and self-image of the Kurds in the 20th century was that they were the ultimate victims of modern history; that “they have no friends but the mountains”; that they are inclined to tribalism and fratricide; and that they are passive actors being cards to play with by others. However, by the beginning of the 21st century they have metamorphosed from victims to proactive players and game-changers in the region. Moreover, the Kurds have managed to internationalize their cause and mobilize support in Europe and other parts of the world.

In the past the Kurds lent themselves to the central government's policy of divide and rule both between the Kurds within one state as well as between Kurds of the different countries. The most glaring examples were the pro-government Kurdish auxiliary, the *juhush* in Iraq and the *konucu* in Turkey who fought against their Kurdish brethren, or the PKK of Turkey which fought against The KDP of Iraq. Now it seems quite unlikely that a new civil war among the Kurds will occur.

The dynamics of the 20th century were such that there were fears that the achievements of one part will be at the expense of the others. This may no longer be the case. In spite of ongoing rivalries and competitions the achievements of one part may empower the others since now, the borders are porous, and the mutual influences are

much quicker and profound than before. There is now also a Kurdish center in Iraq.

Concurrently with the changes among the Kurdish players there were changes in the states themselves. The ethos of the nation-state has suffered a severe blow. Iraq is split into two parts, the Arab part and the Kurdish part, where a quasi-state was established. In Syria the collapse of the state triggered the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region resembling in a way the Kurdish autonomous region established in Iraq in 1992. In Turkey the state had to give up the idea of a Turkish state for Turks and is now conducting a peace process with its fiercest enemy, the PKK. As to Iran, behind the façade of a nation-state, the non-Persian ethnic groups, most importantly the Kurds, are only waiting for a trigger to challenge this hegemonic state.

Throughout, the states attempted to delegitimize the Kurdish national movement by labeling it a terrorist organization that should be put down by force. Recently, however, they began to internalize in the most agonizing way that it is in fact a national movement with which they should find a *modus vivendi*. Similarly, until not too long ago the states cooperated with each other against the Kurds. Now this seems almost impossible due to the transformations in the region and the changing geopolitical map. The most glaring example is that Ankara forsook its longstanding anti-Kurdish alliance with Baghdad for the sake of an alliance with the KRG against Baghdad.

At the same time there were changing paradigms in the international arena as well. In the 20th century the Kurdish issue was considered a domestic problem in which the international community and international organizations were reluctant to interfere. However, by the beginning of the 21st century this taboo was broken. In Iraq, for example, many countries are developing relations with the KRG against the will of Baghdad.

With regard to Turkey the solution of the Kurdish domestic issue became part and parcel of the EU's condition for accepting Turkey into its fold. In other words there formed a Gordian knot between Turkey's relations with the EU and the Kurdish domestic issue. In Syria too the PYD, the leading Kurdish party, which controls the autonomous region, had managed to publicize the Kurdish cause in Europe where its leaders are personae gratae in many capitals. Interestingly, unlike the PKK, its mentor, the PYD is not considered a terrorist organization either by the EU or the US.

Another important development was that at the turn of the century the inter-

national community no longer upheld the notion of the sanctity of borders. Thus, between 1990 and 2010 the number of states in the world grew from 151 to 192, most of which arose through secession. Thus, it is possible to say that in the 21st century there has been legitimization of new entities and states.

## THE CAUSES FOR THE CHANGE

The main trigger for the change was the coming of the Americans to the region in 2003, namely the war on Iraq, and their departure at the end of 2011. This American move can be compared to the coming of the British to the region in the aftermath of World War I. The common denominator in the two cases is that they triggered the opening up of the region's geopolitical map – with one major difference, namely that in the American case it was an unplanned consequence of the war on Iraq.

The other important causes for the change were the three interrelated revolutions, namely the revolution of the new media, the Arab revolutions, and the Turkish revolution with regard to its relations with the Kurdistan Regional Government and its capital, Irbil. Turkey's revolutionary conceptualization of the KRG may be described thus: While in the past Irbil was perceived as part of Turkey's internal Kurdish problem, now it is being perceived as a partner to a possible solution. No doubt economic interests were a main driving force for Turkey's new approach.

Linked to this is the attractiveness of Kurdistan to the outside world because of oil and gas. While the prospects of finding oil in the Kurdistan region had at the end of World War I moved the British to annex the oil-rich Kurdistan region to Iraq, the attraction of this same oil to global companies has assisted the Kurds, maybe unintentionally, to begin disengaging from Iraq in the 21st century.

Another crucial factor is the role of the Kurdish diaspora, which is becoming engaged, politicized and a power to be reckoned with in the articulation of Kurdish nationalism and its goals. Yet, the most important factor is the growing assertiveness and cohesion of Kurdish nationalism in Greater Kurdistan.

## AT A CROSSROADS, YET AGAIN

The situation of the Kurds at the beginning of the 21st century resembles to an extent that of the early 20th century. In the aftermath of World War I and the division of the Kurdish homeland into four parts the Kurds were at a crossroads.

Will they be granted independence as promised in the Treaty of Sevres? Will they have autonomy in the new

Turkish state as promised by Kemal Ataturk, or will they be assimilated in the emerging new states? The latter alternative was the one which they did not choose but that was imposed upon them by the states for the next 80 years.

At the turn of the 21st century the Kurds are standing yet again at a crossroads, facing similar dilemmas and question marks. Will they have independence in the Iraqi part? Will they have an enduring autonomy in Syria? Or will they resign themselves to being equal partners in the Turkish and Iranian states?

For all the similarities there are huge differences between the two eras. While in the first case they were divided and separated, now the borders and the dividing lines are blurred. While in the first case other forces and players were acting upon and deciding for the Kurds, now the decision making has gradually shifted to the Kurds. While in the first they were cut off from the outside world now they are much more visible and vocal.

Without purporting to predict the future, the following conclusions seem fairly certain: The pace of progress is likely to be different in each of the parts of Greater Kurdistan, but the synergistic effect will continue to reverberate. The KRG is expected to move forward toward independence. As for the Kurds of Syria, they stand to hold on to their autonomy because they are much better organized than the other groups and because of their fait accompli on the ground.

Regarding the peace process between Turkey and the Kurds, it might face a lot of ups and downs, because the Turkish public is not ready yet to accept the notion of Kurdish nationalism, because the government might use the Kurdish card for tactical reasons and because the Kurds themselves are quite bewildered with the sudden changes and do not have clear-cut goals. Whatever the results of the peace process, it will be difficult to turn back the wheel on it. As to the Kurds of Iran, they are greatly influenced by the developments in the other parts but they are waiting for the tectonic shift to reach Iran.

All in all, the Kurds have learned in the hard way how to deal with governments and not be solely the proverbial card manipulated by them. The Kurds are now on the map, but much depends on them if they manage to use this momentum to alter the geopolitical map to their own advantage.

The author is senior research associate at the Moshe Dayan Center at Tel Aviv University. She is the author of *The Kurds of Iraq: Building a State within a State*.

## George Washington's Benghazi blues

• By ELIZABETH COBBS HOFFMAN

Good thing George Washington didn't have to worry about email in 1776.

Political opponents made the leader of the American Revolution's life miserable enough (and the war harder to fight) by blaming him for lost forts and agonizing retreats. Some schemed to oust the “weak” Virginian who almost “ruined” his country. Leaders of Congress for a time preferred Horatio Gates, the weaselly and opportunistic victor of the Battle of Saratoga.

Today, the American Congress is once again making a scandal out of something that isn't one, diverting attention from real problems and undermining the efficacy of the commander-in-chief. Critics' obsession with State Department emails about the September 2012 attack on America's consulate in Benghazi, and the media's parsing of President Barack Obama's every word, should remind us that petty carping is the worst response in a national crisis. A *Washington Post* blog criticized President Obama last week for having called the Benghazi attack “an act of terror,” not an “act of terrorism.”

Did I say petty?  
America's history since World War II is replete with examples of breached security and violent assaults: Pearl Harbor in 1941, the kidnapping of US ambassador to Brazil Charles Elbrick in 1969, the Iranian Hostage Crisis in 1979, the Beirut Embassy Bombing in 1983, the Oklahoma City car-bombing of 1995, and the destruction of the World Trade Towers in 2001, to name some of the most infamous.

From Roosevelt to Reagan, from Bush to Obama, American presidents (like Israeli prime ministers) have coped with threats no one saw coming, from sources they struggled to identify. Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz first identified the “fog” of war, which “gives to things exaggerated dimensions and an unnatural appearance” and makes “all data” uncertain.

Under Ronald Reagan, a Republican president strong on national security, terrorists assaulted American com-

pounds in Lebanon three times. The first attack in Beirut killed 63 people in April 1983, including CIA station chief Kenneth Haas. The second attack six months later killed 241 servicemen at the US Marine Barracks. The third attack a year after that killed 24 people and destroyed an embassy building open only six months. No one made these events into partisan “scandals.”

Nor should they have. President Reagan was no more to blame than President Obama is now. Enemies spend countless hours studying how to get through the proverbial hole in the fence, and some do. Reagan's own security was breached in 1981, when John Hinckley Jr. shot the president and three others, one of them disabled for life.

After the first Beirut bombing, three terrorist organizations claimed credit. Ambassador Robert Dillon said it was not initially clear who engineered the assault that blew him across the room, or why. Experts in Washington later decided that Hezbollah was “essentially” at fault. Nonetheless, within a few hours, Dillon stood in front of smoking ruins with a piece of paper someone placed in his hands so he would have something to say to journalists.

“My concern was... finding of the survivors, but from the point of view of the United States it was important that the media be addressed with dignity and a display of courage, even if a little false,” Dillon later admitted.

In the 1980s, one person jotted talking points on the spot. There weren't 15 iterations of email by committee, as there were in 2012. Yet officials acting in the days immediately following a crisis will never get everything “right,” nor should citizens expect more than first approximations of what went wrong and who was responsible.

It's the job of spokespeople to present a brave face. It's the job of professional analysts, including designated government investigators and private journalists, to flesh out the full story –

though fog may always obscure some information.

Today's partisan accusations that the administration “covered up” what it half-knew define carping.

Critics wildly assert that Obama knew within 72 hours that the Benghazi attack was planned, rather than spontaneous, and changed the initial report to the public to evade responsibility for a breach of security on the eve of election. But Obama's recent release of the relevant emails confirms that the administration's initial guess never varied: “Currently available information” suggested that the attacks “were spontaneously inspired by the protests the US Embassy in Cairo.” Security was breached, period.

We still do not know exactly who planned the attacks or their precise relationship to al-Qaida, and the criminal investigation remains underway.

Blame-minded Republicans in the US Congress might look in the mirror. As national security expert Amy Zegart commented in her recent book, *Eyes on Spies*, the executive branch under both Bush and Obama has worked feverishly to improve performance, but “Congress is another story” because of its endemic turf battles and obsession with re-election.

Lee Hamilton, co-chair of President Bush's 9/11 Commission, told Congress straight up in 2007, “the Senate... and House of the United States is not doing its job.”

Biographers credit George Washington for his dogged refusal to give up despite nearly constant attacks on his character. Washington certainly understood that not every reversal of fortune could be laid at the door of incompetent or self-interested leaders in the field.

One wishes the American Congress did.  
The writer is the author of *American Umpire from Harvard University Press*, and a *National Fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution*.