In Israel’s army, more officers are now religious

by Christa Case Bryant

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(*The Christian Science Monitor*) A cease-fire had just gone into effect on August 1 when Palestinian militants ambushed an Israeli reconnaissance team in southern Gaza.

Someone shouted, “Goldin’s gone!”

Lt. Hadar Goldin had been kidnapped—dragged into a nearby Hamas tunnel—and his commander killed. Lt. Eitan Fund, the deputy commander, quickly resolved to pursue the captors. Ditching all of his gear save a pistol and a flashlight, the lanky 23-year-old ran hundreds of meters into the darkness, hurtling past weapons, explosives, and other tunnels. He and his small team found the missing officer’s equipment, but not Goldin.

Thus began a massive effort led by Givati Brigade commander Col. Ofer Winter to stop Goldin’s captors. Local sources, who dubbed it Black Friday, said at least 130 Palestinians were killed in the aerial and ground assault. (Givati put the death toll at 41). By nighttime, the Israel Defense Forces had determined that Goldin was dead, based on evidence found in the tunnel.

As Gaza grieved for more than 2,100 people killed in the 51-day war, including hundreds of children, Goldin’s family mourned a young man committed to serving his nation, one of 66 Israeli soldiers killed in the conflict. In February, Fund received the highest of 53 military honors awarded for the Gaza war. Colonel Winter is still awaiting the IDF military advocate general’s decision on whether to launch a criminal investigation into the August 1 assault.

Goldin, Fund, and Winter all graduated from Bnei David, Israel’s flagship preparatory program for modern Orthodox Jews headed to the IDF. Established in 1988, Bnei David has spearheaded a swift increase in the number of religious men serving in the IDF’s officer corps and combat units.

In the early 1990s, when Fund was born, Orthodox men accounted for 2.5 percent of graduates of infantry officer training courses; since then, it's grown to more than 25 percent, according to a 2013 book. In some combat units, they make up as much as 50 percent of new officers—roughly quadruple their share of Israel's population. The upward trend, coupled with a parallel decline in the number of combat soldiers and officers coming from secular families, is dramatically changing the face of the IDF.

Many Israelis respect religious Zionists like Fund—Orthodox Jews who see the state as playing a part in the prophesied redemption of Israel—for their willingness to defend the nation.

But some worry that their worldview could change the character not only of the army—traditionally a secular "people's army," where youth of all stripes forged lasting bonds during their mandatory two- to three-year service—but the state of Israel itself. One of the most cited concerns is that if Israel agreed to a peace deal with Palestinians, the outsized influence of religious soldiers could complicate the IDF's evacuation of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

"There was sort of a vacuum, which the religious camp entered," said Amos Harel, author of *The New Face of the IDF* and veteran military correspondent for the liberal newspaper *Haaretz*. "There are troubling trends from within Israeli democracy and the state of Israel that will start affecting how the army conducts itself. But those fears have not been proven yet."

Spearheading a quiet revolution

For decades the IDF was led by secular Zionists, who went from glory to glory—most notably in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, when Israel captured the Palestinian territories, Golan Heights, and Sinai Peninsula in six days, under the command of Moshe Dayan, Yitzhak Rabin, and Ariel Sharon.

The young Israeli state was jolted in 1973, however, when Egypt and Syria coordinated a surprise attack on Yom Kippur. Within three weeks, Israel managed to repel its enemies. But the intelligence debacle would haunt Israel for decades.

While the IDF and intelligence agencies had their own tools for guarding against another such military surprise, religious Zionists saw a different need. At the intellectual headquarters of religious Zionism in Jerusalem, Rabbi Tzvi Yehuda Kook was encouraging his pupils to give the people of Israel a stronger sense of spiritual

mission. Zionism had provided the body of the state; now, they believed, religion needed to build up its soul.

One of his students was Eli Sadan, whose unit had been one of the first to cross the Suez Canal during the ’73 war, a decisive maneuver. He understood that to gain greater influence in the state, religious Zionists needed to take responsibility for defending it, which is a commandment in Jewish law. Unlike the ultra-Orthodox, religious Zionists hadn’t claimed a blanket exemption from military service, but few served in IDF combat units or the officer corps.

“I don’t think anyone can have the chutzpah to say something about the state if he is not taking part in this responsibility,” said Sadan, in the West Bank settlement of Eli.

In 1988, when only about a dozen Jewish families called this windswept hilltop home, he and Rabbi Yigal Levinstein cofounded Bnei David in a one-story industrial building. Students lived in trailers. A guy with a Volkswagen bus shuttled folks into the settlement on a bumpy dirt road.

It was a modest start, but Sadan had a long-term vision.

“In society changes can happen by a group of people who show the way and other people admire it, and this makes a dynamic process and momentum,” he said. “What I believe is that the model that we build will awaken other parts of the people [of Israel] to do the same.”

A West Point for religious Zionists

Two years after co-founding Bnei David, Sadan extended the model of a pre-army academy, or mechina, to the secular community. Today there are more than three dozen such preparatory schools, about a third of them religious, where 18-year-olds come to study full-time for a year before enlisting. According to a 2008 study by the National Security College, 80 percent of mechina students go into combat units, and 25 percent become officers—triple the national rate.

At Bnei David, it’s exceptionally high: more than 40 percent of the academy’s 2,600 graduates have become officers.

Indeed, Bnei David—meaning “sons of David” after the biblical king—stands out as a West Point of sorts for religious Zionists, combining rigorous Talmud study with lectures by rabbis and career officers, as well as physical training.

“The mechina builds … your soul, and it comes out in the battle,” said retired Lt. Col. Dror Hogibakov, a member of Bnei David’s inaugural class. He cites fellow alumnus Maj. Roi Klein’s split-second decision to throw his body over a hand grenade in the 2006 Lebanon war against Hezbollah, laying down his life to save his soldiers.

For 18-year-olds, the preparation is intense. Bnei David subscribes to the ideology of Rabbi Kook and his venerated father: defending Israel’s sovereignty over Judea and Samaria, the biblical lands known today as the West Bank, and opposing territorial compromises for peace.

This ideological uniformity initially felt like a “steamroller,” said alumnus Yishai Gutwillig. “I felt sometimes that people were not thinking,” he said. But he came to appreciate Bnei David, and said it gave him a moral decisiveness that helped him as a commander to strengthen his soldiers’ resolve.

For many graduates, that decisiveness stems from their religious beliefs. Last summer, Winter, the Givati Brigade commander, rallied his officers on the eve of battle by telling them that history had chosen them to face “the terrorist enemy, the Gazan,” and calling on them to enter the Gaza Strip in “the spirit of Jewish warriors who go out in front of the camp.”

Winter’s letter to his commanders created fierce debate in Israel. Some praised his faith and courage, but others accused him of mixing religious ideology with a military mission—which was to destroy the tunnels and stop Hamas’s rocket fire.

“The mission didn’t come from God, it came from the chief of staff and the government,” said former IDF psychologist Reuven Gal, editor of the 2013 book *Between the Yarmulke and the Beret: Religion, Politics, and the Military in Israel*.

The head of the IDF’s personnel directorate defended Winter, however, saying the letter reflected a tradition of commanders drawing on their worldview to inspire soldiers.

And in January, after the Israeli press published leaked video footage of the August 1 fighting, Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon rejected calls for a criminal investigation

into Winter's Givati Brigade. Benny Gantz, then-chief of staff, also responded, saying, "Everyone should know the commanders are the best there are."

Reconciling spiritual and military authority

Many secular soldiers say they appreciate the commitment of religious soldiers and their willingness to serve in combat and officer positions, especially as secular enlistment in such positions has fallen.

"I think it's really, really important that you have guys like that because today it's not something you can take for granted," said Tomer, a former soldier in southern Lebanon, while waiting for a seat at a Tel Aviv café.

However, a young secular commander from the Givati Brigade said that a classroom debate during his officer training raised a red flag—one that speaks to a wider divide in Israeli society: whether religious soldiers should be required to evacuate Israeli settlements to make way for a Palestinian state.

The religious soldiers in the course argued against participating, and some Israelis are sympathetic to such views; a recent study by the Israel Democracy Institute found that nearly 40 percent thought soldiers opposed to such an evacuation should refuse orders.

"It's quite a problem if you create an entire unit of commanders that will refuse to evacuate a settlement," said the Givati commander, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he is still on active duty.

IDF tested by Gaza withdrawal

Israel's 2005 withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, in which Israel removed more than 8,000 settlers from their homes, was a test case of sorts for the IDF.

Maj. Gen. Elazar Stern, the IDF's head of human resources and a religious Zionist himself, ensured there was ample manpower to carry out the operation. While some religious soldiers were exempted from the operation, others were not—though they were assigned tasks that didn't involve them directly in evictions of settlers. Sadan weighed in with a rare pamphlet, saying Jewish soldiers should not refuse to follow orders. In the end, about three dozen soldiers officially disobeyed orders.

But a withdrawal from West Bank settlements would involve removing tens of thousands of residents, or more—a far greater task, Gal said.

He adds that it's "unacceptable" that a soldier would find himself in a situation where they have to listen to two different sources of authority, his commander and his rabbi.

Sadan said it's not about a rabbi wielding control over soldiers, however, but helping clarify Jewish law and its application to the complex ethical situations soldiers face—not unlike an accountant advising a client on tax law.

"He's doing what the rabbi says not because the rabbi is his commander; God is his commander," Sadan said. "He wants to know what God says to him, but he doesn't know the details, so he asks the rabbi, 'Can you tell me what is forbidden and what is allowed according to the Torah?' "

So does the Torah allow the removal of settlements? Bnei David rabbis believe that evicting Jews from their homes and turning the land over to Palestinians runs counter to the army's task of exercising sovereignty over the land of Israel, and thus goes against the grain of Jewish law. But they recognize that a mass refusal of orders would undermine the IDF's mission. Therefore, they say the preferred course would be redirecting religious soldiers to alternative tasks.

More prominent role for religious Zionists?

While some Israelis fear a religious takeover of the army or the state's other institutions, many in Eli say it would be counterproductive to force their views on others. Rather, they see their role as leading by example, reasoning with them, and then letting them make up their own minds.

"God finds the way to make people make the right choices," said Amiad Cohen, CEO of Eli, who studied at Bnei David and later taught at a secular yeshiva in Tel Aviv. "Give them the knowledge and let them choose."

Last December, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin visited Eli, wading through a sea of eager young men to a packed hall. Flanked by Sadan, the president took issue with the rabbi's claim in a recent TV interview that Israel was not ready for a religious chief of staff.

“I’m certain that in the not-distant future, a religious chief of staff will be appointed in the IDF,” said Mr. Rivlin, adding that Israel was even ready for a religious prime minister. “However, he will be appointed to his role not because he is religious, but rather because he is talented.”

Then the president’s car wound down the nicely paved streets of Eli, now an epicenter of the growing strength of religious Zionists in Israel—many of whom go on to work in intelligence agencies or government ministries after the army.

“We believe we have a mission and each of us … needs to do his part,” said Shilo Adler, a battalion commander who fought in the second intifada and 2006 Lebanon war and was chief of staff in the last government’s ministry for senior citizens. “Also when we go out [of the army], it’s not finished…. We continue to serve the country.”