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'Judaism is not the IDF's enemy'

Knesset panel on role of religion in IDF sparks heated debate between national-religious, secular MKs

• By LAHAV HARKOV

Discussion on whether religion is forced on IDF soldiers grew heated in the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee panel on manpower and training Monday.

The arguing began before the meeting officially did, with MK Yoni Chetboun (Bayit Yehudi) protesting the wording of its topic, which used a Hebrew term that he felt means a religious takeover, but **Dr. Reuven Gal**, a researcher on religion in the IDF, said translates to "religionization" and is not necessarily a negative word.

Subcommittee on manpower and training chairman Omer Bar-Lev (Labor) addressed concerns that religious factors are changing the IDF's character.

Bar-Lev said he called the meeting after two incidents in Operation Protective Edge: one in which Givati Brigade commander Col. Ofer Winter

sent a letter of encouragement to his soldiers with religious overtones and biblical references, and another in which Golani Brigade soldiers leaving the South were taken to the Western Wall, where they recited the blessing for having survived a life-endangering situation.

"Oh no, the Western Wall," Chetboun said sarcastically.

"These aren't extreme actions. The paratroopers all go to the Western Wall, even if they're not religious," MK Mordechai Yogeve (Bayit Yehudi) pointed out.

OC Manpower Brig.-Gen. Gadi Agmon said that nothing is happening in the IDF that could be called "religionization," and the IDF makes sure there is equality for all and loyalty to the state, while integrating different population groups, as part of it being "the people's army."

"There are clear orders on the topic. No one is required to

attend religious services in the IDF. There is no religious coercion and every soldier has the right to decide if he wants to take part in a religious event," Agmon stated.

As for Winter's letter, Agmon said that every commander can write letters based on his values and worldview, whether that means biblical references or quoting Berl Katznelson.

Bar-Lev accused Agmon and religious MKs in the committee of feigning innocence and that Winter and the Golani officer's behavior is "outside of the acceptable norms in the IDF, which raises question marks."

"There's nothing wrong with it if the soldiers were given a choice," MK Aliza Lavie (Yesh Atid), who is Orthodox, told Bar-Lev. "The IDF isn't the same as it was when you were there; 40 percent of officers' course cadets are religious."

MK Yisrael Hasson (Kadima) wondered why the IDF even

counts people who wear kipot, asking if they also count redheads and people with mustaches.

"This whole meeting is inappropriate and should not take place in the Knesset. Judaism is not the enemy of the IDF or of Israel; Hamas and Hezbollah are. Judaism is an essential part of our roots here. This is an attempt to separate the Jewish people from their roots," Yogeve stated.

However, MK Nitzan Horowitz (Meretz) lamented that he received many complaints from IDF soldiers who said they faced religious coercion.

A representative from the Soldiers' Ombudsman's Office said that during Protective Edge he received six complaints related to religion, all of which were from religious soldiers who felt their commanders did not let them have a religious lifestyle.

Chetboun responded that the numbers speak for them-

selves, and there is no religious coercion.

Gal said concern about "religionization" of the IDF is rooted in the possibility of soldiers putting rabbinical authority before the chain of command.

"When Turkey was more secular, if any soldier said anything religious, he was dismissed, because he was following an authority other than his commander. In Iran, everything is run religiously," he said, before Lavie interrupted.

"If you want people to listen to you, you need to give normal examples. I'm closing my ears," Lavie stated.

Chetboun said that **Gal** and other researchers are "trying to destroy the last nature reserve in which the different parts of Israeli society work together in dedication to their homeland."

"The IDF is showing the numbers and saying this phenomenon doesn't exist, but some researchers and MKs refuse to believe it. They're obsessively trying to destroy what unites us as one Israeli Zionist society," Chetboun added.

Yesh Atid faction chairman Ofer Shelah (Yesh Atid) took the middle ground, saying that clearly there is a more religious atmosphere in the IDF than there used to be, but it is natural because there are more religious combat soldiers these days.

"If you don't like it, then send your kids to be combat soldiers," he said to the secular people in the room.

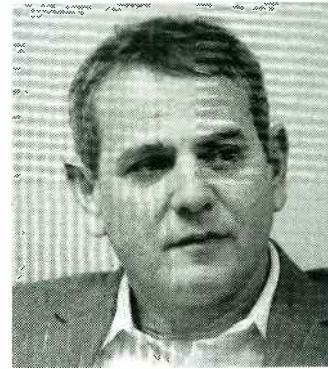
At the same time, Shelah said the situation is also a result of the IDF cutting its education budget and allowing NGOs to hold activities for soldiers, most of which are religious.

Bar-Lev closed the meeting by calling for balance in the content of programming from IDF education soldiers and those from the IDF rabbinate.

"Anyone who thinks everything is fine is feigning innocence. This is a topic that the public is concerned about, and we will continue to follow it," he said.



OMER BAR-LEV
(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)



NITZAN HOROWITZ
(Marc Israel Sellem/The Jerusalem Post)