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Position Paper

Sde Teiman and Beit Lid Events:

A Reading into the Militiazation of the Israeli State

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The storming by right-wing groups of the Sde Teiman military camp in the Negev—a brutal detention center for residents of Gaza—and the Beit Lid barracks on the same day, as well as the support these groups received from cabinet ministers and members of the Israeli Knesset, raised a question about the transformations that Israeli society and state institutions are undergoing today.

This paper argues that these raids are one of many indicators of the disintegration of the concept of "statism" ("*mamlakhtiyot*" in Hebrew) in the thought and behavior of leaders and broad segments of Israeli society. They also point to the emergence of a militia mentality among these sectors, a mentality that has also penetrated the ranks of soldiers and units of the Israeli army. The storming of Sde Teiman followed the arrest by the military police of eight soldiers from "Unit 100" that supervises the prison for raping a Palestinian detainee from the Gaza Strip, which led to his transfer to the hospital in critical condition. The soldiers in the detention center had published a video calling on "the people of Israel" to intervene to prevent the arrests. Groups accompanied by members of the Knesset from the coalition supporting the government stormed the detention center, and then the "Beit Lid" camp, where the soldiers' arrest warrant was going to be extended that evening.

This paper attempts to analyze the causes and indicators of the disintegration of statism in Israel and the rise of militiazation in Israeli society and among political and military elites. There is a clear link between the two phenomena, as each one feeds the other, which makes it less likely for either of them to weaken. Needless to say, these did not arise from the war on Gaza but were more clearly exposed because of it.

Imposing Statism, Disarming Militias

With the declaration of the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948, Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion worked to impose the principle of "statism" and to remove the militia character of Jewish militarism during the British Mandate period. Statism aims to expropriate the interests of individuals or social sectors in favor of the supreme interest of the state,¹ place its security and interest centerstage, mobilize human and material resources and capabilities in its service, and remove individualism and maximize collectivism for the interest of the state.²

The dismantling of the militias by force of arms came when the "new" Israeli Army sank the ship "Altalena" that carried a cache of weapons for the paramilitary organization "Etzel" (Irgun Tzvai Leumi) after a series of armed confrontations. This incident led to the death of 19 people, 16 of whom were on board the ship and three were members of the army. Ben-Gurion aimed to impose the principle of one army, one weapon, and one organizational and military hierarchy that is subject to state authority. Here lies

the relationship between statism and the idea of a people's army, whereby the army works to dissolve political, ideological, and class differences in order to serve the state and its supreme interests. However, the state system was unable to resolve the question of religion and state, but left it open in the "status quo agreement" that Ben-Gurion signed with the Haredi religious parties before the declaration of the State of Israel. It also failed to resolve the question of the identity of the civil state by refraining from drafting a constitution that guarantees rights and freedoms, thus continuing the agenda of a colonial state that persists in trying to eliminate the Palestinian national movement.

Imposing Militias, Weakening the State

Much Israeli literature warns against retreating from the "statist" character coined by Ben-Gurion,³ and is today concerned with elevating and magnifying the state and its interests over regional, personal, and factional interests. It is represented today in Israeli discourse by emphasizing internal unity and rejecting social division. The truth is that statism has failed to achieve its goal, and this is not only related to the nature of Israeli society as a society of immigrants, but also for three central reasons: the failure to produce a solid Israeli civil identity; the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands; and the failure to resolve the question of the relationship between religion and the state early on, a prospect that is no longer possible. Many of the new theories about the importance of returning to statism and renewing it are dominated by a rhetorical discourse and unrealistic wishes to achieve it.⁴

The political right in Israel soon took over the conversation and contributed to the disintegration of the state. Its latest project to weaken state institutions came in the form of constitutional changes that it tried to implement and continues to do so today. These changes aim to affirm Israel's character as an ethnic-religious Jewish state at the expense of the civil identity, and to attempt to resolve the issue of occupation by annexing the West Bank and deepening the settlement project. Additionally, the changes aim to resolve the issue of religion and state by giving dominance to the religious establishment. Thus, weakening the state's institutions aims to control and harness them for the right's agenda in the three axes mentioned above.

Renewed talk about statism today is simply a reflection of its demise and disintegration. Indeed, in the transitional period, it contributes to the submission of the state's institutions to right-wing hegemony.⁵ This was recently seen in the transformation of the police force into an arm of the right, and in the prevalent fear of other institutions to challenge this hegemony, for which organized militias that violate statism—and even the law—have been recruited without accountability. In fact, this reality has political support from state institutions, such as the militias that appeared in the Dignity Intifada (2021) and pursued and terrorized the Palestinian residents of Lod, Acre, and Ramla, and the settler

militias that practice terrorism against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. These militias reached the point of mass attacks and killings in the town of Hawara, receiving political support amid the silence and complicity of state institutions such as the army and police.

The weakness of the state was evident also in the complicity with the right-wing socialized militia atmosphere, especially when it came to targeting and assaulting Palestinians, and finally in the political tolerance of organized groups storming the Sde Teiman prison and the Beit Lid base. This tolerance manifests in providing political support to these militias, not holding them accountable, and even guarding and supporting them, as often happens with the organized militias that assault Palestinians inside the Green Line and in the occupied West Bank. The leniency with the militias was evident even in the emergence of a militia climate in the army, and the establishment of ideologically consistent military units such as the "Netzah Yehuda" battalion.⁶ This is even further represented by the introduction of religious Zionist rabbis into the military and instituting a system of military religious schools that graduate religious nationalist soldiers who consider the rabbi to be their highest authority. The new soldiers see the army as a tool that serves the settlement project. There are hundreds of cases and examples that prove the militization of the army at the level of individuals, units, or groups.

The army has accepted the militization within its ranks, as was the case of the soldier Elor Azaria who killed the Palestinian Abdel Fattah al-Sharif in 2016 as he lay wounded on the ground. This case highlighted an old internal conflict between the Ashkenazi and Mizrahi military elites,⁷ which was compounded by the deepening militization in the army with the support of soldiers and politicians. The Azaria case was only an example. Events followed that worsened this proclivity, and the war on Gaza further exposed this phenomenon among more individuals and military units. The latest of these events was the rhetoric of the new Gaza Division Commander, Barak Hiram,⁸ which represents the transformation of the army into a tool in a religious war.⁹ More importantly, the appointment of Hiram represents the army's submission to militia agendas in thought and deed within the military establishment, which itself is a step on the path to the army's disintegration.¹⁰ The idea of the "People's Army" carries the seeds of militia thought. Maintaining this at all costs—in light of the social, economic, and political transformations through which Israeli society is going—pushes the army to submit to ideological and political demands within its ranks that ultimately lead to the emergence of militia tendencies, the goal of which is the very opposite of the idea of the People's Army. Over time, this becomes the basis on which militias grow in thought and behavior within the military institution.

In this regard, what happened in "Sde Teiman" can be interpreted as a rebellion by soldiers against military orders. Their call to the "people of Israel" to protect them, which led—in a short period of time—to the organization of large groups supported by

ministers and politicians to defend the accused soldiers and attempt to forcibly remove them from the Ofer military base. It also showed the weakness of the state in confronting them and holding them accountable. With its project of weakening the state and its institutions, the right aims to deepen militia tendencies in the army in order to prevent the dismantling of the settlement project in the West Bank, or even a part of it as was the case in Gaza in 2005. The Gaza withdrawal was a great shock that led the Israeli right to begin implementing its agenda of dominating the state by weakening its institutions and dominating the army by introducing militia tendencies into it. This process took place gradually and reached its peak in the plan for constitutional amendments in 2023 and in the removal of the supposedly "sacred" character of the army by attacking it if it conflicted with the interests of the colonial project. At the same time, the "ideologization" of the police in a way that serves the agenda of the extreme right continues apace.

Conclusion

The events of October 7 revealed the weakness and disintegration of the state through the weakness of the concept of statism. Over the past two decades, the right has played the primary role in weakening the state's institutions in order to incorporate them into its settlement project in the West Bank on the one hand, and to be subordinate to this project on the other. The right aims to dominate state institutions and to dislodge their old elites, or what can be called the "deep state." The right's method combines a populist discourse with a retreat from the liberal transformations that the state and its institutions underwent in the 1990s and intends to redefine the state as a Jewish state in harmony with religious Zionism. Such a project appeared in the legislation of the Basic Law of the State of Israel as the State of the Jewish People in 2018, known as the Nation-State Law.

Ben-Gurion realized that the strength of the Zionist project lies in strengthening the Israeli state, and in eliminating militia thought from the Israeli army, which played a social role in building the single "nation" of immigrants. What has been unfolding in Israel for decades, and which the war on the Gaza Strip has deepened and exposed, is the dissolution of statism and the broadening of militia thought among individuals, officers, and military units, representing a real existential threat to the State of Israel.

1. Tehila Freidman, "To Return to Statism," Shalom Hartman Institute, February 6, 2023 (Hebrew).
2. Nir Kedar and Avi Bareli, (2011). Israeli Republicanism. Policy Paper No. 87, Jerusalem, [The Israel Democracy Institute](#).
- 3 See, for example, Tamar Herman and Ofer Schiff, Eds., *21 Thought about Israeli Statism*, Ra'anana: Open University, 2023. (Hebrew). See also Yedidia Stern, Ed. *Statism in the 21st Century*, Jerusalem, The Israel Democracy Institute, 2021, (Hebrew).
4. See Ari Shavit, *Existential War: From Catastrophe to Victory to Renaissance*, Tel Aviv, Yedioth Publications, 2024, (Hebrew).
5. *Haaretz* Editorial, "Ben-Gvir's Police," March 2, 2023.
6. Yael Levy, "The Israeli army and the state have abandoned Netzah Yehuda," April 25, 2024. (Hebrew)
7. Eastwood, James. (2018). "Reading Abdul Fattah al-Sharif, reading Elor Azaria: Anti Mizrahi racism in the moral economy of Zionist settler colonial violence," *Settler Colonial Studies* 9(1). Pp. 59–77.
8. He was an army officer, and commanded army forces, including special forces, on October 7, and dozens of soldiers under his command were killed during the clashes. Later, he gave the order to bomb a house in which Israeli hostages were being held in Kibbutz Be'eri, which led to the deaths of 13 Israelis and all Hamas fighters. Hiram decided to bomb the house even though one of the Hamas leaders in the house had decided to surrender, taking with him an Israeli hostage. This did not prevent Hiram from bombing the house with two tank shells. Despite this, the army reported that Hiram acted professionally, and he was even promoted to commander of the Gaza Division. During the war, Hiram gave the order to bomb Gaza University in the Strip for no security reason.
9. Mohanad Mustafa, "Religion in the War on Gaza," Mada al-Carmel, December 2014.
10. Yael Levy, "This is how an army disintegrates," *Haaretz*, March 19, 2024. (Hebrew)



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