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Israel: National Security Decision-Making in a Leaky Political Fishbowl

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The article is a first attempt to systematically assess the impact of leaks on Israeli decision-making. Five major cases were studied on three levels: whether leaks affected the process, policies adopted, and outcomes. Leaks had a strong impact in two cases, but not on the policies adopted, or outcomes, in any of the cases analyzed. As a tentative conclusion, most leaks are about Israel’s broad strategic thinking and the politics thereof, rather than hard information. The primary impact is on process, important in itself, not substance.

Introduction

It is commonplace in Israel today that virtually everything leaks. A standing joke among officials is that the only difference between information marked “top secret, for your eyes only” and media coverage is two days. Indeed, leaks have become a seemingly unstoppable scourge of the Israeli decision-making process, and are thought to affect it significantly.

There is much anecdotal evidence to substantiate this belief, and certainly no one with even a cursory familiarity with the Israeli decision-making process would deny that a significant problem exists. To date, however, little or no systematic analysis has been conducted to substantiate this common wisdom,1 and the question is whether the problem is truly as severe as thought and how and in what ways leaks, and the fear of leaks, actually have an impact on the decision-making process. This article is an initial attempt to close this lacuna in the existing literature.

The impact of leaks will be assessed in five major case studies and a number of smaller ones on the basis of the following criteria: whether they affected the decision-making process, the policies or positions Israel adopted, and the outcomes achieved. The five major case studies are: development of the Lavi fighter aircraft (1974–1987); Israeli-Palestinian negotiations (2000); the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon (2000); unilateral disengagement from Gaza (2005); and the war in Lebanon (2006).

The Israeli Decision-Making Process: Primary Characteristics

Israel’s national security decision-making processes are shaped by three primary causal factors: a uniquely harsh and dangerous external environment, characterized by rapid and sweeping change and only limited malleability, which greatly affects and circumscribes Israel’s national security choices; Israel’s proportional representation electoral system, which causes deep political fragmentation, a consequent need to govern through coalition government and intense politicization; and the relative weakness of the primary civilian national security organs in the national decision-making process (the foreign and defense ministries and the National Security Council), compared to the Israel Defense Forces.
The first pathology is that Israeli decision-making is characterized by a nearly total preoccupation with the present and immediate future and thus suffers from deficient forethought and policy planning. Among the consequences are often poorly formulated policy objectives, priorities, and options; continual improvisation and crisis management; and sequential decision-making.

Second, the decision-making process at the cabinet (but not bureaucratic) level is highly politicized. The unremitting battle to preserve the coalition means that political considerations often reign supreme, and that the cabinet and Ministerial Committee on Defense (MCoD), the sub-cabinet forum established especially for purposes of discreet and expeditious decision-making, are primarily the loci of strident partisan debate, rather than substantive policy deliberation.

Third, the premier has few formal prerogatives and is often at the mercy of his party and coalition partners and his ability to govern is almost entirely dependent on his political skills and de facto power at any given moment. A powerful leader when in firm control of his party and coalition, the premier is typically forced into endless political give and take. The cabinet has become dysfunctional due to its unmanageable size and politicized character and the MCoD, too, has also become far too large and politicized. Consequently, most decision-making is done in small, informal settings, leaving Israel without an effective statutory forum for policy formulation.

Fourth, the Israeli decision-making process remains unusual for its informal and idiosyncratic character, with leaders’ beliefs and preferences bearing a heavy impact on the decisions made, often at the expense of systematically derived conclusions stemming from an institutionalized decision-making process. This tendency is further reinforced by inadequate parliamentary and bureaucratic checks and balances.

Finally, the defense establishment, first and foremost the IDF, and defense considerations, have an unusual degree of influence on the national decision-making process, far beyond that typical of other Western democracies. The IDF has by far the most highly developed policymaking capabilities and is the primary bureaucratic player, framing issues and presenting objectives, priorities, options, and recommendations. The IDF does not always prevail. Indeed, numerous major decisions have been made over its objections or even without its knowledge. However, it is the single most powerful bureaucratic player by far.

Needless to say, the Israeli decision-making process also has some strengths. If the unplanned and improvisational character of the Israeli decision-making process is among its primary pathologies, the extraordinarily frenetic nature of Israel’s environment means that the ability to rapidly adapt to new circumstances is also a vital strength and has become a sphere of national excellence. The severity of the threat also stimulates a tendency to creativity in the formulation of options, particularly at the operational level.

Political discourse in Israel is highly charged, but the national security establishment itself takes a distinctly pragmatic, problem-solving approach. For the most part, it focuses strictly on the professional ramifications of issues and does its utmost to avoid being drawn into the political debate. Moreover, if one looks beneath the veneer of rhetoric and party politics, dynamic and pragmatic decision-making, not rigidity and ideological conviction, typify most Israeli leaders. The West Bank, settlements, and Jerusalem (all related) are the primary exceptions to this general rule.

The national security establishment is comparatively small, most officials know each other personally, and informal ties facilitate common understanding and ease and speed of
communications. New issues tend to “percolate” quickly and there is usually little difficulty in bringing issues to decision makers’ attention or identifying both those responsible for, and capable of dealing with, an issue.

Although Israel’s national security environment has grown significantly in recent years, in both breadth and complexity, many of the basic issues that have been a major part of its national life since the early decades remain so to this day. As such, most of the major issues are clearly defined and are well-known to decision makers, and a comparatively high degree of expertise prevails.

Like all organizations, the Israeli national security establishment has its own ways of thinking. It is, however, not a closed elite. Civil-military borders are highly porous and IDF officers lead lives that are fully integrated within the general population, are in frequent contact with civil, political, and business leaders, and travel abroad extensively, further exposing them to different ways of thinking. Turnover is high, with most officers retiring at relatively young ages.

Israel’s judiciary intervenes in national security affairs as do few, if any, others in the world and IDF policies and operational practices have been repeatedly amended or overturned. Israel is reported and often skewered by both the domestic and international media and is engaged in a deep ongoing exchange with the international community, exposing the national security establishment to additional approaches and constraints. Short-term difficulties aside, judicial review, media coverage, and domestic and international opinion serve as important policy inputs and “reality checks.”

The failures of the decision-making process are partly offset by the quality of the people involved at all levels and their deep commitment to shared goals. Moreover, the national security establishment has grown tremendously in recent decades, in size, organizational complexity, and sophistication. New organizational structures have been added, existing ones greatly expanded, and staff work within the various agencies has improved markedly. The system also benefits from a number of centers of excellence, such as the intelligence agencies, IDF Planning Branch, Air Force, and more. For the most part, however, this is largely operational excellence, not cabinet-level policymaking, which is the primary problem.4

How Leaks Affect the Process5

Israel is a chaotic democracy with a frenetic political style. Ministers, who are political figures in their own right, rather than professional or political appointees, must continually jockey to shore up their positions and ensure their political fortunes. Indeed, their future usually has far less to do with how effectively they run their ministries, than how successfully they pander to their party constituency and the media. With an extraordinarily intensive 24/7 news cycle, volatile party politics, and short electoral cycles, ministers—including prime ministers—have no choice but to devote inordinate time to intra-party politics and the next day’s headlines, no less than to the affairs of state. Spin control, courting party activists, building a party base, and maneuvering to build support for various policies all consume an enormous share of their time.

With what may be some hyperbole, one former senior official estimated that Israel’s leaders are forced to spend 80 percent of their time on political survival, rather than policy, and that there were only three weeks during Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s entire tenure in which he was confident that his coalition would last to the end of the week. A different official was only slightly more restrained in his assessment of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s tenure, stating that Olmert was never sure whether each quarter would be his last in office.6
In these circumstances, maintaining the coalition often becomes an end in itself, a nearly full-time preoccupation that supersedes policy considerations.

In this high-paced, cutthroat political environment, media coverage, and the leaks central to it, are the “political oxygen” that breathes life into ministers’ political futures and ability to promote preferred policies. Cabinet meetings entail significant political grandstanding, rather than true policy deliberation, as many ministerial statements are made with an eye to media coverage, and indeed are often designed to be leaked. Furthermore, matters are often leaked prior to cabinet meetings in the attempt to affect the outcome. Leaks are also commonly used as a means of “testing the waters,” in terms of both substantive feedback on different policy options and, no less importantly, the domestic and international reaction to them. The bottom line is that little substantive and discreet decision-making can be conducted in the cabinet and MCoD.

Leaks at the cabinet level are endemic, including the premier and his staff, who are often among the biggest leakers, and thus no one truly has an interest in clamping down. Until Olmert banned the use of cell phones during cabinet meetings, ministers would commonly update reporters on what was being said as it happened, and radio and TV audiences could follow cabinet deliberations in real time. Needless to say, the ministers’ accounts were not always totally accurate and were at least partially designed to affect the course of cabinet debate and public perceptions both of them and of rival ministers. When this ban proved insufficient, Olmert then sought to bar ministers from stepping out of cabinet meetings to call reporters or to update their spokespersons so that they could do so.7 This, of course, had no effect on the long-established practice whereby ministers meet with the throng of reporters waiting outside the cabinet building to interview them immediately after meetings, or on leaks at other times.

To circumvent, or at least minimize, the danger of leaks, premiers tend to do most substantive decision-making in two primary types of informal settings. The first includes the various incarnations of the so-called “kitchen cabinets,” such as the “septet” convened by Olmert, or the “octet,” “septet,” and ultimately “nonet” convened by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his second term. These forums met on a regularly scheduled basis, bringing the most senior and influential ministers together for discreet and expeditious deliberations. Lacking in statutory authority, they could not make decisions, but their conclusions served as highly influential recommendations for the formal decision-making bodies such as the cabinet or MCoD. A second primary variation on the informal settings has been small-group consultations convened by the premier, usually with the defense minister, chief of staff, and other senior defense officials as needed, possibly the foreign minister and maybe one or two trusted ministers and advisers. Most truly sensitive decisions are made in these latter informal consultations and then presented either to the cabinet or MCoD for formal, at times almost pro forma, approval.

If the cabinet leaks endlessly, plenary meetings of the Knesset Foreign and Defense Affairs Committee (FADAC) have become almost open forums. Consequently, the various national security agencies tend to make only highly general presentations in the plenum, typically designed to obfuscate, rather than illuminate, to uphold the principle of parliamentary oversight while minimizing the danger of leaks.8 Conversely, FADAC does have a number of subcommittees in which truly discreet discussions are held and in which substantive presentations are made.

It is not just the politicians who leak, though they are by far the primary source, but parts of the national security bureaucracy as well. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is widely recognized in Israel to have become a veritable sieve. Most MFA leaks are thought to originate with the minister, or his staff, some from the director-general,9 but to a far
greater extent than other agencies many stem from MFA officials at various levels. In these circumstances, ministry officials are hesitant to put sensitive reports (diplomatic “cables”) in writing, preferring informal or direct channels of communication to decision makers, and the entire system loses out on what is often important information.

The never-ending leaks from the MFA make other, more closed-minded agencies, such as the IDF or intelligence agencies, reluctant to share information with it and to engage in collaborative inter-agency efforts. Indeed, the intelligence agencies long ago ceased transferring sensitive information to the MFA’s intelligence arm, the Center for Diplomatic Research (akin to the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research) and unlike the other intelligence services (Military Intelligence, Mossad and Shin Bet) it is not a member of the inter-service coordinating committee (known by its Hebrew acronym VARASH).10

The IDF enjoys unusual public stature and legitimacy in Israel due to its image as the guarantor of the nation’s existence, role as the national melting pot, and popular association with much of what is successful in Israel. As a consequence, the IDF has a huge impact on public opinion, which attributes far greater veracity to its statements than to political leaders. Given this popular prestige, turning to the public, whether on the record or through leaks, is a highly effective means by which the IDF affects policy.

Sensitive leaks from within the ranks of the IDF and especially the intelligence services are rare. Conversely, agency leaders conduct off-the-record briefings for the media primarily as a means of informing the public and shaping public opinion, but at times also to influence foreign governments and the course of events. The defense minister, chief of staff and other senior defense officials clearly leak as well, though unlike the MFA these appear to be more policy-based leaks, rather than simply an attempt to promote their organization’s stature. The recurrent IDF leaks regarding the potential impact of budgetary cuts, bordering on scare tactics, during the annual budgetary process is an important exception to this general observation.

Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin feared that the “leaking disease” would have an impact even on issues of strategic importance and thus chose to conduct policy planning primarily within the defense establishment, to minimize the danger. Premiers, however, rarely trust even the defense establishment fully, and Rabin himself kept the Oslo talks (1993) with the Palestinians secret from it until a relatively advanced stage. He refrained from telling the cabinet, including Foreign Minister Peres, about his conditional willingness to withdraw from the Golan Heights, out of fear that a leak of this concession, prior to conclusion of a final agreement, would lead to a political uproar and a collapse of the talks.11 Sharon restricted intelligence briefings even in meetings of the MCoD. Senior officials at the time found their own ways of dealing with the danger of leaks; Mossad Director Halevy largely refrained from speaking in MCoD meetings and the head of the Shin Bet simply chose not to attend at times.12

Prime Minister Ehud Barak was known to harbor a deep fear of leaks and to believe that the moment he said something he no longer had control over it. On important matters he therefore sought to minimize written documentation and avoided meetings, both large and small, preferring instead to consult with people on a one-to-one basis. By doing so, he could know who had leaked what and partly protect himself. Under Barak, an Israeli leak of the draft peace accord with Syria resulted in a suspension of negotiations.13 Olmert shared Barak’s fears. In January 2006, for example, he convened a closed meeting of ministers and defense officials regarding the ramifications of the upcoming Palestinian elections, but instructed participants not to make recommendations
out of fear that leaks would create the impression that Israel was considering intervening in internal Palestinian affairs.\textsuperscript{14} Netanyahu forced his senior advisers to undergo polygraph tests, in the attempt to stop leaks. He canceled a meeting of the MCoD after leaks from a previous meeting, in which the national intelligence assessment had been presented, and considered forcing ministers to submit to polygraph tests as well.\textsuperscript{15} In 2011, the split within the cabinet on Israeli policy toward the Iranian nuclear program became public.

Sharon’s bureau chief, Weisglass, explained premiers’ reluctance to fully open up, even before senior defense officials, as follows: After meetings with the premier, each participant convenes his own senior staff and presents the premier’s thinking to them. Each of these officials in turn then updates his own staff and the number of those “in the know” grows exponentially. As a result, premiers avoid putting themselves in this kind of situation without first considering the ramifications of a possible leak. According to Weisglass:

Every premier’s working assumption today is that not a single word said in his office [remains secret], except for maybe the most sensitive intelligence channels and special operations . . . People who participate in military meetings [leak] the minute they leave . . . An unfortunate phrase, a harmless joke, can result in a vote of no confidence . . . [or] an international uproar.\textsuperscript{16}

The problem is not just the sensitivity of leaks from a security or diplomatic perspective, but the loss of control over an issue once it gets out and becomes embroiled in Israel’s raging partisan politics. Indeed, premiers’ fear of leaks and consequent politicization of an issue is so great that it often outweighs their calculus of the potential benefits to be derived from systematic policy planning. Policy planning requires a willingness to share one’s thinking with others, bring them into a process, and elucidate policy objectives, priorities, and possible options, but for an Israeli premier living in a coalition cauldron the risks are often too great. An objective or option raised for no more than initial consideration, let alone a conceptually developed policy initiative, is likely to become highly charged politically and risks a rift with the premier’s coalition partners and even his own party. Indeed, the moment the premier’s thinking becomes known to the cabinet, and certainly to the media, he no longer controls the process.

Consequently, premiers and ministers are reluctant to present sensitive information or their true positions to the cabinet and MCoD, to each other and to senior officials, and tend to “keep their cards close to their chests.” If at all, they are usually willing to present their true thinking only to a few trusted confidantes, in one-on-one meetings, very small groups, or the relatively closed confines of the defense establishment. Even policy planning in the defense establishment and small informal forums may become known and pose unacceptable political costs.

The fear of leaks is so deep that premiers and other senior officials also commonly refrain from disseminating the substance of their talks with foreign leaders to the national security establishment, especially their own positions, thereby denying officials a full appreciation of the processes under way. The IDF and intelligence services, either at their own volition or at the direction of the premier or defense minister, refrain at times from presenting the full range of information and options to the cabinet and MCoD, saving this for the smaller and more discreet forums.
Case Studies: Life in a Political Fishbowl

The article details five case studies along with four additional incidents to assess the impact of leaks on the decision-making process. The cases were chosen for the following reasons: First, they include some of the more momentous issues Israel has faced in recent decades, including historic decisions to go to war or make peace, with fundamental political, ideological, and strategic considerations. Second, although Israel was reacting to strong external pressures in all of the cases, they were not so extreme as to compel decision makers to respond in a particular manner and they consequently enjoyed the freedom to choose from a number of options. Third, the cases occurred under a variety of premiers and coalitions, thereby hopefully neutralizing potential differences stemming from the character of a given one. The one outlier among the cases, the development of the Lavi fighter, was chosen precisely because it appeared so different from the others, ostensibly a case of cold financial, technological, and strategic considerations, not highly charged ideological and political ones.

Each of the cases is assessed in terms of the impact leaks, and the fear thereof, had on the decision-making process itself, the policies adopted, and the actual outcomes achieved. The case studies seek to provide a convincing analysis of the relative impact leaks may have had on each level, but in the end this is a judgment call based on highly detailed case studies presented elsewhere, but which can only be briefly encapsulated here.

Development of the Lavi Fighter, 1974–1987

From 1974 to 1987, Israel launched a concerted national effort to develop an advanced fighter aircraft of its own, the Lavi. For a nation Israel’s size it was a monumental undertaking, reflecting a number of important considerations. Strategically, Israel sought to reduce its dependence on foreign arms sources and achieve self-sufficiency, and to balance the mammoth Arab arms buildup following the Yom Kippur War (1973). Politically, the Lavi program became enormously popular, both at the public and governmental levels, indeed a national cause célèbre, a consensual issue in a nation divided over just about everything else. Economically, the program was viewed as a means of generating employment, advancing Israel’s high-tech sector, and promoting its industrial and technological capabilities generally.

For the most part, the Lavi decision-making process was conducted within the closed confines of the defense establishment. Though development work began in 1974, the first cabinet discussion on the project was only held in February 1980, at which time it was given immediate formal approval. Five and a half years passed before the next cabinet-level meetings on the project, in which the MCoD met twice and rapidly approved its continuation. The MCoD briefly returned to the issue in January 1986, but the first substantive cabinet deliberations on the project, Israel’s foremost strategic weapons program, the largest undertaking in the nation’s history, only took place in 1987, in a marathon series of eight meetings, which ultimately led to its termination.

As a weapons development program, the Lavi decision-making process should have been essentially one of technological, operational, and financial considerations, not one of deep political or ideological conviction. For most of the development process it was, until the final marathon meetings in 1987, at which point it became highly politicized, probably the most politicized of the cases analyzed in this article. The project’s ultimate termination, under heavy pressure from the United States, was on strictly partisan lines in the “National Unity Government” of the time. Labor voted unanimously for termination. Likud, with
one exception, the finance minister, voted unanimously for continuation. The fact that the
defense minister, chief of staff, and the IDF were all arguing for termination was not the
determining consideration, politics were.

The Lavi project swept Israel’s imagination partly as a daring national effort in a
highly security-conscious country and partly because Israel Aircraft Industries (IAI), the
manufacturer, mounted the largest and most professionally orchestrated lobbying campaign
in Israeli history to promote support for the project. In one eighteen-month period, over
1,000 “public opinion molders” visited IAI to learn about the project and witness firsthand
the technological marvels it was said to present. The general public was also targeted with
great effectiveness. On Independence Day in 1987 over 100,000 people came to see the
Lavi fly.

Given the public’s fascination with the project, as well as IAI’s vested interest in pro-
moting public support for it, media coverage was vast throughout the process. Nevertheless,
leaks were not a problem in the Lavi case at any point. Its general character and capabilities
were known to the public and the development process and cabinet meetings were covered
massively. The sensitive information, however, the Lavi’s detailed operational capabilities,
was carefully safeguarded. Leaks thus had no impact on the decision-making process,
policies adopted, or final outcome achieved.

**Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations, 2000**

From the time he took office in July 1999, until he was defeated in early elections just
eighteen stormy months later, Prime Minister Ehud Barak was a man on a mission. Peace
with the Palestinians would entail truly wrenching concessions on the core issues of the
Arab-Israeli conflict, but Barak believed that Israel had no choice other than to make some of
the most dramatic decisions in its history. His brief premiership was a whirlwind of activity,
in which he sought to transform Israel’s strategic circumstances and reach breakthroughs to
final peace agreements not just with the Palestinians, but with Syria and Lebanon as well.
He ultimately failed in all three, succeeding only in conducting a unilateral withdrawal
from Lebanon in 2000, but not for lack of effort.

Rarely had an Israeli premier entered office with as clear a strategic vision as Barak.
Given the magnitude of the issues, Barak believed that a breakthrough could not be reached
by negotiations between senior officials, who would lack the authority to make the tough
decisions, but only by creating a “pressure cooker” situation in which both he and the
Palestinian leader, Arafat, would be put to the ultimate test. Consequently, Barak’s efforts
were designed from the beginning to create a “moment of decision” which, he recognized
from the beginning, would inexorably lead to concessions that would exceed what he had
initially considered to be Israel’s maximum position.

The negotiations were conducted intensively throughout his premiership, but the two
relevant events were the Camp David Summit in July 2000 and the “Clinton Parameters,”
the president’s proposals for a final agreement, in December 2000. At Camp David Barak
proposed a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and 91 percent of the West Bank, with a return
of tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees and a division of Jerusalem along its ethnic
lines. Under the “Clinton Parameters,” he later agreed to a withdrawal from 97 percent of
the West Bank, with a 1–2 percent land swap, and a further division of sovereignty over the
holy sites in Jerusalem.

Unlike the other cases presented in this study, the negotiations with the Palestinians
were characterized by extensive policy planning. Nevertheless, it was also very much an
idiosyncratic process, in which Barak’s leadership style played an important role. Even his
closest advisers were often ignorant of his true thinking and Barak did his best to keep the negotiations away from the cabinet, to prevent it from impinging on his freedom of maneuver.

Barak’s fractious coalition unraveled rapidly as the negotiations progressed and by the time of the Camp David Summit, a mere year into his premiership, he was left with a minority coalition. As the momentum for early elections grew in the final months of the negotiations he was forced, unsuccessfully, to frantically try to outrun the political tide overtaking him. Barak conducted the negotiations most of the time as if the raging partisan politics surrounding them did not exist, but in the end they led to the early fall of his government, to his electoral defeat, and to the talks’ collapse.

In this highly charged political environment, the fear of leaks was constant. Indeed, Barak was long known to have harbored a fear of leaks bordering on paranoia and in this case his fears were justified. A Palestinian leak of the breakthroughs achieved in May 2000 led them to retract important concessions. His chief negotiator prefaced submission of a paper to the Palestinians at the time with the comment that it would be a “political death blow” for Barak if it became public. Barak was especially afraid that the Palestinians would learn of Israeli fallback positions. At one point he instructed his staff to cease work on possible alternatives to a final agreement, out of fear that Arafat would refuse to make the necessary concessions if he learned that Israel was even considering other options.

His fear of leaks was particularly pronounced regarding written documents. Clinton initially informed Barak that he would only convene a summit if he had a document to work from, but Barak refused to put his positions in writing, out of fear of leaks. In a meeting prior to the summit Barak stated that “our positions, as known to the president [Clinton], are much more advanced than what we can document in writing” and he also directed that an intelligence assessment of the Palestinians’ positions be presented to the cabinet “with adjustments, because everything leaks there.” The IDF, for its part, refrained from holding a pre-summit simulation of the negotiations out of fear of leaks.

Barak was most concerned about the potential impact of leaks regarding Jerusalem; indeed his fear was so great that he instructed his negotiators to refrain from any preparatory work on Jerusalem, even it when it became clear that it would be a primary focus at Camp David. “Be careful during discussions of Jerusalem,” he warned, “do not document positions. No drafts or written documents are permissible . . . .” Barak feared that a leak of the very fact that Jerusalem had been under study prior to the summit would cause such controversy that he would be unable to make the necessary concessions. Consequently, he had a Jerusalem think tank, rather than a governmental agency, prepare a paper on Jerusalem, but ordered an immediate halt to all contacts with it when this became known.

Leaks thus had a significant impact on the Israeli decision-making process during the 2000 talks with the Palestinians. They do not, however, appear to have had an effect on the nature of the positions Israel ultimately presented or the outcome of the negotiations. Barack pressed ahead with the negotiations and made major concessions on virtually all of the issues, including Jerusalem, nevertheless. The talks ultimately failed because of Arafat’s rejectionist position and the collapse of Barak’s coalition, not because of leaks or any specific failings of the negotiating process.

The Unilateral Withdrawal from Lebanon, 2000

In May 2000, Israel withdrew unilaterally from the security zone it had maintained in southern Lebanon for eighteen years. Israel first invaded Lebanon in 1982 in an attempt to evict the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and end its de facto control over much of
the country, as well as to weaken the Syrian forces in control of much of the rest. Though initially successful—the PLO was forced into exile in Tunisia and Syrian forces were hit hard—the invasion rapidly turned sour, as Syria subsequently succeeded in reasserting its control and Hezbollah, established shortly after the war, bogged Israeli forces down in an ongoing war of attrition.

Between 1985 and 2000, Hezbollah fired some 4,000 rockets at Israel. The number of civilians killed was small, but many were wounded and the disruption to civilian life was significant, as was the number of IDF personnel killed. By the late 1990s, the ongoing bloodletting was a source of rising public discontent in Israel. It appeared to much of the public that the security zone was exacting a heavy price in lives, without achieving the objective of security for northern communities, and pressure grew to withdraw to the border.

Israel’s unilateral withdrawal was the result, above all, of this grassroots public pressure. Initially opposed by virtually the entire political spectrum as an illusory hope, the concept had become a consensus issue by the time of the 1999 elections, indeed, one supported both by the Likud and Labor. Labor’s Barak won the elections, promising to withdraw unilaterally from Lebanon within one year, if a negotiated withdrawal could not be reached first, a commitment he ultimately fulfilled in just ten months.

Barak was intensively involved in the withdrawal issue from the moment he assumed office in July 1999. Nevertheless, he first brought the issue to the cabinet in February 2000, almost eight months later, receiving unanimous support. Only three more cabinet-level meetings were convened throughout the withdrawal process, including a largely technical one to assess IDF preparations and one which gave the largely *pro forma* final approval to actually carry it out. Political and bureaucratic infighting, whether at the political or military levels, was minimal. The IDF had been opposed to the concept of unilateral withdrawal from the outset, though not to a negotiated one, but once the cabinet decision was made it implemented it faithfully.

Leaks, for the most part, were not an issue. Barak had explicitly stated his intentions and strategy from the outset, little changed over the ensuing months, and the cabinet was only involved on a few occasions. In order to prevent leaks which might have enabled attacks against the withdrawing troops, Barak requested that the cabinet only give its final approval for the withdrawal *in principle* and that he (and the chief of staff) be authorized to decide on the precise timing. In a highly unusual move, Barak did not invite IDF officers or other senior officials to the two crucial cabinet meetings in which the withdrawal was to be approved, explaining that this was to ensure that the meetings would be truly “strategic” discussions rather than narrowly focused military ones—as if the IDF did not regularly participate in all such meetings. It is far more likely that he simply feared the impact that the IDF’s firm opposition to unilateral withdrawal would have had on the public had its opposition leaked. Leaks thus had a limited impact on the withdrawal decision-making process, but apparently none on the positions adopted or outcomes achieved.

**Unilateral Disengagement from Gaza, 2005**

When Prime Minister Sharon announced the Gaza Disengagement Plan in December 2003, the peace process was on the verge of collapse, a massive wave of terrorism was underway (the Second Intifada) and Israel’s international standing had deteriorated severely. The United States, some Arab states, and much of the international community largely shared Israel’s view of Arafat as someone who was not a partner for peace, but not its willingness to leave the peace process in abeyance while it conducted defensive military operations.
Indeed, in 2003 the United States announced a new Mideast peace plan, the “Roadmap”, which Israel initially feared might be the beginning of an internationally imposed settlement. The idea of withdrawing from Gaza, though not unilaterally, was also part of a broader trend in Israeli thinking at the time, which sought to bring about a separation between Israel and the Palestinians as a means of dealing with the rising demographic threat.

In these circumstances Israel had to do something, but this does not explain Sharon’s surprising decision to withdraw unilaterally from all of Gaza, dismantle all seventeen settlements there and four in the West Bank as well, with some 8,000 residents. There was no expectation at the time, either on the part of the international community, or just the United States, that Israel would take such a dramatic step. The prospects for peace and the security situation appeared so dismal that Israel would have gained widespread international acclaim had it taken comparatively minor measures.

Disengagement was a solo decision. No planning process or cabinet meetings preceded Sharon’s decision, Israel’s objectives had not been spelled out, nor were different options considered. Indeed, when first presented to the public in December 2003, disengagement was little more than a general concept and crash planning began following the announcement.

Disengagement was one of the more controversial decisions in Israel’s history and the politics surrounding it were fierce. For eighteen months, Sharon was forced to ride a perpetual political roller coaster in order to gain approval for the plan and bring about its implementation. He faced an ongoing rebellion within the Likud and a leadership challenge from then Finance Minister Netanyahu and an entire “rebel wing” within the party. Endless challenges and objections were raised both in the cabinet and the Knesset (legislative branch), along with a massive public protest movement. Sharon prevailed in the end, but he was forced to backtrack, go over the heads of the cabinet, face down repeated challenges, and cajole and coerce his party and cabinet. Not only did his coalition collapse, but he was ultimately forced to break away from Likud and form a new party.

In this highly charged atmosphere, leaks were rampant, but in practice had virtually no effect on the policies adopted, the outcome, nor, surprisingly, even the process itself. Once Sharon announced the plan in December 2003, certainly by the time the concept had been agreed upon with the United States in March 2004, most of the planning and negotiations behind it were not particularly sensitive. Many details remained to be resolved, but for the most part the process was a political one, taking the form of raging cabinet debates, which were reported in the media in the minutest detail, and public activism, not sensitive defense or foreign affairs issues. The one case were leaks were a factor was at the very beginning, prior to the plan’s announcement, when Sharon first asked his senior advisor to put the proposal in writing. The latter was so afraid of a leak that he turned to a secretary from his former law firm and asked that it be typed there over the weekend, rather than in the premier’s office.

The War in Lebanon, 2006

On July 12, 2006, two IDF soldiers were kidnapped and eight others killed in a Hezbollah attack along the Lebanese border. Within hours, the IDF was striking targets in Lebanon, in what would turn out to be Israel’s longest war since the War of Independence. As noted, Israel had withdrawn unilaterally from its security zone in southern Lebanon in May 2000 and maintained that no basis now existed for further conflict and thus that it expected a quiet border. In support thereof, it also enunciated a clear deterrent policy, stating that it would retaliate massively to any further Hezbollah attacks. It rapidly became clear, however,
that Israel could not put this declaratory policy into practice. With the outbreak of the Palestinian Intifada and massive terrorism in September 2000, Israel found itself militarily and diplomatically unable to wage two wars concurrently, and chose to give priority to the Palestinian issue. This policy continued for the next six years, despite repeated Hezbollah attacks.

Israel was in a bind. The small number of incidents, though painful, did not justify a major response, particularly given the preoccupation with the Palestinian front, and Israel had little choice but to exercise restraint. It thus sought to perpetuate a tenuous balance of terror with Hezbollah and to maintain the relative calm as long as possible. Conversely, no one in Israel believed that the calm would last for long; eventually Hezbollah would find a pretext for renewing hostilities. Moreover, Hezbollah was using the passing time to build a truly massive rocket arsenal. The arsenal numbered over 13,000 rockets by 2006, compared with “just” 7,000 at the time of the withdrawal in 2000. Sooner or later Israel would have to deal with the threat. What Hezbollah did not know was that both Sharon and then Olmert had already concluded, months earlier, that the policy of restraint had run its course and that Israel would have to respond forcefully to its next provocation.

The war in Lebanon was not politically divisive and neither partisan politics nor coalition maintenance had a significant effect on the wartime decision-making process. Disagreement within the cabinet was limited to begin with and was substantive in nature, not political, and the public was overwhelmingly supportive. This only began changing, both at the cabinet and public level, in the final days of the war when it became clear that Israel would not achieve its objectives.

The fighting ultimately ended in what appeared at the time to be a standoff and as such, in effect, an Israeli defeat, given the vast asymmetry between the IDF and Hezbollah. Israel responded with considerable anguish and soul-searching. The three primary wartime leaders, the prime minister, defense minister and chief of staff, were all forced out of office, the IDF instituted an exhaustive learning process, and important changes were made to the national decision-making process, including statutory provision for a National Security Council.

The fear of leaks had a significant impact on the decision-making process from the start. On the first day of the war, Olmert was already so concerned about potential leaks that he directed that details of the planned operation be withheld from the cabinet and MCoD and he ultimately even decided to refrain from conducting a discussion of Israel’s options. In need of a forum for expedited and discreet wartime decision-making, he established a “septet,” but it proved no better. Indeed, sensitive information leaked within hours of its very first meeting, on the first evening of the war, and Olmert largely ceased convening it. As a result, the real decision-making was conducted in informal consultations convened by the premier and Israel went to war without an effective policymaking forum.

The fear of leaks continued to affect the decision-making process throughout the war. During the MCoD meeting on July 27, 2006, Vice Premier Shimon Peres stated:

I do not wish to raise ideas here, because I raised ideas once or twice and then found them in the newspapers in a distorted way the next day, which got me very angry. If a smaller group is convened I will say what I propose.

Olmert again refused to discuss the details of military operations, averring that “we do not have to inform the whole world what we do and do not intend to do . . . ” Meetings of the MCoD thus came to be seen as the equivalent of briefing “the whole world.” Considerable criticism was also raised following the war regarding operational leaks from the IDF.
Leaks thus had a major impact on the entire decision-making process, but there is no evidence to indicate that this affected the policies adopted, or the outcomes achieved.

Some Other Cases of Note

Based on preliminary research,20 leaks do not appear to have had a significant impact in the highly politically charged cases of the peace talks with Egypt during 1977–1979, nor during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, arguably the most controversial of Israel’s wars domestically. In the former case, Prime Minister Menachem Begin largely kept the cabinet and public in the dark regarding Israel’s negotiating positions, concentrating authority for the negotiations in his own hands. Moreover, he conducted the negotiations without benefit of virtually any policy planning processes, even at such crucial junctures as the historic visit of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat to Israel in November 1977 and the Camp David Summit the following September.

In the case of the invasion of Lebanon, then Defense Minister Sharon did everything possible to control the flow of information to the cabinet, even keeping some information from Prime Minister Begin, and setting up a parallel policy planning entity within the defense establishment to circumvent opposition from the IDF. Despite Begin and Sharon’s shared determination to launch the invasion, the cabinet rejected their plans on five occasions, only finally agreeing to an operation that was considerably more limited than the one Sharon, and apparently Begin, actually envisioned. Whatever leaks took place, they were insufficient to thwart their intentions.

Israel has maintained a policy of nuclear ambiguity for decades, even though some observers believe that it has had a military nuclear capability since the late 1960s.21 Despite intense international interest in Israel’s capabilities in this area, virtually no information has leaked from Israel itself. The one exception to this was the information provided to a British newspaper in 1986 by a disgruntled and possibly disturbed former employee of the Israeli Atomic Energy Committee,22 but this is a case of a traitor, not a leak in the traditional sense.

The Iranian nuclear program has now been at the forefront of Israeli national security interests for two decades, ever since Prime Minister Rabin was the first to identify it as a preeminent threat to the nation. In the interim, Israel has taken numerous measures to deal with the potential threat and it is well known publicly that it has procured long-range offensive capabilities, such as the F-15i aircraft, developed defensive measures such as the Arrow anti-ballistic missile system, conducted long-range exercises and more. Nevertheless, virtually no information of consequence appears to have leaked in regard to Israel’s operational capabilities and plans vis-à-vis Iran.

In 2011, considerable controversy erupted over press reports of various Israeli leaders’ opposition to a possible attack on Iran’s nuclear program. The former head of Israel’s external intelligence service, Mossad, called a possible Israeli strike at that time, “the stupidest thing I have ever heard of,” warning that it might ignite a regional war and stating that there was still a window of three years. His counterpart, the former head of the domestic intelligence service, the Shin Bet, stated that he did not trust “the messianic” leadership of Prime Minister Netanyahu or then Defense Minister Barak. A former chief of staff made his opposition to an attack known in a more restrained manner, and even the then current chief of staff allowed his opposition to become known. President Peres went beyond the strictures of his largely ceremonial office and came out strongly against an Israeli attack.23 For all of the heated media controversy generated, it is unclear what concrete conclusions Iran could have derived from the controversy; indeed, one could argue that in some ways they
Table 1
Impact of Leaks in the Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case Study</th>
<th>Decision-Making Process</th>
<th>Policies/Positions Adopted</th>
<th>Outcomes Achieved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lavi Fighter, 1974–1987</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palestinian Negotiations, 2000</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lebanon Withdrawal, 2000</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gaza Disengagement, 2005</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon War, 2006</td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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served Israel’s deterrent interests. In any event, all of these officials were careful to avoid any mention of Israel’s plans and actual operational capabilities, focusing their criticism on whether an attack should be conducted at all and the likely consequences.

Conclusions

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the five major cases analyzed in this article. Leaks and the fear of leaks had a strong impact on the decision-making process in two cases. They did not have a significant effect, however, in any cases on the policies or positions adopted, or the outcomes achieved. The small number of cases is certainly insufficient to draw definitive conclusions regarding the posited effect of leaks. The findings appear commensurate with a number of other important cases, such as the four additional ones mentioned above, which also seem to indicate that the actual impact of leaks may not be as severe as thought.

On the basis of this preliminary study, as well as a close personal familiarity with the Israeli national security decision-making process, the following tentative conclusions can be derived. First, leaks at the cabinet level, both by the premier and ministers, are rampant, as posited. Some parts of the national security bureaucracy also leak, primarily the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Leaks from the defense establishment are more rare, with the important exception of matters pertaining to the defense budget. The fear of leaks from the MFA affects other agencies’ willingness to provide it with sensitive information and to collaborate with it, i.e. the nature of the process.

Based on the findings, most leaks appear to be about Israel’s broad strategic thinking on a given issue, and the politics thereof, and who has taken which position, rather than hard information regarding Israeli capabilities and intentions. This, too, however, can be harmful, providing Israel’s enemies with an insight into its strategy and the prospects of action.

For the most part, leaks of truly sensitive military and operational information are rare and Israel has actually done an effective job of preserving military and operational secrecy. For all of their proclivity to leak extensively, most ministers do observe reasonable standards of operational security. There are, of course, exceptions, such as during the 2006 Lebanon War when some sensitive operational details did get out.

Leaks, and the fear of leaks, often do have a significant impact on the politics surrounding the decision-making process and the process itself, i.e. on premiers’ and ministers’ expectations and thus how they handle issues in the cabinet and politically. A key finding in
this regard was decision makers’ deep reluctance to engage in systematic policy planning and tendency to conduct true policy deliberations in small informal groups lacking in statutory authority, rather than the cabinet plenum or MCoD. This has the effect of eroding their importance as decision-making bodies and also limits the number of agencies and views represented. Conversely, there is little evidence to substantiate a claim that leaks have an impact on the substance of the decisions made or the policy outcomes achieved. Even if the effect is only on process, this in itself is of great importance, nevertheless.

Finally, in a reformed process, the premier would have to ensure secrecy, inter alia, by taking preventative measures, punishing offenders, and, first and foremost, observing the new norms himself. Leaks are endemic to all democracies and will remain so in Israel; the norms, however, were far more restrictive in the past and can become so again. The virtual absence of leaks from Netanyahu’s septet (ultimately a nonet) during his second term and from his outgoing MCoD indicate the validity of this conclusion.

Notes
1. A literature search from 1980 to this day did not turn up a single journal article on the issue of leaks in Israel.
3. Freilich, Zion’s Dilemmas, 71–74.
4. The preceding section, including characteristics of the Israeli DMP, both pathologies and strengths, is based on Freilich, Zion’s Dilemmas, introduction and Chapter 2.
5. Except where noted otherwise, the following section draws on Freilich, Zion’s Dilemmas, chapter 2.
6. Giora Eiland, “The Decision Making Process in Israel,” in S. Brom and M. Elran, eds., The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives (Tel Aviv: INSS, 2007; Giora Eiland, lecture, Jaffee Center, Tel Aviv University, October 31, 2006; A. Harel and A. Issacharoff, Spider’s Web (in Hebrew; Tel Aviv, Yediot Aharonot, 2008), 394; interview with former national security advisor Dani Arditi, July 21, 2009.
9. In Israel, all ministries are headed by a director-general, the senior-most bureaucrat, akin to the British Permanent Secretary.
11. Freilich, Zion’s Dilemmas, 51.
12. Ibid., 52.
13. Ibid., 52.
14. Ibid., 52.
17. The case studies are condensed from Freilich, *Zion’s Dilemmas*, chapters 4, 69.
18. See Freilich, *Zion’s Dilemmas*.
20. Freilich, *Zion’s Dilemmas*, chapters 3 and 5.

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