

Community Squads – No Substitute for State’s Responsibility for Security of Population

The murderous terrorist attack launched by Hamas on 7 October 2023 dealt a blow unprecedented in cruelty and scope to Israel’s civilian population.¹ As of 6 November 2023, 834 murdered civilians have been identified,² the condition of 241 persons kidnapped into Gaza remains unknown,³ dozens are still classified as missing, and 348 soldiers have been killed.⁴ The attack, which primarily targeted civilians, brutally violated the security of residents of the Gaza periphery and seriously cracked the sense of safety of Israel’s population at large. In addition, since the start of the war, all communities along the Lebanese border have been evacuated due to relentless attacks and infiltration attempts by terrorist organizations from the ground and the air.

In the aftermath of the cataclysm of October 7th, during which entire families were held captive, tortured, and massacred for hours on end until security forces managed to rescue some of them, a deep sense of insecurity and a growing desire to acquire weapons and organize into local security squads has taken hold among the population.

There’s no doubt that the presence of such squads is particularly vital in isolated and threatened communities (as in the Gaza periphery and the Lebanon border), where a rapid initial response by law enforcement and other security forces is unfeasible.

A Ministry of National Security communique on 23 October noted that 511 new security squads had been formed and issued thousands of Saar rifles since October 7th. “Security squads are subordinate to the Israel Police’s top command and under their control.

¹ Eitay Mack, [Hamas Committed War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Israel's Southern Communities](#), *Zulat*, 18 October 2023.

² Staff report, [The Effort To Identify the Victims Continues: 834 Civilians Murdered in the War Have Been Identified](#), *MivzakLive*, 6 November 2023.

³ [Press Briefing by IDF Spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari November 3rd 11:00](#), *The Israel Defense Forces*, 3 November 2023.

⁴ Ido Efrati and Aaron Rabinowitz, [Authorities Fear the Fate of Many Israelis Will Remain Unknown Following Hamas' Attack](#), *Haaretz*, 31 October 2023; [Daily Recap: Hamas-Israel War November 6th, 2023 - Day 31](#), *The Israel Defense Forces*, 6 November 2023.

Volunteers are recruited according to a model co-developed by the Ministry of National Security and the Israel Police,” the ministry asserted.⁵

One of the key election campaign pledges of Otzma Yehudit, a party led by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, was to ease civilian access to firearms.⁶ Concurrently with the establishment of hundreds of squads, Ben-Gvir embarked on a nationwide public relations campaign, holding festive and highly publicized “events” (shared on his social media accounts) where he personally handed out most of the rifles.⁷ This led the United States to threaten to halt shipments to Israel of US-made arms.⁸

Zulat’s position is that security squads must be under strict supervision and undergo rigorous training. Nonetheless, primary responsibility for safeguarding the life, body, and property of Israel’s population lies with the state, by way of professional security bodies qualified for the task. As the head of a Gaza border community squad pointed out in response to Ben-Gvir’s remarks on 19 October, “there’s no way a security squad with minimal equipment could have overcome hundreds of terrorists. Even if we had had a tank in our backyard, it would still have been impossible. A squad contains at most 12 individuals. What could such a team do when dozens or hundreds of terrorists storm a community from every direction? His remarks only show his lack of knowledge.”⁹

The mass establishment of armed security squads spearheaded by Ben-Gvir could have negative consequences and might generate a false sense of security. Composed of civilian volunteers, these squads cannot adequately substitute the state or professional, skilled, and qualified security forces. What’s more, their rushed creation has not been accompanied by government-funded training, nor by a commitment to ensure their professional competence or to provide them with the necessary gear in the short and the long term, not to mention that the Israel Police have serious operational problems of their own, which have only intensified in the past year.

⁵ [Nearly 50 Emergency Teams Established Throughout Israel Within One Week](#), *Israel Police*, 23 October 2023 (Hebrew).

⁶ Avi Cohen, [MK Ben-Gvir: I'll Demand Appointment as Internal Security Minister](#), *Bahazit*, 30 October 2022 (Hebrew).

⁷ [Itamar Ben-Gvir @itamarbengvir](#), *Twitter*, 19 October 2023 (Hebrew).

⁸ Avi Bar-Eli, [U.S. Threatens to Stop Supplying Guns After Ben-Gvir Gives Them Out at Political Events](#), *Haaretz*, 28 October 2023.

⁹ Matan Zuri, [Outrage Over Ben-Gvir's Remarks: 'Distorts Reality and Prepares for Commission of Inquiry](#), *Ynet*, 19 October 2023 (Hebrew).

As noted, after the October 7th tragedy, the deep sense of insecurity and subsequent growing desire of the population to acquire weapons and organize into local security squads is understandable. In Zulat’s view, these are the potential risks posed by the massive establishment of armed security squads:

- The rushed massive establishment of armed security squads is not accompanied by government-funded training, nor by a commitment to ensure their professional competence or to provide them with the necessary gear in the short and the long term. Even after the festive ceremonies and Ben-Gvir’s photo ops showing him handing out weapons, the government has not passed a decision to budget and ensure the professional competence and short- and long-term outfitting of hundreds of security squads. These squads could consequently turn into “empty shells” with no real capability to handle the tasks expected of them.
- Given that 511 security squads were established within three weeks, it is not clear according to which criteria the suitability of volunteers is being assessed or if their vetting follows any proper administrative procedure. At the start of a situation assessment with the Police Commissioner on 19 October, Ben-Gvir stated: “In recent days we have significantly mitigated the requirements for licensing weapons to civilians... and simultaneously promoted the establishment and reinforcement of community security squads. I gave the order: as many security squads as possible, as many weapons as possible.”¹⁰ Selection of the towns or neighborhoods where security squads are established should be based on professional and practical considerations, priorities, and the assessment of professionals and should keep out any political involvement, particularly by Minister Ben-Gvir.
- Security squads cannot replace regular security forces and might instill a false sense of security. The police comprise an array of professional units with diverse expertise, equipped with different gear and undergoing specific professional training, which are meant to operate in coordination and harmony. Their good intentions notwithstanding, community security squads ultimately consist of a handful of civilian volunteers who do not deal with security on a daily basis and who lack the full

¹⁰ Ibid.

range of equipment, knowledge, and experience of Israel Police units and other security bodies.

- **The wholesale establishment of security squads is taking place at a time when the Israel Police face a severe shortage in personnel, equipment, and intelligence, and have been degraded and politicized by the Netanyahu government.** According to Israeli law and court rulings, the police are in charge of law enforcement, crime prevention, upholding the public order, safeguarding life, body, and property, and ensuring internal security. As stated in numerous State Comptroller reports, despite their vital roles, the police suffer from a severe shortage of personnel, budget, equipment, and intelligence. Not only are human resources scarce, but the quality of new recruits has decreased dramatically as minimum hiring requirements decreased significantly and training was shortened by 75% in 2023.¹¹ This being the case, the addition of competitors in charge of internal security is expected to hinder the solution of Israel Police’s existing problems and drain their already strained resources. Minister Ben-Gvir’s actions could have far-reaching consequences after the war is over, as the privatization of the police might prove irreversible.
- **Armed security squads are established instead of reinforcing the Civil Guard.** The role of the Civil Guard is anchored in the Police Regulations-1996 (Civil Guard) and relevant Israel Police guidelines.¹² While Civil Guard volunteers are embedded within existing police units, community security squads are defined in the aforementioned regulations as separate “units” under looser professional supervision. There is no professional, organizational, or managerial logic in massively enlisting volunteers to security squads instead of drafting them to the Civil Guard.
- **Massive numbers of Saar rifles in the hands of civilians might end up accidentally hurting innocent bystanders.** While the Ministry of Internal Security communique of 23 October noted that “security squads are subordinate to the Israel Police’s top command and under their control. Volunteers are recruited according to a model co-developed by the Ministry of National Security and the Israel Police,” it is highly doubtful that the police will be able to effectively oversee hundreds of new

¹¹ Hen Artzi Srur, [Data Show: Quality of Police Recruits at Record Low](#), *Ynet*, 25 August 2023 (Hebrew).

¹² [Police Regulations-1996 \(Civil Guard\)](#), *Nevo*; [Orders and Procedures](#), *Israel Police* (Hebrew).

community security squads all over the country, especially in light of the shortage of policemen and officers.¹³ Furthermore, without proper training and unless outfitted with suitable non-lethal equipment, squad members might aim their weapons against demonstrators or anyone they identify as a “lawbreaker.”

- Concern that some security squads could emulate the illegal and racist enforcement methods used by settlers in the occupied territories. Israeli settlers conduct “enforcement operations” throughout the West Bank, which often include violence, torture, harassment, and even killing Palestinian demonstrators, passersby, farmers, shepherds, and others. Especially at a time when acts of revenge enjoy political and public legitimacy, some squads might misuse their weapons for illegal and racist enforcement and even for acts of revenge against the Arab minority in Israel.
- Concern about Saar rifles ending up with criminal organizations and about a surge in domestic violence. The “Gun Free Kitchen Tables” project has repeatedly warned that the proliferation of firearms in the civilian space might fuel violence toward women,¹⁴ while criminal organizations acquire some of their arsenal through theft as it. A year ago, the IDF decided to collect weapons from security squad members in remote communities near the Syria and Lebanon borders for fear that criminal elements might steal them.¹⁵

Conclusions

- ✓ Primary responsibility for protecting the life, body, and property of Israel’s population lies with the state, by way of professional and qualified security forces. Therefore, it is necessary to proceed at once to reinforce the ranks of the Israel Police and the Civil Guard. If necessary, they should be bolstered with private security companies overseen by the government (even if such oversight is not ideal).

¹³ Liran Levi, [Police Might Have Hard Time Dealing With Multiple Events? Senior Officer Warns: 'There's Room for Concern'](#), *Ynet*, 4 September 2023 (Hebrew).

¹⁴ [Feminism and Firearms](#), *Gun Free Kitchen Tables*.

¹⁵ Idan Avni, [Absurdity: IDF Forbids Security Squads in Communities Near Syria and Lebanon To Stockpile Arms](#), *Israel Hayom*, 15 August 2022 (Hebrew).

- ✓ The establishment of security squads is particularly crucial in isolated or threatened communities (such as those along the Gaza and Lebanon borders), where there is no option of a rapid initial response by the Israel Police and other security forces.
- ✓ The selection of towns and neighborhoods where security squads are established should be based on professional and practical considerations, priorities, and the assessment of professionals and harassment should keep out any political involvement, particularly by Minister Ben-Gvir.
- ✓ Existing and future security squads must be under strict supervision and undergo rigorous training. Their short- and long-term funding, training, and outfitting must be anchored in a government decision or in some other manner.
- ✓ The suitability of volunteers to security squads should be assessed according to predetermined criteria set forth in guidelines for their operation and training.

Author and legal consultant: Attorney Eitay Mack

English Translation: Shoshana Michkin