

Book Review

Ian Westerman (2024) *Israel's civil-military relations and security sector reform. Lessons for conflict-affected societies*. New York, NY: Routledge, 190 pp., ISBN: 1032589140

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This book is probably the best research on civil–military relations (CMR) that I have read in a while. Ian Westerman's book is potentially interesting to a wide range of professional researchers, including those studying CMR, security sector reforms (SSR), international relations, and military studies. It is also a valuable resource for military anthropologists due to the research method chosen by the author. The stated goal of this research is to provide alternatives to orthodox Western models of SSR in post-conflict countries, with the aim of maintaining a balance between civil authorities and a strong military. To address this objective, Westerman begins by exploring an unconventional CMR model. He selects a state that aligns with the Western criteria for SSR, while also being a post-conflict or conflict-affected country suitable for SSR programs as suggested by international organizations. Westerman chooses Israel, a nation perpetually in a post-conflict or war-affected state, yet one that maintains an admirable balance in its CMR. In addition to a thorough review of the available literature on CMR in Israel (Chapter 2 and Annexure C), which he approaches both synchronically and diachronically, Westerman includes a chapter on the impact of political and military personalities in sustaining the balance of CMR (Chapter 7). Westerman's strength, however, lies in his methodology, which justifiably occupies an entire chapter and an additional annexure (Chapter 3 and Annexure A). Methodologically, this book is a gem. The structure of the author's research method is highly recommendable, not only for future studies in SSR and CMR models but also in the broader sociological field of polemology.

The choice of Israel as a country where CMR is preserved in equilibrium arises from several conditions, which are elaborated on in detail in this book. Due to the circumstances of its creation, Israel developed a model in which the political and military spheres have been intertwined since the early days of the state's founding in 1948. Westerman takes the time to guide his readers through this unique model of CMR by scrutinising the defence reforms it has undergone and the challenges it has faced. His aim is to identify the key elements that have driven the model's transformation over time. From the outset, Westerman is clear in his approach: he meticulously traces the aspects of Israeli CMR, dedicates space to exploring the networks and elites in the Israeli CMR community—many of whom he interviewed extensively—and evaluates these findings to draw meaningful conclusions and provide future recommendations.

What is most noteworthy for the international readership is probably Westerman's diachronic assessment of the relationship between the Israeli military and the civil government. In a country where military culture is integral to citizenship, where every soldier is a voter and most voters were once soldiers, understanding the key to its successful democracy—one that, at least to date, has never experienced a military coup—is crucial. Ian Westerman's book offers valuable insights into why this is the case.

For readers unfamiliar with the concepts of CMR and SSR from the perspective of international relations, Westerman provides an early and concise introduction to these models, as advocated by key international organisations, such as the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF), which are foundational to international efforts in the field. One of the first significant publications on SSR is the *Integrated Technical Guidance Notes* (ITGN) by the UN (2012), which was further reaffirmed in 2013 as a roadmap for advancing SSR in the UN framework. In an international context, SSR is defined as a process of assessment, review, implementation, and monitoring, led by national authorities, to provide accountable security for the state and its citizens while adhering to the rule of law. The key international organisations mentioned above have outlined the SSR principles, and Westerman examines how these organisations differ in the way they articulate them. For instance, the OECD identifies six SSR principles: local ownership of the process; people-centred, internationally acceptable approaches; integrated security and development policies; a multi-sectoral approach; accountability and transparency; and the development of effective, well-functioning security institutions. In post-conflict countries, implementing even one of these principles can be challenging, if not impossible. With anthropological sensitivity, Westerman suggests that some failures stem from the insensitivity of international (or globalist) attitudes in addressing the cultural and political particularities of local contexts when applying SSR. The author argues that enhancing the capacity for successful SSR implementation requires more than a mere change in the baseline of CMR. A significant part of Westerman's motivation for exploring the intersection of CMR and SSR lies in his aspiration to balance strong democracy and the rule of law with an effective and robust military. While this goal may sound straightforward, as the book reveals, it is far more complex. In peacetime, democratically chosen heads of state and military leadership often coexist smoothly through layers of public sector management and administration. However, this becomes much more complicated in post-conflict states. This complexity underpins Westerman's choice to focus on Israel as a case study. Israel's statehood is deeply reliant on a strong military, given the perpetual threat of annihilation posed by hostile neighbouring countries. This results in a highly militarized society, where the country's leadership is nominally civilian, but military figures frequently “parachute” into political roles at the end of their military careers. The presence of military leaders in civilian institutions creates a paradoxical situation. This paradox drives Westerman's

methodological approach, which analyses both diachronic and synchronic conditions of the CMR balance.

The Israeli model of CMR was established even before the creation of the state. Under Ben-Gurion's leadership, a "state-in-waiting" was created prior to the declaration of independence, which had significant consequences for the subsequent CMR. Another distinctly Israeli characteristic of the well-balanced CMR is the fluid boundaries between the civil and military sectors, such as the transition of high-ranking military officials into the political arena, a practice that was rare before the 1967 Six-Day War. This phenomenon stems more from individual ambitions than from public demand.

The author's method should be considered a potential blueprint for similar research. Westerman conducted thirty-nine interviews with thirty-seven individuals from diverse backgrounds, including senior politicians, eight former ministers, nine retired two-star officers, five senior members of the judiciary, three Israeli Supreme Court (ISC) judges, one minister of justice, and a former director of Mossad, among others (see full description on p. 59). This was a tremendous undertaking, for which Westerman used coding to organise the research material and identify key themes, ultimately retaining six as central to the analysis. The research is methodologically thorough, and the book is richly illustrated with graphic tables that are both clear and easy to follow.

Westerman also provides a qualitative analysis of his research data in the subsequent chapters. He uses excerpts from interviews to illustrate the relationship between civilians and the military as well as societal attitudes towards the military. In the Israeli society, the military is seen as an organic part of citizenship, which, as a critique, could be interpreted as reflecting an "undeveloped" sense of civilian identity. The author's conclusions about why Israeli CMR remains balanced are noteworthy. First, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF or *Tzahal*) is perceived as belonging to the citizens rather than as the "property" of the state. Second, there is no clear division between the notions of "civilian" and "soldier," as most civilians have served in the IDF or still serve in the reserves. Finally, from an anthropological perspective, army service acts as a rite de passage for accessing full citizenship, reinforcing the sense that individuals belong to an organic unity.

However, due to the issue of security—a pivotal topic in Israel, given the tremendous number of terrorist attacks over the past few decades (more than 4,400 between 1970 and 2020, according to the [Global Terrorism Database \[GTD\]](#))—the military has a significant impact on state affairs. There is a high level of informality in the relationship between civil and military elites in Israel. As one interviewee stated, "to make a decision against the recommendation of the Chief of Staff is almost political suicide in Israel" (p. 92). Westerman also extends his analysis to the Israeli judiciary, which, while highly capable of overturning aggressive or illegal military actions, might pose challenges for the implementation of SSR programmes due to concerns about civil control mechanisms.

Anthropologically, the IDF serves as a kind of substitute for God for secular Israelis, according to one of Westerman's interviewees, because the nation is acutely aware that its survival depends on the IDF's capabilities (p. 105). However, over the past few decades, the image of the military has deteriorated, which is a key element in the author's assessment. Most of the public criticism focuses on the political involvement of current or former military officers in arenas that the public perceives as outside their rightful domain. There is a notable distinction between the pre-1967 period, when retired high-ranking officers began transitioning into politics, and the present day, when their political involvement appears increasingly obsolete. This shift likely explains the public support for Netanyahu's Halutz Law—named after IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz (2005–2007), who

was expected to run for the highest political office upon retirement. Passed in 2007, the law extended the cooling-off period before senior defence officials could enter politics from 6 months to 3 years.

The roots of a successful CMR balance, as demonstrated in the Israeli model, stem from the history and culture of both the Jewish nation generally and the Zionist project specifically, claims the author. While the Western model advocates for an uncompromising separation between civil and military spheres, Israel presents a counter-model to this idea. The military is deeply integrated into civil society—and probably *vice versa*, argues Westerman. These “porous boundaries,” as he describes them, have eliminated both social and conceptual limitations between the two. Of course, this model is not without its challenges. In this framework, civil sovereignty is heavily dependent on military approval. Moreover, there is a significant degree of informality in this CMR model, relying on unwritten rules and mutual understandings rooted in the ethnically homogenous nature of its social actors, as noted by Westerman’s interviewees. Such a model is inconceivable in a traditional Western SSR agenda. However, as Westerman argues:

[T]he informality found in the Israeli model has much to recommend it to SSR programmers working in post-conflict scenarios. The “Transactional Model” that it promotes allows an effective and helpful interchange between ministers and generals, whilst it also enhances flexibility and responsiveness, features that are much sought after in situations where security is paramount. Yet in Israel, paradoxically, the data suggests that, by permitting the head of the armed forces to operate within the political sphere (at least in matters regarding security), they have reduced the chance of direct military intervention in government. (p. 129)

In this spirit, the Israeli model of CMR offers valuable insights for the development of a more pluralistic SSR methodology globally, and this book provides an excellent starting point for such exploration.

References

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