

## **Israeli leaders name candidate for army chief**

**The move comes amid calls for military reform after the inconclusive war with Hezbollah.**

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January 23, 2007

JERUSALEM — Israeli leaders on Monday nominated a new army chief to replace Lt. Gen. Dan Halutz, who quit last week after lingering criticism over last summer's war in Lebanon.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Defense Minister Amir Peretz put aside recent bickering long enough to recommend Gaby Ashkenazi, a respected major general in the reserves who left the Israel Defense Forces after losing out to Halutz for the top post two years ago. Most recently, Ashkenazi has been the Defense Ministry's director general.

The military has a rather exalted role in Israeli society, and the naming of a chief of staff draws close scrutiny and public commentary.

Deliberations over Halutz's successor have received extra attention because of widespread calls for army reform after the inconclusive war with the militant group Hezbollah, concern over Iran's nuclear ambitions and the tensions between Olmert and Peretz.

Quick agreement helped the prime minister and his defense minister skirt a new spat in what has become an open feud between the chief partners in the coalition government, both of whom were severely weakened by the war.

Military analysts described Ashkenazi, who was born in 1954, as a tough former infantry commander who served in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and later gained long experience with Lebanon.

He headed Israeli forces along the northern border, overseeing the withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

His nomination requires review by a civil service panel that evaluates candidates for top security posts; it also needs Cabinet approval.

The other main contender, Maj. Gen. Moshe Kaplinsky, who is the deputy chief of staff, dropped out of the running Sunday after it was apparent that Peretz would put Ashkenazi's name forward.

Kaplinsky, who was sent to coordinate Israel's operations against Hezbollah toward the end of the 34-day war, wanted leaders to hold off naming a new army chief until a special commission that is examining how the government and military performed during the war had released its findings.

A civic group, the Movement for Quality Government in Israel, filed a petition with the Supreme Court on Monday in a bid to block an appointment until the so-called Winograd Commission issues its interim findings. The report is expected by March.

Halutz stepped down after months of criticism from reserve officers over the war, which ended in August with a cease-fire and a sense among many Israelis that their military had been beaten.

Halutz, a former air force commander chosen as military chief in 2005 by then-Prime

Minister Ariel Sharon, came under fire for what many saw as an overreliance on airstrikes against guerrillas who worked from populated areas of southern Lebanon.

Although hundreds of Hezbollah's fighters were killed and many of its rocket launchers destroyed, the Shiite Muslim militant group fiercely battled Israeli ground forces while firing nearly 4,000 rockets into Israel. In all, 117 Israeli soldiers and 41 civilians died during the fighting, and the military did not gain the release of two soldiers who had been captured by Hezbollah.

Halutz's resignation prompted new demands that Peretz and Olmert step down. Both men are hoping for vindication from the study commission, named after its chairman, retired Judge Eliyahu Winograd.

Commentators said Halutz's successor would face a host of challenges, from restoring public confidence in the military to preparing for a possible new conflict with Hezbollah, or even Iran.

The army needs "to get back to the basics of the military profession, to discipline, to the principles of warfare that were forgotten in the Lebanon war in lieu of a baseless perception about the ability of achieving victory from the air," military affairs correspondent Amir Rappaport wrote in Monday's edition of the daily newspaper Maariv. "Ashkenazi is going to have to restore to the IDF its self-pride and the public's faith."