



Evelyn Gaiser is trainee with the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung in Israel.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MILITARY AND SOCIETY IN ISRAEL

**THE ENTIRE NATION IS AN ARMY, THE ENTIRE
COUNTRY THE FRONT LINE¹**

Evelyn Gaiser

As a member of the OECD and the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel can be considered to be firmly anchored in the Western world in terms of its values. However, the country differs from many other Western democracies on account of its geopolitical situation and the central role that its military plays in so many areas of the country's life. The founding of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948 was swiftly followed by a combined attack by five Arab armies (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq). This was to be the first real test of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), officially set up on 26 May of that year, a test from which they ultimately emerged victorious. Ever since its founding, the State of Israel has lived through numerous wars, military operations and other violent conflicts, such as the Arab uprisings in the Palestinian territories (known as the First and Second Intifadas). To date, the only peace treaties to be signed were with Egypt in 1978 and the Kingdom of Jordan in 1994. Negotiations with the autonomous Palestinian Authority have currently reached an impasse.²

In the past, the main threat to Israel was the possibility of attacks by the armies of its Arab neighbours. But in the last ten years there has been a growing threat from other, non-state actors. In addition to terrorist groups in the Gaza Strip, there are now numerous terrorist networks

1 | Israel's founder David Ben-Gurion on the role of the army, 1948.

2 | Evelyn Gaiser and Stefanie Frieze, "Nahost-Friedensgespräche: Pause oder Ende? Von der Sackgasse in die Krise", KAS Country Report, Jerusalem, May 2014, <http://kas.de/israel/de/publications/37644> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

in the Sinai Peninsula, a significant number of terrorist organisations in civil war-torn Syria, as well as the heavily-armed Hezbollah militia in Lebanon, who are supported by Iran. Therefore, a strong army is absolutely essential for Israel's very survival. National security has always been at the forefront of the Israeli mindset and is inextricably linked with the country's political culture.

The issue of national security has always been at the forefront of Israeli consciousness and is inextricably linked with the country's political culture.

AN ARMY OF THE PEOPLE – CONSCRIPTION IN ISRAEL

The IDF is a conscription-based army. While it is compulsory for Israeli citizens from the age of 18 – men and women alike – the legislation makes numerous exemptions. The following groups are represented within the IDF:

- Jewish males currently have to serve for 36 months. This is to be reduced to 32 months under new legislation aimed at a more equitable sharing of the military burden (Equal Burden Law), which will be discussed in more detail later.³
- Military service for the majority of national-religious Jewish males is based on the Hesder-Yeshiva model, which combines military service with Torah studies. Until now, Hesder students have had to serve in the army for 16 months, which is to be increased by a further month under the Equal Burden Law.
- Ultra-Orthodox Jewish males (Haredim), who are enrolled in a Torah school (Yeshiva) on a full time basis, have so far been exempt from military service. Under the Tal Law, which the Supreme Court of Israel (SCI) recently declared unconstitutional, military service could be deferred from year to year with no upper limit on the number of years.⁴ The new conscription law provides for a significantly higher number of ultra-Orthodox conscripts in the future.

3 | Cf. Jeremy Sharon, "Knesset committee votes to shorten men's army service to 32 months", *The Jerusalem Post*, 10 Feb 2014, <http://jpost.com/Defense/Knesset-committee-votes-to-shorten-mens-army-service-to-32-months-340935> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

4 | Cf. Haim Zicherman, "The IDF and the Ultra-Orthodox", *The Israel Democracy Institute*, 12 Mar 2014, <http://en.idi.org.il/analysis/articles/the-idf-and-the-ultra-orthodox> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

- Jewish females have to serve for 24 months. They can opt out if they prove they are religious, married and/or have children.



Among the Arab population, the Druze are the only group required to fulfil military service. They took part in the War of Independence in 1948/49 and were members of the IDF, e.g. as seen here in guarding a mobile power station. | Source: Kluger Zultan, Government Press Office, flickr ©1550.

Conscription does not apply to all of the country's Arab population. Within this group, military service is only compulsory for Druze males. Bedouins, along with Christian and Muslim Arabs (Bedouins are also Muslim Arabs, but will be considered as a distinct group in this article), also have the opportunity to volunteer for military service. However, as a significant proportion of the Muslim and Christian Arabs living in Israel define themselves as Palestinian, they consider military service with the Israel Defense Forces to be a fundamental contradiction of their own identity.

- The Druze community, which makes up only two per cent of the Israeli population, is very loyal to the state and members of this community have been volunteering for military service since 1956. Today, some 83 per cent of the male Druze population are enlisted – a relatively high proportion. Many Druze serve in distinguished military units and hold the rank of officer.⁵

5 | Cf. Rotem Pesso, "56 years of Druze soldiers serving in the IDF", IDF, 3 May 2012, <http://www.idf.il/1283-15853-en/Dover.aspx> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

- The number of serving Bedouins has also risen in recent years. There are currently 1,665 – out of a total population of approximately 260,000.⁶ Because of their original nomadic lifestyle, many of today's more settled Bedouins are highly skilled trackers and, as a result, are often employed in reconnaissance and scouting units, whose job is to protect Israel's borders.
- Last year there was also an increase in the number of Christians volunteering for military service (currently around 150). Observers believe this particular group wants to be better integrated into Israeli society, a desire that has been intensified by recent attacks on Christians in Egypt and Syria.⁷ For its part, Israel has tried to promote the integration of Christians into the military and hopes to see evidence of more solidarity with the state in future.⁸
- The number of people from the Muslim minority in the IDF is very small with approximately 20 conscripts per year from a total population of 1,354,000 in 2012.⁹

Figures released by the army for the year 2007 suggest that three quarters of eligible males and 56.5 per cent of eligible females were doing military service that year. In 1980, still 87.9 per cent of eligible males joined the army while by 2002, that figure even dropped to 76.1. The growing number of ultra-Orthodox Jews within the Israeli

A growing number of ultra-Orthodox Jews within the Israeli population is the main reason why more males don't join the army.

- 6 | Cf. "Muslim Arab Bedouins serve as Jewish state's gatekeepers", *Al Arabiya News*, 24 Apr 2013, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/profiles/2013/04/24/Bedouin-army-trackers-scale-Israel-social-ladder-.html> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).
- 7 | Cf. Jack Khoury, "Onward Christian soldiers. Israeli army sees increase in Christian Arab Recruits", *Haaretz*, 9 Feb 2014, <http://haaretz.com/1.573172> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).
- 8 | Cf. Michele Chabin, "Israeli Christians seek more integration into the country", *USA Today*, 11 Mar 2014, <http://usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/03/11/israel-christians-military-service/5846019> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).
- 9 | Cf. Jordan Hoffman, "His deep, dark secret: He's Arab, Muslim and serves in the IDF", *The Times of Israel*, 10 Nov 2012, <http://timesofisrael.com/his-big-secret-hes-arab-muslim-and-serves-in-the-idf> (accessed 22 Jul 2014); Yaron Druckman, "CBS releases data about Israel's Muslim population", *Ynetnews online*, 25 Oct 2012, <http://ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4297091,00.html> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

population explains this downward trend. Of the 25 per cent of eligible males who did not serve in 2007, eleven per cent were ultra-religious. By 2011, this figure had risen to 13 per cent, while the total number of eligible males who were not enlisted remained at 25 per cent.¹⁰

Ordinary conscripts alone are not sufficient to maintain the necessary strength of the IDF. Consequently, a proportion of male soldiers and unmarried female soldiers (especially from combat units) also serve as reservists for approximately one month per year once they have completed their three years of military service. Men normally serve until they are 40 (officers until they are 45). Women are usually released from reserve duty when they reach 24, but in certain individual cases may be called up until they are 38. Today women represent seven per cent of all reservists.¹¹ The army ensures the payment of reservists' salaries while on duty. Reservists are often called up to strengthen the forces during an operation.¹² Career soldiers make up another important part of the Israel Defense Forces in addition to conscripts and reservists. According to figures published by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in 2012, Israel's troops comprised 176,500 regular soldiers and an additional 445,000 reservists.¹³

10 | Yaakov Katz, "60 percent of Israelis won't serve in IDF by 2020", *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 Nov 2011, <http://jpost.com/Defense/60-percent-of-Israelis-wont-serve-in-IDF-by-2020> (accessed 22 Jul 2014); Stuart A. Cohen, "The False 'Crisis' in Military Recruitment: An IDF Red Herring", BESA Perspectives Paper 33, 23 Jul 2007, <http://biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/docs/perspectives33.pdf> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

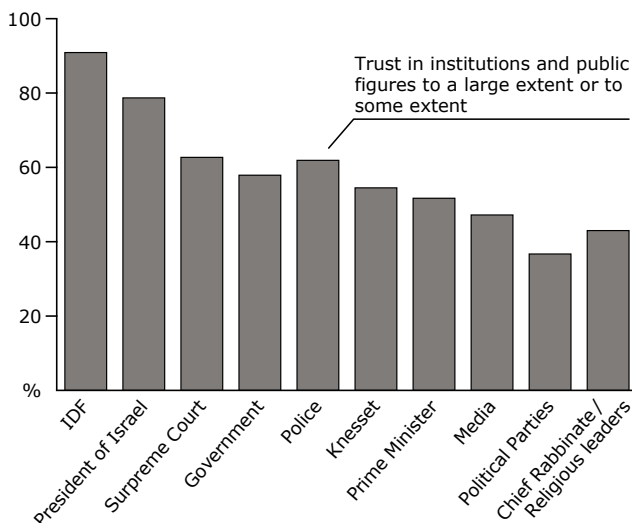
11 | Cf. IDF, personnel department, <http://www.miluim.aka.idf.il/894-he/Miluim.aspx> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

12 | For the latest military offensive in Gaza (Operation Protective Edge) 82,201 reservists had been called up by 5 Aug 2014.

13 | The Institute for National Security Studies, "Israel", 8 May 2012, <http://d26e8pvoto2x3r.cloudfront.net/uploadimages/SystemFiles/israel-2012.pdf> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

Fig. 1

Reputation of Public Institutions Among the Jewish Population in Israel (in per cent)



Source: Own presentation based on Hermann et al., n. 15.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ARMY IN SOCIETY

The dividing lines between the civilian and military spheres in Israel are blurred as these domains are very much intertwined.¹⁴ The army is highly appreciated compared to the country's political parties, and its renown goes far beyond political affiliation. 91 per cent of the Jewish population trust their armed forces, which came out top in a poll measuring public trust in Israeli institutions.¹⁵ This high level of esteem is in part due to the important societal role played by the IDF, which will be discussed later. Such a positive image can also be explained by the fact that they have emerged victorious from every war fought against other nations.

14 | The aim, therefore, is to examine specifically the relationship between the military and Jewish-Israeli society, as an analysis that also included the Arab-Palestinian population would be beyond the scope of this article.

15 | Cf. Tamar Hermann et al., *The Israeli Democracy Index 2013*, The Israeli Democracy Institute, 2013, 40, <http://en.idi.org.il/media/2720081/Democracy%20Index%20English%202013.pdf> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).



Commemorating soldiers killed in action and victims of terrorism: The Memorial Day Yom HaZikaron precedes the Independence Day. | Source: Masa Israel Journey, flickr ©①②.

Its role as an army of defense also confers a certain legitimacy on the IDF. It is viewed as a defensive institution with the mission of protecting the Israeli people. Most Israeli Jews consider the wars fought by the IDF as “wars of necessity”, forced upon the country because of repeated attacks by its Arab neighbours.¹⁶ Because of the existential importance of the IDF to the very survival of the State of Israel, there is a great willingness on the part of the Jewish Israeli society to contribute to and make personal sacrifices in defense of their country. Military service is seen as one way every individual can contribute to the existence of the state. It became part of growing up and a key hallmark of citizenship.¹⁷ By serving in the military conscripts encounter a high probability of being involved in combat operations and of risking their own lives. Memorial Day (Yom HaZikaron), which is dedicated to fallen soldiers, is considered to be one of the most important days of remembrance in the Israeli calendar. Nearly every Israeli has someone in their circle of family or friends who was killed in a war or because of a terrorist attack. The end of Memorial Day marks the beginning of the celebrations for

16 | Cf. Yoram Peri, *Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy*, United States Institute for Peace Press, Washington D.C., 2006, 19.

17 | Cf. Noya Rimalt, “Women in the Sphere of Masculinity: The Double-Edged Sword of Women’s Integration in the Military”, *Duke Journal of Gender Law & Policy* 14, 2007, 1103, <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1135&context=djgplp> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

Independence Day (Yom HaAtzmaut), a fact which further underscores the symbolic importance of the army in politics and society.



State founder Ben-Gurion: Israel's first Prime Minister while visiting an army base in 1957. He designed the IDF as a backbone of society contributing to the integration of different groups and conveying social values. | Quelle: Israel, Government Press Office ☺☺.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE IDF

The Israeli army has often been described as a melting pot, a human mosaic of different cultures and a catalyst for integration and communication between the various sectors of society. It is known as "The People's Army", a citizen's army that transcends social differences.¹⁸ This reflects the philosophy Israel's founder David Ben-Gurion was keen to promote. He saw the IDF not just as an instrument of defense, but as an institution with a duty to undertake social tasks and help shape the new Israeli society. Ben-Gurion's vision was for the IDF to be an apolitical national institution, in which every segment of heterogeneous Jewish immigrant society would be represented. This "citizen's army" called up men and women alike and played

18 | Cf. Matan Vilnai, "A public debate on the people's army", *Haaretz*, 5 Dec 2003, <http://haaretz.com/1.107734> (accessed 22 Jul 2014); Brig.Gen. Orna Barbivai, 3 Jun 2013, at the Mandel Leadership Institute conference "Country, City, Army", <http://mli.org.il/english/News/Pages/Country-Army-City.aspx> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

a central role in the country's development. It promoted the integration of immigrants and supported the education sector. Soldiers assisted with the building of rural settlements (kibbutzim) and acted as teachers, helping new arrivals to learn Hebrew.¹⁹

The reservist system has also helped to strengthen the image of a citizen's army. Regular service creates a long-term connection to the military, which in turn allows the IDF to continue to be regarded as an army of majority society.²⁰ Some critics, however, argue that social differences can be detected in the way certain army units are put together. The Unit 8200 intelligence corps, for example, which is considered to be a talent incubator for the high-tech industry, has many more representatives of the educated middle and upper classes from the Tel Aviv region than from the socially and economically weaker periphery.²¹ The army's function as a promoter of integration is stretched to its limits if certain sections of the population distance themselves from it as a state institution or are not involved for other reasons. This applies especially to Arab Muslims, Christians or ultra-religious Jews whose already marked role as outsiders in Israeli society intensifies by their absence from army service.

The Impact of Military Service on the Individual and on Society as a Whole

Military operations leave soldiers and their families facing severe psychological stresses and traumas.

Military service influences the personal and professional development of young Israelis in many different ways and also has an impact on society as a whole. Military operations leave soldiers and their families facing severe psychological stresses and traumas. Coming to terms with combat experiences is a major challenge for individuals and society alike.

Young people generally start their years of military service immediately after finishing school, which means they have to put off going to university or starting a job. As a result, much of what has been learned in school tends to

19 | Cf. Vilnai, *ibid.*

20 | Cf. Peri, n. 16, 23.

21 | Cf. Inbal Orpaz, "The secret to high-tech success? This elite Israeli army unit", *Haaretz*, 18 Apr 2014, <http://haaretz.com/1.585863> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

be forgotten and has to be relearned. The relatively high average age at which Israelis enter university for the first time disadvantages them in the international job market. It also means that many young people who fulfilled their service find it difficult to become financially independent before the age of 30. On the other hand, military service helps the transition to adulthood. Soldiers are often given responsibility at a young age because of the opportunities for quick promotion – especially, if they stay in the army once their military service has been completed. This means they can quickly develop leadership qualities and be in a position to make difficult decisions in dangerous or conflict situations.²² They are often called upon to find solutions or improvise when faced with difficult or even apparently hopeless situations. This ability to think outside the box can be a great advantage in later life, especially in the workplace.²³ Unlike most military organisations, the army has a flat hierarchy, which favours creative thinking and gives soldiers the space to develop their own ideas. In comparison to other armies, the Israeli military has a smaller number of high-ranking officers, which encourages those in the lower ranks to use their own initiative.²⁴

One phenomenon that has often been observed in Israeli society is a highly developed sense of solidarity between its people, something military service only serves to strengthen. Camaraderie within the unit, watching each other's backs and mutual support are all part and parcel of military operations. This kind of solidarity tends to spill over into civilian life and strengthens the sense of team spirit among young Israelis.²⁵ But there may be a downside. Sociologist Eva Illouz suggests that military service helps to promote a sense of solidarity and obedience within society, which in turn reduces the capacity of people to protest. According to her analysis, military service makes obedience and discipline the norm,

Sociologist Eva Illouz suggests that military service helps to promote a sense of solidarity and obedience within society, which in turn reduces the capacity of people to protest.

22 | Conversation between the author and Professor Mordechai Kremnitzer, Vice-President of the Israel Democracy Institute on 11 Jun 2014 in Jerusalem; Dan Senor and Saul Singer, *Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle*, New York, Twelve, 2009, 46.

23 | Cf. Senor and Singer, *ibid.*, 48 et sqq.

24 | Cf. Edward Luttwak and Dan Horowitz, *The Israeli Army*, London, A. Lane, 1975, quoted in: Senor and Singer, *ibid.*, 45.

25 | Cf. *ibid.*

but it also produces a feeling of national solidarity by creating a sense of common responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people and the Israeli nation. Eva Illouz argues that it is this kind of thinking that led to the failure of the social justice protests in 2011, as the protest leaders refused to give them a specific political direction and instead insisted on an approach based on national solidarity.²⁶

The Army as the Launching Pad for a Successful Career

The army is considered to be a first class training ground for employees in the public sector and also, increasingly, in industry. In addition to developing social skills such as leadership and decision-making, military service also gives young Israelis the opportunity to gain specialist knowledge, professional experience and learn about working life. Their unit post can often determine the future career. For this reason, many young Israelis opt for a unit that best matches their career plans. If they are interested in the world of media, for example, they might try to work for the military radio network Galei Zahal or for the IDF press unit. Meanwhile, those who consider a career in the high-tech sector are likely to pin their hopes on serving for the Unit 8200 intelligence corps. The education corps can also help to pave the way for a teaching position, while those who are accepted on the pilot training course can later usually get a job in civil aviation. Military service is advantageous for just about every career – especially for those who have served in one of the more prestigious units.²⁷ The issue of military service frequently becomes the connecting element in job interviews and supplies the basis for dynamic conversations. Time spent in the army often helps to provide the necessary contacts for working in particular occupations. Company representatives also often visit distinguished units to present career possibilities and recruit potential employees. The opposite applies to those sectors of the population that do not serve in the military – it is often much harder for them to enter certain professions. This is particularly true for jobs in the civil service,

26 | Cf. Eva Illouz, "Breaking Israel's holy trinity: Settlers, religious and the wealthy", *Haaretz*, 24 May 2013, <http://haaretz.com/1.525588> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

27 | Cf. Senor and Singer, n. 22.

security²⁸ or in the high-tech sector, where secular Jews are disproportionately represented. Arab Israelis or ultra-Orthodox Jews tend to lack the necessary connections or the kind of training provided by certain IDF units.²⁹

ISSUES OF EQUALITY AND FAIRNESS IN CONSCRIPTION

Women in the Military: an Army of Equality?

When the IDF was first established, it needed every person available. Women were conscripted from the very beginning and took part in combat missions during the War of Independence. However, they were subsequently banned by law from taking part in front line combat missions, based on their role as mothers. This changed in the 1990s when women challenged the status quo in the courts. Through one of the most famous Supreme Court decisions one female complainant achieved the right to attend the Air Force Flight Academy. Subsequently, more and more combat units have opened up to female soldiers, who can now serve in all units with just very few exceptions.³⁰ Nevertheless, they are still significantly under-represented in combat units. In 2011 the proportion of women in these units was only three per cent.³¹ Women also lack real representation in high-ranking leadership positions, which are normally filled by members of prestigious combat units.³² The highest rank a woman has so far achieved is that of major general, awarded to Orna Barbivai as head of the Manpower Directorate in 2011. The fact that women were excluded from the more prestigious combat units in the past also proved to be disadvantageous in civilian life, both symbolically and materially. They were not only prevented from attaining the same social status through their military service as men, but being part of a combat unit often

Since the 1990s, more and more combat units have opened up to female soldiers. Nevertheless, they are still significantly under-represented in combat units.

28 | Many jobs in the security sector or in public service require IDF security screening.

29 | Cf. Inbal Orpaz, "Arabs taking their place in Startup Nation", *Haaretz*, 24 Jan 2014, <http://haaretz.com/1.570280> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

30 | Cf. Senor and Singer, n. 22.

31 | Cf. Israeli Defense Forces, "More female soldiers in more positions in the IDF", 30 Nov 2011, <http://www.idf.il/1283-14000-en/Dover.aspx> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

32 | Cf. Rimalt, n. 17, 1104 and 1114.

served as the perfect launching pad for a successful career for men, whereas women were denied this particular benefit for a very long time.³³

The Ultra-Religious

The Haredi Jews' exemption from military service at the expense of the majority of Israeli Jews has prompted a debate on how to spread the burden more fairly throughout society. The rules on military service for the ultra-religious go back to the time of the founding of the state, when Prime Minister Ben-Gurion exempted some 400 Torah students from military service. However, the ultra-religious group now represents almost ten per cent of all Jewish Israelis, with 15 per cent of those between the ages of 18 and 34 defining themselves as ultra-Orthodox or National ultra-Orthodox.³⁴ After the SCI had declared the Tal Law and the common practice of exemption unconstitutional, the Knesset passed the Equal Burden Law on 12 March 2014, which is designed to better integrate ultra-Orthodox Jews into the army and therefore also into the labour market and society as a whole. It is envisaged that 75 per cent of ultra-Orthodox students of an age appropriate for conscription (some 5,200 men per year) will be called up for civil or military service by the year 2017. Only 1,800 outstanding students at Torah schools will continue to be exempt from military service each year.³⁵

The law also stipulates that criminal sanctions should be applied if the 75 per cent quota is not achieved by 2017. This would mean an ultra-religious student trying to evade military service would face one to two years in prison. However, if thousands of the ultra-Orthodox men tried to evade

33 | Cf. Dafna N. Izraeli, "Paradoxes of Women's Service in the Israel Defense Forces", in: Daniel Maman et al. (eds.), *Military, State and Society in Israel: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, New Brunswick, Transaction Publishers, 2001, 227 et sqq.

34 | Cf. Michael Mertes and Stefanie Friese, "Wehrpflicht für Ultra-religiöse", KAS Country Report, Mar 2014, <http://kas.de/israel/de/publications/37152> (accessed 22 Jul 2014); Hermann et al., n. 15.

35 | Cf. Jeremy Sharon, "Haredi IDF conscription bill: Trouble up ahead", *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 Feb 2014, <http://jpost.com/Features/Front-Lines/Religious-affairs-Trouble-up-ahead-341412> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

conscription, it would be practically impossible to apply the threatened sanctions and imprison so many of them. This would not only be damaging to the principle of the rule of law but could result in a serious split within Israeli society if there were a serious confrontation between the country's security forces and the ultra-religious.³⁶ The Haredim strictly oppose the new law, as they believe studying the Torah makes a spiritual contribution to the defense of the country. Because the new quotas will not be implemented for three more years it becomes less likely the law will actually be enforced. Knesset elections are scheduled for 2017 and a new government could amend the law or do away with it altogether.



Ultra-Orthodox Jews have been able to apply for an exemption from military service. The new Equal Burden Law aims at drafting more religiously observant conscripts. In that respect, the army offers special courses. | Source: IDF, flickr ©113.

THE ARMY CAUGHT BETWEEN POLITICAL AND SOCIAL INTERESTS

Religious Influence: A Clash of Cultures within the IDF?

Secular kibbutz inhabitants are considered to be the traditional "old elite" of the IDF. However, the mid-1980s saw the beginning of a "crisis of motivation" within this particular sector of the population. Between 1985 and 1996 the willingness of members of this group to serve in combat units or participate in command programs fell from 90 per

36 | Cf. *ibid.*

cent to 70 per cent.³⁷ Meanwhile, the number of National-Religious within the armed forces has risen significantly over recent decades and there are now a disproportionately high number of national-religious soldiers in leading

While religious and secular Jewish Israelis have limited interaction in normal civilian life, the complex nature of the differences that exist in society is starting to be reflected in the army.

positions in the military compared to their share of the population as a whole.³⁸ Some observers believe the movement is using the army to spread its influence in politics and society as a whole. In the end, the army is increasingly being subjected to ideological influences. Thus, the planned incorporation of many ultra-Orthodox Jews may well lead to further tensions within the IDF and beyond. While religious and secular Jewish Israelis have limited interaction in normal civilian life, the complex nature of the differences that exist in society is starting to be reflected in the army.



After graduating from high school, most young Israelis begin a multi-year military service. Female draftees serve for a period of 24 months and can enter almost all army units. | Source: IDF, flickr ©①③.

The army's task is to find a practical framework which allows secular and religious representatives to serve their country together. This is particularly important when it comes to the position of women within the armed forces. Some of the efforts made by the IDF to better integrate religious

37 | Cf. Inbal Hakman, "The People's Army? Orthodox Soldiers and Religious Dilemmas in the IDF", The Jewish People Policy Institute, 31 May 2012, 180 et seq., <http://jppi.org.il/uploads/The%20Peoples%20Army.pdf> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

38 | Cf. *ibid.*, 180 et seq.

soldiers have been sharply criticised by the military itself. The introduction of new (more modest) clothing regulations, for example, has been seen as discriminatory. There have also been reports of incidents in which women have been denied leadership positions, despite having excellent qualifications, because religious representatives within the unit did not accept female staff officers.³⁹

The high number of national-religious soldiers who justify their military service ideologically and spiritually by claiming they are making a contribution to the settling of "greater Israel" is beginning to cause operational problems for army leadership. This is especially the case in the West Bank where, for example, the army is called upon to clear illegal Jewish settlements. In that respect, there is a tendency to avoid using national-religious soldiers in order to avoid problems.⁴⁰

Politicisation of the Military or Militarisation of Politics?

In a country where security policy is the number one concern on the political agenda, a close interdependency between politics and the army has always been existing. Therefore, cooperation with the military is essential. The armed forces are subject to the primacy of politics as they are subordinate to the civil control of the Cabinet, the Prime Minister and the Defense Minister.⁴¹ The Knesset, the media and, increasingly, the Supreme Court also act as monitors.⁴² Having said that, the influence of the military tends to be greater than in other Western countries. There is a substantial amount of mobility between the armed forces and politics. Consequently, service in the IDF can be a relevant factor in a future political career. Army figures often enjoy a great deal of trust and credibility in society. It is the army that people trust to lead their

Army figures often enjoy a great deal of trust and credibility in society. To date, nine of Israel's defence ministers have been former army chiefs of staff.

39 | Cf. Amos Harel, "Is the IDF becoming an Orthodox army?", *Haaretz*, 22 Jul 2011, <http://haaretz.com/1.374653> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

40 | Cf. Senor and Singer, n. 22; Hakman, n. 37, 182.

41 | Cf. Yagil Levy, "Who Controls the IDF? Between an 'Over-Subordinate Army' and 'a Military that has a State'", The Open University of Israel Working paper series, 23, 2012, 11, <http://www.openu.ac.il/policy/download/maamar-23.pdf> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

42 | Cf. Samuel W. Lewis, "Foreword", in: Peri, n. 16, ix.

country safely through the challenges to its security. Many high-ranking politicians have held important military positions in the past. To date, nine of Israel's defense ministers had been former army chiefs of staff. Two former chiefs of staff, Yitzhak Rabin and Ehud Barak, even became prime ministers.

Until 2007, the official cooling-off period before it was possible to move into politics from a top job in the army was only six months. According to Yoram Peri, one of the leading experts on civil-military relations in Israel, this encouraged the "politicisation of the military and the militarisation of politics".⁴³ In order to reduce the influence of the army on policy making and stop high-ranking military officials from preparing for entry into politics while they were still in the army, the cooling-off period was extended to three years. Experts argue that many Israeli politicians who spent long periods in the armed forces tended to develop a military mindset.⁴⁴ If former IDF representatives move directly into politics, there is also the danger that they are more likely to make decisions in line with the army's interests. Sheffer and Barak suggest that throughout Israel's history it has been more often than not (former) members of the country's security apparatus, as opposed to politicians with a civilian background, who made the key decisions on security policy and military operations. As a result, it might compromise the civil control of the military by political institutions.⁴⁵

Another weakness in the way the relationship between politics and military is controlled is the lack of clarity about which civil institution or individual is directly responsible for the military. There is a division of labour, but it is not explicitly clear when the highest power of command is vested in the Cabinet, the Prime Minister or the Defense Minister.⁴⁶ The military also regularly plays an advisory role

43 | Yoram Peri, author of *Generals in the Cabinet Room: How the Military Shapes Israeli Policy* (n. 16), at a book launch at Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, 16 Nov 2006, <http://carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20061116/index.html> (accessed 22 Jul 2014); Peri, n. 16, 4 et seq.

44 | Cf. Levy, n. 41, 10.

45 | Cf. Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak, *Israel's Security Networks: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, 41.

46 | Cf. Peri, n. 43, 2.

in government decisions. The Security Cabinet⁴⁷ decides on behalf of the government on issues of national security.⁴⁸ It relies on military assessments and information on the security situation and consults military representatives with regard to foreign and security policy. The National Security Council (NSC), set up in 1999 to advise the government independently of the army and to provide an assessment of the security situation, has not been able to replace the armed forces or the secret services as the highest authorities when it comes to advising on security policy.⁴⁹ The IDF has a highly efficient planning department, which is far superior to civil institutions of a similar nature and politicians continue to place the highest degree of trust in the expertise of what is a superbly well-organised military.⁵⁰

The National Security Council has not been able to replace the armed forces or the secret service as the highest authorities when it comes to advising on security policy.

In his book *Generals in the Cabinet Room*, Yoram Peri describes the civil-military relationship as being one based on partnership. He argues that the amount of influence the military has on political decision-making is largely dependent on the political leadership at the time. Throughout Israel's history, strong governments with a clear vision had shown themselves capable of prevailing against the advice of the military when they had not agreed with its assessments.⁵¹ However, Peri shows that there have also been times when political decision-makers with little experience in security issues have emerged and have effectively "outsourced"

47 | According to the law, the Security Cabinet is made up of the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister, the Foreign Minister, the Minister of Finance, the Justice Minister and the Internal Security Minister. The main Cabinet can appoint additional ministers to the Security Cabinet, but the latter must not contain more than half of the government's ministers.

48 | Cf. Herb Keinon, "Security Cabinet remains key in deciding on war", *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 Jun 2012, <http://jpost.com/Diplomacy-and-Politics/Security-cabinet-remains-key-in-deciding-on-war> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

49 | Cf. Charles D. Freilich, "National Security Decision-Making in Israel: Process, Pathologies, and Strengths", *Middle East Journal* 60, 2006, 641, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/freilich_mej_autumn_2006.pdf (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

50 | Cf. *ibid.*, 642.

51 | For example, Prime Minister Sharon pushed through the Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip against the advice of his Chief of Staff, Moshe Yaalon. Yaalon's term in office as Chief of Staff was not renewed and his successor Dan Halutz was left to carry out the withdrawal.

The army has often tried to avoid conflicts and so found itself in opposition to the political leadership on more than one occasion.

difficult decision-making to military representatives and simply followed their advice.⁵²

History has shown according to Peri that when the IDF has not received clear strategic

objectives from the politicians, they have felt obliged to develop objectives of their own.⁵³ The army has, however, often tried to avoid conflicts and so has found itself in opposition to the country's political leadership on more than one occasion. It had, for example, a significant influence on the initiation of peace talks with the Palestinians and Jordanians in the 1990s and actively supported the process.⁵⁴

Another key interface between the military and politics are negotiations on the defense budget, which far outstrips that of other departments. Between 2001 and 2011 it made up 14.7 per cent of the total budget, compared to an OECD average of 3.6 per cent.⁵⁵ These huge funds are a constant bone of contention, particularly between the Finance and Defense Ministries. The Knesset plays a secondary role in this respect.⁵⁶ Again, the information monopoly can be observed in the army's provision of data relevant to security policy. The budget debate gained a whole new dimension in the aftermath of the social justice protests of 2011. The Trajtenberg Committee for socioeconomic reform established by the government recommended a reduction in the defense budget, which had been implemented for the years 2013 and 2014. At present, experts are warning against any further cuts in light of the difficult security situation.⁵⁷

52 | Ehud Olmert gave in to pressure from Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz, and agreed to go to war against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon (Second Lebanon War 2006).

53 | Cf. Peri, n. 43, 8 et sqq.

54 | Cf. *ibid.*, 3.

55 | Cf. Meirav Arlosoroff, "OECD: Israel is the only member that cut spending per capita 2001-2011", *Haaretz*, 16 Nov 2013, <http://haaretz.com/1.558380> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

56 | Gabriel Sheffer, Oren Barak and Amiram Oren (eds.), *An Army That Has a State: New Approaches to Civil-Security Relations in Israel*, Carmel Publishing House, Jerusalem, 2008, quoted in: Reuven Pedatzur, "Military Affairs / State of Emergency", *Haaretz*, 3 Jul 2009, <http://haaretz.com/1.279343> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

57 | Cf. Shmuel Even, "Defense Expenditures and Israel's Social Challenges", in: Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (eds.), *Strategic Survey for Israel*, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, 2012-2013, 259, http://d26e8pvoto2x3r.cloudfront.net/uploadImages/systemFiles/INSS2012Balance_ENG_Even.pdf (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

Influence Exercised by the Judiciary, Media and the Public

Since the mid-1990s, the Supreme Court has played a major role in exercising civilian control over the military. Up to this point, it had refused to institute proceedings and pronounce verdicts on military matters. However, since this change of course, the Court has concerned itself with legal issues relating to operations, the legitimacy of using certain weapons and the behaviour of soldiers in the West Bank. The actions of the Supreme Court during that phase have been described by observers as judicial activism that compromises the autonomy of the IDF and represents a takeover of the military sphere by civilian institutions.⁵⁸ Even if, as military expert Stuart A. Cohen comments, the Supreme Court had only rarely overturned military decisions, it still exerted indirect pressure on the military administration and thus influenced military behaviour.⁵⁹ However, according to Peri, this form of political interference is less obvious in times of military conflict because the Supreme Court – and society in general – tend to support the position of the political leaders under these circumstances.⁶⁰

Even if the Supreme Court has only rarely overturned military decisions, it still exerts indirect pressure on the military administration and thus influences military behaviour.

The Israeli media also monitors the military, though not to the same extent as the Supreme Court. Journalists are restricted by military censorship, as certain information is classified for reasons of security. In times of war, television, radio and newspapers tend to be more restrained in the way they report on the IDF. Peri states that during the peak of the Second Intifada, the media reported relatively little about the victims among the civilian Palestinian population and breaches of the rules during military operations. Of course the diverse and dynamic media landscape still produces channels such as the daily newspaper *Haaretz*, which takes an investigative approach and critical tone towards such conflict situations. The restrained media reporting is also related to the fact that many journalists had themselves been soldiers or still serve in the IDF as reservists. In contrast to most foreign (war) reporters in

58 | Cf. Peri, n. 16, 171 et seq.

59 | Cf. Stuart A. Cohen, *Israel and Its Army: From Cohesion to Confusion*, New York, 2008, 76 et seq.

60 | Cf. Peri, n. 16, 171 et sqq.

Israel, they and their families are directly affected by the conflict.⁶¹ While in the past it was unusual to question the army, which was considered to be the key player in guaranteeing Israel's survival, nowadays, airing public criticism of the armed forces has become more common. The main focus of public attention is the relationship between the military and politics, operational and moral issues and financial questions. Most of this criticism is brought forward by people and organisations that are markedly to the left or right of the political center.

After the Yom Kippur War of 1973, support for the IDF experienced its first setback. Their image of being invincible or even infallible had clearly been tarnished. The military suffered a similar loss of credibility during the First Lebanon War of 1982. Its inaction when faced with the massacres in Sabra and Shatila and the advance of Israeli troops as far as Beirut, despite the original statements made by Prime Minister Menachem Begin, sparked criticism of senior commanders and particularly of the Defense Minister at that time, Ariel Sharon. The 1970s and 1980s also saw the emergence of critical voices who viewed the ongoing presence of the Israeli army in the West Bank as occupation and who warned against Israel's moral decline. The Second Lebanon War in 2006 brought about criticism of the armed forces as well when it became obvious that the army had not been adequately prepared for this war and that the military commanders had made strategic errors.⁶²

Tough fighting without victories and the hard line taken by the army towards the Palestinians during the Second Intifada raised questions about the legitimacy of Israel's actions.

In general, particular types of conflict have an impact on public perceptions of the IDF. Long-lasting, low intensity conflicts have an effect on public opinion. Tough fighting without victories and the hard line taken by the army towards the Palestinians during the Second Intifada raised questions about the legitimacy of Israel's actions.⁶³ In the wake of a critical atmosphere at home, a number of NGOs on the left of the political spectrum have become active. These include Breaking the Silence and B'Tselem, which

61 | Interview with Prof. Mordechai Kremnitzer, n. 22.

62 | Cf. Stuart A. Cohen, "Why the Schalit Decision Makes Military Sense", Arutz Sheva, 27 Oct 2011, <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/10762> (accessed 22 Jul 2014).

63 | Cf. Peri, n. 16, 46 et seq.

document the actions of the Israeli army with a view to exacting punishment for breaches of human rights. At the same time strong criticism of the code of Purity of Arms, a value that was set out in the IDF's official ethical doctrine from the outset, evolved. This code requires the lives of civilians from a conflicting party to be protected.⁶⁴ However, the activities of terrorist organisations have made it more difficult to abide by this code during asymmetric conflicts. Many terrorists use civilians as human shields, for example by getting children to accompany them or by concealing themselves within mass demonstrations in order to shoot Israeli soldiers. The fact that the IDF continues to uphold the Purity of Arms approach has led to criticism from certain sectors of society, who claim that the military is endangering its own soldiers by trying to protect civilians on the other side.⁶⁵

Paradoxically, in times when there is a widespread sense of security and the security forces are successfully preventing conflicts and attacks, there seems to be a general increase in criticism directed at the Israeli armed forces. This is partly linked to the fact that socio-economic issues tend to dominate the political agenda at such times. During the social justice protests of 2011, when Israel's secular middle class protested against the high cost of living and demanded a fairer distribution of the burden, the focus of public attention also turned to the country's massive defense budget. After the 2013 parliamentary elections, the party that emerged from these protests, Yesh Atid (There is a Future), joined the ruling coalition and its member Yair Lapid was appointed Minister of Finance. During the 2013 budget negotiations, Lapid took a rather aggressive stance towards the high pensions paid to military veterans. This was a novelty in Israeli politics and it triggered a great deal of media debate.

To conclude, it should be stated that public criticism of the military is still marginal and generally restricted to academia and liberal, leftist journalists. The military continues to enjoy broad support among the Israeli people, who stand particularly strong behind their forces in times of armed conflict. This is currently being demonstrated by

64 | Cf. *ibid.*, 180.

65 | Cf. *ibid.*

reactions to "Protective Edge", the latest operation in Gaza. In this context, the army will be in a good position during Israel's ongoing round of budget negotiations, which have to be completed this year. In light of the new tactics and strategies employed by Palestinian militant groups, a strong army is a top priority for the Jewish Israeli public, so there are unlikely to be any further cuts in defense spending.

Nevertheless, the IDF is facing some major challenges. If it is to retain its character as an army of the people, then it must adapt to social change. It needs to find ways to improve the integration of ultra-Orthodox soldiers in its ranks without affecting the status of women soldiers. If the army fails to mobilise adequate numbers of ultra-Orthodox, it will find itself struggling on the recruitment front. This is exacerbated by the new law reducing the length of military service for men. Reforms are essential if the army is to continue to enjoy the trust and high esteem of the Israeli public.

The manuscript was finalised on 5 August 2014.