

Motivation Levels for IDF Enlistment over the Years

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General

A distinction must be made at the outset between two central concepts, or categories, that despite their significant difference are often confused with one another. The first category is combat motivation, or the motivation to fight,¹ and refers to that which inspires the soldier to charge the enemy in the battlefield. This motivation will be discussed only briefly in this article. The second category and the focus of this article, the motivation to enlist,² pertains not to the soldier's behavior on the battlefield, but to the factors that led him to join the military in the first place. Within this framework, a number of questions arise: What makes people want to join a military framework? What factors influence their willingness to be enlisted, whether for compulsory or volunteer service? What are the sources of these motivations, and do they change over time?

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the motivation to serve in the military has undergone huge changes that in many ways reflect the many transformations that Israeli society has undergone. The impetus of young Israelis to enlist in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) over the years can be divided into four types of enlistment motivation: survival, ideological, normative, and personal. The article begins with a description of each kind of motivation and then considers the changes that have affected these motivations in Israel over the years, from the inception of the IDF up to the present.

Survival Motivation

Survival motivation occurs when there is no alternative but to enlist and fight. It characterizes situations when societies, or states, struggle for their own existence and survival. It is present not only in states in their infancy, but also in societies such as Great Britain during the Nazi bombings in World War II, or the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa and its defense of its territory against the German invasion. These are just two of many historical examples. The Jewish community in Palestine during the War of Independence (1947-1949) is a closer example. The entire Israeli society then felt a threat to its very existence, and the motivation to enlist was the default.

Barring a small number of exceptions, this kind of motivation is characterized by total dedication to the struggle, which tops the list of public and social priorities. Individuals enlist based on the understanding that they are facing a matter of life and death and that they have no choice but to join the struggle. In such situations, those who do not do so are referred to as “evaders.” Conscription evasion not only lacks public legitimacy but is also frequently regarded as treason, and the society in question prosecutes such evaders. In such societies, military conscription is non-selective and total – “All able bodies – to arms!” (“*Kol bachur vatov laneshek*,” as the Hebrew song goes) – and sometimes also involves the mobilization of women, youth, and even children as fighters.

In such societies, there is almost no need for means to compel individuals to enlist, as the existential state of affairs causes the public to reach the conclusion that it is a matter of life or death, creating the strongest incentive possible. The individual’s personal interests are subordinated to the collective interest, and the individual serves the nation and is willing to sacrifice himself on its behalf. Because motivation of this kind is so extreme and intense, it is also extremely draining and cannot be expected to remain strong for an extended period of time (despite exceptions such as the Soviet Union during World War II where it lasted for four years).

Ideological Motivation

Ideological motivation, which is usually an extension of survival motivation, is based on national identity and a struggle over values, and is not necessarily related to a sense of existential threat. During the Spanish Civil War, for example, there was no existential threat but rather a problem of national identity

and a struggle over values such as freedom and democracy. Enlistment in the militia army that took part in the Spanish Civil War was based primarily on ideology, as citizens of different countries around the world joined the struggle. Another example is the Vietcong Army of North Vietnam (PLAF), where enlistment during the protracted Vietnam War was cultivated by the communist ideology inspired by Ho Chi Minh. Although the PLAF was a mandatory army, characterized by conscription that reached 95 percent of every age group,³ the motivation for enlistment was mostly ideological. Other examples include the Red Army during the period following World War II and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland. Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as several other terrorist groups, can also be viewed in a similar manner, since the motivation to join such militant groups is distinctly ideological, whether based on values (such as democracy or the liberation from tyranny), theory (communism or socialism), or religion (Islamic fundamentalism or Catholicism versus Protestantism).

Belief in the “justness of cause” is a central element of ideological motivation that provides complete legitimacy for almost any action. An army based on ideological motivation becomes a sacred cow within its society, and history is full of examples of serious crimes being committed in the name of such ideologies. Most notably, ideological motivation contains an extremely powerful emotional element characterized by love of country, land, and – at times – a spiritual father or ideological leader whom everyone worships. The individual is perceived as serving the collective, and the stronger the ideological identification of the individual, the higher his status. Consider, for example, the political commissars (*politruk*) of the Russian army, whose importance exceeded that of the senior commanders, because they operated under the flag of ideology.⁴ In the case of this kind of motivation, there is also no need for a means of coercion for compulsory conscription, as the source of motivation is moral and emotional in character.

Normative Motivation

Normative motivation differs from the two types discussed above. Normative motivation is manifested by individuals doing what is regarded as acceptable, customary, and legitimate according to the social conventions of the society in question – but not necessarily as a result of ideology or existential need. Nevertheless, normative motivation can be equally as powerful as ideological motivation or survival motivation. In many cases, such motivation can

be the derivative of the ideological or survival motivation that preceded it. Typically, it is difficult to identify the exact point that perpetuates the motivation through the transition from an ideological or survival basis to a normative basis.

Non-military examples of normative motivation include youth movements in Israel, which continued to operate on the basis of inertia alone for a number of years after they had been emptied of ideological drive, because youth movement membership was still considered customary, admirable, and proper. Another example is the kibbutz as a settlement type, which continued to exist, seemingly without change, many years after its ideology had weakened or disappeared altogether.

Normative motivation is also characterized by the collective's impact on the individual, not due to ideology or an existential threat, but rather because of the social pressure of the norm. Norms possess immense power in societies and groups. One interesting example is the norm of young Israelis to take backpacking trips to the Far East or South America following their discharge from the military. The pressure to take such a trip is so great that those who deviate from this norm are considered the exception. Still, normative motivation also contains an element of changing fashion. In this way, it can exist for a period of time, sometimes even a prolonged one, and then give way to one of a number of alternatives, including: reinfusion with existential need or ideology (as we will see below), replacement by another fashion, or disappearance.

Individualistic Motivation

Referring to Maslow's theory of the Hierarchy of Needs, the origin of this last type of motivation is the "need for self-actualization."⁵ The need for self-actualization, or self-fulfillment, is an extremely powerful psychological need. Maslow positioned it at the top of his hierarchy of human needs, ascribing it the same importance as other basic needs. In the case under consideration here, the individual uses a resource of society – in this case, military service – to fulfill his or her own personal needs. Although the individual is officially conscripted and contributes to society through his military service, he is serving primarily because doing so suits his personal needs and furthers his individual development. From the perspective of society, such motivation on the part of the individual is also typically perceived as

legitimate and acceptable. When individualistic motivation is shared by a large community it may also contribute to society as a whole. This dynamic is reminiscent of Max Weber's theory regarding the Protestant ethic,⁶ in the sense of an individualistic motivation that serves not only the individual, and not only a particular society, but humanity as a whole.

The Evolution of Motivation in Israel

How are these four kinds of motivation manifested in Israel? What follows is an historical overview, from the War of Independence up to the present, which highlights the changes that have occurred over the years in the different aspects of motivation for service in the IDF. Before we begin, however, there are a few points to remember. First is the fact that the changes delineated here were not abrupt, or revolutionary changes, but rather evolutionary and gradual changes that occurred through extended processes. It is therefore difficult to determine the exact date when one period ended and another began. For this reason, the years used henceforth are meant only to indicate relevant eras. Second is the fact that we can speak of at least three types of changes: periodical changes, generational changes, and sectoral changes. A *periodical* change refers to a situation in which one period differs in an extreme manner from the previous one, as in the case of the period preceding the Six Day War and the one that followed it. *Generational* changes, on the other hand, refer to situations in which, during the same period, one generation acts in accordance with one kind of motivation and another generation acts in accordance with another. For example, during any given period, reserve soldiers in the IDF belong to one generation while regular soldiers (conscripts) belong to another, and their motivational characteristics vary by generation, not by period. Finally, *sectoral* changes refer to the fact that during the same period, within the same age group, and within the same generation, the motivation for one sector of the population may be ideological whereas the motivation for another sector may be individualistic or normative.

No period is necessarily characterized purely by one kind of motivation. Moreover, there are cycles: that is to say, a particular type of motivation may be characteristic of a period in the past, but may reemerge in a later period and become predominant again. For example, the Yom Kippur War resulted in upheaval and dramatic changes and for a period of time brought the reemergence of a sense of existential threat and a renewed sense of survival

motivation that had all but been forgotten. Later in this article the non-linear trends of these different motivations at the present time will be discussed.

The first period covers (approximately) the first two decades of Israeli statehood, from 1948 until the Six Day War (1967), and was characterized, alternately, by the two first types of motivation. Early on during this period, primarily during the War of Independence, members of the Jewish *yishuv* perceived the situation of the newborn state as one of “the few versus the many” and experienced the frightening sense of having their back against the wall. Even if these were partially subjective feelings, they were dominant and powerful, and constituted the basis for enlistment to the pre-state militia (Palmach, Haganah, or the Irgun and Lehi), or to the new IDF. In the background lay the memory of the Holocaust, and the Jews in the country felt as if they were fighting for their very existence.⁷ It was the motivation of survival: “All able bodies – to arms!” – men and women, old and young, long-time inhabitants (*vatikim*) and new immigrants (*olim*) alike. This motivation continued to be influential for a few years after the War of Independence and ultimately merged with ideological motivation – as the IDF established by David Ben Gurion in 1948 was a distinctly ideological army. Ben Gurion maintained:

The IDF must serve not only as a military training apparatus but also as a state school that imbues the youth entering its ranks with knowledge of the language, the country, Jewish history, the fundamentals of general education, neatness and order, and, most importantly, love of the homeland.⁸

Thus, the IDF emerged as an ideological platform for the fundamental values of Zionism, settlement, Jewish immigration to the country, and pioneering activity. This ideology outlasted the War of Independence and persisted into the 1960s.⁹ The ideological element drew not only on the issue of survival but also on the concept of the IDF as a national melting pot and, in practice, the site of the creation of a galvanized people.¹⁰ In this way, the motivation for enlistment in the IDF was ideological, and not just compliance with law and order.

This powerful ideology was also accompanied by an emotional element. The young Israelis “of handsome forelocks and countenance” who enlisted on the basis of this type of motivation loved their homeland, its nature trails, and its landscapes. They enlisted in the army with a sense of sacrifice

made willingly and with love, and whoever failed to do so was considered a shirker or a traitor and had low social standing. This view was commonly manifested in phrases such as “the entire country is the front” and “the entire people is the army.” The emotional expression of this view was Yosef Trumpeldor’s well known proclamation that “it is good to die for one’s country,” which was still considered valid many years after the clashes at Tel Hai.¹¹ Representing the young generation of the period, Yoram Kaniuk offers an illustrative account of this dynamic in his novel *1948*:

We walked and sang about how we would die at Bab el-Wad.
We sang with yearning and with power. What idiots we were.
We thought that it would truly be wonderful to die at Bab el-Wad, and we imagined how they would pour armor-piercing bullets down on us.¹²

The second period began with the Six Day War and also lasted approximately two decades. All of a sudden, the struggle for survival ended and the sense of existential threat passed. Even the ideology of love of the homeland weakened. Nonetheless, motivation during this period remained extremely high, even though it was no longer existential or survival motivation. According to surveys conducted during this period,¹³ some 80-90 percent of Israeli youth expressed the desire to enlist, even if they were given the (hypothetical) option of not doing so. In other words, the motivation of youth to enlist in the IDF during this period was not ideological, and was certainly not based on concerns about the survival of the country. It stemmed, rather, from the fact that army service was customary, normative, and prestigious. This normative motivation remained high throughout this period not only just with regard to enlistment in the IDF but also in terms of the more specific willingness among the young conscripts to volunteer for combat and elite units. This norm found expression in the negative connotation of the term “*jobnik*” (Israeli slang for a non-combatant soldier), while terms like “*kravi*” (combatant), “*sayeret*” (commando unit), and “*shayetet*” (Israeli navy seals) became buzzwords that warmed hearts, especially the hearts of young women. Prominent examples of this sentiment are found in songs of the period, such as “I have a Beloved in Sayeret (recon-unit) Haruv” and “My Sailor (*malakh*) is My Angel (*malach*),” and slogans such as “*hatovim latayis*” (the best – to aviation). The desirable norm was to enlist and be a combat soldier, preferably in an elite unit. Deviations from this norm were

not considered to be legitimate and were met with a critical and hostile attitude, almost like the attitude toward evaders during the period of survival or ideological motivation.¹⁴

The normative motivation to serve – especially in combat units – remained intact for approximately two decades after the Six Day War, despite immense changes in the Israeli political system. The political turnover of 1977, after 29 years of Labor-led governments, had no impact on this type of motivation, even among conscripts from the labor collective and cooperative settlements (i.e., kibbutzim and moshavim).¹⁵ Even a controversial war like Operation Peace for the Galilee, which was conducted outside the Israeli consensus, failed to reduce the motivation to enlist,¹⁶ providing additional evidence that the normative motivation was based on social norms that crossed political and social sectoral lines and were not in need of ideological reinforcement.

The third period began with the first intifada in the late 1980s and lasted until the Second Lebanon War in 2006. During this period Israeli society grew increasingly utilitarian and individualistic,¹⁷ as did the primary motivation for youth to enlist in the military. For a large portion of post-Oslo adolescents,¹⁸ the dominant motivation to enlist in the IDF has been of the individualistic type, satisfying the desire for self-actualization; they are still willing to enlist, but in a manner that serves their own interests, will benefit them in their future civilian lives, and will further their personal advancement.¹⁹

Some seek self-actualization in the most prestigious combat units that put them in harm's way and that demand physical effort and present them with physical challenges. Others, who are no less willing to serve in the IDF, seek their self-actualization in "intellectual" units in which the challenges are thought-based and tackled in an environment of computers or sophisticated electronic systems. Service in such units ensures integration into the rapidly developing hi-tech industry in Israel. Indeed, it is no coincidence that during this period, Unit 8200 of the Intelligence Corps came to occupy a very high position among the elite units of the IDF. The IDF understood this individualistic motivation and began marketing itself through advertisements for units and exhibits at its central Absorption and Selection Base. This period also witnessed the onset of an era of remuneration and differential salaries, the unionization of reserve soldiers, and an emphasis on processes of professionalization. At the same time, more and more positions were made available to women, not necessarily because of any existential need but rather due to struggles for equal rights, which, from a sociological

perspective, is a distinct expression of individualistic motivation. Thus, during this period, the IDF found itself adopting more and more features of an “occupational” army in comparison to the “institutional” feature that characterized it since its inception.²⁰ This period also witnessed the first expression of – and legitimatization for – voices calling for a reexamination of the “people’s army” model,²¹ whose primary essence is the universal compulsory conscription, and consideration of the alternative model of a volunteer professional army, based primarily on individualistic motivation.

The fourth and final period (to date) covers, more or less, the last decade, from the Second Lebanon War up to the present, in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014). Today, the configuration of Israeli youth motivation for enlistment in the IDF is of a mixed nature: in addition to the individualistic motivation that still characterizes many groups in Israeli society, we are currently witnessing a return to ideological motivation, at times even accompanied by glimpses of survival motivation. This is the case primarily among youth from the Zionist national-religious sector, particularly adolescents from the Jewish settlements in Judea and Samaria, and “hesder” students (yeshiva programs that combine advanced religious studies with military service) and other yeshiva high schools. Today, an increasing number of soldiers from these sectors serve in the most active combat units in the IDF and hold command positions in field units. Their motivation is based not on an individualistic motivation or a universal age-based norm. Rather, it is clearly an ideological motivation, based on love of the Land of Israel and a sense of responsibility for its existence and its defense.²²

At the same time, in some sectors within the Israeli left, the prevailing ideology nowadays is one of refraining from serving in the IDF, or refusing to serve in certain regions. This motivation is also ideological and enjoys partial legitimacy. In parallel, a strong normative motivation also continues to underlie the enlistment of many adolescents in Israel – those who enlist in the IDF simply “because that’s what all my buddies are doing.”

Finally, we turn to the ultra-Orthodox sector, which maintains an ideology of “*torato omanuto*” (Torah study as a man’s primary occupation). Based on this ideology, young ultra-Orthodox Israelis have enjoyed sweeping exemption from military service for many years. Only in the past decade have an initial few thousand ultra-Orthodox Israelis enlisted in the IDF – within the ultra-Orthodox Nahal framework or the Shoham track – in accordance with the Tal Law. Those examining the motivation of these pioneers will

discover a combination of individualistic motivations (the ability, following the completion of the military conscription, to enter the labor market and acquire a profession and a source of income), alongside the early beginning of a new social norm penetrating the ultra-Orthodox population. The annulment of the Tal Law by Israel's High Court of Justice (February 2012) – which in itself was the product of public ideological motivation under the slogan of “equality in sharing the burden” – raises serious questions regarding the motivation for enlistment among ultra-Orthodox Israelis in the near future.

A situation conceiving a number of different motivations for army service carries with it a potential risk. Today, in the same tent, under the same hangar, and on the same deck, groups of soldiers serving in the IDF are motivated by different drives (which at times can be contradictory or hostile to one another), draw legitimacy for their service from different ideologies (some of which are completely external to the IDF), and view the IDF as a means to achieve different goals. Not only does the melting pot model that once characterized the IDF no longer exist in practice, but Ben Gurion's declaration that “the IDF must serve as a state school” is also coming under a significant threat to the hegemonic statehood (from which the IDF is supposed to draw its legitimacy). The previous hegemony is now being replaced by diverse, at times even clashing attitudes toward the state: religious patriotism, ultra-Orthodox non-state faith, individualism alone, or simply a normative position devoid of any ideology or vision.

Yet the most prominent and surprising fact emerging from this multi-year survey is the enduring high level of motivation for enlistment in the IDF among Israeli Jewish youth, which has remained almost unchanged over the years.²³ More than six decades have passed since it was in need of an overall survival motivation to fill its ranks, yet the IDF still enjoys a surprisingly high level of motivation.²⁴ Reports to the effect that “for every open position in Golani Brigade there are four candidates,” and that “more than 70 percent of the candidates fit for military service have requested to serve as combat soldiers”²⁵ appear repeatedly in the media today, as they have in the past, and it sometimes even seems as if there is an upward surge in the motivation to serve. It therefore appears that quantitatively, the level of motivation for enlistment in the IDF has not changed over the years. What has changed, primarily, is its makeup and its profile. Perhaps in this sense, as in many others, the IDF constitutes, first and foremost, an accurate reflection of the Israeli society that feeds it.

Notes

- 1 Lord W. Moran, *The Anatomy of Courage* (London: Collins, 1945); Samuel A. Stouffer, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, Marion Harper Lumsdaine, Robin M. Williams, Jr., M. Brewster Smith, Irving L. Janis, Shirley A. Star, and Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., *The American Soldier. Vol II.: Combat and its Aftermath* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Penguin, 1979); Yitzhak Benvenisti, Uzi Ben-Shalom, and Ziv Ronel, "Society Is Not Everything: Motivations for Fighting in Operation Cast Lead," *Maarachot* 430 (2010): 38-45.
- 2 See Stephen L. Mehay, "Determinants of Enlistments in the U.S. Army Reserve," *Armed Forces and Society* 16 (1990): 351-67; John Eighmey, "Why Do Youth Enlist? Identification of Underlying Themes," *Armed Forces and Society* 32 (2006): 307-28. On the IDF, see Reuven Gal, *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986).
- 3 John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945–1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).
- 4 For a real-time account of the status of the political commissar in the Red Army, see the Nechemia Levanon memorial website at <http://nechemia.org/references/politruk.pdf>.
- 5 Abraham H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-96.
- 6 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (London and Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1930).
- 7 For one example of many, see Yoram Kaniuk, *1948: A Novel* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2010).
- 8 David Ben Gurion, *The Eternity of Israel* (Tel Aviv; Ayanot, 1964), p. 158.
- 9 David Ben Gurion, "The IDF – The Source of a Fighting and Productive Nation," *Maarachot* 287 (1983): 3.
- 10 Moshe Lissak, "The Security Ethos and the Mythos of Israel as a Militaristic Society," *Democratic Culture* 4-5 (2001): 187-211.
- 11 Yael Zerubavel, "Between History and Legend: The Incarnations of Tel-Hai in Popular Memory," in Robert Wistrich and David Ohana, *Myth and Memory: Transfigurations of Israeli Consciousness* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuhad, 2005), pp. 189-202.
- 12 Kaniuk, *1948*, p. 28.
- 13 Department of Behavioral Sciences, *Surveys among Candidates for Security Service, 1970-2014*, IDF Manpower Directorate; Ofra Meizels and Reuven Gal, *The Motivation of Youth to Serve in the IDF – Israeli Adolescents during the Intifada* (Zichron Yaakov: Israeli Institute for Military Studies, 1990).
- 14 See Reuven Gal, *A Portrait of the Israeli Soldier*, pp. 58-75; and Amia Lieblich, *Tin Soldiers on Jerusalem Beach* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).
- 15 Dani Zamir, "Attitudes of Kibbutz Youth to the Military in Israel: Exceptional Group or the Tip of the Iceberg?" in *Youth Motivation and Military Service*, eds.

- Jürgen Kuhlmann and Anton Bebler (München: Sozialwissenschaftliches Institut der Bundeswehr, 1987), pp. 139-80.
- 16 Department of Behavioral Sciences, *Surveys among Candidates for Security Service, 1970-2014*.
 - 17 The Israeli Democracy Index survey of 2007 found that 39 percent of Israelis believe that the interests of the individual are much more important than the interests of the state, in comparison to 6 percent, who expressed this sentiment in 1981 and 7 percent in 1996. See Asher Arian, Nir Atmor, and Yael Hadar, *The 2007 Israeli Democracy Index: Cohesion in a Divided Society* (Jerusalem: Israeli Democracy Institute, 2007), <http://en.idi.org.il/media/1665204/Index2007Eng.pdf>.
 - 18 See Reuven Gal, “Post-Oslo” *Youth: A Profile* (Zichron Yaakov: Carmel Institute, 1996).
 - 19 Yagil Levy and his associates refer to this change as a transition from “obligatory militarism” to “contractual militarism.” See Yagil Levy, Edna Lomsky-Feder, and Noa Harel, “From ‘Obligatory Militarism’ to ‘Contractual Militarism’ – Competing Models of Citizenship,” in *Militarism and Israeli Society*, eds. Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010). Levy uses the term “republican equation” to describe the manner in which young Israelis exchange the sacrifice of their three years of service for the social and economic benefit they derive from it. See Yagil Levy, “Is There a Motivation Crisis in Military Recruitment in Israel?” *Israel Affairs* 15, no. 2 (2009): 135-58.
 - 20 Reuven Gal and Stuart Cohen, “Israel: Still Waiting in the Wings,” in *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces After the Cold War*, eds. Charles Moskos, John A. Williams, and David R. Segal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 224-41.
 - 21 Ofer Shelah, *The Silver Platter: Why Is a Revolution Necessary in the IDF?* (Or Yehuda: Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2003).
 - 22 Reuven Gal and Tamir Libel, eds., *Between the Yarmulke and the Beret: Religion, Politics, and the Military in Israel* (Ben-Shemen: Modan, 2012).
 - 23 Udi Spiegel, *Youth Motivation to Serve in the IDF*, submitted to the Knesset Education and Culture Committee, Research and Information Center, June 2001; Stuart Cohen, *The False “Crisis” in Military Recruitment: An IDF Red Herring* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2007).
 - 24 See article by Roni Tiargan in this volume.
 - 25 Amir Buhbut, “The August Draft: The Golani Brigade is the Most Desired in the IDF,” *Walla! News*, July 22, 2012, <http://news.walla.co.il/?w=/2689/2551851>.