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Combat Military Service: The Crisis in Motivation

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There has reportedly been a significant decline in motivation to enlist in IDF combat units. The IDF is not eager to reveal actual figures, but the published information showed a considerable decline in motivation among the November 2017 recruits, and particularly for field units, including combat intelligence, the armored corps, combat engineering, and artillery. A senior commander noted that the army attributes the drop in motivation to the calm security situation and to the fact that "young people today always ask: 'what's in it for me?' concerning their military service."

This assessment is only partly correct. The drop in motivation to serve in field units is not a localized problem that can be attributed to the calm security situation, but is the result of a long process that saw significant changes in the nature of IDF service and recruitment. Advances in technology and their wide ranging (and some would say excessive) use by the IDF have shifted the center of gravity in recruitment from the combat field units to the Special Forces and technological units.

In systematic and structured fashion, the IDF recruitment process gives priority to recruits joining the Special Forces, Flight and Naval Academies, technological units, and Military Intelligence directorate. These branches have access to the best quality recruits that the State of Israel can offer. The process of locating personnel for the prestigious intelligence units starts in high schools with a sophisticated marketing approach, including assurance that the army will provide them with a profession and skills that will be useful in civilian life, whether in hi tech or other fields. It is therefore no surprise that young people ask what benefit they will derive from their military service. Graduates of technology and cyber units assure themselves of an advantage in their future career after the army. It is enough to look at the conferences of Military Intelligence 8200 graduates to see what a considerable advantage they have over their comrades in the field units.

This is the competitive space in which the IDF field units contend, and without much success. They must be content with those who are not "intercepted" during the triage process by the special units, the prestigious courses, and the technology and intelligence systems. The field units cannot offer their recruits similar advantages. On the other hand, they have to address their recruits in terms of motivation, image, and values.

The IDF recruitment process has undergone far reaching changes in recent decades. Initially the IDF filtered recruits based on its own needs, and the recruits themselves had little influence on where they would serve. Nor was the volunteer option overly developed in those years. However, as the debate on individual rights gained traction, the IDF began to give recruits more opportunity for choice, with an attempt to satisfy their wishes (and sometimes those of their demanding parents). In light of the huge technology advances and the benefits they offered recruits, the IDF found itself facing a gradual decline in the quality of recruits for field units. Perhaps the IDF went too far – it needs quality and not just quantity in its units, including the less attractive units such as the armored corps, which has suffered from serious problems of image and soldier motivation in recent years.

The trend reached a new height in the November 2016 induction, when 86 recruits who were assigned to the armored corps refused to leave the recruitment base to join the corps. The army handled the incident with resolute determination. Half of the “protesters” were sent to detention at the base, while the others were sent to military prison for periods ranging from four to ten days. At the same time the army began to work on improving the corps image in the eyes of recruits, with considerable media coverage on the operations of the armored corps, interviews with senior commanders, early location of potential recruits and guarantees that they serve in the corps, and presentations by commanders to high school students before they enlist.

The problem of the quality and motivation of new recruits in field units likewise affects the quality of the IDF command. It is universally agreed that field units are the supplier of the army's main command backbone, and particularly in the IDF. This is due to the nature of warfare and the centrality of ground combat. A shortage of high quality personnel in these units leads to fewer high quality and professional commanders. It is already possible to identify and correct this phenomenon with the attempt to move commanders from the Special Forces to the field units in order to improve the standard of the field units and their commanders, and to give those commanders promotion prospects.

Already when he was the commander of the Galilee Division, Maj. Gen. Herzl Halevy warned of giving priority to intelligence and cyber jobs in the allocation of high quality personnel, which could mean that the IDF would one day find itself with inferior company and brigade commanders. Then-head of the Military Intelligence directorate Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi stated that in the future the IDF would have to develop “combined paths, for example, an infantry officer who would be trained to work in intelligence after serving as a company commander.” This is similar to the way in which the army integrates officers from the ground forces into the Special Forces, or alternatively from the special forces into the infantry brigades. An example is the path

Halevy himself followed, from the Paratroopers Brigade to the Military Intelligence directorate units, and back.

The IDF is based on the principle of a people's army and therefore benefits from the fact that unlike other professional Western armies, it receives into its ranks the citizens with the best human potential. However, by referring most of them to the technology and Special Forces units, it will become unable to provide the State of Israel with the security it requires. At the hour of need, the IDF field units need the strike forces, in addition to firepower and intelligence, to defeat the enemy in the shortest time possible.

It appears that in recent years IDF commanders have begun to absorb the depth of the problem and are trying to remedy it. It was announced recently that the IDF will use a variety of means to reward soldiers serving in the field units, but this is not enough. The army must build a holistic perception of manpower to deal with a variety of fundamental issues, including: a balanced division of high quality recruits to meet the various IDF needs, means to reduce the Special Forces triage system, a review of the model of command development, and more. Developing the IDF manpower concept is not just a matter for the army's human resources professionals. It must be based on a broad vision of operational needs and led by the IDF's most senior commanders.

While handling the crisis in motivation is the responsibility of the army, it is also a social challenge of the first order. Israel will face many more security challenges. The need to instill in the youth a system of values that while not ignoring their desire for self-fulfillment provides a world view in which giving, volunteering, and sacrifice are important values, remains vital to Israel's existence and security.