

INSS Insight No. 1221, October 31, 2019

Shortening Compulsory IDF Service for Men

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The discharge of men inducted into the IDF from July 2015 began in March 2018, after 32 months of compulsory service (compared with 36 months until then). A law stipulating a further shortening of compulsory service for men is supposed to apply to those drafted from July 2020, such that they will serve 30 months. However, according to media reports, the past year has heard dissenting voices within the military against adopting this shortened service, in view of the increasing security challenges. In contrast, some in the Ministry of Finance want to shorten the compulsory service period even further to just 24 months, for economic reasons. This article presents the main issues regarding shortening compulsory service for men enlisting from July 2020. Either way, in the foreseeable future, compulsory service soldiers will remain the main source of manpower in the IDF, and will overwhelmingly determine the quality of the military.

The IDF includes career soldiers and soldiers in compulsory service; the latter comprise the decisive majority of soldiers in uniform. Soldiers in compulsory service are the source for soldiers in the regular army and in the reserves, and therefore have a decisive role in shaping the image and quality of the military. The number of soldiers in compulsory service depends on four parameters:

- a. *The size of potential recruitment cohorts:* A cohort of 18-year-olds comprises about 95,000 men and women, almost all from the Jewish sector, and increases in accordance with natural growth. Potential compulsory recruitment also includes men from the Druze and Circassian communities. In general, the Arab sector is not required to serve and is therefore not part of potential recruitment, even though this exception is not anchored in law.
- b. *Actual recruitment rate:* This depends on the IDF's needs and on the "people's army" principle, which underlies the compulsory enlistment. The general recruitment brings the highest quality groups to the IDF, but makes it difficult for the IDF to be selective in recruitment regarding those less suited to its needs. According to open data presented to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee in January 2017, the recruitment rate of men and women in compulsory service is about 65 percent of the potential total (compared with 75 percent in 1990), and is expected to decline to 64 percent by 2020. The recruitment rate among men is 72 percent; among women it is 59 percent. These

figures include the very low recruitment rate among the ultra-Orthodox population (which is increasing at an annual rate of 4.4 percent – three times the non-ultra-Orthodox Jewish population). The recruitment rate of men from the Druze community exceeds 80 percent (about 1,000 recruits each year). In addition, over the years, the variety of military professions staffed by women in compulsory service has increased, including combat roles, leading to an increase in the quality of their contribution to the IDF.

- c. *Dropout rate from compulsory service*: In 2016, about 14.7 percent of men and about 7.2 percent of women dropped out of compulsory service.
- d. *Current duration of compulsory service by law*: 32 months for men, and 24 months for women, other than exceptions.

Shortening Compulsory Service for Men

In February 2006, a public committee led by Prof. Avi Ben-Bassat recommended that compulsory service be shortened from the standard 36-month period. The recommendation was adopted by the government, but the Second Lebanon War of that summer disrupted the process, which was then postponed. Service was shortened by four months for those enlisting from July 2015 onward, such that their discharge began in March 2018, following 32 months. The duration of compulsory service for women remained 24 months, even though there was an idea to extend it to 28 months.

In December 2016, the Knesset approved second and third readings of a bill that would require men enlisting from July 2020 to serve 30 months of compulsory service, meaning a further shortening of 2 months. This was done with the agreement of the IDF. However, according to media reports, there have been dissenting voices within the IDF over the past year against implementing the change, in view of the increased security challenges. A decision to cancel the further shortening of service that was to take effect with the July 2020 enlistment would require legislative amendment. In contrast, sources in the Ministry of Finance want to further shorten service to 24 months, for economic reasons.

Considerations in Favor of Continuing to Shorten Military Service

Compulsory service is considered a necessary evil in democratic countries. Civil society prefers a professional army based on voluntary service. Compulsory service still exists in some democratic countries, including Switzerland, Austria, Greece, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and South Korea, but is of much shorter duration than in Israel. Compulsory service for women is a rare phenomenon in the world. While Israel's security challenges do not allow it to shorten compulsory service radically, there is room to advance the process.

The natural increase in recruitment cohorts will make it possible to shorten service given the number of recruits. The shortage of compulsory soldiers will be temporary and will be closed within a few years. For the long term, the IDF is already expecting constraints in the volume of compulsory recruits it can efficiently absorb at a given budget.

Benefit for the individual and the civilian labor force. Shortening service will enable discharged compulsory soldiers to join the civilian economy earlier. This may contribute greatly to the discharged soldiers themselves, as they will be able to launch their studies and careers earlier, and receive fair wages. It may also contribute greatly to the civilian labor force. (The estimated alternative cost of compulsory service to the economy is an issue unto itself, partly because of the contribution of compulsory service to the economy.) In any case, it seems that shortening the duration of compulsory service on its own will not necessarily lead to a drastic reduction in basic security costs. This assumes that the number of soldiers in compulsory service will increase again over the years with the natural increase in enlistment cohorts, and in the short term, the military will adopt solutions that incur a higher cost, such as retaining soldiers in compulsory service for additional military service under regular army terms, and recruiting reserves under regular army terms. In addition, a drastic shortening of compulsory service may lead to a decline in security output (see below).

Shortening compulsory service eases the tension between the people's army principle and the difficulty in realizing it. More than 50 percent of Israel's population does not enlist (including the Arab sector), and this trend is increasing. In the absence of the ability to uphold equality in sharing the burden, as required in the people's army principle, the burden on the enlisting population must be eased by shortening service and improving terms of service. In addition, shortening service will enable the military to deal with the increasing enlistment cohorts over time, including among the group that views itself as committed to enlistment (the "core population"). The commitment of this group to military service is a primary asset that the state must strengthen.

Considerations against Continuing to Shorten Military Service

Shortage of manpower in high quality groups in the military. While shortening compulsory service is welcome among low to medium quality groups in the military given the surplus manpower, the process will encompass all groups and aggravate the shortage of combat troops, combat support troops, and professional soldiers.

Negative ramifications of rapid turnover for the quality and training of the military. Shortening service is not just a quantitative issue. Significantly shortening service may have a negative impact on the skills of the regular army, which may trickle down to the reserves as well. Shortening service makes it necessary to shorten service tracks,

including training and operational engagement. As such, junior ranks can be expected to grow younger and less experienced. Presumably the more rapid the turnover, the higher the decline in the security output.

Security challenges. Israel currently faces much more difficult challenges, mainly from Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah, than it did in 2015 when it was decided to shorten service (for those enlisting from 2020 onward). In addition, the IDF is now preparing its "Tnufa" multiyear program, which aims, according to the Chief of Staff, to turn it into a "deadly, efficient, and innovative military." To this end, the IDF must recruit and train more soldiers in high quality groups and strengthen the vanguard with experienced soldiers, even at the price of surplus manpower in lower quality groups.

Israel does not have any practical alternative to compulsory military service in the foreseeable future. The alternative to canceling compulsory service and the reserve service is to increase the regular army by a scale of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and that is even after deep streamlining. This would also solve the problem of unequally sharing the burden. However, this solution is not practical in terms of resources in the foreseeable future, nor does it ensure that the high quality groups in Israeli society will come to the military. In addition, without compulsory service, there can be no reserve army in its current format. The IDF currently maintains differential recruitment of soldiers in compulsory service, such that the essential and more significant roles in the army require compulsory recruits to extend their service under junior regular army conditions for a short time. While it seems that this is a good solution for staffing essential positions, it depends on the readiness of soldiers from high quality groups to sign on for the desired lengths of time, and is constrained by budgetary considerations. The more compulsory service is shortened, the more it may be difficult to realize this solution.

Conclusion

In the foreseeable future, Israel has no alternative to compulsory service, because it is not practical for it to maintain a large regular army, and because compulsory soldiers are a high quality and quantity source for the regular army and the reserves. However, there is a solid social and economic logic to continue the processes of shortening compulsory service for men in the IDF. With that, the security consideration is paramount, and therefore, the decision on continuing to shorten service, and its timing, must be set in accordance with the "Tnufa" program.