

Shortening Men's Compulsory IDF Service: Beyond Economic Ramifications

Meir Elran, Sasson Hadad, Tomer Fadlon, and Ofer Shelah | No. 1503 | August 5,
2021

Endorsing the position of the IDF Chief of Staff, Israel's Prime Minister and the Ministers of Defense and Finance decided recently to postpone implementation of a previous government decision to shorten compulsory IDF service for men. Accordingly, compulsory IDF service for men will continue to be 32 months. This significant decision opposes the recommendations of several professional commissions and earlier decisions by the government and the Knesset to gradually shorten men's compulsory service to 24 months. Human resources development planning for young people in Israel should be based on an integrated national, social, and economic approach that addresses a variety of needs, including – but not limited to – those of the IDF. The appropriate model for IDF compulsory service for men should balance between 28-30 months of compulsory service and strengthened IDF core systems comprising standing army soldiers serving shorter terms. There should be a differential model of compulsory service, which shortens the duration of service in units with personnel surpluses, and a system of longer and better-paid positions for those serving in essential roles.

On July 27, 2021, an agreement was reached on the defense budget for 2022, including the postponement until 2025 of the measure to shorten men's compulsory military service to 30 months. This recent decision, which overrides the decision of July 2020 to shorten the compulsory service period, reflects the position of the IDF Chief of Staff, who since assuming his post in January 2019 has opposed shortening the period of compulsory service, given the framework of his proposed Tnufa ("Momentum") multi-year plan, which the government has yet to approve.

The decision making process for shortening compulsory military service has a long history. The first stage began with legislation in 2014, when service was shortened

from 36 to 32 months. In the second stage, part of the 2015 agreement between then-Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon and then-Defense Minister Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon (based on to the IDF multi-year Gideon plan), service was shortened further to 30 months. From the outset the decision was problematic. Shortening service was portrayed at the time as one of the Ministry of Finance's achievements, along with pension regulation, legislation to implement the Goren Commission's insights regarding disabled soldiers, and increased transparency in the Ministry of Defense.

Shortening compulsory IDF service to 30 months is inconsistent with the IDF's "life cycle," which is based on drafting soldiers three times a year, a set length of basic training, and personnel turnover in operational units. Shortening service by two months requires preparation and a change in these elements. No such change was made; leading IDF figures most likely did not believe the decision to shorten the service would be implemented.

The IDF opposes shortening men's compulsory service to 30 months primarily for the following reasons:

- a. A projected shortage of personnel in high-quality units: since shorter service was supposed to apply to all units, large personnel gaps in combat units and some of the essential combat support units were likely to emerge. The needs of the ambitious Tnufa plan are liable to widen this gap.
- b. Utilization of the "quality element," mainly in operational and technology units, would likely be adversely affected. Operational and technological training takes a long time, and shortening compulsory service leaves less time for utilizing the soldiers' capabilities.
- c. Shortening service would impact negatively on combat units comprising soldiers in their compulsory service. According to the IDF, this would require assigning reserve soldiers to regular security tasks, a problematic scenario insofar as the Reserve Service Law limits mobilization of reserves in any given year.

In contrast to the IDF's position, the plan to shorten compulsory service is based on a long-term concept recommended by a number of professional commissions. Among them is the Ben Bassat Commission, which recommended gradually shortening the length of compulsory military service to 24-28 months, starting in 2007. Its recommendations were approved by the government in February 2006, and to this day constitute the mainstay of any discussion of the issue. The

Commission highlighted the need to reduce the burden on soldiers and decrease social inequality, along with the necessary reduction of the economic burden. The Commission recommended compensating the military for shorter service with procurement of alternative resources, primarily new technologies and outsourcing, and increasing the number of young soldiers in the standing army.

Implementation of the recommendations was postponed following the 2006 Second Lebanon War, after which the Brodet Commission endorsed the Ben Bassat Commission's recommendations on shorting compulsory IDF service, but recommended postponing their implementation until 2011. Legislation on the matter began only in 2014 as part of the discussion on equalizing the burden of military service and regulating the status of yeshiva students. In this framework, it was decided to shorten the length of compulsory military service for men from 36 to 32 months, starting in July 2015. In 2015, the Locker Commission again recommended gradually shortening compulsory military service for men to only two years. These recommendations were not approved. Following the Locker Commission, the IDF supported a 2019 law shortening service to 32 months in return for allocation of a multi-year budget for 3,000 additional paid service positions for essential soldiers.

The recommendations for shortening compulsory military service were criticized regularly for relying mainly on economic considerations, without taking sufficient note of military needs, based on the dynamic strategic situation. The criticism referred mainly to the weight placed by the commissions on the high economic costs incurred by delaying the entry of young men into the labor force. In retrospect, the IDF heads admitted more than once that shortening compulsory IDF service helped the army by reducing hidden unemployment, and that it was possible to retain combat soldiers and support personnel genuinely needed by the IDF for short periods through the standing army.

We propose that the length of compulsory IDF service should be based on the following primary considerations:

- *Inequality of the burden*: The proportion of those drafted and fulfilling compulsory military service is falling, along with the increase in the exemptions for yeshiva students (given the growing haredi population), religious women, and Arabs, the gap in the length of service between women and men, and the increased dropout rates among those in compulsory service. The gap between the various groups generates friction

between them and detracts from national solidarity. A change is therefore necessary – adoption of an equal length of service model for women and men according to contribution to the system, and lowering the exemption for ultra-Orthodox to age 21 in order to encourage them to go to work.

- *The burden of military service versus civilian occupation:* Compulsory military service for men in Israel is one of the longest in the world (the global average is 12-24 months). It constitutes a heavy burden on those serving, who assess their situation from the perspective of a culture of individualism in a free and affluent society.
- *The population increase:* Since the Ben Bassat Commission's recommendations were approved in 2006, Israel's population has grown from seven million to more than nine million. The population is projected to exceed 10 million in 2024. Even taking into account the large natural increase among population groups that do not serve in the IDF (mainly ultra-Orthodox and Arab), if 65 percent of those of draft age were to serve in the IDF, there would be a large surplus of soldiers drafted, incurring unnecessary budget costs.
- *Greater professionalism:* The main contribution of compulsory service is the creation of professional personnel for the standing army and the reserves. A correct allocation of resources would make it possible to increase the number of those serving for short periods in the standing army in combat and technology units, so that more soldiers and officers with professional experience would serve in these units instead of being replaced shortly after their training is completed.
- *Efficiency:* The IDF needs top-level personnel in both technology and combat roles. Non-selective conscription for long service exacerbates hidden unemployment in the IDF, mainly in the rear units. The excess manpower, which is not properly utilized in the IDF, could contribute a great deal to civilian economic growth. The Ministry of Finance contends that the cost of suspending the shortening of compulsory military service by two months is NIS 2.8 billion a year, caused by the delay in the entry of employees into the labor force.
- *Differentiation:* The IDF employs an inclusive approach in its human resources management, which purports to sanctify the value of equality. The arrangement in which all conscripts are mandated to serve the same length of time is based on this value. This arrangement makes it easy for the IDF to manage its human resources, but some of those resources are not utilized, as the specific needs of the various IDF systems dictate a

differential policy on the length of service. The differential approach does exist in certain elite IDF units in which professionalism requires a different arrangement that balances the training period and the active service period.

In conclusion, the appropriate systemic solution to the tension between the various needs in human resources management of conscripts should rely on a proper balance between 28-30 months of compulsory service for men and reinforcement of the core IDF systems with short-term standing army soldiers. It is also correct to double the number of those performing additional service for extra pay, while shortening the service of those who are less essential. The leading principle should be based on a differential length of service: shortened service for those in units in which there is an expensive surplus of conscripts, and longer and better-paid service for those in essential positions. This pattern of differentiation in the service model already exists in practice in the IDF.

Furthermore, all of the development planning for young personnel in Israel should be based on an overall national approach that takes social, economic, and military considerations into account. Adopting the differentiation principle in compulsory military service would create a system in the IDF that from a national perspective is more professional, efficient, and just, and also takes into account the large groups of young people who do not serve in the IDF, but who can and should contribute to the economy and the nation's prosperity.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen