

# **Salaries, Compensation, and Benefits in the IDF: Implications for the Regular and Reserve Service Model**

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**The IDF has not been a "people's army" for a long time, at least not in the traditional sense as Ben-Gurion intended. Meantime, discussions of benefits in the IDF have grown far more common, part of a debate that at present is conducted as a means of preserving the remnants of this model. The recent increase in the subsistence allowance of conscripts raised the topic of benefits anew, while at the same time there is confusion between compensation (for loss and damage), benefits (for activity and contribution), and salary (in the conventional sense, according to the labor market). Salary increases for conscripts - which tripled in the last six years - are an expression of public pressure resulting in part from a decline in motivation for military service. However, raising financial rewards to increase motivation distances the IDF from the concept of a "people's army" and is another step toward the very problematic model of a professional army. IDF leaders would do well to introduce valuable benefits for soldiers that are not just monetary. At the same time, the vital question of the appropriate IDF recruitment model must be discussed in depth: "equal service for all"; selective and official recruitment in which everyone is required to enlist but the IDF recruits only some according to clear and transparent criteria; or another model altogether.**

It was recently announced that the salary of IDF conscripts will increase by about 50 percent. The media mainly dealt with the question of whether this increase was due to pressure exerted by the public and whether the goal was to legitimize the army's position on the issue of pensions for the standing army. These questions, however, do not deal with the central issue, that is, the implications of the salary increase for conscripts, and its effect on motivation for recruitment in particular, and on the IDF's recruitment model in general.

One of the problems stems from the fact that there is confusion between the terms compensation, benefits, and wages, which are known to have meaning beyond the dictionary definition.

**Compensation:** payment to a soldier for the loss and expenses caused due to military service. Social Security to reserve soldiers is one example: the soldier receives a refund according to the salary he lost during the period he served in the reserves. Thus, in the same tank, for example, there may be a soldier who receives lower compensation than that of his friend serving alongside him, because his civilian salary is lower. The payments to mandatory service conscripts, which have been defined in the army as "subsistence allowance" (and have been recently called "salaries" in the media and by some politicians), are compensation designed to cover expenses incurred by a soldier in the army due to service (food products, toiletries, and so on). The apparent contradiction is that if we truly want to compensate the conscripts according to the damages they sustain, then the soldiers in central locations not on the front lines should receive higher compensation, because their expenses (and in fact their parents' expenses) are much higher compared to combatants and supporters in closed and remote bases.

**Benefits:** Benefits are an expression of recognition and appreciation of regular or reserve soldiers for their actions. It is differential (more for combatants and combat support soldiers), and therefore soldiers performing the same mission will receive the same reward. The benefit can be expressed in money, but also in other ways, such as tickets to shows, participation in a consumer organization, vacations for combat units, and more. (The issue of inequality between soldiers due to the non-identical contribution of the service itself – "cyber combatants" versus combat fighters, for example – goes beyond the scope of this discussion.)

**Salary:** A monthly payment based on the job and on market forces. The level of wages is determined over time according to supply and demand and in accordance with labor market dynamics.

Currently, permanent soldiers receive differential salaries according to the nature of the service, and differential benefits. This reflects the need to reward soldiers in the field and increase motivation to serve there, and the need to compete with high civilian salaries in order to retain certain personnel, especially intelligence and technology personnel. Reservists receive compensation and benefits but no salary. The picture in the world of compulsory service is more complex: the monthly amount that a combat soldier will receive in his third year, NIS 3,000, is about 50 percent lower than the minimum wage and does not constitute a salary in a real sense, although many use the term "salary," and not by accident. In 2015, combat soldiers received NIS 1,100, which means a threefold increase in six years, when the index barely rose. This is a direct result of the IDF's need to deal with the ongoing decline in motivation and the assumption that monetary reward will solve the problem.

Kurt Lewin's 1951 field theory ("Three-step Change Model") suggested that a sociological component, such as motivation, is influenced by incentivizing and inhibiting forces. In the current reality in Israel, incentivizing forces are a sense of mission, personal fulfillment, social leadership, appreciation of society, and financial reward. Forces that inhibit the increase in motivation to serve in the IDF are related to changes in social values, the economic situation (the influence of affluent society), the reduction of the existential threat, a surplus of soldiers (creating "hidden unemployment," especially in rear positions), and the notion that serving in the military is for "suckers." The impression is that whenever there is a decline in motivation to serve, the IDF and the government choose the easy way: instead of strengthening the value-based motivating forces, the soldiers' salaries are raised. In fact, it is a short-term solution to a deep problem, which may clear the air only until new demands arise. Over time these payments will turn today's compensation into a real wage, with all the social implications involved. The reserves have been in a similar process in the last twenty years. Thus, with the help of growing rewards, the IDF solves the need to distinguish the serving minority and enhance motivation.

The issue of rewards and salaries has serious and direct significance for the long-standing discussion of the IDF as the "people's army," which ostensibly stands in juxtaposition to the professional army model.

The "people's army" model, according to Ben-Gurion, was based on equal service by all (or at least most) young men and women reaching the age of 18; on the "melting pot," designed to unite society and its tribes; and on an army whose job is not just to fight and defend the homeland but also engage in social activity. A long time has passed, and far-reaching changes have occurred since then. The military threat has changed completely, Israeli society is different, and the economy is largely based on market forces, but the IDF chooses to adhere to the term "people's army." For example, in 2004, the General Staff and Chief of Staff Moshe ("Bogie") Ya'alon published a document entitled "Purpose and Distinction," stating that the IDF, as the "people's army," will continue to recruit as many soldiers as possible, regular and reserve. The "IDF Strategy" document published in 2018 by then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot addressed the issue of force buildup and promoted "establishing the IDF's strength on the quality of servicemen and the attractiveness of service and strengthening the IDF as a combat army and people's army." This situation was not true as early as 2004, and certainly not in 2018. It seems that although even today IDF commanders often use the term "people's army," especially at festive events and ceremonies, they also understand that the IDF has not been like this for a long time, neither quantitatively nor regarding representation of all sectors of society. Suffice it to say that only between half and two-thirds of the candidates for security service enlist in the IDF, and about one-sixth of them do not complete their full service. In a November 2021 survey by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), to the question "What would you advise a young man facing recruitment," 32 percent answered "enlist in the IDF for a valuable civilian position," and only 26 percent answered that they would advise enlistment in combat service or as a soldier in elite reconnaissance units.

In the reserve service, the picture is even more pronounced, and mobilization has long been selective and voluntary. This is because the IDF has always recruited only from those who have been discharged from regular service and only those it needs from among combat units, combat support, and special positions. In addition, although by law every soldier must serve in the reserves, it is agreed that only those who volunteer perform actual reserve service. Thus, only about 6 percent of those who enlisted in compulsory service serve as active reservists.

The media discourse juxtaposes the "people's army" model with the professional army model. A survey by the Israel Democracy Institute published in November 2021 indicates that 47 percent of Jewish respondents believe that the compulsory army should be abolished and replaced with a professional army. This number has grown steadily since 2017.

The State of Israel, in its current geopolitical and social situation, cannot afford a professional, non-operational, non-economic, or non-ethical military.

Maintaining a professional army on the scale that exists today in which soldiers earn salaries will be an economic burden that the state will not be able to carry.

Even more important: moving to a professional army will probably result in recruitment on the basis of a relatively few idealistic values, and most recruits will volunteer to serve mainly for employment reasons (and will likely come from weaker socio-economic strata). The operational capability of the army will decrease, in part because such an army will be characterized by less of a fighting spirit, fewer social values, and less commitment to the homeland. In addition, a professional army will find it difficult to maintain public commitment and legitimacy toward it and will contribute to widened social gaps between the military and the general public.

The obvious conclusion is that the Israeli government, the Israeli public, and especially the IDF should in principle decide on the continued existence of the IDF as the "people's army." This is not just a rhetorical decision. It necessitates a series of practical decisions regarding the correct recruitment model in the current reality. It seems that the systemic solution to the dilemmas presented above, and to the preservation of at least partial characteristics of the "people's army," is enlistment in the IDF as part of a different model from the one that exists today, but not in a professional army model or a model that will lead to it.

Possible models are, for example, the "equal service for all" model of the Pnima ("Inside") movement, or a selective and official recruitment model as proposed in the past, for example by Prof. Yagil Levy for the regular system and by me for the reserve system. According to this model, a conscription obligation will apply to all, but the IDF will recruit only some according to clear and transparent criteria, with compensation and benefits given accordingly. This model seems more practical, and is compatible with the social environment that currently exists in Israel.

The army would do well to advance the debate, including a public one, on the issue of the recruitment model, before a crisis occurs. Hopes that increasing the subsistence allowance (soon to be "salary") of conscripts, increasing pensions for permanent personnel, and increasing benefits for reservists will solve all problems are misplaced. Motivation and values are not bought with money!

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