

The Motivation for Serving in the IDF: In the Mirror of Time

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Over the years, the motivation of Israeli youth to serve in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has reflected societal changes in politics, culture and norms. This article will describe the process amid the changing relationships between the army and society in Israel.

Israel has not been immune from the changes in the world over the last decade, particularly in the West, which today includes Eastern Europe. These comprise the process of globalization: economic interdependence; a regional monetary standard; English as the dominant language, and the worldwide Internet. Western militaries are downsizing, a process that is sometimes drastic. Armies are changing their recruiting process from the draft to the volunteer system. Israel is one of the few countries that employ the draft, and will probably continue this for years to come.

Moreover, warfare is changing. The amount of wars and their size have decreased. This trend still can't be seen in the Middle East, where memories of the 1991 Gulf War are still fresh. Still, the world is marked by small and relatively brief conflicts such as in Eritrea, Kosovo and East Timor. These conflicts have been limited by the United Nations and the world powers. Militarism enjoys little support. The

mass media hardly focuses on NATO maneuvers or reports the latest military parade and weaponry.

Still other psychological and behavioral changes have taken place that affect society. Marriage, for example, has been increasingly delayed. Where once the average age for marriage was 21 or 22, it has risen to 30 or older. The result is that many couples have their first children at age 30 or even close to 40. Youth has been extended, and the relationship between work and leisure is no longer the same. Work has been increasingly incorporated into family life and is meant to be as fulfilling and creative as leisure. The relationship between the individual and society has also been modified. Greater emphasis is placed on the individual and less on the collective.

Origins of Motivation for Army Service

A distinction must be made between two central concepts: combat motivation and induction motivation. Combat motivation refers to that which inspires the soldier to charge the enemy in the battlefield. This motivation will be discussed only briefly in this article, which is primarily concerned with the issue of induction motivation. In this framework, a number of questions will

be raised: What makes people want to join a military framework? What factors influence their willingness to be inducted, whether for compulsory or voluntary service?

There have been hardly any changes in combat motivation over the course of human history. From the biblical Gideon through ancient Greece and Rome on to World War II and the Israeli wars, the motivation for combat has been based on more or less the same factors: the collective, cohesion, and personal ties. Other factors include leadership and the commander as well as the need to survive and return home safely.

The change can be seen in the motivation for induction, the desire and imperative to join a military framework. Joining the army is no great pleasure. It is an extremely demanding and high-pressure framework that involves risk of life. Military service in Israel ranges from between less than two years for women to three or four years for men and officers. This is a significant amount of time, a period that comes at an important point of development. Young people are called to serve in combat after completing high school, itself a pervasive institution. The army is another such institution and young people face moral dilemmas, physical challenges as



well as social pressure.

Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the motivation to serve in the military has undergone huge changes. This article will not make any value judgments, rather it will present the facts in an organized and analytical manner.

Types of Motivation for Army Induction

There are four types of motivation for military induction: survival, ideological, normative and personal.

Survival Motivation

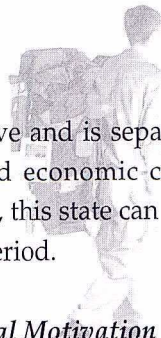
Survival motivation is when the

soldier is convinced he has no alternative but to fight to stay alive. This motivation applies to struggles for survival by a society or country. Some examples are Britain during World War II; the Soviet Union during the 1941 Nazi invasion; and recently, the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo. The Jewish community in the British mandate of Palestine had to struggle for existence immediately after the United Nations approved the establishment of a state in 1947 and during the war of independence the following year. The entire community then felt a threat to its existence.

The primary trait of survival motivation is total dedication to the struggle. Individuals join the fight because they feel it is a matter of life and death. The feeling is so pervasive that the exceptions are de-legitimized. Those who dodge the draft are regarded as traitors. Induction is not selective. Everyone is drafted: men and women, young and old. This type of recruitment was conducted by the partisans during World War II and by the Palmach and Haganah before Israel's independence.

Another trait of survival motivation is that it subordinates the individual's interest to that of the collective. Coercion is not required because the individual understands the need to subjugate his desires for the collective interest.

Survival motivation, however, lasts only as long as the existential threat. This type of motivation is exhausting



and erosive and is separate from any social and economic consideration. Therefore, this state can last only for a limited period.

Ideological Motivation

Ideological motivation does not necessarily stem from a lack of alternatives or a threat to existence, although in many cases the ideology that fuels statehood is derived from such a threat. The Spanish Civil War did not concern an existential threat, rather a struggle over identity and values, such as freedom and democracy. Ideology was the reason for joining the forces in the civil war and many foreigners who shared either the values of democracy or fascism participated. A more recent example was the Vietnam War in which the army of Hanoi was based on ideology. Although 95 percent of all eligible North Vietnamese were drafted, their induction and the army they joined were based on ideology.

Other examples of ideological motivation include the Soviet Red Army after World War II, such groups as the Lebanese Hizbullah militia, the Palestinian Hamas and the Irish Republican Army. All of these groups were motivated by ideology, rather than an existential threat. The motivation could be based on values, whether democracy or liberation; ideological, such as communism; or religious, whether Catholic or Protestant. Before Israel's independence, the motivation for

induction was ideological, whether the group was the Palmach, the Irgun or Lehi. This continued even during the early years of statehood.

A consequence of such motivation is that the strong belief in ideology legitimizes virtually any means. An army based on ideological motivation becomes a sacred cow. History is full of examples of armies using an ideological cloak to commit atrocities.

The existence of various motivations for army service is dangerous. The nation is thus divided into constituencies and is no longer united over the need for the military.

Another important element is that such motivation is very emotional. Such motivation might be based on love of nation, love of land, love of origins, love of an idea, or love of a spiritual leader. As with survival motivation, the individual motivated by ideology is perceived as serving the collective; the more ideological the individual, the greater his status. In such an army, the status of the political officer/party *apparatchik* can sometimes be greater than that of a battalion commander. The role of the commander in an ideological army is not only to provide military

leadership, but also to educate and transmit the ideology.

An army motivated by ideology requires virtually no need for coercion or obligatory service because the source of motivation is based on values and ideology.

Normative Motivation

The concept of normative motivation is generally less known. This motivation is based on the individual doing what society perceives as legitimate. It often appears in the wake of ideological or survival motivation, and, frequently, is the result of inertia from previous attitudes. An example is the youth movements in Israel. These movements continue despite their being void of ideology. Simply put, it has become a norm to join a youth movement. Another example is the kibbutzim, which continues to operate years after the ideology has died or severely weakened. Normative motivation is powered by an inertia that eventually peters out.

Another quality of normative motivation is the influence of social pressure. Such pressure is a key element among societies or groups. One example is the practice by demobilized soldiers to travel to the Far East or South America. The pressure on these youngsters is so great that those who do not embark on such a journey are regarded as odd. Here, ideology is not the issue; nor is it the threat to existence. Still such travel reflects a powerful norm.

Normative motivation contains the element of fashion. This could last for a short or even protracted period of time, after which it might receive a boost by an existential or ideological need. Or, the practice might disappear and be replaced by a new fad.

Personal Motivation

The type of motivation fulfills the strong psychological need for self-actualization. The renowned psychologist Abraham Maslow places this motivation at the pinnacle of human needs, equivalent to other basic requirements. Self-realization is the need of the individual, unconnected to the society or group.

Society can benefit when the individual's motivation is shared by the collective. Sociologist Max Weber asserted in his essay, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," that the preference for Protestant values – excellence, competitiveness, achievement – led to accomplishments that benefited all of society. This included economic growth, the industrial revolution, and capitalism. In this motivation, the individual is the focus, and his needs, considerations, and preferences take priority over those of the organization or society. The individual wages his own revolution, attempting to harness the resources of society for his own needs. His question

is not, "What can I do for my country?" rather, "What can my country do for me?"

The changes in motivation for serving in the IDF have been gradual. They have taken place over periods and generations. "Period" refers to drastic changes from one time framework to another. "Generation" refers to the age



groups within society. One group might be driven by a certain motivation and a second group by a different sort.

Fashion and technology change according to periods. Thirty years ago, there were no personal computers. Today, a large percentage of people have one. By contrast, changes in society and values are usually generational.

Changes are fluid and can be reversed. Moreover, different groups in

society could have different motivations. The 1973 Yom Kippur War, for example, resulted in a feeling of national insecurity in which many felt an existential threat. At that point, survival motivation, which had almost been forgotten, made a comeback.

During the first 20 years of Israel's existence, the main motivation for IDF service consisted of a combination of survival and ideological motivation. During the early years, and particularly during the War of Independence, the decision to join the military stemmed from the heavy odds against the Jewish people, when many felt their backs against the wall. The Arabs vowed to drive the tiny state of Israel "into the sea." In the wake of the Holocaust, which claimed six million Jewish lives, this was no idle threat. As a result, military service was regarded as vital for survival. This

motivation continued for several years following the War of Independence.

During this period, ideological motivation was combined with survival motivation and pathos. The IDF established by Israel's first prime minister and defense minister, David Ben-Gurion, was an ideological army. "The IDF must serve not only as a tool of military training," he said, "but also as a state school which imbues the youth entering it with knowledge of

language, nation, Jewish history, fundamentals of education, neatness and order, and – most importantly – love of homeland.” [David Ben-Gurion, *Netzakh Israel*, p. 158]

As a result, the IDF transmitted the values of Zionism, settlement, immigration, and pioneering. This ideology outlasted the war of independence. In his farewell to the IDF at the end of 1953, Ben-Gurion said: “The IDF must be not only responsible for the nation’s security, as every other army. But it must also serve as a melting pot for diaspora communities that arrive in the homeland from the four corners of the earth as well as a laboratory for producing an integrated people. The IDF is intended ... to be a pioneering nursery which cultivates builders of the homeland and those who make the wilderness bloom, because the security of Israel will not be established without integrating ethnic groups, bringing immigrants to Israel, and populating the wilderness.” [Ben-Gurion Archives, letter files.]

This powerful ideology was imbued with emotion for “the young and the beautiful,” the title of the popular song in the 1950s. It appealed to those who joined the army out of love of the country and its natural beauty. Inductees were ready to sacrifice and those who did not share this attitude were regarded as draft-dodgers or traitors. Popular phrases of the era included “The front is everywhere” and “The army is everybody.” These slogans recalled the last words of

Joseph Trumpeldor, who died at the battle of Tel Hai 30 years earlier: “It is good to die for our country.”

The hierarchy of values during this period can be evaluated by a look at the nation’s elite. The defense establishment was headed by the elite of the kibbutzim and moshavim [farming cooperatives] in Israel. The parents of Ezer Weizman, Haim Herzog, Moshe Dayan, and Yitzhak Rabin were part of the Israeli elite long before their sons rose to senior positions. Since defense was the most important issue, the elite was summoned to take charge. Had the most important issue been draining the swamps, these people would have undoubtedly assumed the responsibility.

The second period was from the 1967 Six-Day War through the end of the 1980s, during which the dominant motivation was normative. Motivation to join the IDF remained high, nearly identical to that of the previous periods of ideological and survival motivation. Polls conducted during the Seventies and Eighties showed that 85-90 percent of Israeli youth expressed a desire to serve in the army, whether on a draft or voluntary basis. Most of the polls found only 5-6 percent who said they would prefer not to join the army. In other words, the motivation among these youngsters to join the army was not ideological, rather the result of social pressure. The army was a norm and young people were expected to be part of the military.

The motivation to serve was not affected by the Likud rise in power in 1977 after 29 years of Labor-led governments, proof that motivation was normative. Because this motivation was an outgrowth of societal norms, it did not require ideological reinforcement. The term “jobnik,” or noncombatant, was derogatory while words such as combatant and commando swelled hearts – especially those of women soldiers. One popular song was entitled “I Have a Boyfriend in the Haruv Patrol,” a reference to a prominent infantry unit. But the change to normative motivation was reflected in the shift in the nation’s elite. No longer did the military attract the cream of the civilian sector. Instead, the move was in the other direction, and from the end of the Sixties, senior military commanders found new careers in politics.

The third period began from the Palestinian uprising in 1987 to the present, when the main motivation for youth to join the army was personal. A large percentage of inductees was driven by the need for advancement and saw the army as an important tool. The IDF responded quickly to this trend and today the military branches compete for the best and brightest. Moreover, the military has instituted a salary tier that includes a range of positions. The IDF has also begun to offer more opportunities to women – not out of existential need, but rather to ensure equal opportunity, a vital element in personal motivation.

Today, the motivation for a military career is so heavily based on salary and other benefits that in early 1999, air force reserve pilots threatened to strike unless they received full life insurance plans. This attitude might lead to union representation of soldiers, similar to that in several European militaries. Essentially, the IDF is moving toward an all-volunteer force based on personal motivation.

Personal motivation has also led to a change in the nation's elite. The elite, rather than being in the army or in defense, is found in business, finance, communications, judiciary, and possibly academia. But this is only part of the picture. As personal motivation has become dominant in certain sectors, ideological motivation has reappeared in other parts of the population. Many Orthodox Jewish youth study in *hesder*, a program that combines religious

study with army service. Increasing numbers of Orthodox soldiers are serving in the most demanding combat units, including infantry and naval commando units and in the officer corps as either company or battalion commanders. They express a clear ideology and their motives are neither personal nor normative. They contrast with some in the leftwing who refuse to serve in the army out of ideology. The ultra-Orthodox also refuse to serve in the army out of belief that Torah study is paramount.

The existence of various motivations for army service is dangerous. The nation is thus divided into constituencies and is no longer united over the need for the military. It is a situation long feared by Israel's leaders: that as external threats fade, society will increasingly polarize.

Aharon Yariv, the late parliamentarian and military intelligence chief, addressed this threat long before it emerged. In October, 1979, Yariv wrote the following:

During a period in which there are relentless demands to raise the standard of living of the individual and satisfy an ever-growing level of consumption, it behooves us to integrate into the wishes of the people, even within its illusions of approaching peace ... an opposing spirit for national fitness and defense. It is the obligation of the national leadership to be vigilant and maintain this fitness, without which it can no longer provide answers for the lack of strategic depth. Without this, we could find ourselves facing severe defense risks ... Accordingly, we shall add the demand for leadership depth to the list of 'complements.'"

[Aharon Yariv, *A Cautious Appraisal*, p. 78]

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