

The Reserves Comeback

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The State of Israel has often donned its uniform in times of emergency and placed national security ahead of individual welfare. The IDF was the army of the people, and the reserves model that was devised in the 1950s was the strongest expression of this ideal.¹ Military reserve duty was considered a sign of genuine “Israeliness,” part of the national ethos and, for better or worse, a civil obligation. Manual laborers and senior executives alike, regardless of socioeconomic standing, found themselves leaving their families and their jobs for a set time each year to fulfill their duty to the state. Reserve service was a norm, and the defense establishment viewed the reserve forces as “a strategic human resource” capable of deploying rapidly and winning wars. As David Ben-Gurion put it, “Our security is first and foremost built on our reserve forces.” As such, one of the standing army’s unofficial duties is to train, prepare, drill, and most of all “produce” reserve soldiers within a limited period.

In the decades following the establishment of the state, reservists were staunchly supported by society. Employers accommodated employee absences, universities showed understanding toward students missing classes because of reserve duty, and people wearing uniforms were a common sight on the streets of Israel. The Israeli reserve soldier even gave rise to an entire genre of folklore² that was positive and full of humor, encouragement, and self-criticism.

The reality, however, has changed, and the situation assumed new and problematic dimensions with the Second Lebanon War. Over the last two decades the IDF and reserve forces have undergone a substantial process – from the army of the people with obligatory reserve duty to a small semi-vol-

untary reserve military force. Today, anyone who wants to serve may do so, while those who don’t can evade service without too much trouble. People who do reserve duty have to contend with materialistic and hedonistic tendencies in society that make it hard to combine service with making a living. The flag of reserve military duty has become a banner of naivete and at times even an obstacle to employment.

A cursory analysis can highlight a number of factors that brought about this dramatic change, some of which are related to the modernization of philosophical underpinnings of Israeli society, while others are connected to the evolution of Western military thinking. Certainly, however, serious study of the subject of reserve duty and its socio-

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national impact, in all its various aspects, lies beyond the scope of a single article. The historical aspects relating to operation of the reserve forces in the past; economic considerations connected to allocation of the budget outside the defense establishment and within the IDF itself; and social aspects relating to division of the burden and due reward for reservists are all important dimensions that merit sensitive examination.

This essay focuses on the processes relating to the reserves that have occurred within the IDF and the results of these processes, from 2000 through the period leading up to the Second Lebanon War. Finally, though without the benefit of major chronological perspective, the essay points to the significant changes that have taken place – and are still underway – within the IDF with regard to the reserve force since the war.

The Process of Change

There is a fundamental link between thinking in the IDF in recent years and changes that have occurred in relation to the reserve force. The initial signs of the process began with the withdrawal of the IDF from Lebanon to the security zone. Yitzhak Rabin, then Minister of Defense, took a crucial decision to reduce the length of reserve duty in order to support technological development, based on the idea that the chances of a major war had declined.³ In the following years these initial signs became stated policy, as the IDF adjusted its appearance while defining its vision according to the model of “a smaller and smarter army.”⁴ The security challenges facing Israel, the development of a low intensity conflict with the Palestinians, and finally, the reduction of the military budget were the critical factors that led to a change of approach.

In the twenty-first century the IDF promoted the emphasis on standoff warfare, and its main focus shifted to firepower and low profile activity (small units), in accordance with the challenges it faced in Judea and Samaria and Gaza in those years. In practice, this led to concentrating on indispensable elements in the standing army and moving away from the mass capabilities of maneuvering efforts. Reservists were no longer important as a strategic resource, and they were viewed accordingly. The IDF, under threat of budget cuts, decided not to allow the standing army forces to train as long as reservists were not called up. The reservist tank divisions (using

M60 tanks) were dissolved and dispersed as dummy targets for firing ranges, a large number of reservists were discharged, and general preparedness was neglected.

Between 1990 and 2004 the length of annual reserve duty was cut by 75 percent, from ten million days a year to two and a half million days in 2004. Routine security tasks were transferred to standing units, and training exercises were stopped almost entirely.⁵ The major exception of these years was 2002. The ready use of reservists in Operation Defensive Shield (April 2002) led to a sharp increase in investment in training in that year, and to a focused change in awareness. Yet the result of that unscheduled investment in the campaign and its ramifications (despite its clear success) was a decision in 2003 to stop all training of reservists.⁶ Finally, in 2005 the new reserve military service bill, which proposed limiting service to fourteen days a

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year, passed its first parliamentary reading and the discharge age was lowered to forty.⁷ Overall, the general trend in the IDF up to the Second Lebanon War was a reduction in the size of the combat forces and an ongoing examination of the possibility of lowering the discharge age and exempting civilians from reserve duty.⁸

So as to avoid losing all of the manpower, the meager usage of reservists notwithstanding, the IDF decided that reservists would be viewed as a reserve pool and if the need arose for such reserve forces, they would be mobilized, equipped with equipment stored in emergency storage facilities, trained quickly, and dispatched to the battlefield.⁹ On July 12, 2006 the Second Lebanon War broke out and it was decided to call up three divisions of reservists. The reservists arrived on the battlefield after a long period without training, without suitable equipment, and with very little knowledge of the missions and capabilities.

The Post-War Awakening

Following the war there were waves of criticism from reservists who served in Lebanon

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and experienced the results of the neglect. The IDF, under Chief of Staff Dan Halutz, picked up the gauntlet and conducted a thorough examination of the system, even before the Winograd Commission's report. The findings of the internal investigation committees were adopted by Halutz's successor, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, and their implementation within the army can be seen in the drastic change that has occurred in the last year with regard to reserve forces:

Training and Drill

The reserve forces, especially those involved in maneuvers (armored corps and artillery) were detached from their particular field of warfare for many years. Operational activity in the territories required only specific abilities. For example, tank personnel engaged in arrests instead of conducting tank maneuvers, and infantry personnel were assigned to checkpoints and fighting in urban areas in small fighting teams, instead of classic warfare practice, such as advancing and taking positions as part of regimental and divisional warfare. The rationale was as follows: since "the next war" is not "supposed" to involve the large scale use of reservists, and as reservists can "always" be trained if a significant war breaks out, training of reservists disappeared from the IDF's multi-year training programs. The only training that occurred was preparation for specific missions. In other words, no classic warfare needs were addressed.

After the war, towards the end of 2006, the IDF devised a systematic training program for all reserve forces. After many years of inactivity the reserve forces began to focus on the armored corps conducting training with live fire. In 2007 most of the land based divisions carried out full exercises, including closing gaps in warfare procedure and basics. The IDF is thus undergoing a process of establishing and training all combat forces and combat support forces and, more important, today there is outside civilian and political control of maintaining preparedness of the reserve forces.

Equipment and Means

During the Second Lebanon War reservists were forced to fight with inadequate equipment. The emergency stockrooms,



which were supposed to contain the necessary equipment, were not well maintained, and the equipment there was outdated, with some not even suitable for combat. A neutral observer of the Second Lebanon War would have noticed two armies: one a standing army, well equipped and armed, and the other, a poorly financed reserve force with inadequate equipment and means of protection.

In 2007, the IDF began to implement the “Eshed HaNehalim” (Stream Rapids) plan, equipping reserve soldiers with full equipment, correcting the situation of reservists who are meant to fight side by side with regular army soldiers.

The first line of soldiers facing the threat from the north has already been fully equipped and, by the end of 2010, all the reserve combat units are to receive new equipment, which will be stored in emergency storage facilities. The multiyear program will cost NIS 2 billion.¹⁰ According to the guidelines set out by Chief of Staff Ashkenazi, ev-

ery reservist will check his unit’s emergency storerooms once a year and ensure that the equipment is suitable and is ready for use.

Command and Control

Like the standing army, training of the reserve force has also been neglected in recent years. However, in contrast with the regular army, which has been engaged in ongoing operational activities, on the eve of the war some reservists were in the absurd situation whereby officers knew their soldiers only through printed lists. According to a report by the state comptroller released in November 2007, 39 percent of the company commanders had not carried out any training. In addition, between 2001 and 2007 a large number of the reserve division commanders had not

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undertaken advanced professional training courses and were commanders for less than 24 months – “a very short time for this position,” said the state comptroller.¹¹ Despite the great difficulty in training reservists for com-

mand tasks, in 2007 the IDF conducted a series of training exercises for reservists and divisional commanders. Serving commanders and officers design-

nated for commanding positions were sent to the officers training school for two to three months. The IDF integrated the trainees in military preparations on the Golan Heights, in addition to routine exercises of all the reserve forces under their command.

Conclusion

The Second Lebanon War led to a reexamination of the importance of reserve forces in Israel. The old default option – that combat manpower can be maintained without routine maintenance on a regular basis, and can be properly used as needed after a short refresher – was proved by the war to be unfounded.

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Following the conclusions drawn by internal and external investigate committees, the IDF made changes and adjustments to


its operational approach. As a result, it was decided to increase maneuvering efforts and to reinforce the reserve force. Under the leadership of Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, the IDF has restored its faith in the reserves as a provider of strategic and decisive depth on

the battlefield. This entailed restoring the reserve forces to full readiness, including training, equipment, and appropriate command.

As of now, the current trend is receiving support from the political leadership and public opinion in Israel, although the test of time will show if this is a genuine strategic change. This process will also affect the national level: renewed investment of resources in reserve forces will further accentuate the discrepancy between those who do reserve duty and those who don't.¹² Although there has been an increase in the response to reserve duty, most of the country's citizens still do not carry out active service. In addition, the Reserve Service Law, which was designed to correct historical distortions and to reward the minority who carry out active service, is still mired in the bureaucratic processes, principally due to the financial cost. The ultimate restoring of the reserve service system to the military machine mainly depends on the future positions of the Israeli government, society, and economy towards the last of the idealists who make economic growth possible.

Notes

- 1 A Hyman, “The Reserves, IDF, and Israeli Society: Past, Present, and Future.” *Ma'arachot* 394 (May 2004): 4-12.
- 2 Assi Dayan's film “Halfon Hill Doesn't Answer,” starring the famous Hagashash Hahiver comedy trio, is an example of an Israeli viewpoint on reserve duty, portraying civilian life intertwined with military service and ideological volunteering versus evasion of duty.
- 3 See Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor, *Captives in Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2007), pp. 317-24.
- 4 S. A. Cohen, “Changes in the Reserve Forces,” *Ma'arachot* 394 (May 2004): 22-27.
- 5 Lt. Col. A. Kolitzki, “The Reserves: Trends

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- and Directions," *Ma'arachot* 394 (May 2004): 40-43.
- 6 Col. A. Segal, "Reserves Training," *Ma'arachot* 394 (May 2004): 50-57.
- 7 See Hanan Greenberg, "New Reserves Law: Revolution or Mirage?" Ynet, May 28, 2005, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/1,7340,L-3091250,00.html>.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 See Shelah and Limor, *Captives in Lebanon*, pp. 317-24.
- 10 See Hanan Greenberg, "IDF Completes First Stage of Reservists' Equipment Upgrade," Ynet, August 16, 2007, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3438435,00.html>.
- 11 See Yehosua Breiner, "The IDF was Not Prepared for the Lebanon War," Walla, November 19, 2007, <http://e.walla.co.il/?w=1/1197548/@@/item/printer>.
- 12 Currently, the IDF uses fewer than 100,000 reserve combat soldiers for periods of more than seven days.