

# IDF Service – Where is it Going?

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## Foreword

Scores of articles and studies have been written about the obligation to serve in the IDF Israel Defense Forces (IDF); an obligation which is also a privilege. This has never been a pleasant obligation for all; worse still, at no period has the State of Israel ever implemented this obligation equally on all sectors of Israeli society. While in theory this obligation is placed on all Israeli citizens, in practice, only non-Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) Jewish, Druze, and Circassian citizens have implemented it in full. Among Haredi Jews and Arab citizens, only a minority serve in the IDF, on a volunteer basis.

In the wake of the findings of the Tal Commission, which examined the issue and published its conclusions in 2000, the public debate over the universal obligation to serve has become progressively more pointed. The Tal Commission's mandate was to examine the question of deferments for yeshiva students (who receive service deferments under the framework of an arrangement called 'Torah Study is their Profession'). These amounted to about 10% of the total pool available for conscription in 2000. While the commission may have opened a window onto the ultra-Orthodox world and its problems, this did nothing to resolve the feeling of inequity among those who do serve in the IDF, a feeling which derives from the ongoing growth in the number of deferments.

Arab citizens of Israel, who are not obligated to serve, comprise over 20%

of the draft-age population. If we add to this the fact, as shown in Table 1, that about 21% of the Jewish, Druze, and Circassian conscription pool received deferments during the current year, it emerges that, currently, about 42% of the *total* Israeli citizenry aged 18 are not conscripted into the IDF. Moreover, this number is expected to grow.

This article presents a concept for consideration which will guide the IDF: payment of a salary for army service. It should be noted at the start that some aspects of this are already being implemented, while some others require clarification and implementation. In the framework of presenting the logic of this concept, this article shall examine a number of additional questions related to IDF conscription. These include: the importance of mandatory military service, reasons for why the IDF

cannot base itself only on volunteer service, ways for utilizing the abilities of women in the IDF, and the manner of handling reservists.

## Mandatory Service in the People's Army

Israeli society must begin to deal with the following question: How long can mainstream Israelis adhere to the principle of mandatory service in a people's army before it becomes clear that such slogans ring hollow? Based on current trends, only 50% of draft-age Israeli citizens will perform national service in the IDF within a few years. What will become of the term "mandatory service for all" in light of such a reality? What will those serving say about the fact that the *majority* of 18-year-old Israeli citizens are not serving? How will the State of Israel compensate those who continue to bear the burden of mandatory conscription, and successive years of

Table 1  
Annual Trends in Draft Exemptions by Type  
Actual and Forecast (%)

Year	1996/7	1998/9	1999/0	2000/1	2001/2	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5
Medical	5.4	5.3	5.0	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.4
Yeshiva study*	6.0	7.0	7.6	8.1	8.6	9.1	9.6	10.2
Unfit	2.8	2.2	1.7	1.6	1.8	1.8	1.8	1.8
Criminal record	0.7	1.3	1.6	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.7	1.7
Living abroad	4.1	3.8	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5	3.5
Deceased	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.1
Total	19.0%	19.6%	19.5%	20.1%	20.9%	21.5%	22.1%	22.7%

\*Constant growth of 0.6% - 0.7%/year for yeshiva-study deferment

reserve duty? Moreover, part of the 18-year olds not entering the IDF are getting a three-year head start over those who do serve, able to continue directly after secondary school to higher education and/or the job market. The sense of inequality that such a situation threatens to engender demands first of all that we seriously consider some form of civic service for all; some will serve in the army and some will serve in the civilian sector.

## The Value of Universal Service

During the past decade, the value of universal service came under question from a number of quarters, including the IDF itself. From 1993 to 1995, with the end of the *intifada* and a simultaneous increase in the numbers being conscripted as a result of the influx of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, a policy took shape which turned a relatively blind eye to the discharge of problematic soldiers. In 1995, some 23% of conscripts were released prior to completing their designated period of service. Similarly, deferments were more readily given to conscientious objectors. This phenomenon engendered a feeling among the populace that the IDF had a surfeit of conscripts, at the same time assisting those who were waffling to take the decision for early release from duty.

However, when the IDF decided to change the downward trend in motivation to serve and to ease the burden on those doing reserve duty, it had to make a fundamental change in its approach to army service. It had to place the value of service for all on the public agenda, and to change its attitude toward soldiers serving in

Table 2 Benefits Currently Given to Soldiers in Regular Service, Pre-demobilization, and Post-demobilization	
Type of Benefit	Cost (per year, millions of NIS <sup>1</sup> )
Free public transportation	30.0
Housing for conscript soldiers	17.6
Pre-discharge study courses for combat soldiers	3.7
Dormitory fees for medical students in military	0.36
Matriculation examinations for fighters <sup>2</sup>	1.6
Housing costs for engineers in line of duty	1.2
Housing and expenses for psychometric examination courses <sup>3</sup>	0.5
Sports shoes for combat soldiers	3.5
In-country flights for combat soldiers	Cost underwritten primarily by IDF Technology Branch
'combat certificates' <sup>4</sup>	0.22
Salary bonuses for special populations	In the form of salary enhancements, particularly for combat soldiers, soldiers participating in the academic reserve, and physicians

1. New Israel Shekels (NIS). For purposes of comparison, US\$1=NIS 4.13.

2. Matriculation examinations (*bagruyot*) are examinations required for university study, similar in concept to British GCSE and A-level examinations.

3. Also required for university admission; similar to American SAT.

4. 'Combat certificates' are plastic cards awarded to combat soldiers, which confer to the bearer discounts on various goods and services. The cost here reflects the cost of the manufacture of the cards themselves. The discounts on goods and services are donated by participating businesses and institutions.

the standing army and the reserves. This change included giving rewards as an expression of recognizing their contributions. The army had to tend to those who *were* serving, and not just address those *dodging* service. In order to change the prevailing trends, the IDF had to implement internal changes and publish data from studies it had commissioned. At the same time, it appealed directly to the public. Its efforts bore fruit: motivation to serve rose about 10%, a phenomenon

which has continued from 1997 to the present.

## A Professional Army

In recent years, increasing numbers of voices have been calling for voluntary military service, with all serving on a career basis: a professional army.

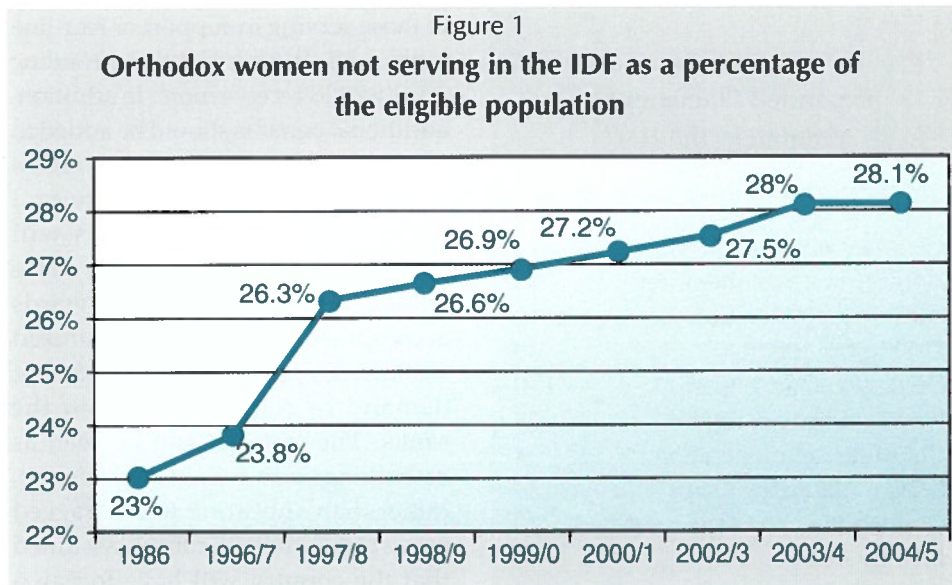
This article will not exhaustively discuss issues such as the cost of a professional army, its qualities, advantages, or disadvantages. It is important, however, to note two



reasons briefly for dismissing such an idea out of hand:

1. *Quality of personnel.* Based on the experience of other countries, the upper echelons of the population (in terms of intelligence, talent, and the like) do not volunteer for army service. In Great Britain, for example, close to 50% of the positions for junior field commanders are not filled by officers. In the IDF, however, all officers — male and female alike — are from the upper 30% (in terms of quality measurements) of the population. This provides the IDF with a critical advantage *vis-à-vis* the armies of neighboring countries: access to high-quality human resources. If not drafted, it is clear that these high-quality personnel would not enlist of their own free will into an all-volunteer force. This engenders the question as to whether Israel would be able to survive in the Middle East if its army were lacking the main component of its military superiority — the quality of its personnel.

2. *Number of Missions.* It can be assumed that, even if further peace treaties are signed, Israel's existential strategic condition as a small country in a hostile environment would not fundamentally change. Israel will still need to rely on a reserve army, whose ranks must constantly be replenished by those doing their obligatory service. It will not be possible to reduce the size of the IDF in the foreseeable future, given the number of missions it will be tasked to carry out. The supposition that it would be possible to base the IDF, including its reserves, solely on career soldiers is neither appropriate nor practicable at this stage.



### Salaried Obligatory Service

Assuming Israel cannot forego the quality of those serving, it is imperative that we examine how we can offer conscripts appropriate remuneration, giving them the sense that the country recognizes their contribution and is compensating them, appropriately, in various ways.

Until recently, the responsibility to serve was simply treated as a norm, and the majority behaved accordingly. This is why emphasis was placed on dealing with those shirking service. Moreover, since service was the norm, the prevailing concept was that there was no need to invest in those who were serving in the army, a concept which proved to be misguided. Against the backdrop of changing conditions (lower percentages of conscription), it is incumbent upon the state to give appropriate attention and remuneration to those serving in the regular army and the reserves — without detracting from the need to deal with those who illegally evade the

draft. When less than 50% of the population of conscription age is being drafted, a conceptual change is needed with regard to how the country treats the minority which does serve.

The state must take measured steps to provide appropriate compensation to those doing their national service. While it is impossible to put a price on the death of a soldier who falls in the service of his or her country, it is my opinion that providing material rewards to those who serve in the army is a step in the right direction. The youth of today are seeking self-actualization; they are prepared to volunteer for service in units where the service is difficult, but they seek society's appreciation for doing so.

It is my opinion that the condition to which we should aspire is one wherein combat soldiers fulfilling their mandatory service receive a monthly salary equivalent to the minimum wage, with perquisites appropriate to their service conditions. Lesser compensation would be given

Table 3  
**Expanded Placement of  
Women in the IDF\***

Communications - Artillery	14
Artillery systems operation	10
ABC decontamination	18
Drill instructors	30
Field surveillance teams	130
Naval combat instruction	10
Coastline radio operation	4
NCOs, Adjutancy Corps	20
Coordinating assistants - Artillery	20
Infantry instructors	30
Border Police	117
Anti-aircraft teams	60
Pilots	2
Balloonists	16
Naval Officers	1
Paramedics	2
Parachute instructors	5
Truck drivers	110
Operators of airborne drones	several
NCOS, maintenance	100
NCOs, governance	30
Rescue teams	18
Airborne medical teams	5
Combat soldiers on border duty**	60
Electronics	227
Maintenance	500
NCOs, discipline and regulations enforcement	17

**Average number of inductees, annually:  
about 1200.**

\* Women assigned to combat positions in principle serve 30 months (compared to the standard 20 month tour of service for female conscripts)

\*\* Serving along borders with countries that have signed peace treaties with Israel

to those serving in support or rear-line units, while those in fighting/frontline units would receive more. In addition, additional benefits should be added to those given to soldiers about to complete their mandatory service. I have no doubt but that this will ultimately happen, but the state should take the initiative towards accomplishing this in an organized manner, as opposed to waiting for the demand to come from within the ranks. The state should be seen as embarking on an enlightened mission, rather than appearing to be dragged into submission. It can be assumed that the country will have to pay a higher cost if it does not proceed in an orderly fashion toward instituting salaried service.

### **Obligatory IDF Service for Women**

Two contentions have been voiced in recent years with regard to women's service in the IDF. The first is that, as a matter of law, there should be full equality between men's and women's service, including combat professions, length of active service, and duration of reserve duty. In contrast, the second contends that mandatory service for women should be eliminated entirely. At present, the figures show that 37% of eligible Jewish women are not drafted into the IDF. Figure 1 shows the multi-year trend with regard to the number of Orthodox women who do not serve in the IDF.

In the past, the fact that men's abilities were maximized to such a high degree led to *under-utilization of women's talents in the IDF*, creating a huge gap between how the abilities of each gender were capitalized. In recent

years, the IDF has started, where possible, to integrate women who have demanded the equal opportunity to prove their capabilities into positions which had previously been considered men's jobs. This trend was thus the result of a confluence of interests: the demands of female inductees, the needs of the IDF, and public pressure. The main beneficiary of this process has been the IDF itself, by better and more correctly utilizing the high-quality potential which these women bring.

Thus, an opening has been created for placing women in combat positions. This should not lead the reader to expect, however, that this will inevitably result in the opening of all combat roles to women, as has taken place in other armies. No great rush of women seeking such jobs is presently anticipated; certainly not as soldiers in infantry companies. It is more likely that women will fill combat-support positions, including at the battalion level, such as Adjutancy/Manpower Officers. It is also likely that more women will take positions in the purely technological divisions, including those defined as combat and combat support. As the process advances, equality will be demanded in length of mandatory service (which is currently shorter for women than men), and similarly for reserve duty (most women currently being exempt from it or doing reserve duty for only up to five years). In parallel, a decline can already be seen in the number of women serving in traditional clerical positions.

There is still a gap between in the degree to which the potential of men and women are capitalized. The existing trend to better capitalize on



the women's aptitudes must be expanded, and women should continue to be directed into high-quality professions in all areas.

## Reserve Duty

The pool of reservists is drawn from precisely the same group of citizens who were 'suckered' into performing their military service obligations. About 300,000 people bear the burden of reserve duty: of these, about 220,000 of them actively serve every year. From their point of view, only a very small portion of the residents of Israel - compared to the potential number fit for service from the standpoints of age and gender — shoulder the burden. Against the backdrop of this feeling, there has also been a significant change in the IDF's approach to this issue. Here too, attention is being given to those who *serve*, rather than to those who *avoid* service. This does not satisfy the reservists, however: with economic and job competition being what it is, reservists are placed in a disadvantaged position, bringing them to wonder if they are being appropriately remunerated.

Moreover, is the average employer prepared to hire employees who perform active reserve duty (which entails relatively lengthy absences from work) with equal preference, when it is just as easy to hire people who do not have commitments to the reserves?

Care must be taken to follow stringent rules in all matters connected with reserve-duty call-ups. All who are called to report for reserve duty should be utilized in an appropriate manner and should be compensated suitably, starting with financial

Table 4  
**Improvements Made in Reserve Duty in Recent Years**

- Financial remuneration to those serving more than 26 days *per annum*.
- Exemption from patrol duty (training and exercises only) at age 45 (except officers, doctors, and regional defense)
- Portable computer for every battalion commander
- Field vehicles for reserve brigade commanders
- Divisional rest and relaxation for officers (company commanders and above)
- Full life insurance for reserve soldiers, equivalent to that of officers in the professional service
- Improved facilities at camps and reserve unit training bases
- Social events for soldiers, held on a battalion level, every two years
- Provision of improved equipment (lighter shoes, improved webbing, etc.)

remuneration and continuing with service conditions and the level of training exercises (see table 4). This remuneration must culminate, moreover, in the attitude of both the IDF and the public toward them. It must be re-emphasized that only a small minority is regularly and continually serving in the reserves. Recognition and appreciation of these reservists are the *sine qua non* for ensuring that the reserve-duty system is able to continue to function efficiently for as long it is needed.

## Shortened Mandatory Service for Men and Lengthened Service for Women

If the security situation permits, starting with the draft call-up of August, 2001, men's service will be reduced by four months and women's service will revert to being 24 months. In effect, the duration of service for men will be reduced by about 10%, while that of women will be increased by about 14%. This process will necessitate directing more women to what have traditionally been men's

roles; in parallel, it will involve placing male soldiers from the professional standing army — rather than conscripts — in those professions which require particularly long periods of training. In the longer term, and depending on the security situation, additional shortening of the period of service for men will be considered, the ultimate goal being full equality between men and women in this regard. There will still be an absolute majority of men in combat positions, however, and it is primarily they who also will be called upon to serve in the reserves.

## A Surfeit of Human Resources in Mandatory Service?

It has been contended at various times that there is an excess of both men and women serving in mandatory service. To a certain extent, this is the case: the IDF could indeed 'afford' to reduce its complement of conscript personnel by not drafting about 5000 inductees with comparatively low aptitudes. The real question is whether or not this is *desirable*: it may be preferable to draft

all levels of talent, even if the majority of them will be relegated to rear command bases such as the IDF's main headquarters in Tel Aviv, the main induction and training center at Tel Hashomer, the Adjutant-General Command, and the cluster of bases at Tzrifin. When I was head of the Human Resources Branch, I established the precept that the *value* of service for all who wish to contribute is greater than its *cost*. Accordingly, all who are interested in serving will receive the opportunity, even if, from the standpoint of efficiency and quality, it would have been possible to forego their service.

As a result of this decision, recent years have shown an increase in the number of conscripts. The rate of those rejected on the basis of low aptitudes dropped at least 3%, and all those who volunteered were accepted. While this does in part create the impression that

there is an excess of inductees, it also allows a greater number of individuals — who might be regarded lacking talent or potential — into better citizens. Some might argue that this is not the role of the army; the fact that the IDF's attitude is otherwise is a matter in which I, for one, take a great deal of pride. Perhaps this harms the image of the IDF in the present, but by reinforcing the value of "service for all" the army serves an important role in making better citizens for the future.

### Summary

Israel has a clear need for mandatory conscript service, and the quality of those inducted provides the key to the IDF's advantages in high-quality personnel. Because of the need for a quality pool of human resources, it is not possible, in the foreseeable future, to forego mandatory service and maintain the army only on the basis of voluntary service. With that, unless

current trends change, less than 50% of the total population of 18-year-olds who are obligated by law to serve will do so. Accordingly, two parallel processes must be initiated:

1. Civil/public service must be set up for those not serving in the IDF.
2. Suitable compensation must be paid to those serving in the IDF — as conscripts and as reservists — including payment of real salaries on a progressive scale.

The State of Israel and its citizens should take the initiative in appropriately showing their appreciation for those serving in the IDF, rather than belatedly being dragged into recognizing the existence and dimension of the problems. It is important these actions be taken sooner rather than later.

## Strategic ASSESSMENT

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