

# **A Sea Change and a Slippery Slope: When the Military Becomes a Political Actor**

**Kobi Michael | No. 1710 | April 18, 2023**

**The threat by reservists to refuse to volunteer – which is cast by the political leadership, large portions of the public, and even some among those serving in the IDF as tantamount to insubordination – represents nothing less than a sea change. The IDF, against the wishes and not at the instigation of the top military leadership, but specifically because of the mishandling of developments within the military due to the political crisis, has become a political actor. Moreover, the threat of refusing to serve has proven to be of much influence in the public sphere, in the current reality that is shaped by a heated moral civil-political argument.**

**The chapter itself and the response by the military leadership have scarred Israeli democracy, undermining the public consensus regarding the IDF and its apolitical standing. They have eroded not only the relations between the various echelons, but the relations between the military and Israeli society as well. From now on, the military could find itself forced to deal with organized refusals to serve among reservists and perhaps even among conscripted soldiers, over issues that are civil-political in nature, or with other national issues. Moreover, this is a slippery slope that will be characterized by tense civil-military relations.**

The threat of refusal to volunteer to serve by reserve pilots in the Israeli Air Force, reservists in Special Operations units, and reservists in the IDF cybersecurity units has been described in some quarters as “gray refusal,” since those involved announced that they would only refuse to volunteer for reserve service but would not refuse to serve if called for operational reasons. This, however, is little more than a whitewash – certainly as far as

the vast majority of Israeli's political leadership is concerned, and among a large portion of the public.

These three sectors in the military, which are at the heart of the IDF's operational and offensive capabilities – at least in the public conception that relies on reports in the media – depend on reservists and a model of volunteer reserve duty, which is unlike the usual model of reserve service. Under this model of service, mobilization orders are issued retroactively once the volunteers have agreed with their commanding officers on their service days. In practice, however, the moment that volunteers receive their mobilization orders, the reserve duty is reserve duty in all respects. Accordingly, any declaration of intent to stop volunteering is tantamount to a threat to paralyze these branches of the military or to severely disrupt their smooth operations, and undermines a unique model of service. In essence, it is a refusal to serve.

Even if one can understand the considerations of the commander of the Air Force, the IDF chief of staff, and others in the top military echelons in their response to the challenge – that is, the desire and belief that they would be able to resolve the problem internally, to placate concerns, and to prevent the spread of the phenomenon by responding harshly and punishing those involved – it would be wrong to justify the phenomenon and downplay its severity. The move spearheaded by officers and reservist soldiers from these branches of the military was collective action, not the individual decision of one reservist or another. Even if we ignore philological and legal casuistry regarding the essence of collective action as an act of sedition, as one could define it in terms of the military establishment or in accordance with Clause 136 of the penal law on sedition, and even if it does not exactly fit the definition of sedition, it is clear that those who spearheaded this collective action understood the significance of their actions. They harnessed their background, experience, military reputation, military expertise, and vital reserve duty to protest an issue that is fundamentally civilian and political in nature, without having been issued an order that was expressly illegal and without their being able to say with any degree of certainty that because of the judicial overhaul promoted by the

government they would find themselves being given an order that was expressly illegal – a “black flag,” which legally must be rejected.

This move has had a profound impact on the entire military and has filtered down to the ranks of conscripted soldiers, too – both those in mandatory service and those who joined the regular army – and has shaken the military’s very foundations. Israel’s political head, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, insisted that this was an extremely serious matter and demanded that Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and the military leadership deal with it. However, the IDF leadership was unable to contain or curtail the phenomenon, and in part because of the very real concern that the phenomenon would spread throughout the IDF, warned the political leadership that this was a serious matter with dangerous security ramifications that could harm operational capabilities.

And so, a sea change has occurred. The IDF, against the wishes and not at the instigation of the top military leadership, but specifically because of the mishandling of developments within the military due to the political crisis, has become a political actor – the most influential actor in the public sphere in the reality of the current civil-political-moral debate. A precedent has been created: for the first time, and in blatant fashion, it is the military that is spearheading the process of securitization. This is the use of military and security arguments to highlight a potential threat posed by a civil issue, as justification for the use of extreme measures to deal with the threat, in this case, freezing the legislative part of the judicial overhaul proposed by the government.

The severity of the incident and responsibility for its spread are also part and parcel of the civilian leadership, which failed to implement effective civilian oversight of the military – that is, subordinate military thinking to political thinking in the abstract sense of the concept, and totally subordinate the military to the political leadership in the most fundamental sense of the concept. Evidence can be found in the change of policy from the commander of the Air Force and the IDF chief of staff in the spirit of the Prime Minister’s instructions and his retroactive demands. Judging by the

outcome, the legislative process was suspended because of the extraordinary speech by the Defense Minister, who, on the one hand, spoke about the severity of security threats, and on the other hand, about the operational ramifications and damage to the military. In fact, the military leadership, against its wishes and because of a profound sense of distress among its ranks, provided a significant tailwind to the civilian protest against the proposed judicial overhaul and forced the political leadership to reverse its original intentions. At this stage, the military – even if, more specifically, it was reservists in vital branches of the military – became identified with the civilian protest and the opposition camp fighting against the judicial overhaul.

These incidents and the subsequent response sent shockwaves throughout the military. Inter alia, for example, soldiers serving in the Air Force's technical divisions contacted the commander of the Air Force and the chief of staff, expressing their displeasure at the behavior of reservist pilots – they even demanded that the pilots apologize to them, and they expressed deep frustration over the discriminatory treatment that they and their views received. Even if there are some who say that the collective protest action was created by actors from the political sphere, this too should serve as a warning about the slippery slope and how far the IDF has fallen from its apolitical pedestal.

Moreover, the military's handling of this situation created a profound divide with the political leadership because of the severe damage to the political level's faith in the military leadership and its response to the crisis. This will have a profound impact on future civil-military relations. The incident and the IDF response have scarred Israeli democracy, undermining the public consensus regarding the military and its apolitical standing, certainly when it comes to some of the most important branches of the military and the top echelons of the IDF leadership, which was perceived as supporting, or at the very least, being willing to turn a blind eye to the refusal to serve and, as a result, has become identified as opposing the judicial overhaul – even though none of the top officers have spoken about it. Therefore, the

damage is not just in terms of civil-military relations, but in socio-military relations as well.

It is hard to imagine, given the conditions that have been created, that this will not have an impact on the IDF's recruitment model and on its standing as the "people's army," which in any case has eroded in recent years. Organized threats of refusal to serve and the decision by the military leadership to contain these threats persuaded the Defense Minister to call for the judicial overhaul process to be suspended, and laid the groundwork for future protests and for future threats of refusal to serve in the military. Since the external security threats existed in any case, the Defense Minister would not have called for a suspension of the legislation if it were not for the incident in question, which exacerbated external threats due to the danger that it would impact negatively on the IDF's operational preparedness and the possibility that Israel's enemies could interpret all this as weakness and an opportunity to attack.

From now on, the military could find itself having to deal with organized refusals, perhaps among other reservists, over different civilian, political, and national issues. The implications of this slippery slope are that the IDF will inevitably become more involved in civilian-political issues and there will be increased tension between the political leadership and the military echelon. Suspicion and lack of trust will make it hard for the political echelon to believe that the professional positions offered by the military are free of an agenda or of political and/or moral considerations. This will disrupt the nature of the dialogue between the two echelons, and instead of an open, challenging, and free discourse, which is also a space for both echelons, who share a common base of knowledge and who challenge each other's thinking, there will be a close, restrained, hierarchical space in which no common learning is possible.

Once the dam has burst, the political leadership will be concerned about future threats of refusal to serve. From now on, it will be hard for the politicians to believe that the military can dedicate all its capabilities and professionalism to a military operation designed to achieve a strategic

political goal, as determined by the elected leadership of the country. If elected politicians are suspicious of the security establishment, and of the military itself, Israeli democracy will be severely damaged, in terms of the civilian control as a fundamental layer in civil-military relations in a democratic regime, and in terms of what must be the apolitical nature of the military in the eyes of the political leadership and society as a whole.

To begin the process of healing that Israeli society needs so much in terms civil-military and socio-military relations, the severity of the problem and the extent of the schism must be understood. Any attempt to downplay the gravity of the situation will thwart a proper process of healing, which in any case will be complex, difficult, and prolonged.

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