



The IDF as a National Training Center: A Personal, Social, and Economic Accelerator

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This article, written by Lt. Gen. (ret.) Aviv Kochavi toward the end of his term as IDF Chief of Staff, calls for a comprehensive look at the role of the IDF in Israel, not only as a security asset but as a national, social, cultural, and economic engine. The IDF contributes to Israel's being a thriving, advanced country. The article argues that the IDF is in effect a "personal gym" for conscripts, who in the course of their service develop many of the skills and capabilities required in the 21st century, while it is also a "national gym" that strengthens solidarity and the social fabric, and encourages economic growth. As a result, upon their discharge soldiers return to civilian society equipped with what they learned during their service, as well as a sense of confidence and competence. Indeed, the IDF gives the State of Israel, as discharged soldiers, citizens who are more aware of social differences, more united, and with a greater sense of belonging to the community, society, and the country. In addition, Israel's industry and economy develop within a reciprocal military-civilian system that impacts economic success. Thus, the article urges that the IDF be seen as an organization whose contribution to society considerably exceeds its security mandate; it is an organization that also makes a singular contribution to personal, social, and national development, and provides an opportunity that Israel must continue to provide and nurture.

Keywords: IDF, civil-military relations, conscription, national security, economic security, societal security

Introduction

A few years ago, I received a letter from a soldier named Adir, who wrote as follows:

I am Adir from Tel Aviv. I enlisted in March 2014 and was discharged after full military service as a combat soldier and commander in the Golani Brigade, Battalion 13. During my service I was trained in combat, as a battalion

fighter, and a commander, holding three command positions while training combat soldiers and in the battalion...Following my discharge (three years ago) I now understand the meaning of military service for my personal life. First, it expanded my options and capabilities. When starting a career as a combat soldier, the end seems almost impossible. But along

the way, as you mark successful efforts, you understand that it's achievable, and we find that our physical and mental abilities are far beyond what we expected. Of course, one of the things that strengthens us is defending our land and our home and protecting our fellow soldiers. Later, awareness expanded as I became a commander, which entails a huge responsibility; to protect and lead soldiers from their first day until they complete their training is the most satisfying task. I felt enormous pride, for myself and for the new combat soldiers. During that period I learned the meaning of responsibility, fellowship, protecting others, authenticity, assertiveness, and a lot of daring. All these gave me a great deal after the army. I expanded my horizons, and I represented Israel on a mission for the Jewish Agency in the United States. I became an independent real estate agent and I have closed dozens of successful deals with key people from Israel's leading hi-tech companies. My military service was a shortcut to acquisition of a sense of maturity and capability, both internally, and of course, externally. I began to volunteer for the Make-A-Wish Foundation; I initiated a soccer tournament for hi-tech companies, which raised NIS 350,000 in donations; and today I am a member of the organization's board of directors.

In the course of their military service in general, and particularly during combat service, soldiers undergo a personal journey of development where they learn, experience, grow, and uncover new strengths and talents in themselves.

Adir's letter echoes the sentiments of many who serve in the IDF, and I feel it in meetings with

discharged soldiers and their families. Almost all of them understand that their military service is an important asset in their lives.

The IDF is a developing, advancing, and self-renewing army, drawing from the strengths of Israeli society and the best of the people who join its ranks each year. The steady influx of new people makes an invaluable contribution to the IDF's internal learning processes, and in this vein, the IDF is required to note and consider the changing viewpoints of the tens of thousands of new recruits and their families. Conscription demands that the IDF engage in a process of ongoing learning and adaptation to changes and improvements.

The central purpose of the IDF is to protect the state, its people, and its sovereignty, and enable it to achieve its objectives. But in practice, the IDF contributes at two more levels, which I will call "the personal gym" and "the national gym."

Skills and Abilities: "The Personal Gym"

In the course of their military service in general, and particularly during combat service, soldiers undergo a personal journey of development where they learn, experience, grow, and uncover new strengths and talents in themselves. In the military they develop adaptability, mission focus, self-discipline, the ability to operate under pressure, initiative and creativity, the ability to be part of a team, and above all—acceptance of the other. They develop personal responsibility and responsibility for human lives, and many who become commanders develop leadership and management skills. They reach the end of their service with a respectable level of self-confidence and feelings of competence. These "muscles" were strengthened throughout their military service, and in that sense the IDF is a personal gym that develops professional abilities, as well as mental and social skills.

Consider adaptability: young men and women join the military, are accepted into a new unit, and meet new commanders. They are assigned

to companies or teams, undergo professional training, and are usually assigned once more to other units. Then they are expected to go through many other stages. These transitions develop the ability to adapt to new surroundings, to adjust to new commanders and new roles. Another example is general discipline and self-discipline. A soldier who every day must attend morning roll call, participate in physical training, and then carry out dozens of tasks within a defined time is a soldier who develops organizational discipline and self-discipline. A soldier who is navigating, and the time to complete the navigation exercise is approaching, must do everything possible to meet the deadline, or admit failure and report his position. The same applies to soldiers who are required to improve the personal times they achieve in their fitness tests as a condition for remaining in the team or group. These are daily examples of the way in which self-discipline is developed.

Imagine how many times a day soldiers are required to use their initiative and show creative thinking, be it when plans go wrong or when opportunities arise. Soldiers are expected to use their specific skills and training in order to improvise solutions and obtain results.

Another important capability that the IDF cultivates is the ability to work in a team, including the ability to live and operate within a shared social fabric and to accept others. Most IDF soldiers encounter people with different opinions, lifestyles, and world views. They learn about new population groups; they learn to compromise, exercise give and take, cooperate on finding solutions, share resources, share the burden, and consider how to treat others. They must work together, because their own success depends on their partners. Soldiers in a combat regiment, a team of software developers, or an electronic combat team all depend on each other at all times throughout their service—whether it's cleaning their room or completing a shared mission.

There is no other institution that gives people so much personal responsibility at such

a young age and enables them to enjoy full self-expression. Moreover, in many positions soldiers are responsible for human lives. To manage a shooting range, to conduct a squad exercise with live fire, to equip weapons with explosives and install them correctly, or to properly identify the target that will soon be attacked are examples of life and death responsibility. I had a special opportunity to see this up close with my daughter, who served as a paratroop trainer, and for one unforgettable moment I saw her exercising her responsibility for human life. I saw her checking twenty paratroopers, one after the other, ensuring that the rope was properly placed and being careful to release it before the jump without it getting caught. I could not help but think: what a heavy responsibility to put on a young woman of twenty. Where else do they get such an experience at that age? And there are many more soldiers like her. In nearly every action there are professional instructions and safety considerations, such as missions involving driving, organizing firing areas, and ensuring the maintenance of vehicles, planes, or ships, and the soldiers develop a sense of professionalism and responsibility.

Moreover, often these tasks are done under conditions of pressure. The tasks are numerous, time is pressing, and each day's challenges are unlike those of yesterday! All these create pressure that must be overcome. That's true for operational work on the borders, for the work of a flight squadron, on a submarine, on training, collecting, and processing intelligence, and in every type of role, particularly in operational service. Soldiers experience professional, social, or mental pressures, and they develop the ability to handle them. Soldiers gathering intelligence in an attack cell identify enemy targets in real time, and must be fast and accurate. This responsibility is unlike anything they have previously experienced.

For officers and commanders, the challenges are multiplied, and they go through experiences and a learning process unlike any other. The IDF is a practical school for dealing with pressure

and provides training for making decisions in demanding circumstances.

The skills that people develop during military service are part of “21st century skills.” Educators agree that students must acquire essential personal skills for good employability and integration in the society and working world of the 21st century. Many studies have examined the requirements for success in today’s society and job market, and divide them into three categories: abilities linked to critical thinking, abilities linked to orientation in new technologies, and most importantly, the life skills necessary to conduct oneself with others—group work, cooperation, independent learning, flexibility of thought, rapid adaptation and mental resilience, inclusiveness, and ethical and moral awareness.

For example, in the past the skills developed by tank crews were perceived as purely military, but today we understand that they also develop important “civilian” skills, such as teamwork. The members of a tank crew depend on each other and must be tolerant of differences, and develop interpersonal skills that are important in adult life.

Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, worked with entrepreneurship and technology for many years. In the famous book *Start-up Nation* by Saul Singer and Dan Senor, he is quoted (p. 41) as saying: “The Israeli tank commander who has fought in one of the Syrian wars is the best engineering executive in the world. The tank commanders are operationally the best, and are extremely detail oriented. This is based on twenty years of experience—working with them and observing them.”

Another example is the field of collecting, processing, and studying intelligence. These jobs cultivate important skills such as the ability to grasp and process enormous amounts of information, draw rapid and accurate conclusions, separate the wheat from the chaff quickly, and move between different fields of knowledge and changing roles. Looking at military tasks through the prism of life skills

shows that many use the same tools and illustrate how far the IDF is a personal gym that develops and intensifies personal abilities.

It is no wonder, then, that soldiers reach the end of their military service equipped with greater self-confidence and feelings of competency. People are shaped by their experiences, the difficulties they overcome, the abilities they discover in themselves, the friends they make along the way, the ethical priorities they absorb, the heights they scale, and their achievements. Upon their discharge, soldiers take all these into the next chapter of their life’s journey, full of knowledge and ability, more experienced and more competent.

Another “piece of equipment” in the personal gym is leadership—the opportunity to lead others in the performance of tasks. At any given moment the IDF has tens of thousands of commanders who earn leadership experience. They must motivate others to carry out tasks, both in routine time and during operations, and learn how to lead them through difficulties and challenges. The leadership experience they acquire is invaluable, and has no equivalent anywhere in the world. They learn how to pay attention, foster motivation, deal with people, and develop the ability to plan and execute, build trust and personal connection, explain and deal with challenges, face any group, manage and build a team, and handle crises.

Elsewhere in the world, people learn leadership in theory or attend a two week workshop on practical leadership; in the IDF, tens of thousands of young men and women live in positions of command every day for one year, two years, or more. These young leaders acquire the tools to motivate their subordinates and experience being part of the unit’s command team, equivalent to a management team, and as partners in decision making they learn how to plan and implement processes. There are several cases where young commanders have to command their own age group. In these circumstances, they cannot rely only on their authority and must develop the best kind of

leadership—where they convince the others to follow their instructions.

The most powerful experience is always that of the operations and combat commander. This position demands the highest level of professionalism, the ability to make decisions, create trust and identification, function under pressure, and adjust to changing situations. These experiences shape and influence all combat commanders throughout their lives.

The opportunity that the IDF gives its soldiers to command and lead is a personal asset, which empowers people and gives them a sense of confidence and competency, with superior opening conditions for their civilian lives. Adir describes this very well in his letter, and thousands like him are discharged every year.

Another dimension of the personal gym is achieved through the second chance granted to teenage girls and boys after they complete their education. The IDF's "societal take 2" gives everyone an equal opportunity. Some of the IDF's new recruits are young men and women who experienced difficulties, disappointments, and dissatisfaction before their service. The IDF says to them: It doesn't matter where you came from or what your background is; we're giving you a range of options, and all we ask of you is to prove yourselves. We will teach you, educate you, instill in you norms of dedication to the mission and values, and provide you with the conditions to succeed and excel. A mediocre pupil or youth with a criminal past who dropped out of school can leave the past behind and become an outstanding leader.

Thousands of soldiers have seized the opportunities the IDF offers and paved a new path in life for themselves, even forming a new identity. There are extreme cases of soldiers who before their service were involved in crime and dropped out of every framework. At the President's Independence Day ceremony for outstanding soldiers a few years ago, the commander of an IDF commando unit gave a speech. At age 14 his first criminal file was opened, and at 17 he was sent to prison. A

decade later, thanks to the IDF, he was deemed worthy of the President's award for excellence, but more importantly—he commands a commando unit.

There are many more like him. Thousands of soldiers come through the gates of the Havat Hashomer base, the IDF's educational framework for second chances. Each one has his or her unique story, and all are given the tools to change their lives and complete full, empowering, and meaningful military service. Last year over a hundred soldiers had their criminal records expunged and could start their civilian lives anew, with knowledge, experience, and social contacts enabling them to take their place as equals in various study and employment frameworks.

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But it's not only the young man or woman with a criminal past who gets a second chance. Many soldiers discover themselves and reveal that they have character traits and abilities that so far did not find expression in traditional frameworks. The military framework enables them to achieve more and discover sides of themselves that do not always emerge in other educational settings: sociability, initiative, ingenuity, courage, and leadership. And thus the pupil with average grades is revealed to be a charismatic commander who inspires others to follow him, the young woman who thought she wasn't good enough is now solving complex technological problems, and the young man who had no belief in himself completes a long and difficult basic training trek overcoming all obstacles. Even among the backbone of senior IDF commanders you will find those who were not outstanding pupils at school, but the military establishment discovered

them, and they discovered themselves, their characteristics of courage, level headedness, personal resilience, and above all—leadership. These are the characteristics that were nurtured along the way and allowed them to become the commanders they are today.

So the IDF is a personal gym that develops many skills and abilities: organizational and personal discipline, the ability to operate under pressure, pursuit of excellent personal relations and team work, initiative and ingenuity, decision making capability, particularly in conditions of pressure, adaptability, dedication to mission, and of course the ability to manage, command, and lead. The personal gym includes a second chance, and the opportunity to find and develop qualities an individual did not know he or she had, and that are important for both the individual and for society as a whole. This is a gym that empowers individuals and gives them a sense of competence and confidence. For these reasons, the tens of thousands of soldiers discharged from the IDF each year necessarily influence society as a whole.

The National Gym

The IDF makes a massive contribution to society and the state that includes many aspects: imparting personal skills and empowering the individual; strengthening societal solidarity; reinforcing national solidarity; and encouraging economic development.

Individual Skills

The personal development and empowerment experienced by men and women serving in the IDF has a broad and direct impact on Israeli society. Discharged soldiers join civilian society as graduates of “the national school for life skills.” The challenges they have overcome, their experience as soldiers and commanders, their achievements, and their abilities to lead missions and demonstrate leadership strengthen their sense of personal competence, make them stand tall, and are part of their nature when they leave the army. Israeli society

receives people with self-confidence, ready to face difficulties, dare and initiate, and all these affect the culture of work, entrepreneurship, social links, and innovation in the country.

Their experience of leadership in command positions also has a direct effect on society: after their discharge from the military they become part of civilian leadership in local authorities and public organizations, where they improve the quality of management in institutions. Moreover, the second chance granted by the IDF to those who were not outstanding in the education system, dropped out, or fell into antisocial behavior is very significant for narrowing the margins of Israeli society.

It is impossible to exaggerate the impact of the personal gym and individual development on Israeli society, and it is impossible to imagine society as we know it today without these processes. A country whose young people become mature and acquire essential skills in the IDF is a country that is constantly injected with new energy thanks to these people with self-confidence, a sense of competence, and leadership abilities.

Strengthening Social Solidarity

The IDF does not have to be a melting pot. The IDF should be a center of unity, and it is. Military service brings together young people from a variety of backgrounds, and thus blurs the lines between different population groups. Soldiers often encounter others from different neighborhoods of their own home towns for the first time. The encounter dispels alienation, creates familiarity, and fosters comradeship. In this sense, the IDF is a mechanism for creating social unity without equal anywhere in the world. Today, when polarization and separation between groups are deepening everywhere, the IDF and Israel benefit from a unique asset.

Polarization and social alienation disappear in the Golani unit, on the ship, or in the intelligence war room. Every unit contains soldiers from a variety of backgrounds, who work together on a common mission. They must

learn to develop relationships with people who have different views, lifestyles, and outlooks. This variety teaches them to understand and accept diversity. There are no ethnic groups in the bowels of a ship or in a tank, no sectors in the regiment tent or logistical storeroom, and no tribes among a line of fighters stealing along to make an arrest. Anyone who has fought for three years alongside comrades from all parts of society, who has worked in a branch with soldiers from every sector, and who has commanded a variety of populations cannot avoid developing understanding, acceptance, tolerance, and affection for others.

Moreover, military service creates many heterogeneous social networks in the physical space and the digital space, contrary to polarized reality. Friendships formed “under the stretcher” continue through reserve duty, and often throughout life. Many of these social networks are maintained, and even expanded. Soldiers go on trips together, study together, sometimes even work together, and gradually their families join and the circle grows wider. All this injects friendship, tolerance, moderation, and resilience into the fabric of Israeli society and reinforces social solidarity.

Strengthening National Solidarity

The IDF also bolsters the connection between the soldiers and the state. Soldiers who contribute to the IDF become better citizens, closer to their people and their country. Through their jobs in the military, they learn about their contribution to the state. They salute the flag endless times during their service, and they sing “Hatikva,” the national anthem, more than during the first eighteen years of their lives. They learn about IDF heritage and meet commanders, wounded veterans, and bereaved families whose loved ones fell serving the country. They move around the country and often serve in locations that are new to them. They learn about the country through their service and on trips. Every year tens of thousands of soldiers arrive in Jerusalem to visit

the Western Wall and the Knesset; for some, it is the first time in their lives. From basic training onwards, the IDF connects its soldiers to their national heritage and country, and reinforces Israel’s shared story.

“I swear”: with this shout the IDF soldiers announce that the nation takes precedence over the individual. This is the moment that unites the soldiers with the state. It strengthens their sense of belonging to their regiment, their team, the unit, and the IDF as a whole, and of course, to the State of Israel. Moreover, the very fact of military service increases young people’s identification with the country: “I served in..., I served as..., I fought for..., I was there for... so I belong more to the country, and the country belongs more to me.”

Solidarity is also expressed in the role of the IDF in times of crisis and disaster. IDF units are there to clear roads and help civilians, or to put out wildfires. With the outbreak of COVID-19, IDF units reported to help authorities manage quarantine hotels and old age homes, distribute food, set up national information centers, perform medical testing, and organize specific command posts for this purpose, such as Alon. All the soldiers who participated in these efforts experienced a greater sense of belonging to the IDF and the country, and no less importantly, a greater sense that the country belongs to them.

Economic Growth Engine

In Israel, security, the economy, and society are closely interwoven. Therefore, the IDF is an important engine of economic growth: it is a national training enterprise, driving security industries, strengthening the periphery, and encouraging innovation.

A national training enterprise: As well as strengthening individuals with a range of skills and capabilities, the IDF actually qualifies soldiers for multiple trades and professions, as the country’s largest development center. In short but high quality courses, suitable for the pace of modern life, the IDF trains soldiers for hundreds of important jobs. Each year it

produces thousands of engineers, technicians, cyber and digital operators, programmers, data analysts, drivers, armaments and maintenance personnel, and many more. They eventually leave the army and easily find work in the job market, bringing their experience as well as the norms and values instilled by the IDF. This is particularly the case with the highly qualified and experienced technology personnel, since hi-tech is the engine that pulls the economy (56 percent of Israel's exports are attributed to hi-tech companies; 15 percent of Israeli GDP is generated by hi-tech companies; 40 percent of the value of companies in the TA-35 index is attributed to hi-tech companies). Time after time, Israeli hi-tech managers repeat what they told the General Staff Forum: "We couldn't maintain our hi-tech without the IDF" (Adi Teeni, CEO of Facebook Israel).

This was well expressed by Shlomo Dovrat, today a businessman, partner, and founder of a venture capital firm, and formerly chairman of the Dovrat Committee on Educational Reform in Israel, who said:

The State of Israel is a world leader in hi-tech. Moreover, hi-tech has become a huge engine for growth of the Israeli economy. At the core of the process are the technological personnel with their ability for real innovation at any time. The decisive factor behind this qualitative advantage is the IDF, which is the main institution for training the Israeli workforce. Military service in general, and in the technological units in particular, produces workers who strive for technological innovation and excellence, who think outside the box, and who acquire extraordinary experience at a very young age.

Driver for security industries: The challenging security situation and the IDF's self-imposed objective of changing, improving, and developing drive the development of security

industries in Israel. For many years, the link between the IDF and the security industry has encouraged better processes of faster and quality development and manufacturing than in any other country. At the institutional level, the IDF is the ground on which these industries grow, and in many cases it generates the development and is a full partner in the process. Moreover, the IDF purchases weapons and other systems from the industries, thus granting a quality mark for global exports.

The security industries benefit from joint developments with the IDF and from its purchases, which are estimated at over 12 billion NIS annually, and which drive the export of high quality products to the world's markets. Israeli security industry exports account for over 70 percent of their total sales (one of the highest rates in the world). In addition, almost a third of the industries whose output is purchased by the IDF are located in peripheral areas, providing direct and indirect employment to over 80,000 people. For example, the IDF's development projects for tanks (the Merkava) and APCs (Namer and Eitan) are connected to some 200 companies and factories, supporting tens of thousands of households all over the country.

Furthermore, IDF development and manufacturing projects are fertile ground for civilian technological developments (dual use). According to Aharon Aharon, formerly CEO of the Innovation Authority and the first Israeli CEO of Apple Israel:

The number of units engaged in technology in the IDF and the number of soldiers involved continue to increase. The result is expansion of the private market to the Israeli qualitative advantage in all areas: drones, artificial intelligence, autonomous vehicles, and cyber. It's impossible to exaggerate the importance of the extent of civilianization of these technologies, the savings in national training costs, and the generous tax contributions

of the successful companies to the state treasury.

This statement gains extra weight given that 25 percent of income tax in Israel is paid by hi-tech personnel (data from 2020). In this way and through other interfaces, the IDF is the engine for industry in Israel, the country's hi-tech sector, and the economy as a whole.

The IDF encourages and develops a culture of innovation: Among the main strengths of the Israeli economy are innovation, initiative, and the ability to evolve. The IDF is a dynamic, developing, and self-renewing organization, with a culture of change and rapid adoption of advanced technologies. That is the IDF and that is how it is perceived throughout the world—as an effective, relevant, and innovative organization.

Innovation is found in many parts of the IDF: in its various arms, branches, and commands, in the field, and in staff units. The rate of developing methods of warfare, capabilities, intelligence gathering, weaponry, and the ability to learn are among the highest in the world. The IDF culture and climate encourage change, adaptation at both the tactical level and the senior level, and flexibility on operational and administrative issues. This culture penetrates to all areas of the organization and has grown stronger in recent years.

The need to innovate and change in order to adapt to developments in the arena of war, in the nature of threats, and global advances, and to find a response to different challenges all become second nature to the soldiers during their IDF service, and when they return to civilian life they bring this mentality to their work environment, whether in the private or public sector.

The IDF strengthens the periphery: The IDF is undergoing a process of moving to the Negev. More than a third is already in the Negev, creating an economic, social, cultural, and employment ecosystem that strengthens the area. The move to the Negev has numerous benefits for the

IDF and for Israeli society. It brings the spirit of renewal and change to the IDF, together with an opportunity to provide benefits to the local population. Air force bases and intelligence and communications and technology units have already moved, and a new training campus is being set up. The process will bring many new people to the south, driving the development of education, culture, and industry, and above all the development of hi-tech industry in the area. New needs in the field of advanced technology will lead to partnerships and collaborations, all contributing to the economy. Meanwhile the move away from army premises in the center of the country releases prime land for construction and national purposes in areas of high demand.

The defense budget is not a burden: The IDF's contribution to the prosperity and growth of the Israeli economy is considerable. At the same time, in view of the threats from several directions, Israel's defense costs are high for a developed country (although in the past two years other countries in the West and the Middle East have also faced rising defense costs). Nevertheless, over the years the proportion of the budget allocated to defense has decreased, relative to the state budget and relative to GDP, thanks to efficient use of resources and responsible direction from the General Staff.

As proof, four decades ago the defense budget accounted for over 30 percent of the total state budget, three decades ago it was over 20 percent, and today it is less than 12 percent. This means that funds can be channeled to civilian services, above all health, education, transportation, and welfare. Moreover, the IDF is constantly improving its internal efficiency in many areas, such as energy use, the move to training simulators that save costly resources, and more. Just in the last five years the IDF saved about 10 billion shekels, according to the State Comptroller's Report published in 2022.

When the IDF provides security, the economy blooms: A stable and suitable level of security strengthens the economic status of Israel. The security provided by the IDF

contributes to Israel's international economic standing. Credit rating companies attach great importance to stable security, and S&P determined that "positive ratings could be due to improvements in the Middle East security environment." Companies and businesses thrive and investment flows into the country from all over the world. The economy benefits and Israeli citizens benefit. There is no lack of examples, but among the most prominent are the international corporations that locate their centers in the north and south of Israel, in spite of rocket and missile threats. They do this because they rely on the IDF to protect them. For example, the IDF's ability to defend Israel's exclusive economic zone encourages companies to invest and sign contracts, leading to profitable exports. The Iron Dome system, a technological achievement of historic significance, protects the residents of the country, but also provides an "insurance policy" that enables continued construction and economic development, including investment in Israeli and foreign enterprises. Moreover, although it was extremely expensive, the investment in the Iron Dome has been repaid many times over. The Bank of Israel confirmed this: "Given that many places apart from Ashdod suffered the threat of rocket attacks, we conclude that the benefit of the Iron Dome system is greater than its cost" ("Effective War on Terror: Rockets, the Iron Dome, and the Israeli Housing Market," Bank of Israel study, March 2019).

During all operations in the Gaza Strip, the Iron Dome system intercepted hundreds of missiles aimed at Israel. Apart from protecting lives, Israel potentially saved hundreds of millions of shekels in compensation payments for damaged property, far outweighing the cost of the system. In Operation Guardian of the Walls, for instance, the savings were estimated at about half a billion shekels.

The price of security is high, and the amounts invested in the IDF are enormous, but apart from the protection that the IDF provides, it repays the state investment many times over.

Nurturing People: "The Precious Individual"

The IDF receives the best people to its ranks, and thanks to them it succeeds in its tasks. That is why we are committed to making maximum use of the personnel at our disposal, assigning soldiers to the correct tasks, and treating them professionally and humanely.

We constantly work on the subject of leadership and personal development, and therefore we are constantly improving our methods of screening, assignment, and promotion of soldiers. We have assimilated the concept of "the precious individual" to guide us in our dealings with soldiers. We initiate moves to change and improve the processes of preparation for military service, the methods of sorting and assigning recruits to the various jobs (particularly jobs for women), and the expansion of technological frameworks.

We improve access to information for the ISA, increase transparency and access to personal information, tighten the links with local authorities, and organize many activities that involve parents and the community in preparations for IDF service. Our screening processes are undergoing very significant changes—the development of more assessment tools to ensure we make full use of all the skills and abilities of recruits. The screening processes for women and men are equal, and use far more data and advanced tools. The IDF is cutting back or eliminating older trades and developing new ones. For example, 2000 (!) female clerical workers have been assigned to higher quality jobs, particularly in technology. Every recruit can retake all the exams to improve his/her results.

The IDF also works with the education system on special programs in the field of technology, such as the Atidim venture to promote technology studies in the periphery, which is currently being doubled in size; the Magshimim and the Mamriyot programs that give women greater choice in technology and cyber jobs; and many more ventures.

Conclusion

The security situation that Israel confronts is complex and challenging. The IDF is the backbone of security, “and its fate lies in the hands of the security forces,” wrote David Ben-Gurion in his diary on the day the state was established. The IDF must continue to develop, improve, and equip itself with the best means, but above all the IDF must ensure it has the best possible soldiers, whether in mandatory service, in the regular army, or in the reserves. That is the secret of its strength, and that is what has made it one of the world’s leading militaries. The IDF must remain a military based on conscription that continues to produce commanders and excellent qualified professionals.

But the impact of the IDF, as described in this article, far exceeds its military and security function. It is a driver of personal, social, cultural, economic, and national development—the “personal gym” that gives individuals the relevant skills for the 21st century, and the “national gym” that supplies the nation with trained, experienced, and self-confident people who contribute to its economy. The IDF also serves as a means for reinforcing the social fabric and social and national solidarity, through active participation and experience. And apart from maintaining the country’s security, the IDF facilitates economic growth, since the military developments on which the army focuses encourage local industry and drive the local economy and exports.

In conclusion: the IDF provides protection and security; develops and empowers the individual; strengthens social solidarity; contributes to national solidarity; and encourages helps economic development. For all these reasons the IDF is a security, social, economic, and national asset. There are many reasons for preserving the principle of national conscription; the first one is the quality of the IDF and the security it provides, due to the quality of its soldiers, but there are many other reasons.

The IDF is a huge (not big, but huge) organization with numerous tasks, and there are many gaps and issues that require continuing improvement. The IDF learns lessons, pays attention to Israeli society—both praise and criticism—is usually aware of its failures when they occur and the problems that arise, and works systematically to deal with them and make amendments where required. One of the areas where the IDF must continue to improve is the subject of efficiency and full utilization of resources. However, the IDF is a unique asset to the State of Israel, and one of the country’s most important and fruitful products.

There are many reasons for preserving the principle of national conscription; the first one is the quality of the IDF and the security it provides, due to the quality of its soldiers.

Those who talk of the defense burden must look at the whole picture. Not only is the IDF not a burden; it is, rather, an asset. The IDF makes it possible to live safely in Israel, a country that faces unprecedented and unmatched military challenges and threats, while also strengthening personal abilities, and promoting social unity, national solidarity, and economic development. The IDF provides national security as well as personal, social, and economic security, and as such, is a security and national asset.

Lt. Gen. (ret.) Aviv Kochavi was the IDF’s 22nd Chief of Staff. In previous positions he served as Deputy Chief of Staff, commander of the Northern Command, the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate, head of the Operations Brigade in the Operations Directorate, commander of the Gaza Division, commander of the 98th Paratroopers Division, and commander of the Paratroopers Brigade.