

The Reservists' Protest: Ramifications for the IDF

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The protest by the reserve soldiers and the crisis confronting the IDF is examined here from three angles: non-volunteering, containment of the protest, and the conscription law. Even if the protest has ostensibly calmed down, the threat of non-volunteering for reserve service remains and is expected to resurface if, within the framework of the proposed judicial overhaul, the legislation on changes to the composition of the judicial selection committee moves forward in the Knesset, or if the conscription bill, in one version or another, is advanced. The IDF must guard against attempts to draw it onto the political field. In addition, the impact of the reservists' protest on unit cohesiveness and the entire military should be addressed.

The protest by reserve soldiers has apparently calmed down, against the backdrop of the Knesset recess, the Passover holiday and Independence Day, and Ramadan, which passed relatively quietly. There are currently few if any reported threats of non-volunteering, and there has been little if any fulfillment of previous threats not to volunteer. Furthermore, following rocket fire from Lebanon and the Gaza Strip during Passover, the emergency call-up of reserve soldiers went smoothly. The mobilization of cyber operatives, pilots, technical crews, logistical crews, and headquarters soldiers was full. More recently, according to foreign reports, the air force (which includes reserve pilots) has attacked in Syria, and the reserve battalions in field units are training as usual and mobilizing at higher rates than last year. However, the fitness of combat soldiers and their mobilization is only one aspect of the crisis confronting the army. Another aspect is the impact of the reservists' protest on IDF cohesion and on the possible political use of military service.

Non-Volunteering

Early in the protests against the judicial overhaul advanced by the government, thousands of soldiers sent dozens of letters, threatening not to volunteer for reserve service (some people call this by the pejorative term "refusal to serve"). Most of the reservists behind the threat serve in special units and deployments. Above all were pilots, who were the first to write, sign, and organize in groups on social networks. The pilots, because of their standing and their critical role in the IDF, drew most of the attention and response. However, so far very few soldiers, especially from the air force (and not necessarily pilots), have carried out their threat and stopped volunteering. Most of the pilots as well as soldiers from the cyber, intelligence, and special forces units who signed letters threatening not to volunteer have already done reserve service since then (in operational activity and/or training). The mobilization of those called up with an emergency order following the rocket fire from the north and from the Gaza Strip during Passover was also full. Relatively speaking, few petitions or letters were sent that were signed by commanders and soldiers from the ground forces, armored battalions, artillery, engineering, or infantry – a fact of much significance to the essence, future, and model of employment of the reserve corps.

Thus, at this stage there seems to be a gap between the intensity of the threat and ensuing commotion, and the implementation of the threat. If the law on the composition of the judicial selection committee is advanced, the reservists' protest will likely reawaken instantly; only then are many of those who have made threats likely to fulfill them and stop volunteering.

The Containment and its Ramifications

The IDF's efforts to cope with the phenomenon of non-volunteering for reserve service have so far been confined to dialogue. At the Chief of Staff's directive, commanders, and he among them, met with reserve soldiers and commanders in order to underscore the inherent dangers for the IDF if the non-volunteering occurs, both in the purely military sphere (a decline in the operational competence of the reserve forces, and a decrease in deterrence) and in the moral-social context of maintaining the mutual

commitment and preventing a rift in the reserve forces, which would affect (and is already affecting) the entire military.

The IDF's current policy toward those threatening not to volunteer is a policy of containment that "embraces" the undecided, in an effort not to rebuff people deliberating whether to volunteer, out of an understanding of the need for a competent and cohesive reserve force. It seems that the current picture before the Chief of Staff and the General Staff encourages them to conclude that the steps taken so far were correct, and that they are satisfied with the results. Yet while this conclusion is correct for now, the "calm" stage, it will not necessarily be sufficient if and when the legislation is renewed.

This containment approach – i.e., not punishing or removing – is widely accepted in the air force and among some reserve commanders in the ground forces. However, there are soldiers and commanders in the reserve ground forces who think that any non-volunteering, or refusal for its own sake, should be answered with strict measures.

One of the strongest criticisms voiced toward the IDF and the Defense Minister by supporters of the judicial overhaul concerned this policy of containment. The criticism was expressed on social media, and included an explicit demand by the Prime Minister, directed at the Chief of Staff and the General Staff, to deal firmly with those refusing to serve. The dismissal of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant (which was not carried out) was explained by his weak handling of non-mobilization. Despite the criticism, the IDF adhered to its approach, although this policy exacts a toll and is exploited by those who seek to enlist the IDF in furthering political aims.

A clear example is the response to a disciplinary incident that occurred a few weeks ago in Battalion 51 of the Golani Brigade. After a company commander was transferred from his position and in light of the intention of appointing a company commander from the Paratroopers Brigade in his place, the company of combat soldiers left the base, leaving their weapons there. Some of the soldiers in the company shared posts on social media in

which they explained that they were going AWOL "because we love you (the company commander)." After discussions with the soldiers, they returned to the base. Even though this was a disciplinary incident unrelated to the reservists' protest, the IDF faced a dilemma, as various figures made political use of it. Before a decision was made regarding the soldiers, accusations were posted on social media that those who had normalized refusal to serve in the air force should not be surprised if it is echoed in the Golani Brigade. Such statements increased when it became known that the Golani soldiers were symbolically punished by being confined to the base (subsequently, more serious disciplinary measures were taken against some of them). On the other hand, had the punishments been more severe, the IDF would have been accused of adopting a discriminatory policy between pilots, who are identified with the "elite," and Golani soldiers, who are identified with the periphery (even if this is not substantiated by data and objective characteristics).

Another example is the quick punishment of the officer who came to the demonstration in favor of the overhaul in uniform and with his weapon. The officer was sentenced to probation, and figures from the right wing part of the political map claimed on social media that this was because he was a right winger. On the other hand, if he were not punished, people would likely have claimed that the IDF lightened his sentence out of fear of the government.

These incidents and the responses to them indicate that even while the reservists' protest appears to have subsided, its consequences are evident – including potential political use of the military.

The Conscription Bill

It is possible that the challenge posed by the reserve soldiers, who warned of non-mobilization for volunteer service if the overhaul becomes law, was only a prelude to the challenge that the heads of the political-security system in particular would face if the conscription bill passes in the format of an exemption from service starting at the age of 23 (or a similar age), and even worse – if a Basic Law: Torah Study is proposed that seeks to equate

the status of Torah students with those who have performed "meaningful service." The protest against the "judicial revolution" places this issue at the center, in its clear call to create a new social contract in which the burden of service is shared equally. In this spirit, a protest was held under the title of "equality day," and the negotiation teams at the President's residence must also address the issue.

The passage of the proposed law could erode the motivation for enlistment and reserve service, and the ability to maintain the "people's army" model. Furthermore, the military's involvement (under the umbrella of the Ministry of Defense) in the exemption age, by linking it with benefits for those serving in the defense forces (the Value of Service law) drags it, however reluctantly, deep into the political realm, and it could be seen as welcoming this legislation. This is a recipe for deepening the crisis confronting the military.

Conclusion

Although the protest by the reserve soldiers has subsided recently, the General Staff and the Chief of Staff are very preoccupied with its reverberations, and it appears that they (justifiably) are hard pressed to assess how the issue will evolve. The military, which is used to battle procedures and "incidents and responses" to various scenarios on the battlefield, is having difficulty preparing for the unknown in the social realm, and in particular, in the political field, into which it has been drawn. The statement that "the battlefield is the realm of uncertainty" is also true of the socio-political battle, all the more so given that the reservists' protest may expand, while criticism of the military's accommodating approach may increase. The critics of the IDF make extensive use of the narrative of the "first Israel" (pilots) and the "second Israel" (soldiers in the ground forces), and thereby entangle the IDF in the public-political debate regarding the judicial overhaul and the protest against it. This IDF is harmed by this conduct and will require much time and effort to overcome it.

Against the backdrop of the struggle over the character of the State of Israel, those leading the IDF must look ahead to the future, even if the

legislation brought forward by the government is only partly implemented. The IDF must prepare for this while making extensive use of sociological-societal tools, which are completely different from the tools at its disposal on the physical battlefield. It appears that the current situation regarding military service in general and reserve service in particular should be treated according to the principle of "hope for the best, prepare for the worst."

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