

Is the IDF the Most Moral Military in the World?

Dr. Shmuel Harlap | No. 1758 | September 4, 2023

Advocating the separation between the military and politics treats the IDF like a governmental tool – while ignoring, either knowingly or not, the fact that the people who serve in the IDF are, first and foremost, citizens. The outcome of “separating the military from politics” is the nullification of the idea that the IDF is the people’s army, whose values are entrenched in the values of the people – including the very clear distinction between not volunteering and the refusal to serve. It is no coincidence that reserve pilots from the Air Force were the first to declare that they would no longer volunteer for reserve duty, given the legislative moves pursued by the government. Their refusal is very tightly bound to the Air Force’s policy of “roof knocking” as an advance warning of imminent bombing attacks and its strict policy of ensuring that any strike is as “surgical” as possible.

Prof. Vaclav Smil of the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada, is the world’s leading expert in the field of energy. He has written more than 40 books, and Bill Gates is known to be one of his admirers. His most recent book, *Invention and Innovation*, proposes a precise distinction between “invention” and “innovation.” According to Smil, invention creates something out of nothing; innovation takes what already exists, introducing and marketing it to mass markets.

Smil illustrates the difference between invention and innovation by comparing the Soviet Union to China. The Soviet Union was blessed with inventions. Soviet scientists won eight Nobel Prizes, and the research and development work carried out by the Red Army allowed Moscow to build a nuclear arsenal and manufacture a highly advanced force of fighter planes. When the Soviet Union collapsed, however, it became apparent that Russia did not have any consumer industry, such as the manufacture of jeans or personal computers. Every invention was channeled toward the defense industry and the civilian population remained neglected. In contrast to Russia’s failure to find mass applications for its inventions, China’s accelerated economic growth was based on inventions that the Chinese imported from the West, through technology transfer in joint ventures and more. The elevenfold growth of the

Chinese economy since the 1990s was not based on local inventions, but on the mass adoption of foreign technology and production methods, construction of massive factories, unprecedented levels of production, and a charged entry into the global export markets. This is innovation without invention. While the Soviet economy demonstrates that invention does not necessarily lead to innovation, the Chinese economy shows that innovation does not depend on invention.

Smil's distinction is illuminating in the context of the public protest in Israel over what is termed the "regime coup." Is this protest movement "invention" or "innovation"?

The Israeli "Shame!" protest is not a local invention. Shouts of "Shame! Shame!" have been imported from the West's shame culture for a local protest. Writing in 2015, researcher Andy Crouch argued that "shaming" in social media has become the key motif in contemporary Western culture.

Using Smil's distinction, the Israeli protest meets the criteria of innovation. The phenomenon of hundreds of thousands of people taking to the streets in protest for months on end is one of innovation; it is not something that happened in Hungary or Poland, for example – countries that experienced changes to the regime that eroded liberal values. The Israeli protest movement makes "shame culture" accessible to the masses, reaching new Israeli audiences and introducing novelty to the world with its unprecedented force, persistence, and scope.

There is another dimension to the Israeli protest that has nothing to do with "shame culture." The protests by combat pilots and members of elite units, extensive and profound, add a new dimension to the Israeli innovation of the protest. Yet what sets the protest by combat pilots and members of elite units apart is precisely the fact that it is a uniquely Israeli invention, an unprecedented refusal to volunteer for reserve duty. This is neither mutiny nor insubordination, since no one is refusing to honor a call-up for reserve duty. The only issue at stake is a moral one: voluntary service in the reserves.

The argument that refusal to volunteer for reserve duty is tantamount to mutiny or insubordination is not only erroneous, but also misleading. Conflating the two concepts negates the difference between not volunteering and refusing to serve. Both concepts, according to this argument, are a manifestation of the injection of political content into the military, rather than ensuring that there is total separation between the military and politics.

There are two levels to the argument about the separation of the military from politics. On the one hand, advocating for their separation is doctrinal: the IDF is a professional body, immune to external noise. To put it more simply: those sounding the refrain give no reasoning for the separation; they merely spout a meaningless slogan – "keep politics out of the military" – without any informed discussion. On the other hand, advocating this separation is an example of governmental cunning, since, as this argument implies, the IDF is just a tool of the government. Its role is to implement

government policy using military power. Therefore, by this logic, the elected government has the right to call up any member of the reserves at any moment. The officers and the soldiers do not have the right to differentiate between reserve duty that is voluntary and reserve duty that is in response to mobilization.

Be it a military with an autoimmune identity or a tool of the government, the IDF, when advocating the separation of the military and politics, is cast as an autonomous, professional entity, reduced to the pointless slogan of “separating the military from politics.”

Even worse, advocating the separation between the military and politics treats the IDF like a governmental tool, with all the dangers involved in making use of it – while ignoring, either knowingly or not, the fact that the people who serve in the IDF are, first and foremost, citizens. The outcome of “separating the military from politics” is the nullification of the idea that the IDF is the people’s army, whose values are entrenched in the values of the people – including the very clear distinction between not volunteering and the refusal to serve.

It is no coincidence that reserve pilots from the Air Force were the first to declare that they would no longer volunteer for reserve duty, given the legislative moves pursued by the government. Their refusal is very tightly bound to the Air Force’s policy of “roof knocking” as an advance warning of imminent bombing attacks and its strict policy of ensuring that any strike is as “surgical” as possible.

There are those in the leftist camp who enjoy sneering at the claim that “the IDF is the most moral military in the world.” The refusal to volunteer for reserve duty by combat pilots and members of elite units is clear proof that the IDF is, indeed, the most moral military in the world. Those reserve pilots who refuse to volunteer for missions when Israel weathers the threat of a regime change are the same combat pilots who take pains not to hit noncombatants, and who abort missions when there is concern that innocent lives could be at risk. There is no higher military moral link and footprint than this – unprecedented Israeli invention and innovation in the field of military ethics. And there is no greater pride than knowing that the IDF chooses particularly these individuals as combat pilots and elite commandos.

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