

Principles of the Conscription Law: Will They Increase the Number of Ultra-Orthodox Recruits?

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In mid-January, Defense Minister Israel Katz, appointed to replace Yoav Gallant—who presented a position opposed to the government on drafting the ultra-Orthodox—presented to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee the principles of the conscription law that he aims to advance. While these are only principles and not a draft law, the concept of gradual recruitment targets has emerged as a key point of social and political controversy. This is largely because the proposed targets do not align with the IDF's recent declaration that it will be prepared to recruit all ultra-Orthodox men obligated to enlist starting in 2026. In addition, the minister introduced the principle of sanctions, another contentious issue. However, the proposed sanctions would likely be ineffective, as they would not directly impact individuals or address the military's needs. This article examines the principles presented by Minister Katz in comparison with the IDF's position, as reflected in previous discussions, media statements, official documents, and public forums.

Gradual Recruitment Targets

Defense Minister Israel Katz aims to enlist 50% of ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students of conscription age within seven years, with the recruitment targets increasing gradually each year. The target for the first year is 4,800 recruits, rising to 5,700 in the second year; targets for the additional years were not specified. The defense minister also emphasized that recruitment depends not only on the military's capacity but also on the consent of the leaders of the ultra-Orthodox community, attributing this reservation to support from the chief of staff.

Situation Overview: The IDF has declared that by 2026, it will be fully prepared to recruit an unlimited number of ultra-Orthodox soldiers. Therefore, the principle of gradual recruitment targets set forth by Defense Minister Katz does not align with the IDF's statement. This is despite government assurances—including from Prime Minister Netanyahu—that the law would be drafted in accordance with the IDF's position. Maj. Gen. Dado Bar Kalifa, head of the IDF Personnel Directorate, warned that "if the numbers remain low, the burden on reservists will be severe." He stressed that the IDF requires 6,000–7,000 combat soldiers and an additional 10,000 soldiers for technological and frontline combat-support roles.

Reports indicate that the defense minister instructed the legal counsel to omit the IDF's position on ultra-Orthodox conscription from the defense establishment's response to the

High Court, which stated that the IDF can absorb all ultra-Orthodox recruits by 2026. As for the support of rabbis, which Katz considers essential for advancing the law—even though the IDF has consistently advocated for recruitment through dialogue and agreement, the chief of staff has never publicly endorsed this approach.

Sanctions

Defense Minister Katz claims that the proposed law includes personal economic sanctions for those who do not report, mentioning the cancellation of daycare subsidies. He also noted the possibility of personal criminal sanctions and collective penalties against yeshivas that do not meet the recruitment targets, although he did not specify the content of these sanctions or how they would be enforced.

Situation Overview: On January 17, the IDF announced it had issued arrest warrants for hundreds of ultra-Orthodox candidates for military service who failed to report for duty under Section 12 of the Security Service Law. This step was taken after the IDF had exhausted all the necessary procedures according to its approach and because it remains far from reaching the target of 4,800 ultra-Orthodox recruits in the current enlistment year (July 2024–June 2025).

Currently, those who violate conscription laws face consequences only if they attempt to leave the country or are arrested by the police. Thus, the IDF expects to have the authority to impose personal, economic, and administrative sanctions. The heads of the IDF Personnel Directorate and the IDF Human Resources Planning and Management Division have emphasized that sanctions should be linked to an individual's daily conduct and that only direct, personal sanctions will be effective. It should be noted that the attorney general of Israel had instructed the legal counsel of the Ministry of Defense to draft a list of effective sanctions before presenting the law's principles to the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee.

Required Adjustments from the IDF

Defense Minister Katz also mentioned the need for structural and cultural adjustments within the military to promote the integration of ultra-Orthodox soldiers. He emphasized that he would not support a law that would harm Torah students and their way of life. Additionally, he argued that even if the IDF claims it can handle the enlistment of all ultra-Orthodox recruits by 2026, there is a distinction between absorbing ultra-Orthodox recruits and actual enlistment, and he doubted the IDF's ability to meet both.

Situation Overview: In recent years, particularly in the past year, the IDF has made extensive adjustments to enable ultra-Orthodox soldiers to serve in a framework that corresponds to their lifestyle and preserves their religious identity. Military officials declare that the IDF is fully prepared to absorb ultra-Orthodox recruits, starting from the initial induction and screening process at the recruitment base (*Bakum*) and through their active service.

As part of this preparation, the "Hasmonean Brigade"—the first ultra-Orthodox infantry brigade—was established this year. This brigade adheres to strict religious standards designed to ensure an environment compatible with the ultra-Orthodox lifestyle. Some have **cast doubt on the military's position** in this regard, **as reflected in Defense Minister Katz's remarks,**

suggesting that while the IDF claims it can recruit and accommodate ultra-Orthodox soldiers, it has not yet succeeded in doing so.

In response to these claims, the head of the IDF Personnel Directorate clarified before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that,

We have invested millions. I personally traveled several times to Tevetz (the training and preparation base for the Hasmonean Brigade), and I am proud of those who came to see it for themselves [addressing Knesset members]. There is nothing better than seeing it with your own eyes. We are investing enormous resources—trained personnel for this purpose, for certain quantities, and we will expand as needed.

It should be noted, however, that while the IDF can accommodate ultra-Orthodox recruits, it is not responsible for ensuring that they arrive at the recruitment base. Despite the socio-political nature of this issue, the defense minister has repeatedly shifted the burden of responsibility onto the military. Once the IDF publicly declared its ability to recruit all eligible ultra-Orthodox men, those advocating for an inequitable conscription law had little choice but to question the IDF's capability, even at the risk of undermining public trust in the military.

The responsibility for conscription lies with the Knesset, not the IDF, despite Defense Minister Katz's claims. Maj. Gen. Dado Bar Kalifa emphasized this point before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, stating that the IDF is an "executive body" that operates according to state laws: "I operate according to the law—you determine the policy in this house, and we implement it." As an executive body, the IDF is not responsible for persuading ultra-Orthodox political or religious leaders to encourage enlistment.

The political leadership must enact a conscription law that enables the recruitment of ultra-Orthodox yeshiva students in numbers that align with the IDF's operational capacity. This should be achieved through effective personal sanctions rather than superficial sanctions designed for political gain. The political leadership's ongoing public attacks on the IDF have had clear consequences. A survey conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies between January 16–20, 2025, found that nearly half of respondents opposed the proposed law on the grounds that it enables draft evasion. Additionally, public trust in the IDF fell for the first time in three months to 77%—the second-lowest level recorded since October 2023. While part of this decline is due to concerns over the military investigation into October 7 and the delay among senior officers in taking responsibility for the October 7 events, ongoing attacks by the political echelon on the military—including open disregard for the chief of staff's office—have also played a role.

In recent years, political-military relations have fluctuated, especially during the war. This is partly because both political leaders and senior IDF officials recognize that they will eventually have to answer to a state inquiry committee. However, Israel's security needs in its most difficult hour should remain separate from political maneuvering. The IDF requires an appropriate legal framework to promptly expand its ranks, a necessity that has become even more pressing due to the high number of wartime casualties and the growing security threats on multiple fronts that Israel is expected to confront in the near future.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg