

## Introduction

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Issues related to the notion of a “people’s army,” and in particular, questions related to the nature, scope, and elements of service in the IDF, have been on the Israeli public agenda since the establishment of the State of Israel. In principle, from the outset to the present, Israeli politicians and the IDF command continue to attempt to maintain compulsory military service that is applicable to all citizens, subject to the law, and based on the criteria and the needs of the army itself. The underlying goal of this approach is clear: to enable the IDF to retain control over the conscription into its ranks. At the same time, there has also been a clear demographic phenomenon in this context, characterized by an ongoing decline in the relative rate of conscripts out of the overall population of civilians in their induction cycle, including all those subject to the law, completing full compulsory service. It is clear that the National Service Law of 1953 is not applied to all Israelis, and that large groups within the Israeli public – particularly women, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arabs – are consistently provided with the opportunity to refrain from completing full compulsory service.

Public awareness regarding the issue of “equality in sharing the burden” has grown in recent years, including the period of the Israeli social justice protests of 2011. Discussion of this notion has focused primarily on the exemption from military service enjoyed by ultra-Orthodox Jews. This issue was also deliberated by the Israeli government and the High Court of Justice (HCJ), with an emphasis on the effort to regulate the issue of military exemptions for the ultra-Orthodox in a realistic yet egalitarian manner. At the present time, in the twentieth Knesset, it appears that this issue will remain a focal point of division between different groups within the Israeli public and Israeli politics, and that the changing political reality in the country is what will ultimately shape the practices that develop. In parallel, a social and political discussion is underway regarding the format and scope of implementation of the National Civilian Service Law, which

primarily promotes the service of Arabs and Jewish religious women within the existing civilian frameworks.

In general, despite slow shifts in various directions, the developments that have taken place in recent years have not resulted in a meaningful change in the overall situation, which represents a clear reality that has been in place for years. Compulsory service in the IDF remains a burden borne by a relatively and increasingly small number of young Israeli men, while three sectors – women, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arabs – continue, at varying rates, to reflect the phenomenon of deficient participation in equal conscription according to the Compulsory Military Service Law.

Such a situation raises a number of various fundamental questions regarding military service. One frequently discussed question pertains to the dilemma between compulsory service and the possible alternative of voluntary service. In the discussion currently underway on this critical issue,<sup>1</sup> many still appear to be in support of the continuation of compulsory service as the basis for the conscription of young Israelis into the IDF, despite the high financial, social, and personal costs required by such service. To a large extent, this approach is based on a view of the security needs presented by the unique conditions of the State of Israel, despite recognition of the lack of full equality in the existing format of conscription. Indeed, the system that has been in operation in Israel for years enables the IDF to employ selective conscription and selective service, while maintaining the ethos of a people's army as an important tool in the sensitive relationship between Israeli society and the military.

The discussions regarding compulsory service have been closely linked to the motivation for military service among those who are obligated to complete compulsory service. Some researchers have defined a number of types of motivating factors for military service and have examined increases or decreases in the motivation for compulsory or civilian service based on a variety of criteria. Some of the researchers who have considered the question argue that overall, the motivation for compulsory service in the IDF is declining. Other studies, however, and particularly those conducted by government bodies or by the Research Unit of the IDF, hold that motivation – particularly among young men – is not declining, and most identify stability in the willingness to serve in the people's army, especially in combat units. This question, which is explored by a number of articles in this volume, remains unanswered to a degree, and appears to depend on the perspective

of the observer: whose motivation is being measured? Who is supposed to be conscripted? And so forth.

One of the questions asked pertains to the macro-economic implications, not only of the method of conscription for compulsory service, but also of service in the army reserves. Indeed, the economic dimensions of military service are worthy of open public discussion, which is currently conducted from two perspectives: one focusing on the national budget and the portion thereof allocated to the IDF budget; and the other examining the contribution of the IDF, and those serving in its ranks, to the Israeli economy during normal times and periods of military clashes.

Beyond these contexts, we have witnessed the emergence of normative questions with important legal-constitutional aspects. Who is, and who should be, responsible for deciding and planning the scope and structure of the human resources conscripted into the IDF and serving in its ranks, and what considerations should influence policy on these issues? Considering the social, economic, and ethical implications of this thorny issue, and the important considerations of IDF force design, should policy be set by the IDF itself or by the senior political leadership? The prevalent opinion in our discussions on the matter tended toward the view that the issue should not remain the sole domain of the security establishment, which by nature operates according to legitimate security considerations, but rather should be placed on the public agenda and ultimately selected by the government. The need for determining responsibility for this matter also stems from the far-reaching implications of the issue of conscription for all the members of Israeli society.

The examination of the many different issues analyzed and presented in this volume raises a major question: Do the articles assembled here enable us to generate general insights regarding conscription into the IDF and the army's status in Israel as a people's army, with its multiplicity of social significances? Although there are no clear answers to the questions raised above we can, nonetheless, and with all due caution, propose the following primary insights:

- a. Despite what is typically reported in the media, there does not appear to be a clear downward trend in the scope of young Israelis enlisting in the IDF in the relevant sectors, excluding the Arab and ultra-Orthodox sectors. The quantitative state of the scope of conscription appears to be relatively stable, and has remained so over the years.

- b. In light of the continuing growth of the Israeli population and the gradually increasing relative proportion of those two particular sectors in the conscription cycles, and the fact that conscription into the IDF within these sectors remains minimal and without any female component, their relative proportion among new conscripts appears to be on the decline.
- c. Another distinct but related question concerns the percentage of conscripts who complete their army service as required by law. In this category too, there appears to have been a numerical decline in the number of conscripts completing their required service in full, and an increase in the number of conscripts discharged early for various reasons, usually with the consent of the army.
- d. We are also witnessing a trend whereby the army, based on cost-benefit considerations, prefers to enlist for regular service all those individuals meeting the quality standards and professional needs of the IDF – or at least those who do not constitute a burden or require substantial social and budgetary obligations – and to ensure their maximal service. This means that overall, the army (and with only specific exceptions) prefers to refrain from forcing conscription or granting early discharge to young Israelis who, from the outset or in retrospect, do not fully meet these criteria.
- e. All these aspects raise the question of the extent to which the IDF is still a people's army, in the sense of an army that is fed by conscription from the entire Israeli population in an equal manner. According to some of the findings, the IDF appears to be moving away from this norm, which actually never completely existed in reality. Therefore, even if the number of conscripts in any given conscription cycle completing full service is on the decline (and in the years to come, the figure could dip below 50 percent), the IDF can, and should, be defined as a people's army in the future as well, for the following fundamental reasons:
  - i. Even from the narrow perspective of the number of conscripts, the IDF is still based on the main backbone of Israeli society (with its different strata) and will continue to be so in the future. From this perspective, the ultra-Orthodox Jewish sector and the Arab sector are actually excluding themselves (or being excluded) from the general Israeli society by refraining to enlist in the IDF.
  - ii. As in the past, it is clear that the IDF will continue to serve as a leading organization producing and maintaining deep and ongoing popular social connections with the broader Israeli public, which

continues to demonstrate significant support for the army as a distinct institutional expression of the State of Israel. Where the army is concerned, it is making an extensive effort to manifest itself as an army of Israeli society operating in the defense of the country and the entire people.

- iii. In order to maximize the army's ability to fulfill this aim, the IDF must be allowed to continue to rely on the considerable social legitimacy it currently enjoys, which is based in part on its ethos as a people's army. Even if this ethos is not entirely accurate, it nonetheless constitutes an important sociopolitical tool for maintaining the internal strength of the army.
- f. In conclusion, we recommend refraining from changing the existing public paradigm, which views the IDF as a people's army, although it may be necessary to rework the definition of this extremely general and abstract concept. At the same time, the army should be expected and permitted to maintain and bolster the social message covered by the existing concept. This expectation is intended for both the IDF and the state in general: while it is important for the army to be perceived as a people's army, this classification must also, and perhaps most importantly, be imbued with meaning in the current period. For this reason, the state must make a concrete effort to expand the conscription pool for both military and civilian service, including the participation of the sectors that currently do not contribute. The public sense of equality, or inequality, plays a meaningful role in preserving the status of the IDF. At the same time, it is also important that the Israeli security establishment and the IDF meticulously ensure full maximization of the conscription potential, while factoring in broad social considerations, along with budgetary and organizational considerations. To bolster the IDF's status as a people's army it is important to maintain, and even expand, projects of social involvement, although current trends call for reducing them on economic and religious grounds. Finally, it should be mentioned that such social considerations are applicable not only to questions regarding compulsory service, but also to the considerations involved with building a reserve corps.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Yagil Levy, ed., *Mandatory Service or the Duty to Serve? Scenario Analysis of Mandatory Civil Service in Israel* (Open University of Israel, 2015).