

“The People’s Army,” Put to the Test

Dov Tamari

In an interview on the present and future path of the IDF, then-IDF Chief of General Staff Benny Gantz remarked that the public displays no empathy toward those who have lost their jobs in the military and that within the IDF, people are truly troubled by the hostile attitude of the public. This observation is reflective of the social reality. The point of departure of this article is that since its inception, just as it has been a military defensive force at the service of the Israeli state and government, the IDF has also always been a social organization. Whereas most consider the IDF in light of its ability to engage in combat in wartime, this article considers it from a strictly social angle based on the premise that, as long as it remains a “people’s army,” it will also be a social entity.

Is the IDF Still a People’s Army?

The time has come for us to pose questions that have hitherto not been generally asked:

- a. What is the people’s army in Israel? Is there any truth to this notion, or is it merely an old, empty slogan?
- b. What is the meaning of the concept of the people’s army? Is it a universal concept or is it unique to Israel?
- c. What is the social significance of the IDF as a people’s army, and what is its social purpose?
- d. Is the people’s army also based on a volunteering spirit?
- e. Has the model of the Israeli people’s army eroded and been fractured over the years?
- f. And finally, is there an alternative military model that is perhaps better suited for Israel?

It is important to clarify these and other questions, as what was understood and accepted in the past may no longer suit reality and the changes over time. Every Israeli who is aware of the environment in which he or she lives is familiar with the concept of the people's army, or, to be more precise, the notion that "the IDF is the people's army." However, the term "people's army" has no universal definition, as every state and society interprets reality and its particular security needs in its own subjective way and, on this basis, determines the purpose, structure, and organization of its army accordingly.

The origins of the concept "people's army" reach back to the French Revolution when revolutionary France was fighting the empires and kingdoms of Europe. Until that point, armies had been the "armies of emperors and kings" and typically consisted of tens of thousands of men, usually 50,000 or 60,000, and in any event not more than 100,000. They were armies of hired mercenaries paid by absolutist rulers. In 1793, Lazare Nicolas Marguerite, the Count of Carnot and the French minister of the revolutionary regime, issued a law that obligated all French citizens, in accordance with their age, to serve in the army and to provide military service and financial resources. This included the participation of women and children to provide practical and moral support for the military.

Most senior military officers in the armies of Europe during the period preceding the French Revolution were appointed based on family pedigree and their membership in the upper class and the nobility, and not necessarily as a result of skill and ability. The French revolutionary army advanced junior officers from lower ranks to the rank of general and even marshal. In this context, the concept of "general conscription" emerged, and during the nineteenth century, came to characterize the armies of Europe and the United States. The process peaked during the world wars of the twentieth century, in which tens of millions of soldiers were conscripted and fought in the armies of the participating countries.

The people's army, therefore, is characterized by general conscription; the mobilization of the state's resources for the war effort; a regular army (compulsory and standing forces), whose size is determined by a state's economic resources and foreign and domestic policy; and the mass needed for a total war constituted of conscripted reserve soldiers. General conscription had the profound social effect of turning the civilian into a military subject who may end up sacrificing his life in battle. In return, he demanded and received civil rights he had not enjoyed in the past. General conscription

is what produced the modern reserves model. As a large standing army constitutes an untenable economic and social burden, the reserve army model emerged as a necessary compromise between security needs and the economic and social burdens they created. Standing in contrast to the notion of the people’s army is the model of the professional volunteer army maintained by many countries around the world, representing a modern return of sorts to the “armies of monarchs” of the eighteenth century.

The meaning and significance of the concept of the people’s army were already known to the leadership of the Haganah during the hostilities of 1936-1939. Among the Haganah’s commanders were theoreticians who discussed and published articles on the subject of the people’s army (Elimelech Zelikowich and Yehoshua Globberman). The Haganah’s security committee engaged in serious systematic discussion of the Jewish people’s army to be established when the Jewish state would be established in the Land of Israel. Between 1939 and 1941 the Haganah began establishing a regular army – the *Palmah* (Hebrew acronym for “strike forces”), and a reserve army – the *Khish* (acronym for “field corps”) and the *Khim* (acronym for “guard corps”). These three organizations constituted the foundation for the IDF during Israel’s War of Independence.

As the British Mandate over Palestine – and not the Jewish *yishuv* – was the sovereign in the country at the time, these organizations were based on volunteerism and binding social motivation. The social motivation for military service did not disappear after the War of Independence, and the institutionalization of compulsory military service reflects the fact that an army cannot exist and fight based on law alone.

The War of Independence established and shaped the character of the State of Israel. Immediately following the war, militarization was imposed on Israeli society by means of the most comprehensive compulsory conscription law for men and women implemented by any of the world’s democratic countries. There is no cause for alarm regarding use of the word “militarization,” which Uri Ben-Eliezer defines as a cultural phenomenon indicating the existence, and sometimes also the imposition, of a concept of reality whereby war, or organized violence, is a correct and fitting solution to political problems. Israel’s wars, and the conditions in which the State of Israel was shaped, have required total mobilization of its human and material resources. The quality of the IDF stemmed first and foremost from this total mobilization, which incorporated the full range of possible Israeli qualities. The total

quantitative mobilization of the resources and effective military organization doubled the army's ability based on the possible potential. In structure too, the IDF aspired to totality in light of the power relations between Israel and its neighbors, which appeared inferior. The totality of the issue of Israeli national security was based on broad consensus and the absence of almost any dissent.

The 1950s and the 1960s until the Six Day War were characterized by a sense of concrete existential danger. The country was under siege; personal and general security was not perceived as assured; and it appeared that wars would break out every few years, by surprise as well. In this context, general mobilization became a national standard. Compulsory service and reserve duty were accepted as self-evident and as needing no justification. The wars themselves, and the military actions that took place between them, were perceived as actions that Israel had no choice but to take, although some were clearly operations and wars of choice. During this period, the IDF was considered to be the most successful organization in Israel according to a number of parameters, including its relative success in its wars and military campaigns and its actions between wars. The IDF facilitated integration and unity within Israeli society through compulsory and reserve service, especially in the 1950s, which witnessed a major wave of Jewish immigration to the country on the one hand, and an unstable security reality on the other hand. The battle became a national symbol and value, and war emerged as the chief idea shaping Israeli society. This fact was visible on all levels, and in all aspects, of the country's way of life: the economy, national planning, building, literature, poetry, music, and reserve and military service. War became a force that shaped Israel's consciousness. The army stood at the center of the Israeli experience, and the prevalent military ethos was the civilian's obligation to the state. In this way, Israeli society anticipated President Kennedy's call to "ask not what your country can do for you" but "what you can do for your country." The consensus regarding national security that existed in Israel from the 1950s until after the Six Day War rested more on social conventions than on political agreements, to the point that the IDF was transformed from a means to Israel's existence into a value in itself. One manifestation of this change is the concept of "values of warfare," which is used widely in the IDF and which in truth is paradoxical, as all people and communities choose different values in this context. In

democratic countries values are not imposed, and a more accurate definition would be "military norms of warfare" that are binding on all.

The major change began after the Six Day War, but was not evident at the outset. Gradually, however, and up to the present, a profound change has occurred in the IDF's political and social positioning in Israeli society. The sense of siege and existential danger that was once characteristic of the Israeli public has subsided. Instead of war aimed at defense and maintaining the status quo, the IDF's aim has changed to that of holding the territories that were conquered in 1967 and, by so doing, to forever change the territorial formation of the State of Israel. In addition, as a result of the Yom Kippur War, the Lebanon wars, and the intifadas, Israel's sense of military superiority has been weakened. Israeli society observed that not all wars are successful, military supremacy is not assured, and that quite surprisingly, a major war with no resolution can actually give rise to reasonable security arrangements, as reflected in Israel's peace treaties with two Arab countries, and a coming to terms with the existence of Israel by part of the Arab world. This reduced the constant fear of war, although the "existential threat" continues to serve as a political and social tool of government control that, in recent years, has even intensified.

The same period witnessed an initially subversive and later overt stream of massive Jewish settlement in the heart of the Palestinian population, which was aimed at preventing a political resolution based on future territorial concessions. After the Six Day War, it was the IDF that led the process of Jewish settlement in the territories occupied during the war. It did so at first in the form of Nahal "outposts" in the Jordan Valley, the Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula (of 59 Nahal outposts, four were within the Green Line), initially in defense of the settlements in these areas, and later as an operational arm of the policy of displacing Palestinians in favor of Jewish settlement. This stabilized and reinforced the settlement enterprise and transformed the military frontier across the 1967 borders into territory linked to the State of Israel in all ways and walks of life.

After the Yom Kippur War, the IDF no longer defined for itself the purpose and the goals of expansion and Jewish settlement in the surrounding areas by means of military force. It now operated under the motto of "defending all Israelis, wherever they live," and was operated and regulated by Israeli governments that had not yet decided the future of the occupied territories, but that nonetheless conducted an active settlement policy and at the same

time stripped the IDF of its national and constitutional role as the bearer of sovereignty in the territories. The truth of the matter is that the IDF has served as the primary government tool for providing land for the settlements. In the Gaza Strip in the past, and in Judea and Samaria today, extreme interactions between Israelis and Palestinians in which the IDF is involved, and sometimes dictates, have become the norm.

These disagreements have undermined the consensus previously enjoyed by the IDF within Israeli society. The far left rejects the need for a large army in Israel and its excessive influence on society and foreign and security policy, especially in the context of IDF operations in the territories. The far right demands that commanders and soldiers adopt an ethical position consistent with its own with regard to the Palestinians and the future of the territories, and when this runs counter to the obligation of military service and military discipline, it calls on them to disregard the authority of their orders and refrain from following them.

Israeli society is internally divided between right and left, wealthy and non-wealthy, the Jewish majority and the deprived non-Jewish minority, secular Jews and ultra-Orthodox Jews, and along other lines, be they of principle or not. Two issues top the agenda of today's deeply divided and non-compromising Israeli society. The first is the future of Judea and Samaria and the establishment or negation of a Palestinian state. The second is the disagreement between secular and religious Israeli citizens who accept communal and personal responsibility for earning a livelihood and supporting themselves and for standard civil rights and duties, including military service, on the one hand, and ultra-Orthodox Jews who are unwilling to serve in the army under any circumstances, on the other hand. These two disputes have thrown the IDF unwittingly into the heart of the dispute.

Israel's economic strengthening and cultural connection with Europe and the United States gradually brought the "fighting nation and society" to make way for a Western style "consumer society." Such societies tend to reject militarism as a way of life. The Western welfare state needs financial resources that have, and continue to be, tied down in the country's defense budget, as reflected in its size in comparison to the budgets of the other government ministries and the needs of civilian society.

All of this reflects the many cracks in the current accepted social arrangement in Israel. From a national perspective, the concept of "society" once also constituted the framework of the term "nation." These terms, however, are

no longer synonymous. Inside Israel there are a number of sectors separated by differences that outweigh what they have in common. To be sure, this is not only true of Israel but is rather a universal phenomenon. In contrast to the mythological nationalism that was built on nation-based categories and concepts, we now bear witness to individual, isolated societies that are not connected by nationhood. Around the world, the separation between continents, cultures, and nations is disappearing, and the concepts in use are no longer suited to a reality in which borders are dissolving. Societies take shape on an economic basis, and national homogeneity is fractured by social concepts of a new kind.

For decades, the IDF has attempted to remain outside the manifest political and social debates based on the premise that it concerns itself only with issues directly related to security. As a result, the IDF has moved away from the social purpose that at its outset constituted an integral component and was part of the Israeli logic of the people’s army. Today, it deals only with direct security. As the IDF is responsible for defining not only the threats, the needs, and its own purpose but also its budget, its sources of manpower, and the other civilian resources it requires, it plays a dominant role in Israel in every realm of life imaginable. This strict adherence to direct physical security has led the IDF to surrender its role as a people’s army with a social purpose. However, as a result of the issue of control in the territories and control of the Palestinians, the IDF has not succeeded in remaining outside the political divisions, despite its more limited view of its role and its task as a people’s army. At the same time, however, it experienced the onset of stagnation that is characteristic of large, cumbersome organizations lacking experience with extreme phenomena and massive failures, and it is currently difficult to identify efforts within its ranks to function as a social organization. What was self-evident in this context in the 1950s is no longer applicable today. The IDF’s requests from the state, as expressed in the sentence “that is what the IDF needs,” are missing their social dimension – what can and should the IDF contribute to Israeli society.

In this reality, several questions should be asked, such as: What should be the underlying notion shaping Israeli society? And, in this context, what should be the underlying notion shaping the Israeli army? Should it focus solely on maintaining security and developing military capabilities? Or, alternatively, should the IDF seek new proactive ideas so as to function in social realms as a people’s army? What should be the purpose of the IDF’s

social influence in Israeli society? Below are a few examples of deficiencies in the IDF's performance in the social realm.

- a. The IDF is responsible for safeguarding the country's borders. Had it wanted, it could have, from the outset, prevented the mass infiltration of thousands of people seeking jobs that arrived in the country in recent years, and not waited for the fence to be erected. The result is a social problem that the government has no realistic chances of solving. Were we unaware of what was happening on a social level in Europe, which is flooded by migrant laborers from Africa? In this context, the IDF displayed indifference and limited its actions to transporting the infiltrators to the bus station in Beer Sheva.
- b. With regard to the social justice protests of 2011 and their linkage to the IDF and the defense budget, the IDF should have already started cutting its budget at the time and should not have waited for a confrontation with the government.
- c. Another relevant issue is the IDF's intentional long term neglect of compulsory service for women. According to data published by the IDF on the conscription of women, approximately 43 percent of all Israeli female teenagers who are subject to conscription are not conscripted, and approximately 35 percent of those who evade service do so as a result of declaring a religious lifestyle. The army contends that a significant portion of girls lie to the IDF in order to evade conscription. In the media, synagogues, and the IDF, discussion of the matter focuses on the service of women in combat positions and administrative and command positions that were once the domain of men. Although this issue is worthy of discussion in its own right, and much has been done to advance the cause, the original idea of women serving in the IDF was not necessarily functional equality between the genders. The female soldier was also the mother of future soldiers: "I served in the army, and so will my son and daughter." Female service, therefore, bore a social message, and not only a functional one.
- d. Another relevant issue is the IDF's role in states of emergency on the civilian front. The Home Front Command is no less effective than any of the territorial commands, but the IDF has not fought for binding legislation to enable it to penetrate the space of the local municipalities in order to obligate them to make the necessary preparations for crisis situations and natural and human-made disasters through the massive

preparation of the civilian environment for active defense. In the past, the IDF set up and was responsible for a local area defense system ("*hagana merhavit*") in frontier areas. This entity was not particularly successful from a military standpoint, but it had significant irreplaceable value for the new settlements on a social level and from the perspective of morale. Today, in an age of rockets and missiles, the frontier encompasses every location and every settlement in Israel.

- e. The IDF should also have reduced the conflicts regarding social issues in Judea and Samaria, such as Jewish "price tag" attacks, settlers' uprooting of olive trees, and the hooliganism waged by part of the settler population. The IDF's forgiving approach, to the point of inaction on these issues, resulted in seepage of the "price tag" campaign across the Green Line and into Israel proper.
- f. In contrast to these issues, the positive case of Israel's disengagement from the Gaza Strip demonstrated the extent to which the IDF can play an effective role in preventing a violent social rupture in Israel. The manner in which the IDF carried out the evacuation should serve as a guiding light on how to operate with a sense of social-military mission. The IDF must take on and promote national civilian service as an alternative to military service. If there is no need in the army for all members of a compulsory conscription cycle – men and women, secular and religious alike – civilian service should be developed as of equal value to military service, and the importance of civilian service for the general good should be instilled as a component of the development of a civilian ethos and social solidarity among maturing teens. The IDF can ease the burden on the community by providing inexpensive services that represent budgetary savings given the low cost of national/civilian service as opposed to the salary of an employee and, in the process, facilitate the initial employment of a young Israeli who did not serve in the IDF. Israeli governments have evaded their task of leading and managing civilian service. In practice, national/civilian service in Israel is not administered by the state but rather by seven non-profit organizations authorized by the Prime Minister's Office. As of January 2012, the teens subject to conscription participating in the national service program, serving as volunteers and not on a mandatory basis, included 3,885 ultra-Orthodox Jews and 2,399 Arabs. The number of individuals subject to military conscription who are not serving in the IDF is ten times higher.

IDF officers responded to these arguments with a description of the highly positive manner in which the IDF deals with its conscripted soldiers, whether they lack a basic education or come from a difficult socioeconomic background. But while true and important, this is not the crux of the matter. There is no doubt that the IDF takes good care of its soldiers. However, the questions that must be asked include: What does the IDF represent for Israeli society in general, and what is the nature of the interaction between the Israeli military and Israel's civilian entities? What is the IDF's purpose and role in society as a people's army? And, does the IDF have a social mission that extends beyond taking care of its conscripts?

Is There an Alternative to the People's Army?

An alternative to the general conscription-based model of the people's army, as manifested in a regular army and a reserve army, is the model of a "professional army of volunteers" currently implemented by many countries. Prominent features of this model include a relatively small armed force in comparison to the country's social and economic potential; army service as a way of life until a relatively advanced age, as opposed to relatively short compulsory service; high wages, in comparison to the remuneration offered in the civilian labor market; and a strict, coercive, and constrictive military regime over all members of the military.

A professional volunteer army cannot operate alone, and all armies that are based on a professional volunteer force also maintain a relatively large reserve contingent. For example, in the United States the number of all military reservists, including the National Guard forces of the individual states, accounts for approximately 47 percent of the country's armed forces. The different kinds of reserve forces, which were meant to supplement the armed forces in wartime, must maintain a level of training and readiness similar to those of the regular forces, which is a requirement that is met, at best, only partially. In this way, the model of the professional volunteer army does not negate the need for reserves on the one hand, and does not ensure their fitness for war on the other hand. The reserve forces of some armies are based on volunteers alone. Such a model requires large budgetary resources in order to make volunteering for service worthwhile. Another phenomenon that accompanies professional volunteer armies is the gap and the social distance between civilian society and the armed forces, as

reflected in the sentiment that soldiers "are willing to endanger themselves, and that's their problem."

Some economists argue in favor of a professional volunteer army and emphasize that its cost and efficiency are preferable to those of the customary people's army model. Yet even if the figures and analyses are correct, they do not relate to the social dimension. For its part, the Israeli reality precludes the transition to a professional volunteer army for the following reasons:

- a. According to the published data, the entire IDF, including all its branches and corps, consists of a total of 620,000 personnel in the standing army, compulsory service, and the reserves. Even if we assume a massive 15-20 percent reduction in ORBAT, which appears unlikely in the foreseeable future, it will still be necessary to pay the high salaries, social benefits, and pensions of more than 500,000 professional volunteers.
- b. A significant portion of IDF soldiers serve in positions that put them in harm's way. In a professional army, those who volunteer for such positions will need to be paid extremely high salaries, and this raises great doubt regarding the claim of savings for the defense budget. The more the Israeli economy grows and benefits the Israeli employee, the less worthwhile it will be to enlist for extended service in the standing army. Moreover, relatively young Israelis capable of many years of service in a professional volunteer army have long since abandoned the physical work that is characteristic of soldiers. The Israeli laborer, who once built the country, has been replaced by foreign workers from many countries.
- c. Combat positions, primarily on land, are difficult and tiring, particularly for the lower and middle ranks, and cannot be held for many years. The result is frequent turnover, every few years. It is impossible to require the tank driver or infantry soldier who has been discharged after 15-20 years of difficult compulsory service to serve in the reserves. As noted above, a professional volunteer army is supposed to replace compulsory service. However, no army has thus far succeeded in establishing its armed forces without the significant addition of reserve forces, and volunteer reservists represent an extremely expensive form of service.
- d. A typical career standing army soldier in the IDF usually finishes his service at a much younger age than the average civilian retires from the work force. As a result, an army pensioner looks for alternative employment to earn a living and maintain his lifestyle. There are no good reasons for a civilian to volunteer for military service as a tank driver or an infantry

soldier, and in so doing choose not to pursue a civilian profession for 15 or 20 years, and then enter the civilian workforce with nothing but disadvantages. As a result, the professional volunteer army model will not be practicable in Israel in the foreseeable future.

There does not appear to be a third model of military service, although there are secondary possibilities. One is selective conscription, which was implemented in the United States until the end of the Vietnam War. The reason for adopting such a system lies in the fact that there is still a need for compulsory conscription and reserve service, although the need for manpower is significantly less than the number of candidates for military service according to the law. The disadvantages include an infringement on the equality among citizens and a convenient basis for evasion. Another possibility, customary in Germany, entails giving the service candidate the option of military or civilian service, representing a model that is more social in essence than purely military. In practice, without intending to be so, the IDF is also based on selective service. Arab citizens of Israel are not called up for military service and are not obligated to engage in civilian service. Most ultra-Orthodox Jews enjoy the same situation, as do almost half of the country's women. In this way, all of Israel's social disadvantages are embodied in the Israeli model of selective service.

Does the Value of Volunteering for the IDF still Exist in the People's Army Model?

Ostensibly, a professional volunteer army is based on the civilian's free desire and agreement to engage in extensive service for many years – or in other words, on volunteering. This is in contrast to an army of compulsory conscripted soldiers and reserves, which is based on binding legislation. Senior officers in the IDF praise the spirit of volunteerism for military service, particularly among its reserve soldiers. Instructional examples include the reserve soldiers who answered the call to mobilize for the Second Lebanon War and for Operations Cast Lead and Pillar of Defense. The rate of mobilization exceeded 100 percent and sometimes reached 120 percent among reserve soldiers who had already been released from active duty.

By the late 1930s, the Haganah leadership was already troubled by the issue of social volunteering for military service as, above all else, the organization was based on social motivation. Its members engaged in countless discussions regarding how to train a reserve army and maintain its fitness

over time; the role and value of volunteering as a force motivating civilians for multi-year service in a military framework; and whether legal obligation offered the exclusive mechanism for achieving this goal. In 1937, during discussions on planning the defense of the Jewish state, were one to be established, Haganah leader Eliyahu Golomb argued that the value of the sense of volunteerism among the people should not be exaggerated, and that the one way to educate the Jewish people for defense positions was through compulsory service. In late 1947, just before the outbreak of the War of Independence, senior Haganah commander Zvi Ayalon maintained that the solution to the anticipated situation was partial enlistment of the country’s forces into security and defense roles, as is customary around the world in situations where a particular country fears the possibility of attack. According to his approach, experience had taught them that this was not realistic under the conditions of government prevalent at the time. Such action required volunteering, large sums of money, and discipline of the *yishuv* to follow instructions, whereas the past had shown that the *yishuv* would wake up only during the events themselves, and not before. Even then, there was an understanding that a willingness to be mobilized for war and for battle did not ensure the existence of a reserve army prior to or between wars.

The War of Independence was a difficult experience for the military leadership of the young state. The notion that “the entire country is the front, and the entire people is the army” was actualized neither rapidly nor at the necessary pace, because compulsory conscription was not declared in time and volunteering could not compensate for the deficiencies. This was the reason for the compulsory conscription following the War of Independence for a regular army dictated by the legislation and for obligatory reserve service under the law. Volunteering can be helpful in the event of belated awakening to meet a concrete threat but is not well suited for the ongoing maintenance of armed forces based partially or primarily on reserves.

The Challenge of Military Leadership

What is the challenge facing the IDF as a people’s army in the current reality? The original centrality of the IDF within the social experience that was characteristic of the first generation cannot be restored. Still, the IDF in its current form remains no less a social organization than a fighting military organization. The IDF can still survive as an accepted, agreed upon, and desired entity in Israeli society by virtue of its being a body that

contributes no less than it receives in the social realm, and no less than in the realm of direct security. The IDF and the General Staff need to think not in terms of what the IDF needs but rather what the IDF, as a people's army, can contribute to Israeli society. The army as a social organization must seek out roles reflecting a sense of social mission in all possible areas. The era of the people operating on behalf of the IDF may have reached an end; we now live in an age in which the IDF must operate on behalf of all sectors of Israeli society. Otherwise, the gap will continue to widen until it poses a threat to the people's army.

The Israeli government is not expected to do much for the IDF's status and role in Israeli society. Some statesmen and government ministries will erode the status of the IDF, whether in the context of budget battles or struggles over political power. This article has offered a number of examples of the lack of IDF success in this realm in recent years, including the infiltration of migrant laborers, the IDF's response to the social justice protests, the military service of women, the work of the Home Front Command, and the IDF's soft response to the "price tag" campaign. The commanders of the IDF would do well to learn from their own failures in these areas and derive the necessary lessons to ensure better performance in the future.