



Research Report

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Staffing the Israel Defense Force in the 21st Century

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About This Report

Internal and external changes have made the Israel Defense Force's (IDF's) existing manpower and personnel model—the “peoples' army,” in which all serve—no longer a good fit for today's reality. At this crossroads, which could develop into an existential dilemma, the IDF's manpower pipeline is facing formidable challenges. Unless reforms are enacted in the selection and sorting process for recruits, drafting and enlisting, training, assignment, and promotion to command roles, the IDF could be unfit to address internal and external threats. This report analyzes the evolution of the IDF's current model, its merits, and its shortcomings in the context of the changing internal and external environments and proposes a new approach going forward. The analysis and findings are based on decades of researching and analyzing the IDF, a broad literature scan, and interviews with both serving and former senior military and government officers.

This report draws extensively on the knowledge and experience of the lead author, who has engaged as a journalist in innumerable interviews over more than two decades. These include interviews with IDF staff from the top to the level of the recruit. He has discussed these issues, often off the record and informally, with civilian officials, analysts, subject-matter experts, and service families, and this extensive experiential and reportorial base provides the foundation for many of the assertions and observations included in this report.

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Summary

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) is at a crossroads.¹ Its origin as a “people’s army”—one in which all citizens are expected to serve—is increasingly under strain. Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was the first to envision the IDF as a people’s army, in which most Israelis would serve a mandatory term. However, the IDF could be increasingly ill-positioned to address challenges that arise from changes in society (such as reduced participation rates, demographic changes, and reduced motivation for combat unit service), in the strategic environment, and in the nature of future combat. This report presents an analysis of the evolution of the IDF’s current model, its merits, and its shortcomings in the context of today’s internal and external environments and an examination of changes to the traditional people’s army model.

Israel is unusual in the extent to which potential professionalization of the military would go to the very core of its society and challenge fundamental state concepts that have been present since its foundation. It is not a stretch to conjecture that a change in Israel’s military manpower procurement practices would have implications for the political and social cohesion of the state itself. Conscription still exists for all Israeli citizens over the age of 18 who are Jewish (both genders), Druze, or Circassian (male only for the latter two). Arab citizens can enlist but are not required to do so by law.² Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish men and all religious women are also exempt. The prominence of the IDF and the role it plays in Israel stem largely from the fact that the bulk of the population that is subject to conscription by law feels a sense of ownership over the IDF rather than the other way around. The army became the country’s main melting pot, an important path to social mobility, and a critical tool for preparing for a constructive role in civilian life.

The army is still configured to defend against existential threats from enemies on Israel’s borders. But the threats have transformed. Guerilla and designated terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, have concentrated their more-limited powers on what they perceive as Israel’s point of weakness—its civilian society. These new security challenges also affect manpower needs and require adaptation. The challenges have forced the Israeli military to rethink the way it plans, builds, and locates its manpower.

Internal challenges are also challenging the people’s army model. Significant parts of the Israeli public see an exemption from full service as not necessarily being a source of stigma. New recruits are significantly less motivated than earlier recruits to serve in combat units. This stems in part from young Israelis being more aware of life among youth in Western countries and partly to political rifts between the right and left about the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories.

¹ Colloquially, and in this report, the words *IDF* and *army* are used interchangeably. Formally, the IDF is a single institution comprising the ground forces, the Israel Air Force, the Israel Navy, and all special forces reporting directly to the IDF chief of staff.

² The Knesset passed Israel’s Defense Service Law in 1949 and revised it in 1959 and 1986.

The proportion of ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arab Israelis keep growing, yet members of these groups hardly serve in the army. The national service option, an alternative to military service, does not appear to have increased the numbers of those serving. In 1949, Arabs accounted for 15 percent of the Israeli population and now make up 21 percent.³ Because of trends in fertility rates, the share of the Haredi population is expected to continue to rise, but the share of the Arab population will gradually fall. In addition, internal military research has recently shown a drop in high-quality officers' willingness to sign on for long-term service.⁴ Thus, the army faces conflicting pressures that not only consume time and attention but also often put the IDF's leadership at the center of a political storm. The pressures center on matters of principle and the practicalities emerging from three demographic groups: women, Haredi men, and Arab citizens of Israel.

Compulsory service was implemented for women in 1947.⁵ By late 2020, 18 percent of women soldiers were serving in combat roles, 2.5 times more than in 2015.⁶ However, women's integration into combat units has faced strong disapproval from both religious groups and some retired senior officers. It is likely that the proximity of women and Zionist-religious soldiers will create more friction. The share of exemptions to Haredi men rose over 70 years to 15.9 percent of all Jewish men by late 2020.⁷ During these years, this glaring inequality caused much political and judicial discussion. Also, out of all minorities, only Druze and Circassian men are legally required to serve. Several hundred Bedouin men enlist every year, and there has recently been a small surge in the enlistment of both Christian and Muslim Arab men. A tiny number of Arab women also volunteer to serve every year.⁸ Arab members of the Knesset have expressed resistance to enlistment, pointing out that such actions contribute to the oppression of their Palestinian brethren.⁹

Because Israel's internal and external environments call for a new model for the IDF, it has begun to examine possible changes to its service model. It is doubtful that the Israeli army can afford a long wait. Societal, demographic, and security trends continue to evolve and have a significant effect on the IDF's fabric, role, preparedness, and budget.

What, then, are the arguments for and against changing the IDF's structure to provide these security services to Israel? A fundamentally professional military would dispense with the services of conscripts and, instead, build a standing force of long-service regulars. Yet Israel's top economists, unlike their U.S. counterparts, still support a compulsory service model, seeing it as the most effective tool for achieving the country's military and economic goals. The most suitable model for Israel remains the "accordion"—a relatively small mandatory army that can increase its force rather quickly by calling in reserve units. There is also a concern that a transformation to a professional army will not help the IDF maintain high quality.

³ Rudnitzky, "Arab Population in Israel: Demographic, Socio-Economic, and Political Indicators."

⁴ Harel, "The IDF Is Suffering Heavy Losses on the Quality Front."

⁵ The first conscription order was published on November 28, 1947, by the "Command Center for the People's Service," chaired by Golda Meir, future prime minister of Israel ("Conscripting Troops to the IDF").

⁶ IDF officer, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, November 2020.

⁷ Harel, "50% Increase in Two Years: One Out of Eight Israeli Men Exempt from Army for Mental Health Issues."

⁸ Zitun, "IDF Sees Record Number of Israeli Arab Conscripts."

⁹ Khoury, "Hundreds Participate in Conference Against the Recruitment of Arabs for the Army and National Service in Sakhnin."

A possible midway solution is for a coordinated model of compulsory national service that is not limited to military service. Such a plan would rest on principles of universal participation, optimized pathways to suit different communities' ways of life, the IDF receiving first draft choice, exemptions for talented youth on agreed principles, and volunteer services run by civilian bodies.

Even more than the army needs to reset its plans, the society needs to leave behind the long and fruitless debate over service in the military forces. As Israel itself has transformed, the IDF continues to affect public life beyond national security. Therefore, any change to the IDF must also be considered in the light of its role in Israel's state development and in that of Israel's many peoples.

Note on Post–October 7 Israel

This short report was being prepared for publication immediately prior to the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on civilian communities and the IDF military establishment in Israel on the border with Gaza. An afterword to this report suggests that Israel's military manpower challenge has become more profound. The debate over the role of technology, in contrast with the need for a capable ground force that is potentially able to sustain operations on two highly problematic fronts simultaneously, will probably shift as well. This will exacerbate the precise fault lines outlined in this report. Preliminary survey results suggest that the attack did little to change views among Haredi men on their willingness to serve.¹⁰ The issues outlined in this report remain fundamental, even existential, to the nature of Israel's society in meeting—and even framing—its military manpower requirements. If anything, current events have given them a piquancy that few would have imagined prior to October 7.

¹⁰ Rosner, "The Massacre and the Mustache."

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Introduction

The Israel Defense Force (IDF) is at a crossroads.¹¹ Its origin as a “people’s army”—one in which all citizens are expected to serve—is increasingly under strain. Changes in external threats to Israel and growing internal pressures from demographic changes and cultural differences are fueling these strains. Israel’s first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, was the first to envision the IDF as a people’s army, in which most Israeli young people would serve a mandatory term and then enlist in its reserve forces (Hebrew: *miluim*), which would primarily be called on only in emergencies.¹²

However, this vision of the army’s manpower and personnel model is increasingly at odds with current realities. The challenges the IDF faces pose what could become an existential dilemma for an army founded on the principle of shared service and an intimate embrace by the society it defends. Unless reforms are enacted, the IDF could be poorly positioned to address these challenges that arise from two principal realms: societal changes and environmental changes.

Societal Changes

The changes the IDF is facing to its manpower pool are driven by three trends:

- *Reduced participation.* In 2020, only 68.1 percent of Jewish men who were legally required to enlist at 18 actually enlisted. Only 55.7 percent of Jewish women aged 18 did the same. These are the lowest numbers in Israeli history.¹³ The stated principle of an equally shared military burden across both genders, which had never been fully enforced, now seems hollow, considering these numbers.
- *Demographic changes.* The downward trend in enlistment reflects demographic changes, particularly growth in populations that have traditionally been exempt from compulsory service. At Israel’s founding, three populations were exempt: Haredi (ultra-Orthodox) men, all religious Jewish women, and almost all Arab citizens. While a small minority in 1949, Haredi made up 15 percent of the recruitment age group in 2020. Given the political tensions in Israel, questions on whether and how to draft the Haredi group and how they will accept serving with women will continue to linger. Arabs are now 21 percent of Israel’s population.¹⁴

¹¹ Colloquially, and in this report, the *IDF* and *army* are used interchangeably. Formally, the IDF is a single institution that comprises the ground forces, the Israel Air Force, the Israel Navy, and all special forces reporting directly to the IDF chief of staff.

¹² Shelah, *Ha’ometz Lenatzeh [Dare to Win]*, pp. 80–81.

¹³ Senior IDF manpower official, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, November 2020.

¹⁴ Rudnitzky, “Arab Population in Israel: Demographic, Socio-Economic, and Political Indicators.”

Efforts to better integrate the Arab minority will call for some form of military or, much more likely, national service for this group.

- *Reduced motivation to serve in combat units.* There is also reduced motivation among military-age youth to serve in the IDF. Of particular concern is the army's research showing that new recruits are significantly less motivated than before to serve in combat units, a problem the military has tried to hide or at least underplay publicly in recent years.¹⁵ Other forms of military service, such as the intelligence corps or technological units, now seem much more attractive and prestigious to many young recruits because they promise lucrative high-tech careers on completion of service.

Changes in the Strategic Environment

The nature of warfare is changing dramatically, from defending against massive industrial armies (with regular and reserve-force brigades and divisions facing each other on the battlefield) to fighting against guerilla and terrorist organizations that seek to exhaust rather than defeat Israel. These opponents also identify Israel's civilian home front as its vulnerable spot and a potential source of weakness. These new security challenges affect manpower needs. The country will still need a strong military for at least the next few decades because the regional rivalry with Iran is expected to continue and because the prospects for solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remain limited. The actual number of personnel that will be required, however, is unclear. A smaller, leaner IDF will require a fundamental rethinking not only of recruitment strategies but also of the IDF's role in Israel's society.

Implications

These challenges have implications for reform in several areas: (1) selecting and sorting recruits; (2) drafting and enlisting; (3) assignment of new draftees and recruits; (4) training; (5) promotion to command roles; and (6) the long-standing, nearly unique relationship between military service and citizenship in the State of Israel.

In this report, we analyze the evolution of the IDF's current model and its merits and shortcomings in the context of today's internal and external environments. Based on this analysis, we propose changes to the traditional people's army model. The findings are based on decades of research and analysis of the IDF, a broad literature scan, and interviews with both serving and former senior military and government officers.

Organization of This Report

Chapter 2 describes the evolution of the IDF. Chapter 3 discusses changes to the threats Israel faces, externally and internally. Chapter 4 explores ways to reform recruitment. Chapter 5 presents our conclusions.

¹⁵ Shoval, "Motivation for Combat Service in the IDF—Lowest in a Decade."

The Evolution of the People's Army

At least since the time of the French Revolution and the emergence of nations-in-arms mass armies, the issue of military manpower has been inextricably linked to the fundamental sources of national power. This remains true today even in an era of increased professionalization of militaries as weaponry becomes more deadly and more dependent on highly trained personnel for effectiveness. After relying continuously on conscription during times of war and peace from 1940 to 1973, America has since used the all-volunteer model.¹⁶

All countries—including present U.S. strategic rivals China and Russia—have grappled with the issues of staffing as their forces have faced the challenge of increased professionalization. For those countries, the military manpower is largely the concern of analysts, specialists, and public authorities, as well as those liable for conscription (and their families). For Israel, however, the issue is uniquely different. Potential professionalization of the military goes to the core of Israeli society and challenges fundamental concepts of state that have been present since its foundation. It is not a stretch to conjecture that a change in Israel's military manpower procurement practices would have implications for the political and social cohesion of the state itself.

History of the IDF

The army is one of Israel's foundational institutions. Its origin is inextricable from the nation's birth. The former IDF chief of staff, Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi, opened his public speeches with a quotation from Ben-Gurion, taken from the first prime minister's diary, on the eve of Israel's day of independence, May 14, 1948. "The State was established," wrote Ben-Gurion. "Its fate is in the hands of the armed forces."¹⁷ His assessment was put to trial shortly afterward, when the young Israeli military managed to thwart a coordinated attack from neighboring Arab countries. During Israel's War of Independence, the Jewish population only numbered some 700,000 people. Around 1 percent of them, 6,373 soldiers and civilians, died during the war. In 1949, once the war was over, some 116,000 persons had served in the army, almost 20 percent of the Jewish population.¹⁸ Ben-Gurion then reached the logical conclusion that the country's economy would not be able to sustain such a huge military in relative peaceful times. Between battle rounds and against the push from some coalition partners for a professional military, Israel adopted the Swiss military model: Nearly the entire nation would be part of the military but mostly in emergencies.¹⁹ The army would maintain a

¹⁶ Rostker, *I Want You!*

¹⁷ Friling and Troen, "Proclaiming Independence: Five Days in May from Ben-Gurion's Diary."

¹⁸ Naor, "Israel's 1948 War of Independence as a Total War."

¹⁹ Greenberg, *A Fighting Nation*.

core of mandatory-service soldiers, while others would join as reserves during emergencies. Unlike Switzerland, however, Israel has had to put this model to the test of combat during repeated conflicts with its neighbors.²⁰

The compulsory army had three major roles: defending the borders, deploying quickly in case of war, and training the reserve forces. Reserve soldiers would train for a few weeks each year and be called on to support the compulsory army (which was much smaller) if war broke out. Ben-Gurion's doctrine was based on regular units blocking attacks from enemy armies along Israeli borders until reserves could rapidly be called up to join and push the enemy back to its own territory and defeat them there. Ben-Gurion concluded that because Israel had very limited space for maneuvering, a war on its own territory might end in Israeli defeat and even total disaster. He also decided that the air force, navy, and intelligence corps would rely on a more significant professional core, while the ground forces would mainly rely on reserve units.

Conscription still exists in Israel for all Israeli citizens over the age of 18 who are Jewish (both genders) or are Druze or Circassian (male only). Arab citizens can enlist if they want to but are not required by law.²¹ At the onset, two groups, in addition to the Arabs, were exempt from service: ultra-Orthodox (Haredi) Jewish young men and all religious women. These exemptions arose out of complex political arrangements at different times between Israel's various ruling parties and the leaderships of both the ultra-Orthodox and more traditionally religious communities. For exemption, Haredi men were treated initially as a small academic elite of Talmudic scholars. Gradually, their numbers began to rise, from only 400 (about 0.07 percent of the country's citizens at the time in 1948) to well over 70,000 today.²² In 1977, when the right-of-center Likud party first rose to power, the quota limiting the number of exemptions to 800 students per year was lifted.²³

Beyond Defense: Military Service for Social Cohesion and Mobility

As a founding institution of the state, the IDF has had a prominence unusual for a country run on democratic principles. Former IDF generals have become active in politics, but those on active service have not. The budgetary requests from the IDF through the Ministry of Defense still face scrutiny from the stringent Office of the Budget in Israel's Ministry of the Treasury but usually are challenged with considerably less effect than is true for other government offices. Especially in the 21st century, the involvement of the IDF in continued security operations in the West Bank has eroded, to some degree, a sense of consensus over the IDF's place in Israeli society. Yet the prominence of the IDF and the role it plays in Israel stem, in large part, not from its latent power but from the fact that the bulk of the population that is subject by law to conscription feels a sense of ownership over the IDF—rather

²⁰ Adjustments were made for Israeli conditions. Reservists in Israel, for example, did not keep their arms at home; these are reissued when the reservists are called up.

²¹ Israel's Defense Service Law was passed by the Knesset in 1949 and went through revisions in 1959 and 1986. A detailed breakdown in English of the components of the Defense Service Law as amended in 1986 may be found in Israel Ministry of Aliyah and Immigrant Absorption, *Military Service*.

²² Stadler, "Playing with Sacred/Corporeal Identities."

²³ Berman, "Sect, Subsidy, and Sacrifice."

than the other way around. Within this group, almost everyone has served or has an immediate family member, male or female, who has done so.

Over the years, the IDF retained its special place in Israeli society, but its cultural role has evolved. In addition to defending the homeland, the army gradually became the country's main melting pot, an important path into social mobility, and a critical tool for preparing young citizens for a more constructive role in civilian life. The IDF played an important role in helping the country integrate hundreds of thousands of new immigrants in the 1950s. It is still busy with civilian roles, somewhat controversially, more than 60 years later. These include having young women soldiers serve as teachers in elementary schools, helping hundreds of soldiers convert to Judaism every year, and drafting many soldiers who are on the autistic spectrum at their families' request.

Military service often opens opportunities in civilian life. The opportunity for advantageous connections and training that elsewhere causes students to enter business school is a principal driver for new conscripts to strive to enter what they consider to be the best units of the IDF. Israeli networking channels, paving the way to prestigious academic studies and jobs, rely mainly on candidates' military records and prior acquaintances from service. A large part of Israel's extremely successful high-tech industry (marketed as "Start-Up Nation") relies on ideas; friendships; and, sometimes, even applications developed in the army's elite intelligence and technology units. By not serving in the army, Arab and ultra-Orthodox youth miss out on these advantages. However, the IDF's technological units themselves sometimes inadvertently help increase opportunity gaps because young recruits tend to arrive from well-to-do families and neighborhoods and because, to be accepted into these units, many even go through a period of preparation.

Public opinion polls still show that the army is massively popular and that the troops themselves are even more popular.²⁴ A prestigious military record remains a source of popularity for Israeli political candidates, even decades after they completed their service. Many former senior military officers join the political arena after leaving the army. Five former IDF chiefs of staff and one deputy chief have recently served in the Knesset, four of them as ministers and one as a deputy minister. And the media still seems fixated on covering the army, including everyday military activity.

Nonetheless, there has been a steady decline in the IDF's prestige, accompanied by diminished motivation among eligible citizens to serve, as we will discuss later. According to the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies' annual National Security Index, the Israeli public's trust in the IDF dropped nine points, from 93 to 84 percent, between 2019 and 2020 and to 78 percent in 2021.²⁵ While these approval numbers would be the envy of most military establishments, the trend is troubling to the IDF.

These changes imply that the military's power to promote social cohesion and economic opportunity may be declining.

²⁴ Hermann et al., *Selected Findings*.

²⁵ Israeli, "National Security Index: Public Opinion Study 2019–2020," Institute for National Security Studies, 2020; Israeli and Pines, "National Security Index: Public Opinion 2020–2021," in Dror Shalom and Anat Kurz, eds., *Strategic Survey for Israel 2022: A Time for Decisions*.

Challenges to the Old Model

The people's army model has eroded during the last few decades and now faces enormous challenges. These challenges are the result of a combination of developments, in both Israel's strategic arena and society.

The Changing External Threat

Both military experts and the army now estimate that Israel no longer faces an immediate existential threat, except for a possible future development in Iran's nuclear plan. The military balance between Israel and its neighbors is clearly in favor of the Jewish State. It has peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan, recently joined by full normalization agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Potential new agreements were in process prior to this writing; before the Hamas attack of October 2023, open discussions were underway between the White House and both Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israel also maintains close military and intelligence cooperation, mostly confidential, with other Sunni Arab states in the Middle East. The main direct threat to Israeli security comes from paramilitary nonstate actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, both of which also serve as proxies for Iran to varying degrees, as well as guerilla or terrorist organizations, such as Gaza's Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Yet, the number of violent incidents has significantly diminished in comparison with earlier decades.

Diminishing Threats to Israel's Existence

The Israeli public also no longer feels such an immediate threat to everyday life. The Institute for National Security Studies' national security index for 2021 (survey conducted during 2020, at the height of the coronavirus 2019 [COVID-19] pandemic) found that, for the first time in decades, most of the Israeli public was more worried by domestic threats than external ones—39 and 11 percent, respectively.²⁶ During 2019, only 27 IDF soldiers died—the smallest number in the country's history—and only one of them died in action. Even the May 2021 Guardian of the Walls military campaign in Gaza resulted in only a small number of IDF casualties—one soldier was killed in action, along with 12 Israeli civilians (in 2022, a new rise in violent incidents, mainly in the West Bank, cost the lives of 29 Israelis and 152 Palestinians).²⁷ The year 2023, of course, saw a considerable spike in both Israeli and Palestinian casualties in the West Bank. Despite the IDF's regional military superiority, the ongoing Gaza challenge and conflict illustrates that Israel's security threats cannot

²⁶ Israeli, "National Security Index: Public Opinion Study 2019–2020."

²⁷ Berger, "2022 Was Deadliest Year for West Bank Palestinians in Nearly Two Decades."

necessarily be solved with more military might. The government's hesitation to involve ground troops in incursions inside enemy territories demonstrated that such escalations will remain relatively common, with no clear victories in sight.

Yet the army is still configured to defend against existential threats from enemies on its borders. Since its beginning, the IDF has been built for massive, industrial-based wars. In fact, before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Israel was the last nation to have been involved in extended tank division battles, simultaneously against Syria and Egypt during the Yom Kippur War in 1973.

Since then, the nature of war has gradually changed in the Middle East. Some of that has to do with the results of the 1973 war. Israel was surprised by a coordinated attack on both fronts, but, by the end of the battles, IDF forces had penetrated deep inside enemy territories, 100 and 45 kilometers from enemy capitals (Cairo and Damascus, respectively). Eventually, the Arab states shifted from seeking to defeat Israel fighting in this way. The IDF had an obvious advantage, in the air, using sophisticated technology and, perhaps most important, because of the quality and commitment of its field commanders. This conclusion led two Arab states, Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), to sign peace agreements with Israel. Others, such as Syria and Lebanon, went into long periods of effective non-belligerence.

New Threats

At the same time, Israel's strategic environment is changing. While the country will still need a strong military for at least the next few decades, the nature of warfare that the Israeli army will likely face is also changing dramatically.

New enemies have emerged: guerilla and designated terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. These organizations have given up any pretense of beating the IDF in a direct military conflict. Their more-limited powers are concentrated on what they perceive as Israel's point of weakness: its civilian society. Their goals would appear to be to frighten the Israeli public, exhaust the country's willingness to fight, and apply pressure on the political leadership. The Palestinian organizations adopted the strategy of suicide bombings in the 1990s and early 2000s. But these tactics have not hit their intended targets. In fact, the opposite happened. The Israeli public did not budge under the pressure. Israel fought back, and the slaughter of innocent civilians cost the Palestinians much of the sympathy they had acquired in the international community at the time.

However, the press treatment of the 2021 fighting in Gaza, and certainly the most recent bout in 2023–2024, indicated that the international community's relative willingness to accept Israeli military actions is also eroding. Other methods and threats have emerged in Gaza and Lebanon, with Iranian help: Massive rocket attacks on the Israeli home front have been intended to frighten the public and threaten strategic infrastructure, such as power stations, airports, and natural gas fuel paths. Hezbollah's arsenal is believed to contain about 130,000 missiles, rockets, and mortar bombs, while Palestinian groups in Gaza hold more than 10,000.²⁸ The Lebanese and Palestinian groups also use snipers, explosives, and drones and train elite commando units for surprise attacks across enemy lines, sometimes using underground tunnels. On the defensive side, Israel's foes, such as Hezbollah, Hamas,

²⁸ Shaikh and Williams, "Missiles and Rockets of Hezbollah."

and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, fortify their borders and territories against attempts to storm across areas used for launching rockets.

To deal with changes in opponents' deployment and tactics, Israel changed the structure of some of its military units, including designing a multilayer rocket interception system. Israel also upgraded its intelligence gathering systems, cyberwarfare, precision ammunition, and cooperation between the different branches. Even so, on October 7, 2023, Israel was considerably surprised and at great cost in human life. At this writing, fundamental concepts of homeland defense are under considerable review.

These new security challenges also affect manpower needs and require adaptation. Senior military officers openly admit that, under the new circumstances, the army no longer needs all 18-year-old Israelis. According to unofficial estimates, the IDF may only need the services of 70 to 80 percent of its yearly recruits from a potential pool that, as a result of population growth, would increase annually by 10,000 men and women by 2025 and by 17,000 per year by 2030.²⁹

Together, these changes in the correlation of forces, the nature of modern warfare, and the nature of the threat have forced the Israeli military to rethink the way it plans, builds, and locates its manpower. In the 1990s, under chief of staff Ehud Barak, the army had already begun changing its priorities. The vision was of a battlefield that would almost be empty of soldiers and a military force that would rely on long-range strike capabilities and active defense systems. This vision is gradually being implemented almost 30 years later with the IDF increasingly using drones and other unmanned vehicles for standoff strikes at longer range.

However, the final decision between the standoff approach (attack from a distance) and the more traditional Israeli stand-in (close combat) approach will be clearer only after the army finalizes its next multiyear plan.³⁰ This was delayed for nearly four years because of an extended political crisis across five elections and the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of writing, despite some governmental promises for a higher budget, it is still unclear whether chief of staff Herzl Halevi will be able to acquire enough of the resources needed for the IDF's ambitious plans. Health and employment became the priority of the previous Bennett-Lapid government, while the deeply controversial judicial reform agenda dominated the current Netanyahu administration prior to the October 7 Hamas attack. The surprise, loss, and consequences of that attack add further uncertainty. What is clear, however, is that, in the wake of the Hamas attack, the budget will be much larger over at least the next five years because of the resulting war, irrespective of competing needs both inside and outside the military. Reservists will likely serve for longer periods and will require considerable funding to supply their units with better weapons and equipment. It is not clear yet whether the standing force (conscript) units would similarly expand.³¹

Budgetary decisions will also affect the army's policy on manpower. If the end result means no longer planning for deep maneuvering inside enemy territory, the IDF may decide to release some of its soldiers from reserve combat units. A large part of the regular army, especially soldiers in office jobs, may become less necessary and relevant for war. The military will have an interest in reducing

²⁹ IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July, September, and November 2020.

³⁰ The IDF's ethos has been built on officers being the first into combat.

³¹ In contrast with many armies that use reservists to fill out existing units minimally staffed by recruits in peacetime, most reservist combat units in Israel are distinct from full-time service units.

these jobs to cut expenses. When former chief of staff Kochavi presented his previous plan in February 2020, it was quite clear that he intended to rely less on reserve units.³²

Prioritizing intelligence, cyber, and other technology-dependent units will lead to a growing need for soldiers in these units (by one account, a 30-percent addition).³³ And since these are complicated and demanding jobs, the IDF would rather assign the most qualified and intelligent soldiers to those roles. This would only strengthen the dilemma: Where should the top 1 percent (or 5 percent) be assigned? As fighter pilots? Cybersecurity? As tank commanders or elite commando units?

Shifts in Combat Missions

Two categories of combat missions have been most prominent in recent years:

1. airstrikes and secret intelligence missions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq (according to some media reports), and the Red Sea, as part of what the military calls *operations between wars*
2. policing duties in the Palestinian territories, handling an occupied and hostile civilian population.

Under these circumstances, the country's threat awareness was rather mild prior to 2023. Current operations yield few of the traditional public indicators of victory, so the military no longer produces popular heroes as models of inspiration. Neither, however, is there an urgent need for public mobilization. Gradually, between the First Lebanon War of 1982 and the pre-October 7 incidents in the Palestinian territories, such as stabbings in the West Bank and rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, public consensus around the army—and the application of military force in general—began to drop. The Israeli citizens still treat the army quite sentimentally but, at the same time, express growing criticism for its performance and conduct. Future determination of culpability on review of the October 7 surprise assault may affect this balance going forward.

Internal Challenges to the People's Army Model

Internal challenges are also raising challenges to the people's army model.

A Decline in Motivation to Serve?

In recent years, the IDF has identified and acknowledged diminishing motivation among its manpower base to complete a full term of compulsory service. Significant parts of the Israeli public see an exemption from full service, or even avoiding the army altogether, as almost legitimate and no longer a stigma.³⁴ Exemptions based on religious reasons account for only half of the Jewish men who do not serve. Other reasons include exemptions for mental health reasons (8.3 percent in late 2019, up by 45 percent in five years), a criminal record (3.8 percent), health reasons (2.5 percent), or living

³² Kubovich, "Israeli Army Chief Unveils 5-Year Plan to Address Military Threats."

³³ IDF officer, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, November 2020.

³⁴ Shoval, "Motivation for Combat Service in the IDF—Lowest in a Decade."

abroad for a long period (2.4 percent).³⁵ The rising number of exemptions for mental health reasons has to do not only with changes in Israeli society but also with the IDF's growing tendency not to enlist men with such health issues. In 2019, the army announced a change in policy to reduce the number of exemptions for this reason. There is also an ongoing problem of force attrition, although trends have reversed between men and women. In 2011, 19 percent of men and 4 percent of women did not complete their service. In 2019, 11 percent of men and 7 percent of women did the same.³⁶

The army's own research shows that new recruits are significantly less motivated than earlier recruits were to serve in combat units, which the military desperately needs to maintain its ethos and will to fight.³⁷ Other forms of military service, such as the intelligence corps or technological units, draw more young recruits. But the post-October 7 popular response may cause motivation to serve in combat units among new recruits to change and even grow because of the war.

Prior internal military research showed ongoing downward trend in motivation to serve among soon-to-be new recruits. In 2011, 81 percent of men whose medical profiles enabled them to serve in combat units expressed willingness to serve in such units. By 2017, the share was down to 65 percent. Israeli media criticized this change, claiming that it demonstrated both a growing social problem and the military's hesitation to address it in a tough manner.³⁸ In response, the army announced that it would change the method of evaluating motivation. The previous method, relying on questionnaires filled in by 11th graders in high school, apparently too long before actual enlistment, was considered inaccurate. Since then, the IDF has stopped publishing the numbers, yet senior officers admit that they remain relatively low.³⁹

The main reason for this development is gradual change in Israeli society. Many young Israelis saw the state as a relatively modern, liberal, and Westernized society. They were more aware of life among youth in Western countries and less willing to engage in difficult service that could also risk their lives. Until recent events, there had also been a sense of less immediate existential threat to the country (fewer full-scale wars with longer intervals between them) and to the recruits and their families (because of the diminishing number of violent incidents).⁴⁰ The violence in Gaza and the West Bank after October 7 might also affect this calculus. Unlike a few decades ago, the army rarely forces young men to serve in combat units if they distinctly request not to do so. Women must specifically volunteer to serve in combat roles. The IDF is more considerate toward new recruits' wishes than in the past. The army usually attempts to match candidates' expectations and treats the newcomers as clients whose wishes need to be respected for the system to continue working.⁴¹

Even greater alienation among some new recruits may be attributed to a continued political rift between the right and left about the ongoing occupation of Palestinian territories, along with an increasingly public political and constitutional crisis regarding the stature of the attorney general and

³⁵ Shoal, "Motivation for Combat Service in the IDF—Lowest in a Decade." See also State Comptroller's Office, "המיון והגיוס לצה"ל" ביקורת מעקב מורהבת - והגיוס לצה"ל" ["The Selection and Recruitment for the IDF: Follow-Up Extended Audit"].

³⁶ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam* [Equal for Everybody].

³⁷ Shoal, "Motivation for Combat Service in the IDF—Lowest in a Decade."

³⁸ Ram, "Senior Officer: The IDF Hides the Data on a Decrease in Motivation for Combat Service."

³⁹ IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July and November 2020.

⁴⁰ Israeli and Pines, "National Security Index: Public Opinion 2020–2021," webpage.

⁴¹ IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Tel Aviv, February and November 2020.

the Supreme Court of Israel (especially in light of returning prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's continuing legal troubles). In the long run, this alienation could even affect recruits' motivation for substantial military service. The COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to severe tensions in Israeli society between secular and ultrareligious communities and between traditional and religious Zionism. These tensions bring out contrasting visions for the future direction of that state that, in turn, could indirectly affect motivation to serve.

Military data prior to October 7 showed an ongoing drop, in comparison with previous decades, in motivation for combat among young men from well-to-do families and a relatively stable socioeconomic background.⁴² While not surprising elsewhere, in Israel, high willingness to serve has heretofore been directly correlated with higher socioeconomic status.⁴³ The exceptions are highly prestigious units (e.g., air force pilot training, elite commando units, the paratroopers brigade). Being accepted for such roles and, especially, completing the very demanding training are still considered important personal achievements for many. This means that fewer young men from wealthier backgrounds will find themselves serving in units that would be deployed for long periods in the West Bank—long, exhausting policing missions—which are controversial among the Israeli public. On the other hand, other parts of the Israeli population (the Zionist-religious represented mostly by the settler movement, new immigrants, youth from peripheral towns) still see service in regular, nonprestigious combat units and, even more so, volunteering as officers as important.⁴⁴ For this reason, and sometimes for lack of choice, the combat units partially rely on soldiers from lower socioeconomic deciles. Except for infantry brigades, which usually enjoy high demand among young recruits (although not necessarily those with the best qualifications), other combat units, such as tank brigades, find it more difficult to fill their ranks.

Were the pre-October 7 drop in motivation to persist, along with the army being less insistent that soldiers remain in combat roles, fewer soldiers would be likely to complete full service in combat units. The same holds true in reserve service, where most soldiers are perceived by both the public and the military practically as volunteers. Reserve soldiers can relatively easily receive exemptions from serving, and soldiers in office jobs are rarely called into reserve service. Most reserves are either combat fighters or serve in specific, much-needed roles, such as in the intelligence units. The IDF is required to pay reserves for every day of their duty and is, therefore, judicious about calling them up. According to data from 2022, the IDF considers only 25 percent of reserve soldiers as *active*, having served more than 20 days in the army during the past three years.⁴⁵ In Israel's last massive military operation, the 2014 Pillar of Defense operation in the Gaza Strip, only 80,000 reservists had been called into action, and only a few hundred were actually engaged in fighting inside the Strip.⁴⁶ Yet, in a more complex scenario, for example combat on both the northern front (Lebanon and Syria) and Gaza, it has been clear that more reserve soldiers are needed. The war in Gaza saw much more reliance on reservists and ground forces, with some 350,000 reservists called up in the initial months. By contrast, in 2015,

⁴² Harel, "The IDF Is Suffering Heavy Losses on the Quality Front."

⁴³ Gal, "Motivation Levels for IDF Enlistment over the Years."

⁴⁴ Gal, "Motivation Levels for IDF Enlistment over the Years."

⁴⁵ Private communication with a senior army official, Tel Aviv, January 2023.

⁴⁶ Prominent defense analyst, interview with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July 2019.

according to the recommendations of a military committee, the IDF began reducing its reserve force. About 100,000 soldiers were released. Although the army does not publish its force numbers, it is estimated that the reserve forces now include about 465,000 soldiers, with a few thousand of them being women reservists.⁴⁷

Demographic Changes

Although now a developed economy, Israel tends to see fertility and birth rates more characteristic of a still-developing economy.⁴⁸ Two different sectors in the Israeli society maintain greater-than-average birth rates: ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arab Israelis. This means their proportions in society keep growing, although the Arab birth rate is now gradually beginning to fall.⁴⁹ Yet members of both groups hardly serve in the army, for various reasons, with the state's consent. Their tiny share in shouldering the military burden emphasizes the lack of equality in Israeli society and also engenders animosity against these groups for their failure to do so.⁵⁰ This hostility is threefold: They (1) are seen as less patriotic, even as far as doubts about their loyalty to the state; (2) do not risk their lives as soldiers in combat units do; and (3) are able to get a head start by potentially beginning academic studies or career development earlier than peers their age who do serve in the army and who are expected to freeze their personal plans for several years.

On the other hand, Haredim and Arabs who do not serve miss the opportunities created by the massive networking formed through joint service in prestigious military units. These men and women do not have access to those benefits and do not receive useful knowledge or training for future jobs or get a chance to integrate with other parts of Israeli society.

Among Israeli men, ultra-Orthodox 18-year-olds who are exempt from service constituted 15.9 percent of the draft-age male population in 2020.⁵¹ The wide exemption for these men is a matter of a long, heated political debate. Along with Jewish women (35 percent of whom are exempt because they have declared themselves religious) and Arab men and women, this means that 33.7 percent of Jewish men and 44.3 percent of Jewish women did not serve in 2020 and that 47.7 percent of all men and 55 percent of all women, more than half of the young population, do not serve.⁵² The rate of nonserving Jewish men rose by almost 7 percent in five years, and that of Jewish women rose by 2.5 percent during the same period.⁵³ The cracks in the "everyone serves" model have begun to show.

⁴⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2020*, p. 355. The reserve forces include only a few thousand women.

⁴⁸ According to Rosenberg, "Israel Has a Demographic Crisis. And It's Not About Birth Rates": "At 3.1 children per woman, Israel's total fertility rate is by far the highest among developed countries and even exceeds that of many underdeveloped ones. For comparison, France's fertility rate is 1.9 and Italy's is just 1.3."

⁴⁹ Malach and Cahaner, "2018 Statistical Report on Ultra-Orthodox Society in Israel"; Aderet, "For the First Time in Israel's History, Jewish Fertility Rate Surpasses That of Arabs."

⁵⁰ Walter and Cohen, "The Public's Positions on the Issue of Recruiting Members of the Yeshiva."

⁵¹ Updated statistics received from the IDF in 2021.

⁵² Updated statistics received from the IDF in February 2021.

⁵³ IDF manpower official, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, November 2020.

The national service option, an alternative to military service, does not appear to have increased the numbers of those serving (see fuller discussion in Chapter 4). According to the PNIMA [Inward] movement, “the national service [alternative] did not succeed in significantly enlarging the number of people who serve, except for women with a Zionist-religious background” (Table 3.1).⁵⁴ This was “only a partial answer that did not break into other nonserving sectors, such as the Arab and ultra-Orthodox communities.”⁵⁵

Table 3.1. Service-Age Versus Serving Population

Population	2008	2020	2034
Service-age population	120,000	140,000	190,000
Actually enlisted	60,000	68,700	90,000
Joined national service	7,700	1,600	20,580

NOTE: Numbers taken from analysis by PNIMA, based on the IDF’s data (PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*). The 2034 estimate is based on current trends.

The initial service exemptions for the Haredi men, religious women, and Arabs have become political hot buttons over the years. In 1949, Arabs accounted for 15 percent of the Israeli population and now make up 21 percent.⁵⁶ However, the share of the Haredi population is only expected to continue to rise, while the share of the Arab population will gradually fall as a result of trends in fertility rates among both groups. Given the political tensions in Israel, questions on whether and how to draft the Haredi group will continue to linger. At the same time, efforts to better integrate the Arab minority will call for some form of military or, much more likely, national service for this group. In parallel to military service, the state introduced a national service model, mainly applied to women of Zionist-religious background who serve in hospitals and various other organizations in support of the public interest.

The Dynamics of Conscription

After 1967’s Six-Day War, compulsory military service was defined as three years for men and two for women. A committee appointed by the minister of defense in 2006, headed by Avi Ben-Bassat, recommended gradually shortening men’s service to two years. It also suggested changes in compensation to address the loss of manpower by funding long-term service jobs for soldiers in specific, needed professions.⁵⁷ Implementation of the recommendations was initially postponed

⁵⁴ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*. PNIMA is a nongovernmental organization dedicated to addressing fragmentation in Israeli society.

⁵⁵ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*.

⁵⁶ Rudnitzky, “Arab Population in Israel: Demographic, Socio-Economic, and Political Indicators.”

⁵⁷ Government of Israel, “Recommendations of the Committee to Examine the Issue of Shortening Compulsory IDF Service.”

because of the Second Lebanon War later in 2006 and never fully materialized. The Israeli public was rattled by the disappointing results of the war, and the military capitalized on public sentiment to avoid making more concessions.⁵⁸ The Ministry of Finance, which initially supported the move, took a step back under pressure. In 2015, the Ministry of Finance and the IDF reached a new agreement: Men's service would be limited to 32 months. Women still serve only 24 months, yet those in combat roles will serve a duration similar to that for men.⁵⁹

In July 2020, the government decided, according to the 2015 agreement, that men's service would be shortened again to 30 months. However, IDF chief of staff Kochavi strongly objected, claiming that this move would harm the army's preparedness—and subsequently managed to postpone the final decision until at least July 2024.⁶⁰ Under his predecessor, Gadi Eizenkot, the army had begun implementing practices combining elements from the practice of other professional militaries, including lessons from programs of the U.S. military, to create more differentiation in career plans for soldiers serving in elite combat units. In 2018, new members of four elite units were signed to an eight-year plan that includes an academic degree (similar plans started earlier for air force pilots and navy officers).

In the event, the practicalities imposed by the current extended war with Hamas in Gaza have, at least for the time being, thrown out all such calculations. In early 2024, the compulsory service term for male recruits was again raised to 36 months.⁶¹ Prior to this, the army faced a growing excess in mandatory-service soldiers, some of whom would probably have not been needed. During the preceding five years, the growing number of new recruits gradually helped the military overcome the shortage created by shortening men's service by four months. By 2025, the number of new recruits would likely have grown by 17,000 men.⁶² Yet, many of them would lack even basic technological skills (or motivation) to serve in roles for which manpower is short. The result may be a surplus in soldiers for jobs that hardly require more manpower. According to one senior officer, by 2025, the army would have to spend more than one-half of its daily budget on feeding and housing soldiers doing their mandatory service.⁶³

A Drop in Officer Quality

Related to reduced motivation, internal military research has recently shown a drop in high-quality officers' willingness to sign on for long-term service.⁶⁴ The problem was mostly spotted in combat-support roles (logistics, signals) but gradually came to involve more-prestigious roles, especially in intelligence, cyber, and technology units subject to lucrative positions being offered to soldiers by the private sector. Additionally, the military attributes this trend to generational changes.

⁵⁸ Shelah, "The Politics of Military Service."

⁵⁹ Israel Defense Force, "Our Soldiers."

⁶⁰ Ahronheim, "Lawmakers Push to Postpone Shortening of IDF Service to 2024."

⁶¹ Fabian, "Amid Gaza War, IDF Plans to Lengthen Mandatory and Reserve Service."

⁶² Senior IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July and November 2020.

⁶³ IDF officer, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July 2020.

⁶⁴ Harel, "The IDF Is Suffering Heavy Losses on the Quality Front."

Young officers now tend to avoid long-term commitments, emphasize financial aspects of their service, and to try to accommodate a work-life balance. The IDF has a particularly hard time addressing the last demand. Yet conversations with young officers who are considering a long-term military career bring up other concerns. These officers often complain about the IDF's rigid and tradition-burdened organizational culture, are quite critical of their immediate superiors' conduct, and worry about aspects of the current service model. A similar process is at work in the reserve corps, where the army finds it difficult to persuade talented officers to accept battalion command, mostly because their spouses and their employers are worried that the role would take too much of their time.⁶⁵

Taken together, these trends have a negative influence over the IDF's everyday performance, its external image, the officers' perception of the force's quality, and their willingness to sign on for longer service. Some among the senior ranks recently began talking of a "watershed drop in quality" among junior officers.⁶⁶ This is a growing source of concern, considering the changes in the nature of the challenges the military faces. Future officers will have to operate more-sophisticated technology under extreme pressure. More than anything else, the army must maintain quality among its junior officers to win on the battlefield.

Women, the Ultra-Orthodox, and Arabs: The IDF as a Cultural Battlefield

The military's importance in Israel's political and cultural discourse makes policy changes a matter of great public concern. During the 2010s, this was evident in the debate over service by three significant groups in the Israeli society: women, ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arabs. Because Israeli society attributes such importance (and emotional baggage) to the IDF,⁶⁷ the military has served for decades as a cultural and ideological battleground for competing political and social factions. This contention is especially apparent in the friction between women soldiers, Zionist-religious soldiers, and their respective ideological support groups because many conservative Jewish religious leaders object to women's involvement in combat roles, in mixed-gender units, and (sometimes) in the army at large. The tension between the two competing camps has applied opposite pressures on the senior leadership, forcing them to make decisions they would probably rather have avoided. Nonetheless, because service in the Israeli army is compulsory, not voluntary, the military cannot just dictate the rules of the game to new recruits, coming from opposite ideological backgrounds, without compromise or adaptation.

The army faces conflicting pressures that not only consume time and attention but also often put the IDF's leadership at the center of a political storm. The pressures center on matters of principle, such as women's service as tank crew members, which may mean physical proximity to men, but also on marginal issues, such as religious soldiers' opposition to women singing in military ceremonies (considered by some rabbis as immodest). At the same time, service in the people's army is perceived

⁶⁵ IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Shizafon base, September 2019; IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Jerusalem, January 2020; IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Tel Aviv, November 2020.

⁶⁶ Senior IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, July and November 2020.

⁶⁷ Hermann et al., "IDI Releases 2019 Democracy Index."

as a proof of the strength of the competing ideologies, especially given the numbers of soldiers and officers from diverse backgrounds. The army's fear of political or journalistic criticism often pushes it to excessive discussion of controversial questions. Some senior officers claim that this fear comes at the expense of the army's preparations for a future war.⁶⁸ These discussions center on three demographic groups: women, Haredi men, and Arab citizens of Israel.

Women in IDF Service

Compulsory service was implemented for women at the same time as men, in 1947—even before the state was formally declared.⁶⁹ Its roots go back even further to the period of Jewish undergrounds before the War of Independence. During the war itself, about 100 women died and more than 100 were taken as prisoners of war. The Israeli army is one of a few armies with compulsory service for women, but after that first war the IDF began limiting the scope of women's service and gradually pushed them out of combat roles. Between the 1950s and 1990s, Israeli women mostly served in military office jobs, as administrative assistants.

Yet changes in military needs, as well as the insistence of young women who fought legally to desegregate units and roles, brought about another change. In 1995, Israel's Supreme Court ruled in favor of Alice Miller, a young woman who demanded a chance to be accepted into air force pilot training.⁷⁰ Twenty-eight years later, more than 70 women pilots and navigators have successfully finished the course, although that is still a small number compared with men (less than 5 percent).⁷¹ Yet this change means that the air force now openly admits that it needs more women in such roles and actively recruits them to volunteer.

Similar developments occurred in less glamorous roles. After the Miller ruling, more jobs were gradually opened to women. Women now serve in combat roles in the Israeli navy, artillery units, light infantry, and elsewhere. The former IDF chief of staff, Lieutenant General Eizenkot, announced that he preferred more women in light infantry units to release better-trained units from border-protection roles and concentrate on preparing them for future war. By late 2020, 18 percent of women soldiers were serving in combat roles, 2.5 times more than in 2015.⁷²

However, as noted, women's integration into combat units and roles has faced strong disapproval from both religious groups and some retired senior officers. The latter claim that women are not physically fit to deal with the pressures and challenges of combat roles. Many Zionist-religious rabbis warned of the moral implications of mixed units, especially in regard to religious men. In 2019, the announcement of a pilot program for women's service in tank crews created a public storm. By 2020, the Supreme Court again had to address appeals from women who insisted on serving in both the armored corps and elite commando units.⁷³

⁶⁸ Senior IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, December 2019, January 2020.

⁶⁹ The first conscription order was published on November 28, 1947, by the "Command Center for the People's Service," chaired by Golda Meir, future prime minister of Israel ("Conscripting Troops to the IDF").

⁷⁰ Baruch, "What Is the Appropriate Model for Female Service in the IDF?"

⁷¹ Stern, "The History of Female Pilots in the IAF."

⁷² IDF officer, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, November 2020.

⁷³ Bandel and Kubovich, "Israel High Court Rejects Petition to Force Army to Allow Women into Tank Units."

Senior officers say that the military will continue opening up more roles for women, as long as there are enough women who can meet the physical demands of these jobs. This does not include most commando and all infantry units; more disagreement is expected, both from rabbis and retired officers.

As more combat roles open up to women, it is likely that the proximity of women and Zionist-religious soldiers will create more friction. While the army has established special units for ultra-Orthodox soldiers, where women are not even allowed to enter the camp, the same is not true for other religious soldiers, who usually serve in mixed units. A religious soldier may ask not to serve in a mixed-gender company; in most cases, the army would respect the request. Yet, during the last two decades, the number of religious soldiers in combat units has more than doubled. It is now estimated that about 30 to 40 percent of junior officers in combat units come from religious backgrounds, more than twice their share of the general Israeli population.⁷⁴ This may lead to more incidents in which soldiers complain about women's presence in their units (citing religious reasons) and bring the matter to the army's hierarchy through rabbis or political representatives from religious parties.⁷⁵

The growing number of religious soldiers and commanders may also create tensions if, in the future, the Israeli government decides to dismantle more settlements or outposts (illegal settlements under Israeli law) in Palestinian territories. When Ariel Sharon's government withdrew from the Gaza Strip as part of its disengagement plan in 2005, the army tried to avoid the problem by deploying units with a significant number of religious soldiers as far away as possible from direct conflict with settlers. In many cases, religious soldiers were given other assignments to preempt a situation in which they might refuse orders. Eventually, only 63 soldiers were sentenced, mostly to light disciplinary punishment, for disobeying orders.⁷⁶ This will be much harder to do in the future, considering their rising numbers and the political sensitivity and magnitude of West Bank settlements.

Ultra-Orthodox Integration

The share of exemptions for Haredi men rose over 70 years to 15.9 percent of all Jewish men by late 2020.⁷⁷ During these years, this glaring inequality caused much political and judicial discussion. The Supreme Court has intervened a few times to force various Israeli governments to change the legal arrangements, claiming that they were in breach of the government's previous commitments and the stated principle of equal share of the military burden.⁷⁸ In 2012, the court *invalidated* the 1998 Tal Law, which was supposed to sort out the arrangement.⁷⁹ Later on, two governmental committees were established to change the law and institute a new one that would include criminal sanctions against ultra-Orthodox men who would not enlist despite being ineligible for exemption.⁸⁰ In 2017, the court

⁷⁴ Bryant, "In Israel's Army, More Officers Are Now Religious."

⁷⁵ Senior IDF officer, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, February 2020.

⁷⁶ Bender, "63 Soldiers Refused Orders During Disengagement."

⁷⁷ Harel, "50% Increase in Two Years: One Out of Eight Israeli Men Exempt from Army for Mental Health Issues."

⁷⁸ Rabinowitz and Lis, "Israel's High Court Strikes Down Exemption of Ultra-Orthodox from Military Service."

⁷⁹ Ettinger and Cohen, "Israel's High Court Rules Tal Law Unconstitutional."

⁸⁰ Rabinowitz, "Israeli Officials Bypass Gantz to Seek Extension of Ultra-Orthodox Military Exemption Law."

again invalidated a government attempt to change the law and instructed the Knesset to find a new solution within a year.⁸¹ Yet a series of delays, followed by a long political crisis, further postponed any implementation of solutions until mid-2023 (which was the time of this writing). During this period, the main contention between the two ultra-Orthodox parties (United Torah Judaism and Shas) and a right-wing secular party (Israel Beitenu) was the percentage of Haredi men who would be enlisted, 8 versus 10 percent, a rather marginal difference that amounted to about 200 soldiers per year. In January 2023, after a new right-wing, Netanyahu-led government had been established, the two ultra-Orthodox parties demanded further legal changes that would legitimize a full exemption from service for young Haredi men.

Meanwhile, for more than a decade, the army has been operating special programs for integrating ultra-Orthodox soldiers, most of whom are men over the age of 20,⁸² already married and fathering children, to logistical or technological jobs. Fewer men, mostly younger and single, are enlisted to combat roles. The military has presented this project as a success and claimed that, in addition to the massive resources it spent (on payments to soldiers and on separating them from women soldiers), the special programs also benefited the IDF and society at large.⁸³ In 2020, the army reported that 7,600 ultra-Orthodox men served in the army, 600 of whom were officers or career soldiers.⁸⁴ However, even when the IDF reached 3,000 new Haredi recruits, it still fell short of meeting the goals the government had set.⁸⁵

In late 2019, a scandal erupted: The military had systematically miscounted the number of enlisted Haredi soldiers. This was apparently done intentionally, partly to match the political system's expectations. The question of ultra-Orthodox enlistment became a major source of political debate during five consecutive Israeli elections between 2019 and 2022 and continuing into the present.

Yet, over the years, there has been a significant growth in interest among young Haredi men to serve in the IDF. In 2010, only 1,000 Haredi men enlisted.⁸⁶ The relative growth in Haredi willingness to enlist is a result of two important trends: financial difficulties stemming from lack of professional expertise and gaps in education (most Haredi men do not acquire even basic skills in mathematics, science, or English) and the difficulty of fulfilling the tough ultra-Orthodox religious demands. However, the rise in the number of Haredi men enlisting is far from enough to end the frustration among other Israelis. Neither does it solve the problem for most ultra-Orthodox young men. Because of the law's demands, most of these individuals remain stuck in their yeshivas (rabbinical schools) because leaving would mean being required to enlist in the army.⁸⁷ Consequently, these men acquire neither the education nor the professional skills needed to earn a living in the outside world. With no other alternative, many Haredi men work in the informal economy, getting paid in cash without paying taxes or enjoying social security. This situation strengthens the claim that the midway

⁸¹ Rabinowitz, "Israeli Officials Bypass Gantz to Seek Extension of Ultra-Orthodox Military Exemption Law."

⁸² Israel Defense Force, "לוחמה, הנדסה ואקדמיה: מסלולי גיוס חרדים | את"צ" ["Service Paths for Haredi Recruits"].

⁸³ Benn, "Serving God and Country."

⁸⁴ Numbers provided by the IDF, November 2020.

⁸⁵ See also Israel Democracy Institute, "A Proposal to Amend the National Service Law."

⁸⁶ State Comptroller's Office, "שירות חרדים בצה"ל - מבקר המדינה" ["Report on Ultra-Orthodox Service in the IDF"].

⁸⁷ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Handling of Matters Relating to the Israel Defense Forces."

model is not effective. The conclusion some draw is to exempt most Haredi men completely. The ultra-Orthodox rabbis and politicians will continue to oppose a general draft because they would rather protect the continuing of Torah studies. Therefore, it might be better to allow many Haredi youth to fully integrate themselves into Israeli society by working without fear of being forced to enlist.⁸⁸

In 2019, chief of staff Kochavi appointed a committee in response to the aforementioned scandal that also looked at the different models for Haredi enlistment.⁸⁹ The committee had reached the conclusion that the current model is ineffective and should be canceled. It suggested the IDF eliminate the age of final exemption for Haredi men (formally 26, but practically 24). Members of the committee, chaired by retired general Ronni Numa, gathered that the IDF's huge investment in integrating Haredi soldiers is not justified and creates a severe inequality between Haredi men and other young recruits. Haredi men serving in office jobs may receive a stipend of up to ILS 6,700 per month from the army; in contrast, a combat soldier's monthly salary (while in mandatory service) was raised in 2021 to only ILS 2,643. The Ministry of Finance is willing to give the army ILS 100 million a year in exchange for total exemption for all Haredi men.⁹⁰ As previously mentioned, the 2023 political change may alter the legal situation completely. Yet a full exemption for ultra-Orthodox men might also backfire for the government because it could spark outrage among other parts of the Israeli society that still face shouldering the military burden.

As the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed the world in 2020, there were specific ramifications for the Haredi community in Israel. The ultra-Orthodox were hit harder than any other part of Israeli society in the early stages of the pandemic, mostly because many of them live in close quarters, in densely populated apartments and neighborhoods, and in relative poverty.⁹¹ Yet, there was another significant reason for this—the insistence of many religious leaders on ignoring the state's guidance on maintaining social distance to avoid transmission. The growing morbidity and death among the ultra-Orthodox created a backlash against them from other communities, mostly because this was thought to increase the burden on an already strained hospital system and to infect other communities.⁹² By October 2020, signs of secular resentment toward Haredi communities and their political representatives were growing.⁹³ These events worsened the tensions inside Israeli society and had the potential to create more pressure on the other political parties to force the ultra-Orthodox to begin paying their debt to the state. Israel's previous, center-left government, led first by Naftali Bennett and then Yair Lapid, failed to seriously address this politically explosive issue during its term.

⁸⁸ Arlosoroff, "The Israeli Army Is Losing the War to Draft More Ultra-Orthodox."

⁸⁹ Harel, "Israeli Army Report on Haredi Draft Figures Shows It May Be Best to Exempt Ultra-Orthodox."

⁹⁰ Harel, "Israeli Army Report on Haredi Draft Figures Shows It May Be Best to Exempt Ultra-Orthodox."

⁹¹ Bank of Israel, *Bank of Israel Annual Report 2020*. According to the report, COVID-19 morbidity among ultra-Orthodox in Israel was six times higher than among other Jewish communities.

⁹² Zion, "Rejecting Criticism, Fringe Ultra-Orthodox Maintain Defiance of COVID-19 Rules."

⁹³ Jeffay, "Resentment of Haredim on Virus Violations Set to Dominate Next Election—Expert."

Models for Integrating Minorities

Some 21 percent of the Israeli population consists of minorities, most of them Arab Muslims.⁹⁴ Yet, the number of minority citizens serving in the army remains relatively low. Out of all minorities, only Druze and Circassian men are legally required to serve. All others are volunteers. A few hundred Bedouin men enlist every year, and, recently, there has been a small surge in the enlistment of both Christian and Muslim Arab men—a few hundred men per year, altogether. A tiny number of Arab women also volunteer to serve every year.⁹⁵ The army sees this small growth as a positive development and is willing to help increase the number. Contrary to what happened with the ultra-Orthodox, the IDF believes that the COVID-19 pandemic has, in fact, improved the relationship with the Arab community and increased the chances of more Arab involvement in the military, mainly in the Homefront Command.⁹⁶ For the first time, the 2021 Israeli coalition included an Arab party, the United Arab List. Yet, the party—which is part of the Islamist Movement—objects to any form of Arab service in the military.

In fact, the idea is met with strong resentment from most political branches of Arab society in Israel. Arab members of the Knesset have expressed their absolute resistance to enlistment, pointing out that such actions contribute to the oppression of their Palestinian brethren in the West Bank and Gaza.⁹⁷ Somewhat strangely, the Israeli right wing has hardly expressed any opinion on this phenomenon. The army now focuses on integrating minorities into larger mixed units and has canceled or reduced all its minority units. By 2020, Druze men were enrolled in all roles in the army, including those that had been previously precluded either by regulation or in practice. However, the same cannot be said yet of Muslims, Christian Arabs, or Bedouins.

National and Civilian Service

In addition to military service, the state has operated an alternative national service for civilians for 50 years.⁹⁸ Only the 2014 National Service law actually defined this alternative many years after it was established. According to the law, a citizen who is not enlisted in the army for various reasons may volunteer for a year or two of national service; the length of service is his or her choice. The service is operated by various authorized nonprofit organizations, and the volunteers are sent to work in different settings, such as hospitals, schools, schools for children with special needs, social organizations, government ministries, fire departments, and nursing homes.

The national service began as a framework for the service of Zionist-religious women after the national rabbinate had forbidden religious women to serve in the army itself. More than 8,000 religious women volunteer every year for either one year or two years. Over the years, young men and women with health, mental health, or cognitive difficulties also joined the service. Other volunteers

⁹⁴ Central Bureau of Statistics, *Statistical Abstract of Israel 2023*.

⁹⁵ Zitun, “IDF Sees Record Number of Israeli Arab Conscripts.”

⁹⁶ IDF officers, conversations with the lead author, Tel Aviv, June and November 2020.

⁹⁷ Khoury, “Hundreds Participate in Conference Against the Recruitment of Arabs for the Army and National Service in Sakhnin.”

⁹⁸ State of Israel, National Service Law.

included people with criminal records (whom the IDF was unwilling to conscript) and Druze and Arab women. There are 3,600 non-Jews serving in the national service every year, most of them women. In 2020, 13,600 people served, of whom 64 percent (8,731) were listed under “general population” (mostly Jewish religious women); 27 percent were minorities (5,495); and 9 percent were Haredi (1,852).⁹⁹

The state has the authority to supervise the service, but this authority has constantly been moved from one government ministry to another according to different political arrangements. Usually, control remains in the hands of the Zionist-religious parties because most of the volunteers come from this ideological background.

For the Haredi population, the alternative of national civilian service is considered a failure. The number of ultra-Orthodox men serving in such roles is negligible, having dropped from 1,090 in 2011 to 615 in 2017.¹⁰⁰ It should be noted that this debate does not concern young Haredi women, who are immediately exempted from service.

Conclusion

Given the number of changes, both external and internal, that have beset the traditional model for the IDF’s role as both defender of Israel and fundamental pillar of society, it is no wonder that that model now shows signs of being subjected to considerable tension and even the emergence of fracturing. The next chapter considers several proposals for reform with varying degrees of fundamental transformation.

⁹⁹ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam* [Equal for Everybody], pp. 24–25.

¹⁰⁰ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam* [Equal for Everybody], pp. 24–25.

Possible Reforms to IDF Recruitment

Movement toward greater professionalization of Israel's military could potentially address concerns that IDF senior leadership see could emerge from the existing model if it were to continue into the future in a dynamically changing Israel. Yet the role of the military in Israel's national identity and in the structure of Israeli society suggests that the issue cuts across many more lines than would be the case in most other developed democratic states. Because Israel's internal and external environments call for a new model for the IDF, it has begun to examine, slowly and carefully, possible changes to its service model.¹⁰¹ But a series of conversations with the Israeli top brass reveals that they are uncertain about the pace and nature of the necessary changes. One senior official admitted that the IDF is reluctant and would rather have the political system make the most-important decisions. Yet, he said, the changes in policy would be implemented gradually: "There will not be a revolution but gradual changes."¹⁰²

It is doubtful that the Israeli army can afford a long wait. Societal, demographic, and security trends continue to evolve and have a significant effect on the IDF's fabric, role, preparedness, and budget. Developing a new recruitment model would be a daunting challenge, one that IDF officials are not eager to entertain. However, such a new model could alleviate some of the pressures they currently face. It may not be necessary to replace the people's army model altogether, but reforms are necessary. According to a prominent expert on this topic, the defining principles of the alternative model should include maximal equality in expanding the cadre of possible recruits while creating more differentiation in the various service plans. "The only justification for maintaining mandatory service for all is that it helps Israeli security," he said. "Therefore, an alternative service outside of the army will have to be of security importance." He emphasized that this should also be true for Arab citizens.¹⁰³

At the time of this writing (August 2023), a further development has shaken the foundation of Israel's military manpower. Although not directly related to the underlying trends treated in this report, the reaction of important elements of the reserve forces to the proposed changes in the structure of Israel's judiciary (which the current government had introduced) has been to question long-held social norms around the military. Long regarded by society as the cream of the IDF, the reserve air force pilots who form the core of Israel's air squadrons have either threatened to not serve if called up or have actually done so in protest against government policy.¹⁰⁴ Two of the five reserve flag-

¹⁰¹ Discussions convened by the chief of staff of the IDF, 2019–2020.

¹⁰² Senior IDF officer, conversation with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July 2020.

¹⁰³ Former government official and an analyst of the IDF, interview with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Kubovich, "Hundreds of Israeli Air Force Reservists Announce They Won't Report for Duty Due to Judicial Coup."

rank officers in Israel's navy have made similar pledges.¹⁰⁵ It is difficult to convey how shocking such declarations are in light of history and the role reserves have played as a component of national identity. This makes discussion of alternative manpower structures for the IDF all the more timely.

What, then, are the arguments for and against changes in the structure for the IDF to provide these security services to Israel?

The Merits of Shifting to a Professional Military

A fundamentally professional military, at the extreme, would entail dispensing to a large extent with the services of conscripts and instead building a standing force largely staffed by long-service regulars.

Public debate over possible changes to the current model has increased in recent years. In 2019, a small grassroots movement called "The Front" was established. Its mission is to turn the IDF into a professional, all-volunteer army. The movement's perspective is that compulsory service takes a large toll on the Israeli economy; it hurts productivity and gross national product because young men delay entering the job market. They point to assessments by the Ministry of Finance that the current model costs Israel about 5 percent of the annual gross national product, up to ILS 50 billion (about 14 billion U.S. dollars) per year. In the United States, studies conducted in the late 1960s brought about the end of the draft as the Vietnam War approached its end a few years later.¹⁰⁶ Economist Milton Friedman claimed that a professional army would be more efficient than a mandatory-service army and that output could be the same with 30 percent less manpower.¹⁰⁷ Friedman attributed this effect to enhanced personal, basic freedoms. A professional army's soldiers have all chosen their vocation; therefore, the service utilizes their abilities and potential to the fullest. In a population facing compulsory service, large shares see no advantage in service and do not wish to serve. Friedman also wrote that a professional army would be more experienced and more capable, especially when using advanced technologies. By the time a soldier in mandatory service acquires those capabilities, he or she is due to be released soon. In the IDF, more than one-third of the regular service personnel finish their terms every year, and their replacements need to be taught and trained all over.

These needs are even clearer and more persuasive today, 50 years on. The number of sophisticated systems that a tank commander in the IDF's Merkava-4 tank battalions needs to master has grown considerably over the years, not far off from the number required to fly an attack helicopter.¹⁰⁸ Yet an Israeli pilot will serve at least eight years, while a tank commander's service will last only 36 months.

One aspect of the economic cost equation is peculiar to Israel. The IDF has taken on the role of also providing conscripts with educational and skill training opportunities while in service to an extent unusual for most militaries. Indeed, many of the ventures that are the hallmark of Start-Up Nation Israel are based on work either conducted while in the IDF or by teams that first worked together and

¹⁰⁵ Kubovich, "Two Senior Israeli Navy Commanders Say They Won't Serve Due to Judicial Overhaul."

¹⁰⁶ Dror Lavi, interview with the lead author, Tel Aviv, September 2019; Rostker, *I Want You!*

¹⁰⁷ Singleton, "Slaves or Mercenaries?"

¹⁰⁸ Senior IDF armed corps officer, conversation with the lead author, July 2018.

honed their skills while completing their service.¹⁰⁹ Calculations of deadweight loss to the economy need to take these factors into account.

Reservations About a Professional Army

Yet some experts doubt the value and feasibility of shifting to a professional army. The Ben-Bassat committee report from 2006 and other military committees that dealt with the issue over the years concluded that Friedman’s approach would not fit the IDF. Israel’s top economists, unlike their U.S. counterparts, still support a compulsory service model, seeing it as the most effective tool to achieve the country’s military and economic goals. These diverging views can be explained by the two countries’ contrasting strategic situations. The main threats to the United States are global, and so are its likely conflicts. The United States relies mostly on a highly professional and quickly deployed force that can be sent to locations around the world. Many Western countries deal with similar, limited military threats, such as terrorist attacks, against which a small, highly trained professional army can fight effectively. Israel’s situation remains rather different. Although most of its enemies are now guerilla and terrorist organizations, there is still a potential scenario involving both massive rocket fire on the Israeli home front and battles on its borders that would require a significant number of divisions and brigades.

The most suitable model for Israel remains the “accordion”—a relatively small mandatory army that can increase its force rather quickly by calling in reserve units, according to two of the experts who advised the army on the subject, Asher Tishler and Brigadier General (Ret.) Sasson Hadad. This model, they maintain, remains the least expensive option for ensuring that the country remains prepared for a total war. Tishler and Hadad hold that, even if one concludes that mandatory service is in fact a general tax, even a “poll tax” on most of the population, it is still worth the price.¹¹⁰ Adding an estimated yearly loss of income of ILS 50 billion, on top of an ILS 60 billion annual defense budget, will still cost less than maintaining a massive professional army, ready for possible war at any given moment.¹¹¹

A transformation to a professional army—if, indeed, that is even feasible in the context of Israeli society—might lead to a significant drop in the quality of people who choose the military as a way of life. During the decade after the U.S. military became a volunteer army, the top brass almost changed its mind because of the low quality of soldiers. Only after a significant increase in pay did the Americans manage to stabilize the situation.¹¹² Yet, even after that changes, the quality of personnel remained lower than in a mandatory-service model. According to Hadad, “the quality of our mandatory army is higher than in other models. A professional army is perceived as better trained and

¹⁰⁹ Senor and Singer, *Start-Up Nation*.

¹¹⁰ Tischler and Hadad, “Compulsory Army Service Versus a Professional Army: The Effect of the Manner of Recruitment, Israel’s Military Strength.”

¹¹¹ Tischler and Hadad, “Compulsory Army Service Versus a Professional Army.” See also Arlosoroff, “The People’s Army?”

¹¹² Kosiak, *Is the U.S. Military Getting Smaller and Older: And How Much Should We Care?*

equipped, yet not as good as an army that can rely on the full potential of the whole Israeli population.”¹¹³

Another expert asserts that

Israel cannot and will not change compulsory service in the near future. The security necessity remains, in case war breaks [out] simultaneously on two frontiers, which is still a plausible scenario. There are potentially explosive social implications for a volunteer army. The elite’s participation in the military will decrease, and there will be a growing sense that poor men pay in blood, while wealthier men can buy a way out. This notion may tear the Israeli society apart. The current model allows the army to remain more effective. Almost all young people pass through the army’s gates, and it can choose and select the right people without spending too much time on teaching them. General recruitment, combined with the ethos of the people’s army, increase[s] the chances that talented youngsters will strive to serve as officers and choose a military career. The current model should be adapted, not canceled.¹¹⁴

Conversations with the IDF’s top generals suggest that they share this sentiment. One further observation is that Israel’s enemies train and prepare their fighters for longer periods. Fighters in Hezbollah’s elite unit, the Radwan force, serve for 10 to 12 years on average. Until a few years ago, this period included a long deployment to Syria’s civil war to gain important combat experience. Would a Radwan fighter have the upper hand against an Israeli paratrooper, ten years younger and serving for only two-and-a-half years?

There is similar concern that a transformation to a professional army will not help the IDF maintain high quality among its junior combat commanders, especially when compared with Hezbollah. Despite the concerns of a gradual drop in quality among commanders, interviewed officers maintain that, with the current model, Israel still has the upper hand. “Every visit by foreign, Western military officers, first and foremost the Americans, we hear the same remarks. They are in awe of our ability to select the best and the brightest,” said one senior Israeli officer. He further stated that:

We can do that because we can select from a wide variety of choices—in fact, almost the whole population. They tell us: This is like having gold in your hands. But a transformation to an army of volunteers will exempt the brightest youngsters from mandatory service. It will give them an immediate alternative—go to the university or join the workforce. In the long run, we will see a drop in quality, especially in combat units. The ethos of combat service will suffer a severe blow. In ten years, you might have an army of Huns. This would be very different from the quality we have today.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Arlosoroff, “The Israeli Army Is Losing the War to Draft More Ultra-Orthodox.”

¹¹⁴ Prominent defense analyst, interview with the lead author, Tel Aviv, July 2019.

¹¹⁵ IDF division commander, conversation with the lead author, Elyakim base, June 2019.

A Midway Solution?

How should the IDF adapt its old model to new realities?

One proposal, suggested by many IDF generals, is to establish a “virtual point of entry to the IDF.” Once an Israeli man or woman reaches the age of 18, the IDF will have a “first draft choice.” If the army has no particular need for the youth, he or she will have to serve in another role: national service either as a first responder (firefighters, medics, etc.) or as a civil servant in their own community (specifically, Arabs or ultra-Orthodox). Former IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi proposed this solution as early as 2010.¹¹⁶ In 2015, Ashkenazi helped establish PNIMA, which suggested the same idea. After he entered politics, the former Israeli minister of education, Rabbi Shai Piron, became head of this cross-community, civil society movement. In 2019, it presented its alternative model for the current draft.

The PNIMA proposal would construct a coordinated model of compulsory national service, one not limited to military service. PNIMA describes its plan as a “model for creating a joint, deep life which will maintain a community identity while creating a joint Israeli ethos, strengthening the place and role of each community.”¹¹⁷ The plan includes three different tracks: military service, first responders, and community roles, mostly in the educational and welfare fields. Some of these tracks will allow young people to progress to management and instruction roles. Meanwhile, limited exemptions from service would be available for extremely talented youth in specific fields—biblical studies, sports, science, and culture (today this is possible only for religious studies).¹¹⁸

Pay would be decided according to the individual’s role, its intensity, and its level of risk; the person’s family situation; and socioeconomic conditions. Economists who were involved in creating the model, such as Zvi Ekstein of the Aharon Institute, believe it could make a significant contribution to the Israeli economy both in boosting productivity and improving the quality of social services. It could also help social mobility, increase earning capacity, and seriously decrease reliance on welfare and guaranteed minimal income. PNIMA claims that “there’s an economic potential in a ‘service for all’ model which would build alternatives for military service.”¹¹⁹ This would happen because the service could help develop human capital through acquisition of capabilities and could also increase the integration and trust of marginal and excluded groups and connect them to the general society. The service could contribute to increased levels of education, employment, and productivity and could even lead to changes in family structure. This would then become an engine for social mobility and economic growth. PNIMA believes that the price of training should be covered in the future, considering its contribution to the Israeli economy.

In its proposal, PNIMA warns that pushing for a professional army may be dangerous to society’s cohesion and may also seriously damage the quality of command among IDF units. PNIMA also warns that such a step will “lead to cancelling the civilian service, hurt solidarity and the spirit of volunteering, and damage disadvantaged communities.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Damary, “IDF Chief of Staff: Anyone Can Serve the State.”

¹¹⁷ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*.

¹¹⁸ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*, pp. 36–41.

¹¹⁹ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*.

¹²⁰ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam [Equal for Everybody]*, p. 6.

However, as previously noted, the army's draft numbers illustrate that the IDF can hardly still be called an army of the people, at least not in the long run, because it is not built on all parts of Israeli society and because the demographic balance between those groups has significantly changed in recent decades. In 2015, Israel's then-president, Reuven Rivlin, gave a speech in which he described the country as divided to four "tribes" (secular Jewish, Arabic, ultra-Orthodox, and Zionist-religious). Of these tribes, only two—the first and last—are actually taking a significant share of the military burden. In addition, many young Israelis would rather choose a path that will contribute to their professional future, their specific community, or their personal sense of fulfillment.

To address these concerns, the movement's plan rests on five principles:

1. Everybody would take part. Every citizen would be expected to participate and contribute his or her share. This is considered crucial to creating shared solidarity and a sense of common responsibility for the country's future.
2. The different service paths would be optimized to fit the different communities' ways of life. This would presumably allow every young person to protect their lifestyle while in service (and answer the more traditional communities' fear of forced changes on their youth).
3. Israel's security needs would be addressed. Service in the IDF remains top priority, and the military would have both a first choice of entrants and improved pay and rights for those in its service.
4. The state would recognize exemptions for talented youth according to clear and unified parameters.
5. All volunteer services would be run by a civilian body, which would represent all groups in Israeli society.¹²¹

PNIMA proposes a pyramid of service and volunteer work across the three different routes (the IDF, other security branches and first responders, community education and welfare, but not the talents exempted from service). Each track has four levels; from the bottom up, these are training, mandatory service, professionalism, and leadership and command. The intention is to maintain a similar length of service for all options for basic service. All three routes would secure similar status and rights for everyone who completes them and would entitle participants to free academic studies financed by the state. Military service would include only missions that are directly connected to the security of the state. According to PNIMA, the IDF would have to accept new recruits from all parts of the Israeli society but would not be empowered to compel Arab citizens to serve among its ranks. Ultra-Orthodox men would also have the right to choose their own paths out of the three alternatives (plus the talent route). The government would supervise nongovernmental organizations, which would be in charge of work within communities. The model includes a specific route for ultra-Orthodox women, who are now fully exempted from service but also would be involved in the future.

¹²¹ PNIMA, *Shaveh Lekulam* [Equal for Everybody].

Implementation Challenges

The main question PNIMA's model faces is whether it is likely to be implemented. Even if the government and military eventually support it—and this support is far from guaranteed, especially considering the present situation that gives the ultra-Orthodox a huge influence over the current government—the state would still have to recruit the ultra-Orthodox leadership and Arab citizens, who will probably remain quite suspicious about any attempt to enlist their members. Although prominent members of both communities are aware of the merits of some form of service, there is still a long way to go until members of the Knesset, mayors, and religious leaders will commit to this path. And although some anti-Haredi politicians have benefited in the past from attacking the ultra-Orthodox for their lack of military service, it is doubtful whether any of Israel's current leaders will have the will, or the stamina, to implement such deep changes while accepting the ricochets involved.

The immediate threat to the ultra-Orthodox, which may lead to a change of their long-held position, stems from the political and legal situation. In 2019, the debate over changes in the Draft Law and the need for more Haredi recruitment to the military had suddenly become an obstacle to forming a new government. In 2020, the issue became even more acute when resentment toward the ultra-Orthodox grew among other parts of the Israeli society over Haredi communities' seeming disregard for state instructions during the general pandemic shutdown. After the November 2022 elections, the political balance has changed again to the advantage of the ultra-Orthodox parties. It is hard to imagine their leaders not using the new situation to attempt full exemption for their voters. Yet, the response from the opposition center-left block (mainly secular) could be quite aggressive in a way that might further erode society's attitude toward the army.

As for the Arabs, the main obstacle remains Israel's conflict with the Palestinians. It remains to be seen whether Arab citizens can be persuaded to take part in national service as firemen or policemen, less prestigious positions than the army in the eyes of most Israelis but also carrying less ideological stigma. Another question concerns prestige differentials between different routes. Will Israeli society look differently at those who preferred to serve in the military but were not accepted because of the army's priorities? Could this lead to unintended stigmas and other consequences?

Conclusions

All modern militaries are facing the problem of meeting manpower needs. Generally, the move is toward smaller but much more proficient—and deadly—forces. Israel's military establishment faces the same pressures. However, the problem in Israel is more fraught than in most places. Geopolitical realities mean that, even though the nation is less existentially threatened by the prospect of mass-army warfare than in the past, Israel nonetheless needs to be able to answer the call, should such a need arise. Any profound change to military staffing will need to stand a multigenerational test that may see renewed concern about such a threat.

The second reason for concern is even more profound. Changes to the manning of the IDF's fighting branches will, because of the historical role the IDF has played and continues to play in Israel, have profound consequences for nonmilitary outcomes in the realms of politics, economics, and social integration, among others. The IDF is one of the country's key institutions for maintaining social cohesion and forming national identity, and it is not a stretch to say that the future of Israel as a democratic, multiethnic, multicultural Jewish state might be affected.

The evidence suggests that the IDF's current model must change to meet Israel's requirements. The historical people's army approach that served the needs of what once was a largely agricultural society with limited trade and manufacturing is showing the strains of operating a regional military power emanating from a diverse country that has also become one of the major nodes in the global knowledge economy. The IDF now undertakes costs that it would prefer to shed and draws from a pool that largely misses the two communities exhibiting greatest demographic growth. Even among the communities historically and legally exposed to conscription, the IDF increasingly less capable of achieving the ideal that everybody serves.

For these reasons, complete movement toward a professional army model would be problematic and, possibly, widely considered to be too much of a gamble. Some in the military are concerned about even the narrow issue of maintaining command quality. The wider societal implications make this decision even more delicate. It requires national-level deliberation and decisionmaking. For these reasons, senior military leaders, and the civilian oversight engaged in the debate, would both naturally seek a compromise, albeit perhaps for different core reasons. This would entail implementing necessary changes to the current system without deserting it altogether.

Based on years of observing and reporting on the IDF and, more recently, interviewing widely about the issue of IDF staffing needs, the principal author, too, would recommend that Israel consider maintaining the army's right of first choice among draftees while allowing those not selected to pick a different path, through national service or service within their respective communities. This would allow the army to free itself of the overload of thousands of soldiers who are stuck in relatively fruitless desk or menial jobs and finish their service both frustrated and alienated. At the same time, reorganizing the model would help cool down some of the internal tensions in Israeli society because

groups that serve less in the army would face less hostility. This, in fact, may be the new model's greatest benefit. Even more than the army needs to reset its plans, society needs to leave behind the long and fruitless debate over ultra-Orthodox (and to a lesser degree, Arab) service in the military forces. As Israel itself has transformed, the IDF continues to affect public life beyond national security. Therefore, any change to the IDF must also be considered in the light of the IDF's role in Israel's state development and in that of its many peoples.

Afterword on Post–October 7 Israel

The draft of this short report was finalized immediately prior to the October 7, 2023, attack by Hamas on civilian communities and the IDF military establishment in Israel on the border with Gaza. Events and military operations were still unfolding as this afterword was being written. Much has changed and will continue to change in ways difficult to predict reliably in the wake of this shattering experience in Israel's national life. We venture to suggest that, on balance, much of what appears in these pages has become even more timely and will constitute a reliable guide to many of the domestic debates to come.

Israel's military and defense challenge has become more profound. Prior to the Hamas attack on Israel, the communities on its borders with Sinai, Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria could exist with armed sworn enemies, both states and nonstate actors, sometimes only a kilometer or two away. Principally on the frontiers with Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, highly armed and malevolently motivated nonstate actors—Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and various Iran-aligned Shiite militias (including Hezbollah) across the border from the Golan in Syria—were presumably held in check by a combination of deterrence posture, occasional limited and constrained mowing-the-grass-type military operations,¹²² and a grudgingly shared understanding of the rules of the game. A strategic conception existed among Israel's political and military leadership that the uneasy and potentially volatile status quo could nevertheless persist.

This is no longer the case. Hamas's action was, among other things, intended as a direct challenge to the belief among Israel's citizens that the state could protect them and preserve sovereignty over its territory. At this time, it is hard to see them returning to now-abandoned communities in the so-called Gaza Envelope or the northern Galilee with anything like the prior conditions still being in place. This result has been a stunning ideological victory for Hamas in posing a challenge to the fundamental conceptions of the Israeli state. The prior almost unshakable and, at times, headstrong faith in the IDF has been shattered. Either the armed elements situated on Israel's borders will need to be sufficiently diminished to reduce the threat that otherwise would now be ever lurking, or Israel's military burden in both resources and manpower will need to increase. Or both.

Other things have changed. It is still too early to understand what happened on October 7, 2023. However, in light of those events and their aftermath in Gaza, the debate over the role of technology, in contrast with the need for a capable ground force that is potentially able to sustain operations on two highly problematic fronts simultaneously, will probably shift as well. Impressive though the technology might be, it does not appear to have fulfilled its promise, possibly because of operational errors or fundamentally flawed design concepts. The IDF has partially redeemed itself with its demonstrated operational capabilities in Gaza, as carried out principally by traditional armored,

¹²² Inbar and Shamir, "Mowing the Grass."

infantry, and artillery formations in combined operations. Thus, readiness, sustainment, and—above all—manpower requirements for both the regular army and reserves will most likely loom even larger in defense planning than they have in the past. Old-fashioned ground-pounding has come back into regrettable fashion.

This will exacerbate the precise fault lines outlined in this report. Some 340,000 reservists were called back into service in the wake of the emergency. This represents more than 8 percent of the total employed population.¹²³ The equivalent in the United States today would be some 13.5 million in military service, a bit more than the entire military mobilization during World War II (albeit representing a larger share of a then-smaller population).¹²⁴ Then again, a sizable share of Israel's employed population comes from sectors whose members do not serve in the IDF. This burden is shared unequally in several respects. Most of the reservists will have come from the most-productive members of the labor force, largely secular or moderate in religious identity, who are also those who will be asked to support a greater military burden in years to come. This will do little to reduce the vitriol of postwar debates over burden-sharing and the question of who serves in a likely more-manpower-intensive IDF. Preliminary survey results suggest that the attack on the state and the subsequent national emergency did little to change views among Haredi men on their willingness to serve or to reduce their opposition to IDF conscription.¹²⁵

Events are still unfolding, and it is too early to determine where they may lead. However, we believe that most of the issues outlined in this report remain fundamental, even existential, to the nature of Israel's society in meeting—and even framing—its military manpower requirements. If anything, current events have given them a piquancy that few would have imagined prior to October 7.

¹²³ Statista, "Israel: Employment from 2014 to 2024" (last accessed December 12, 2023).

¹²⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Sex and Age" (last accessed December 12, 2023).

¹²⁵ Rosner, "The Massacre and the Mustache."

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