

# Army and Society in Israel:

## An Evolving Relationship

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### Brief Analysis

**T**raditionally, civil-military relations in Israel have been characterized by a very high degree of synchronization, manifesting itself at the elite level in a civil-military partnership and at the popular level in a designation of Israel as a "nation in arms" and of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as a "people's army." The intense degree of consensus between the IDF and Israeli society at large was exemplified by the structure of the armed forces itself -- particularly by the universal conscription of men and women.

**Changes in Civil-Military Relations.** In recent years, the relationship between Israeli society and the IDF has undergone significant changes. On the elite level, an erosion of the partnership between senior politicians and the military has taken place. At the broader societal level, past manifestations of levels of integration between the military and society are not being sustained. There are three main indications that this change of relations has taken place:

- A decline in cultural centrality of the IDF in Israeli society: One indication of this decline is the decreased level of radio airtime allotted to army ensembles and military songs. Songs by army troops or with a military content are far less prominent today than in the 1950s and 1960s, which suggests that the centrality of military experience in popular culture has declined.
- The fluctuation in motivation to military service: This is particularly true among young Israelis, especially in combat units. According to some statistics by the IDF manpower branch, motivation to serve in the military has declined by roughly two percent per annum between 1986 and 1996. In the meantime, motivation to service among reservists has declined even more sharply.
- An erosion in the immunity of the IDF to public criticism: Whereas public criticism of the IDF during the period of its military triumphs in the 1950s and 1960s was rare, Israel's army today is fighting a rearguard action against critical public scrutiny. Criticism comes from a number of sources, most prominently the media. Three additional sources of criticism are the courts, army reservists, and parents of soldiers on active duty. Courts today interfere in a wide range of military matters, ranging from human rights to gender issues. Parents of Israeli soldiers -- many of whom have served in the military themselves -- demand a right to voice an opinion not only on where their children will serve but also on the conditions of their service. Public criticism facing the IDF is also emerging among reservists. The recent strike of reserve pilots over the issue of inadequate life insurance, accompanied by a refusal to fly, is a case in point.

**Possible Strategic Implications:** Changes in civil-military relations are likely to have strategic implications in three main areas: Israel's military options, deployments, and its force structure.

**Military Options:** The IDF's traditional military doctrine stressed offensive action and seizing the initiative on the battlefield. At times, diplomatic constraints have compromised Israel's military freedom of maneuver, most prominently in the 1973 War and during the 1991 Iraqi missile attacks. Nowadays, societal constraints on freedom

of strategic maneuver have appeared as an additional force to be reckoned with. There is not only a reduced tolerance for casualties among the society at large, but also a fear of failure, and of public criticism of failure, among junior officers in the IDF. The most recent example involved a friendly fire incident in Lebanon. The commander of the small unit was publicly vilified even before an official military inquiry had run its course. Such vociferous criticism is likely to intimidate other junior officers and reduce their willingness to take necessary risks.

**Deployments:** By and large, the IDF was constructed as a multipurpose force in which combat units were expected to be able to perform varied missions. It is questionable whether this will continue, owing to societal circumstances. In 1982, the IDF conducted its first sustained military campaign without a major mobilization of reservists. Clearly, the army took societal constraints into account, knowing full well that mobilizing reservists would only raise more societal problems. In the political sphere, dissent on security matters and the phenomenon of conscientious objection, which have become more evident since the 1980s, will influence decisions on force deployments. For instance, the IDF may have to take into account conscientious objections of religious soldiers in the event of an order to dismantle settlements.

**Force Structure:** Israel, it has traditionally been believed, could meet its defense manpower requirements only by raising a militia-style force based upon universal conscription and mandatory reserve duty. This belief is increasingly questioned. Today, just over fifty percent of young Israeli citizens enter into military duty, with many of those not serving being observant women or Arab Israelis. In addition, about ninety percent of the burden of reserve duty is carried by about fifteen percent of the reservists. One of the effects has been that the IDF has turned from a "nation binder" to a "nation divider" -- an institution that serves to create a distinction between those who serve and those who do not. This reality is creating feelings of dissent and might eventually lead to selective service or an all-volunteer army. Most Israelis pay attention to the possible societal implications of a transition in the force structure, and are wondering what the common rite of passage for Israeli citizens will be in the future.

**Political Intrusion into Military Affairs:** The intrusion of politics into military affairs and vice versa is not a new phenomenon. It existed since the 1950s, particularly since David Ben Gurion's prime ministership. The novelty in the present situation, however, is two-fold: First, whereas nobody questions the bravery and professionalism of today's generals such as Amnon Lipkin-Shahak or Matan Vilna'i, neither has had the chance to command large formations in wartime. This could be one reason for their reduced standing in some politicians' eyes. Second, the officer corps itself has become far more pluralistic in its thinking than before. In past decades, most senior military personnel who went into politics joined the left, which enjoyed political hegemony in Israel until 1977. Today, senior army officers are much more evenly distributed among the various political parties.

Recent polls conducted by the BESA Center indicate that the public image of the military is declining. At the same time, generals are still among the better-known and respected public figures, and their military background is certainly advantageous to their political career.

**Ethnic and Religious Groups in the IDF:** The conscription or nonconscription of ultra-orthodox Jews is a sensitive issue and has become even more problematic in recent years owing to two factors: the growing numbers of ultra-orthodox being legally exempted from serving in the army; and the increasingly marked ultra-orthodox profile in cultural and political matters. The IDF already has a surfeit of noncombat troops, while the organizational demands that ultra-orthodox soldiers would place on the IDF would probably be a burden.

Nonetheless, Israel's Arab citizens are watching the IDF's handling of the ultra-orthodox issue very closely, as the imposition of some form of national service obligations on the ultra-orthodox community would almost certainly increase popular pressure for some form of national service for Israel's Arab community.

As to new immigrants in the IDF, ten percent of the annual cohort of new recruits are from the former Soviet Union.

New, Russian immigrants have been more resistant to integration than have been previous groups of immigrants. The army is reacting by taking into account their societal needs, and by not attempting to impose an "Israeli character" on these immigrants.

Sephardim, studies have shown, are overrepresented among noncommissioned officers and underrepresented among the senior officer ranks. Still, many soldiers of Sephardic origin have reached the highest levels of the military echelon, such as Yitzhak Mordechai and Moshe Levy.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Assaf Moghadam.

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