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and the Model of Military Conscription
in Israel in a Changing Social Reality

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Abstract



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January 2021

Text Editor [Hebrew]: Dafna Lavi
Series and Cover Design: Studio Tamar Bar Dayan
Typesetting: Nadav Shtechman Polischuk
Printed by Graphos Print, Jerusalem

ISBN: 978-965-519-333-6

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Printed in Israel

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ABSTRACT

In June 2018, the Knesset hosted a large symposium under the heading, “The (Half of the) People’s Army.” It was sponsored and led by representatives of both the Right and Left; the Knesset members who participated included Arabs, Jews—ranging from secular to ultra-Orthodox Jews—women, and men: people who at first glance would seem to have nothing in common with regard to their ideology or politics, and who come from opposite ends of Israel’s social spectrum. What was common to the Knesset members and the representatives of civil society organizations who were present, was their desire to pursue a legislative and public campaign focused on an open debate on what, in their view, is an inappropriate and outdated model of compulsory military service which should be replaced by a well-paid volunteer service model (AVF—All-Volunteer Force). Most of the arguments advanced against compulsory conscription as currently implemented focused on the issue of inequality between those who do and those who do not serve in the IDF, and on the fact that from an economic standpoint, it is inefficient to draft population groups that are not suitable for military service. The discussants concluded that it will soon be necessary to curtail the state’s coercive power in this matter, in the name of individual liberty and personal freedom.

What led these elected representatives and social activists to join forces in the attempt to modify the venerable compulsory service model? What political and socioeconomic forces are actively challenging the current model? What arguments against the military draft in Israel are being advanced by its opponents? What would be the appropriate model in the eyes of many sectors within the Israeli public? These and other questions are at the core of the present study, which deals with public perceptions of the military conscription model and the model of a “people’s army” and attempts to identify and characterize the groups that are questioning the current model and proposing various options for well-paid volunteer service (AVF).

The study and the responses to these questions are based on various sources: analysis of public opinion polls; a survey designed specifically to investigate this topic; the qualitative analysis of focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews with politicians, retired military personnel, social activists, and academics specializing in this field. The research team also attended conferences and meetings of nonprofit groups and organizations that are promoting the idea of well-paid volunteer military service.

Those opposing the compulsory service model are calling for a substantive change, against the backdrop of the continuing decline in the percentage of draft-age young men serving in the Israel Defense Forces—only 69% in 2019, down from 75% in 1990. In other words, roughly a third of draft-age do not serve at all. This is related in part to the demographic growth of the ultra-Orthodox sector, which now accounts for 12% of Israel’s Jewish population. If we add Arab Israelis, who are exempt from service, only about half of 18-year-old Israeli males serve in the IDF. This figure raises fundamental questions as to the validity of the people’s army and compulsory service models.

The findings of the present study indicate that civil society organizations focused on this issue and population groups relatively marginal in Israeli

society (such as the ultra-Orthodox) are calling for the gradual elimination of compulsory military service in Israel, but these demands are steadily encroaching on the hegemonic political and social mainstream, which still strongly supports the current model. As the number of those subject to conscription who actually serve continues to fall, the “sacred” model of compulsory military service and the ethos of a people’s army are being undermined by the mounting criticism voiced by the sociopolitical periphery and its attack on the rationale behind the model.

Today, the compulsory service model is taking fire from three different directions:

First, the secular left and the economic libertarian right. This group includes the well-established and economically secure, secular middle class, many of whom are left-wing in their political orientation, especially members of the younger generation. They can no longer tolerate protracted and onerous compulsory military service that does not offer them preferential compensation over other groups. They are not afraid that a salary-based alternative to the current model would affect their standing in the social hierarchy or their economic power—the latter deriving from the neoliberal market society that emerged in Israel starting in the mid-1980s.

Rightwing libertarian circles. These too challenge the current model. Their views are gaining traction among the political and economic right wing in Israel, whose spokespersons and political and civil society representatives argue, in the name of principles emphasizing individual freedom, that the state should surrender the right to impose military service, and also raise the economic and operational inefficiency of the conscription of such vast numbers each year.

Marginal groups that do not benefit from the current arrangement — the ultra-Orthodox. The second challenge to the compulsory service model comes from peripheral groups that have never benefited from the current

situation, chiefly the ultra-Orthodox, for whom the IDF does not serve the function of inclusion in the secular Zionist nation-building process. Representatives of this sector promote the idea of a paid professional military, such that enlisting in the IDF would be no different than taking any other job. Going in this direction might mean that the IDF would lose its high prestige and premier status among state institutions; those who choose to enlist would probably not come from strong sectors of the population. This change would eliminate a major obstacle in the complex relations between the majority that does serve and the minority that does not and reduce the frustration and anger that secular Israelis have been directing at the ultra-Orthodox, most of whose young men do not serve in the IDF.

The younger generation. The present study reveals that a higher percentage of the young adult cohort (ages 18–34) now supports a switch to volunteer military enlistment than in the past (55%—up from only 10% two decades ago). The discourse among many young people today is utilitarian and goal-oriented, in the best tradition of the neoliberal ideology that glorifies materialism, competition, and achievement. The younger generation subscribes to these principles and norms, which underlie their conviction that adequate financial compensation should be provided for service in the military. As a result, the IDF has responded to the public and political calls for increased compensation of those in service and is informally modifying the compensation model for draftees, with greater compensation for those serving in combat units and in tracks that demand greater personal sacrifice and a longer period of service.

It is true that, on the formal and overt level, compulsory military service still seems to be held in high esteem in Israeli society. But the two forces that are working against the model—civil society organizations and specific population groups—along with the changes that the IDF itself is introducing informally, could lead in the not-too-distant future to an official modification of the conscription and service model. This scenario,

similar to what has taken place in other democracies in recent decades, is likely to be realized, given that it is difficult to assume that it will be possible to continue to defend the legitimacy of the current model, when it is being questioned by an increasing share of Israeli society. Only time will tell whether and how the IDF adapts to the social, cultural, and value changes which Israeli society has undergone in recent years.

No less important is the need to generate, in the very near future, a profound and meaningful public, social, and political discussion of these questions and their profound implications for Israeli society, so as not to leave these crucial decisions exclusively in the hands of military and security officials.

This is one of the most relevant and pressing issues for Israeli society today, when growing sectors of society are no longer buying into the traditional discourse about military service and sacrifice. The present study demonstrates the need for rethinking and revisiting the social compact between all strata of Israeli society and the military, in light of the changes in the status of the people's army model, which has been left a lonely island in the neoliberal climate of today's Israel.

In recent years, compelling arguments are being voiced against Israel's current policy of mandatory military conscription, highlighting (among other things) the inequity of the existing model, the economic inefficiency of conscripting population groups who are not suitable for military service, and the infringement on principles of liberty and individual freedom. Calls for substantial change to this model come against the backdrop of a continued decline in the percentage of eligible male conscripts who actually serve in the IDF (just 69% in 2019).

Who are the political and other players who are actively challenging the existing conscription model? What are their opinions and arguments? What are the views of the diverse Israeli public regarding the preferred model of conscription?

These questions and others are at the heart of the discussion in this study. The study findings indicate growing demands from groups on Israel's social and civic margins for a gradual phasing out of the mandatory conscription model. These demands are reaching closer and closer to the heart of the country's political and social leadership, which continues to maintain strong support for the current model.

In light of the objections being raised by more and more groups in Israeli society to mandatory military service, it appears that it will be difficult to maintain the legitimacy of this model. Thus, there are questions to be dealt with on whether and how, the country's political leadership and the IDF will prepare for the ideological, social, and cultural changes affecting Israeli society and its attitude toward the IDF and mandatory conscription.

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January 2021

www.en.idi.org.il

ISBN

978-965-519-333-6