



# The end of the IDF as we know it?

Israel debates moving to a professional army instead of the draft

Daniel Gordis December 13, 2021

Israeli women during military training (Photo via Wikimedia Commons)



Israeli women during military training (Photo via Wikimedia Commons)

About six years ago, when I was saying Kaddish for my father, I had to give a lecture at an Israeli Air Force base. There was no way I was going to get back to Jerusalem in time for the afternoon Kaddish, so I figured I'd go to *mincha* at the base's synagogue.

The morning sessions were spent with pilots. All of them dressed in their flight suits (some were in and out of simulator training while we were there), almost all of them could have been lifted out of a *Top Gun* set. Handsome, self-assured, not a *kippah* in

sight, Ashkenazi to a person and (in this particular case) all men, it was a central casting moment.

After lunch, I set out for the synagogue. It was packed, mostly with men in uniform. But this was not the *Top Gun* crowd. They were mostly Mizrachim. And they were dressed in mechanics' overalls or whatever garb their jobs required. Not a flight suit to be seen, very few lighter-skinned people among the hundred-or-so men (it was only men) in the crowd.

I was reminded of that brief synagogue visit—and the “in your face” evidence (though hardly a sophisticated sociological study) that the IDF isn't quite the melting pot that people love to say it is, or a “people's army” either, for that matter—now that Israel has begun a public debate about possibly ending the draft and going (as has the United States) to a professional army. Military service would be a job like any other—you want to serve, you do. You don't want to, you don't. And if you serve, you'll make decent money.

Why make the shift? Because, say many Israelis, the IDF isn't really the “people's army” anymore anyway. Though the number of Haredim who serve is rising, it's still very small; by and large, Haredim don't enlist. Arabs don't enlist.<sup>1</sup> Conscientious objectors don't enlist. Religious women don't have to enlist (though some do). Even among Jews, only about 50% of draft-eligible young women and men enlist.

Enough with the charade, say 47% of Israelis. It's time to move on. (41% are opposed, and want to maintain the draft.)

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What's fueling this discussion? Some of it is the longstanding inequity of the huge number of exemptions given to Haredim. Some of it is the fact that Israel is going to need fewer soldiers even as the pool of young women and men grows along with the population. In 2021 there were approximately **90,000 Israeli young men and women of draft age**. By 2030 – less than a decade from now – projections are that there will be **over 130,000**.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, though, as the number of potential recruits increases, Israel will likely need fewer soldiers. A friend of mine came on a delegation of VIPs after the conflict in May. They had all the requisite meetings. The Prime Minister. The Prime Minister in the “on deck the circle.” The Chief of Staff. And a pilot ... of course.

The pilot was there to describe the many sorties that were aborted because of intel received at the very last minute that there were civilians either in or near the building about to be leveled. It's a known Israeli M.O., but given all the horrible press Israel had received, the brass wanted to stress that point to the visitors. Then, though, he added something that was probably off-script, but perhaps more interesting. He said to them, basically...

**“I'm the last generation of Israeli pilots. With drones and other technology advancing so quickly, there's really going to be no need for people like me not that many years from now.”**

I don't know if that's true, or only partially true. Either way, though, it's telling, that even the Top Gun guys, the archetypes of Israeli heroes, already see themselves as vestiges of an Israeli past.



Women graduates from the 163rd IAF Flight Course (photo via Wikimedia commons)

It's interesting to note who in Israeli society supports the shift to a professional army. Not surprisingly, the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox) are the most supportive (at 80%), while secular Jews (at 47%) fall in the middle. The group that is least supportive of the change—and thus wants to keep the draft intact—is the national religious (what Americans would call “modern Orthodox”) group, among whom only 32% support the change.

Those numbers show what Israelis have known for a long time—the wellspring of Zionist passion and ideology in Israel today (as has been the case for a few decades already) is the national-religious sector.

Matters were once different—there were days when the secular sabra, epitomized by the kibbutz, was that wellspring. Even at their peak, the kibbutzim accounted for only 7

percent of the Jews living in the Yishuv or, later, the State of Israel. Yet they had an enormous impact on what would become Israeli society. The kibbutzim produced much of Israel's early leadership, and even for those who did not live there, it was a symbol of the country's pioneering ethos. By virtue of having been purposely established on the dangerous borders of Israel, the kibbutzim would also become critical to Israel's ongoing defense. That, in turn, created a culture of patriotic devotion in these communities.

In the 1960s, when only **4 percent** of Israelis lived on kibbutzim, some **15 percent** of members of the Knesset hailed from those settlements. In the Six-Day War, kibbutz members were represented among the war casualties at a rate almost five times higher than their proportion of the population as a whole. Almost **20% of the fallen soldiers** came from a kibbutz. Almost **every third officer killed** in the war was a kibbutz member. If Israel had a "factory" for passionate dedication to the new state in its first decades, that factory was the kibbutz.

No longer. In recent decades, it is the religious community that has continued to instill in its young people the value of military service. Though the national-religious community represents only some 12% of Israeli society, in some combat units, religious men now make up **50% of the officers** (four times their representation in society).

It's all a direct function of education. According to a 2008 study by the National Security College, 80 percent of *mechina* students (*mechinot* are one year post-high-school programs, some religious, some not, some mixed) go into combat units, and 25 percent become officers—triple the national rate. At Bnei David, a religious academy devoted to (among other goals) instilling a value of military service among religious young people, more than 40% of the academy's 2600 graduates have become officers.

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From its earliest stages, Israel was a country that believed that the hearts and minds of citizens could be shaped. Faced with the enormous challenge of forging a state out of masses of very different people, Ben-Gurion was determined to impress on Jews of all backgrounds not only the state's political authority, but its moral and cultural centrality

as well. In his mind, it was imperative that everyone and everything be subordinate to the newly formed state.

**“A state is more than a formal entity, framework, regime, international status, sovereignty, or army,” he said. “The state does not exist unless it has been internalized inside people’s hearts, souls, and consciousness. A state is mental awareness, a sense of responsibility . . . [that connects] all the people, the citizens of the state.”**

He even created a term for what he was trying to create: *mamlachtiyut*. There is no adequate English translation of the term, but “statism” or “state consciousness” comes closest. It was in the realm of *mamlachtiyut*—his absolute determination to build a national culture with the state at its core—that Ben-Gurion’s genius (as well as his tendencies to the autocratic) were most on display. With astonishing determination and wisdom, he led the charge to build the state’s institutions and culture. The *Histadrut*, the national labor union (which still exists) which he had helped lead decades earlier, became a powerhouse, responsible for workers’ rights, education, health care, some banking, and more. To many workers, the *Histadrut* was the way that Ben-Gurion’s government cared for them. As one laborer noted years later,

**“Just as the religious believe that God protects them, I knew that the *Histadrut* was taking care of me.”**

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Those days of a centralized economy, with veneration of the government and the state a core value, are obviously long gone. That centralized economy, unlike many others throughout the world in the 40’s and 50’s, worked, because people believed not only in the state they were forging, but in the notion that the state was the way of breathing new life into the Jewish people. Today, Israel’s economy is the success that it is precisely because it is *not* centralized, precisely because Israel has managed to make the individualism that took the western world by storm into a national resource rather than a burden.

It's working in the tech sector and beyond—but would it work in the army? Yohanan Plesner, the enormously talented head of the Israel Democracy Institute, [is worried](#) that it will not:

Convincing our best and brightest to serve in a professional army will demand unprecedentedly high salaries and benefits, and even then, this will not necessarily attract the quantity of high-quality personnel the IDF needs. We may find ourselves in a situation in which a small minority of idealists serve in the military alongside those who chose to sign up for lack of any better employment options. In quantitative terms, a professional IDF will still require high conscription percentages, even without considering the gap that will be created in the IDF's reserve forces, which provide the strategic depth necessary in the event of a conventional war... It is important to understand that, without retaining some form of the 'people's army' model, Israel's security cannot be guaranteed for the long term.

He is right, but there's even more. There were days when Israelis believed that "the entire country is the front, and the entire people is the army," as the saying went. But today, perhaps with the exception of the communities along the Gaza border which have too often been abandoned by the government's defense policy, the country does not feel like a front. And the army hasn't felt like the "entire people" in a very long time. (Ironically, the IDF is venerated in some Diaspora communities far more than it is in many sectors of Israel.)

Plesner's point about attracting enough quality people is undoubtedly correct. But the underlying issue is no less important—is Israel really willing to "cede" ideological formation primarily to the religious community?

The religious community is a fertile ground for Zionist passion for many reasons, most of them quite admirable. But what about the 60% of the country that is not Haredi, not religious and not Arab? Surely, that enormous sector also needs an infusion of ideology, does it not? Isn't the view of 47% that it's time to give up on a "people's army" a sure sign of the erosion the passions that made Israel resilient for so long?

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Were Ben-Gurion to return to Israel to take a gander, he'd see that he made mistakes. The decision to exempt Haredi men from the army because (as he said) they were a last gasp of European Jewry that would soon disappear was obviously entirely wrong, and has caused great damage.

*(In Ben-Gurion's time, 400 exemptions from military service were given each year; by 2010, the number of Haredim excused from military service through the same arrangement reached 62,500 annually—an increase of 15,000 percent, when Israel's population had grown only 1,200 percent in the same period.)*

But Ben-Gurion would also be correct in claiming that he got many things right, including the importance of *mamlachtiyut*. Here's what he'd probably say:

OK, so my version of *mamlachtiyut* was tailored for the 40's, 50's and 60's ... and that won't fly anymore. But some version of *mamlachtiyut* is precisely what you're going to need to keep the enterprise going. Israel will work only if people still believe in the purpose of the country, still talk about the *purpose* of the enterprise.

There were decades when the Zionist movement wrote and published almost endlessly with vigorous debates about that. How did that conversation die out—I don't know. But whatever you do, get it going again. That, more than anything else, is what you need your leaders to do. That, more than anything else, needs to be re-injected into Israel's ether.

Yes, make the most of the individualism that fuels your tech sector and your booming economy. Celebrate how western you have become—but not at the expense of remembering the purpose we all had in mind—we were building a Jewish state, and we were saving the Jewish people.

Do you talk about that anymore? You need to. The issue isn't really the army—it's what your thinking about abandoning the idea of a "people's army" says about what you think—or don't think—about your country.

You might want to think twice before you abandon the last major vestige of Israel's ideological passion. For what you decide about this possible change in the army,

more than anything else, may determine whether or not your grandchildren even have this society to reimagine.