

## Save the Citizens' Army

Imagine for a moment that Israel's existence is once again threatened by a hostile coalition of armies, or struck by a spate of large-scale terrorist attacks. But instead of sending in forces comprised of conscripts from all segments of Israeli society backed up by highly motivated reservists, Israel deploys professional troops. Logistical support—food, supplies, and transportation—is outsourced to international security corporations. The majority of Israelis, meanwhile, remain at home watching the conflict with a sense of distance, if not detachment.

Realizing this scenario would require a radical transformation of the IDF and its role in Israeli society, and some Israeli experts have lately suggested sweeping military reforms that would bring about just this state of affairs. They recommend abandoning the notion of a “citizen army”—a paradigm that has made the IDF not only the guarantor of the physical survival of Israel, but also a foundation of its democratic culture and a central pillar of the Zionist mission of empowering the Jewish people.

As originally conceived, all Israeli Jews—with the exception of limited numbers of haredi students and those deemed either psychologically or physically unfit—were expected to serve several years in the regular army and thereafter to do annual stints on active reserve duty. The IDF, on this model, worked not only to protect the country's territory and population, but also to absorb immigrants, to instill Zionist values, and to galvanize a spirited Israeli identity.

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This paradigm proved immensely successful over the first five decades of Israel's existence. In wartime, an effective division of labor enabled regular forces to hold the line for forty-eight hours until reserves could be mobilized. And aided by the belief that the army exemplified the Israeli ideal, successive waves of immigrants learned Hebrew and were integrated into Israeli society through their military service.

Over the last two decades, however, the ideological foundation of the IDF—and with it Israelis' willingness to serve—has been eroded by a number of factors, including the internally divisive conflicts in Lebanon and the territories; the increasing numbers of exemptions granted to religious students; and Israel's cultural shift from collectivism to individualism. Along with these profound social and economic transformations, the nature of warfare—and of Israel's enemies—has likewise changed. With the elimination of Saddam Hussein's army and the aging of Syria's arsenal, and following peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, Israel today no longer faces the immediate threat of massive armored formations crossing its borders. The immediate peril now comes from terrorist cells based in the West Bank and Gaza, and from missiles launched from Tehran.

The effects of these changes can already be seen. Observers point to a drop in motivation to serve, reflecting not only ideological factors but also the increasing frustration of soldiers with the waste and inefficiency they often encounter in the army, particularly in the reserves. Exemptions from service are more widespread than ever, with fewer than 60 percent of eligible Israelis completing their military service—a number that continues to fall—and only 12 percent doing regular reserve duty. The IDF, meanwhile, is mothballing entire brigades of tanks and artillery. The citizens' army, it seems, no longer conforms to Israel's reality.

In response, a growing number of experts are proposing that Israel adopt a new paradigm. Ofer Shelah, journalist and veteran paratroops officer, for instance, has argued that we should abandon the pretense that the IDF is a citizens' army and work instead toward a professionalized army cleansed of

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ideology and what he calls an “Auschwitz mentality,” or one that is obsessed with survival. A study by sociologists at Ben-Gurion University, meanwhile, suggests modeling the army on the security companies that guard malls and restaurants. Such businesses, they say, could do the job more efficiently than an army run by the government. And Emmanuel Marx, an esteemed sociologist at Tel Aviv University, has called for canceling compulsory service altogether.

Such proposals seem at first sensible. Clearly, serious steps should be taken to reduce waste in the army—such as replacing the reservists’ month of active duty each year with a week of intensive military exercises, which would maintain combat-readiness at far lower cost to society. There is no doubt, moreover, that Israel pays a stiff price for its citizen army. Many of the country’s best and brightest spend the crucial years after high school engaged in developing a range of military skills rather than honing their minds or mastering a trade. The drain on the economy and society is real and significant.

Yet these reasons do not add up to a rejection of the citizens’ army. Calls for reform mean well but fail to take into account the long-term benefits—strategic and societal—which the Jewish state gains from universal military service.

From a strategic point of view, the suggestion that changes in technology and the regional order eliminate Israel’s need for a reserve army are breathtakingly shortsighted. This is, after all, the Middle East, and it does not take too much imagination to envision a sudden change in the region—an Islamic revolution in Egypt, for example—which would place massive, hostile divisions on Israel’s borders once again. If that were to happen, say, ten years after reserve duty had been phased out, Israel would find itself completely at a loss to meet the challenge. Re-imposing conscription in the absence of a hot war is politically difficult

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in a democracy, and rebuilding a competent reserve force takes a very long time.

Moreover, the elimination of the citizens' army is more likely to harm than help the problem of soldiers' motivation. The picture of Israelis' willingness to serve is more complex than is often thought. Though it is true that during periods of relative calm reserve-duty participation has dropped, this can change radically in a time of crisis. At the beginning of Operation Defensive Shield in April 2002, for example, the response to the reserve call-up exceeded 100 percent; even those no longer on active reserve rosters reported for combat duty. In 1967 Israeli reservists left their tractors to fight for their country, and in 2002 they left their computers to do the same. The reason for this response is clear: A citizens' army has much more at stake in maintaining the nation's security, and will bring far more motivation to the battlefield when the country is attacked. Soldiers who try to avoid duty in times of calm will rush to their nation's defense if the threats are real—for they understand that if they do not, no one else will. However, a professional force, consisting mainly of men and women who join for personal reasons rather than ideological ones, cannot be expected to defend the country with the selfless passion which carried the IDF to its victories in the critical battles of 1948, 1967, and 1973, or with the tenacity which more recently has worked to shield Israelis from terrorism.

But beyond the damage these proposals might inflict on Israel's strategic interests, they also pull hard at one of the pillars upon which Israeli democracy is built. It is the army, more than anything else, which has served to educate successive waves of immigrants about the needs and aims of the Jewish state, and to integrate them into Israeli society. The classic image of the IDF as "melting pot" was far more true then, and continues to be far more important today, than is fashionable to believe—as has been proven by the absorption in the last decade of Jews from Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union. More than any Western country, Israeli society possesses an inherent centrifugal force, always threatening the country's cohesion

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because of the sheer size and diversity of its immigrant communities. Only the IDF has consistently proven strong enough to counterbalance this force, and to turn these populations into a single, more or less cohesive, Israeli society. This need is not likely to disappear any time soon.

A citizens' army, moreover, has an ameliorative effect both on Israeli society and on the IDF. Because they are also soldiers, Israeli citizens have a far greater awareness and understanding of defense issues and the policies required to address them. Military experience enables Israelis to critique more competently the decisions of leaders in charge of defense. At the same time, a citizens' army also serves to humanize and democratize the culture of the military. The continuous flow of civilians into the ranks of the IDF helps prevent the emergence of a military caste whose values do not necessarily reflect those of society at large. The ability of the IDF to display unusual levels of restraint and sensitivity to civilian casualties, throughout nearly six decades of almost uninterrupted warfare, is due in large measure to its character as a citizens' army.

**T**hese concerns may not be decisive in other Western societies, which have a long tradition of bearing arms in self-defense. For the Jewish state, however, the citizens' army is indispensable. After nearly two thousand years of statelessness, the Jews' hard-won ability to defend themselves represents nothing less than a revolution in Jewish consciousness. In Zionist terms, to acknowledge the right and the duty to participate in the defense of Israel is to accept the responsibility of sovereignty and a Jewish return to an active role in history. In many ways, the IDF is the nucleus around which the Jewish national revival was formed.

But beyond this, the citizens' army also acts as the repository of some of our most cherished ideals—self-sacrifice, ingathering of exiles, equality. In an otherwise polarized society, the army is the one place in which Israelis from all walks of life—Sephardi and Ashkenazi, religious and secular, dove

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and hawk, rich and poor—join in a common cause. In this sense, the army is not, and has never been, merely a defense organization, but, much as David Ben-Gurion envisioned it, the embodiment of the Zionist ideal.

The Jewish state need not sacrifice this precious institution, or the values it upholds. Together with efforts to make the army leaner, Israelis must be reminded why service in the army is crucial not only to their defense, but also to their society, identity, and system of government. According to study after study, a strong schooling in Zionism contributes immensely to the motivation to serve in the army and in the reserves. If motivation to serve has dropped, the solution is not to eliminate military service, but to revitalize the Zionist education on which this motivation was traditionally built.

If a professionalized corps replaces the citizen army, a great national resource will be lost. If, however, the IDF is streamlined on the one hand and ideologically rejuvenated on the other, it will remain an invaluable asset not only for Israel, but for the Jewish people.

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