

# ISRAEL

## Since 1980

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## **Military–Society Relations: the Demise of the “People’s Army”**

Yagil Levy

“The civilian is a soldier on eleven months’ annual leave.” That sentiment, expressed in the early 1950s by General Yigael Yadin, the second Chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), has prevailed throughout Israel’s history. Israelis have long viewed the IDF as more than simply the military; in popular mythology, the IDF is “the people’s army,” a crucial institution for both the defense of the state and the self-image of the nation. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Jewish-Israeli society and its army has been a tumultuous one. From its lofty status as a powerful “people’s army” in the mid-1950s, the army has met with a succession of crises since the 1973 war, which intensified following its display of weakness in the First Lebanon War (1982–5) and the first Intifada (1987–93). These crises have led to a dilution of the army’s resources, a reduction in its political support, a decline in its symbols, and even its gradual abandonment by social elites. The Al-Aqsa Intifada, the second major wave of violence between Israel and the Palestinians, which erupted in September 2000, filled the army’s sails with fresh wind, though only temporarily. The Disengagement Plan (summer of 2005) placed the army once again in the midst of the political debate. Then the Second Lebanon War (summer of 2006) worsened the army’s status. The prospect of replacing the drafted “people’s army” with a voluntary-professional military, something not considered in the past, is now seriously discussed.

### **The People’s Army**

The French republican principle of the “citizen-soldier” was well assimilated in Israeli society. The IDF was founded along with the

establishment of the state in 1948 and was organized on the basis of compulsory enlistment for every Jewish man and woman, the length of which settled in the 1970s at two years for women and three years for men. The army's core was a small regular army, consisting primarily of conscripts, with the officer corps and part of the professional echelon staffed by career personnel. A large reserve army was also established (inspired by the Swiss model), composed of conscripts obligated to do several weeks of reserve duty every year in order to maintain their fitness as soldiers in case of war. The standing army, according to this model, functions as the "manufactory" of the reserve army, as well as the initial forces assigned to curb an enemy's attack until mobilization of the reserves can be completed. This model facilitated a maximum extraction of manpower to reduce Israel's perceived inferiority to the Arab countries in both territorial and demographic terms, but without overburdening the civilian sectors, with the political costs that overburdening entails.

Political and military preparations for what was perceived as the inevitable "second round" of fighting became the cornerstone of politics, assuming that the military answer to that threat was the exclusive one. Israelis viewed the conflict with the Arab nations as a zero-sum game, in which Israel's defeat would deprive it of its survival as an independent entity. Hence, the "hard-line" school has always triumphed over the moderate ones, and diplomatic alternatives were ruled out. Against this background, Israel twice initiated pre-emptive strikes – the 1956 Suez War and the 1967 Six Day War – to eliminate what it had perceived as an existential threat posed by the neighboring Arabs. Of particular importance was the 1967 war, which ended with a massive Israeli victory, marked by the destruction of the fighting Arab armies and the conquest of large territories. After 1967 people felt more secure, and the idea that Israel was in danger of being wiped out was replaced by the motif of "security borders." This was a concept that eliminated existential danger and aggrandized Israel's military might, if only it would be allowed to preserve its new borders.

The centrality of war preparation and the glorious image of the IDF established its social centrality. This enabled the political leadership to use the IDF to establish internal control and authority beyond the army's instrumental missions. The model of a "nation in arms" was meshed with the model of state-building embraced by David Ben-Gurion, the state founder. It was a model characterized by a

whole society ready for call-up, suspension of certain civil liberties, over-intrusiveness of state institutions, and a seemingly uniform Jewish–Western Israeli identity, devoid of ethnicity.

Under the wing of statism (*Mamlachtiyut*) – the state ideology that inculcated the idea that the state is a supreme entity, supplanting any particularist conception incompatible with state-directed goals – mass compulsory recruitment tied a Gordian knot between soldiering and citizenship in its most fundamental sense. Under the halo of the “people’s army,” this arrangement gave the army a favored symbolic status, and cultivated its image as a universal and depoliticized military that stands above society’s sectarian divisions. Military service was not only a legal obligation imbued with symbolic meaning; it was also constructed in terms of social experience that determines the boundaries of society. So militarization ran its course: the perceived threat to Israel was disursively intensified and the army took on the roles of “nation builder” and “melting pot.”

Ethnically, the IDF was consolidated and spearheaded by the dominant social group of middle-class, secular Ashkenazi men – the very group that had founded the army, populated its senior ranks, and that was identified with its achievements. The army was purportedly built on egalitarian foundations, although in fact, and as a by-product of its being shaped as a Western and modern army, the Ashkenazi secular group was designated to set the tone in terms of its quality. The Ashkenazi *warrior-Sabre* represented the dominant and proper (non-diasporic) masculinity of men who could pass the ultimate masculine test: combat.

Peripheral social groups, and in particular the Mizrachim, who had immigrated mainly from Arab countries in the state’s early years, were portrayed as able to contribute to the army quantitatively, but not to shape its qualitative values. Women, who were deployed primarily in auxiliary roles, as well as standing as mothers at the forefront of the demographic (Jewish) struggle, were forced to the margins as well. Religious recruits were led by their fear of the secularizing influence of the army into auxiliary roles rather than a full military career. The exemption of other groups – Palestinian citizens and the young Ultra-Orthodox – from any kind of service distanced them from the construction site of the new Jewish Israeliness, and added to the value of those who did serve, especially Mizrachim.

Owing to the statism, military service became a decisive standard by which rights were awarded to individuals and collectives acting in

the service of the state. Male Ashkenazi warriors, identified with the military's glorification, succeeded in translating their military dominance into legitimate social dominance. Military hierarchy definitively shaped the social hierarchy. At the same time, the IDF's very mass-based, universal conscription led to its perception as an interethnic "melting pot," as only in the military could all Israeli Jews meet on equal terms, without social barriers. Clearly, the ethos of the "melting pot" played a leading role in the state's absorption of the influx of Mizrachim and was instrumental in mitigating interethnic tensions.

The secular Ashkenazi group bore the burden of war for as long as it advanced its social status. Other groups – mainly Mizrachim, women, the national-religious, and, later on, immigrants from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia – assimilated the principle of the citizen-soldier and its anticipated social rewards. This structure was, then, constituted on *materialist militarism*, that is military sacrifice for social rewards, at least by the 1980s.

### **The 1980s – After the Watershed**

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 was the watershed after which the IDF's social status has seen a gradual decline. The war created a political opportunity, of which mass protest movements took advantage. The first wave of protest movements focused on supervising the military performance in the war in light of the "blunder." These activities were launched by protest groups of ex-reservists. Until then, the Israeli citizenry had not played an active role in monitoring military activities, but had passively tolerated military policies. After this protest the government established a judicial commission of inquiry (the Agranat Commission) to investigate the military's functioning in the war. The commission's findings led to the dismissal of several generals and ultimately to the resignation of Golda Meir's government. The protest helped, and was assisted by, the development of a press that became relatively independent from the political elites and gradually shifted its commitment from the ruling establishment to its reading/consuming public, to whom it felt primarily obliged. The first wave of protest followed the 1973 war and the second wave occurred at the end of the 1970s. Peace Now was the most notable organization involved. A mass movement of young, mainly Ashkenazi, ex-servicepersons led

by officers in the reserves, it called on the government to exploit all political opportunities for peace.

But the most crucial turning point was the First Lebanon War. The Lebanon War was initiated by Israel in 1982 to eradicate the PLO-controlled quasi-state that had been formed in Southern Lebanon and that was perceived as a threat to the Israeli population living by the border (see chapter 1). The Begin government expanded the original goals, which had been partially agreed by the main political parties. In consequence, the IDF was forced to remain on south Lebanon's land for almost twenty more years, suffering heavy losses and withdrawing partially, in 1985, to a "security zone" established in Lebanon and then completely, in 2000, to the international border line. A similar scenario repeated itself during the Intifada that erupted in 1987 – the violent uprising by the Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip against Israel's military rule. It became clear that the IDF had a limited capacity to contain the uprising, but not to annihilate it.

During the war in Lebanon, several new protest movements emerged and left their imprint on society–military relations. Yesh Gvul ("There is a limit/border"), organized reserve soldiers for the first time to selectively refuse to carry out military missions in Lebanon (and later in the occupied territories) because of the IDF's allegedly aggressive behavior. Other organizations, such as Soldiers Against Silence and Parents Against Silence, sprang up to protest against the extension of the war in Lebanon. By demanding an alternative to the accepted military way, these movements broadened their critical scope to include not only the army's modus operandum, but also its very purpose.

Central to this discourse was the unprecedented definition of the Lebanon War as a "war of choice" as distinct from the ostensible "wars of no choice" of the past, thus instilling the notion of an alternative to bellicosity. Largely as a result of these protests, the IDF partly and unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon in 1985. Additional protest groups followed, the most notable of which was Four Mothers, composed of parents of soldiers who had served in Lebanon, who demanded an immediate and complete withdrawal from this front in the middle of the 1990s. The effect of these movements' activity was to bring about restrictions, both direct and indirect, over the military's activity. Restrictions of this sort were increased after the outbreak of the first Intifada (1987), which brought the army into a political struggle for control over a population. This was a situation that threatened to

fracture the ranks of the army, populated by soldiers from Israel's left and right wings. It also threatened to drive a wedge between military commanders and political forces, which were in conflict over the appropriate strategy for the army to adopt. Further cracks in the army's unity were caused by the nature of the soldiers' policing missions, which were seen increasingly as a failing struggle against a militarily inferior population. As a result, political protests were renewed with fresh energy, led by Peace Now and Yesh Gvul.

### **The Decline of State Militarism**

The year 1973, and more notably the First Lebanon War, were the start of the decline of state militarism embodied in the *Mamlachtiyut* and the centrality of the "people's army." Four main processes were responsible for this shift, out of which the protest movements grew. The first was the significant increase in the use of social resources to maintain the Arab–Israeli conflict in the wake of the 1973 October war. This involved a considerable extension of military service: from 1970, compulsory service for males was extended from 30 to 36 months and the burden of reserve duty became 60 to 100 percent higher than the 1950–72 levels. In addition, there was a steep increase in defense spending, from about 10 percent of the GDP in the pre-1967 war period to about 23 percent in the years 1968–73, rising to about 28 percent from 1974 to 1980. Even though American aid alone covered about 40 percent of the defense budget, the rise in defense spending considerably exceeded GNP growth, in a way that increased the national debt. The state therefore failed to balance, as it had in previous wars, the security burden imposed on its citizens and the rewards they were provided with, especially as the 1973 war brought with it a financial crisis.

Second, the security burden became increasingly incongruent with the consumerist values growing in Israeli society from the late 1970s onward, generated by the rise in the standard of living produced by the 1967 Six Day War.

Third, the IDF's prestige declined as it demonstrated deficient prowess against Arab standing armies in the 1973 war and against Muslim militia in the Lebanon War, which eroded the prestige formerly conferred on military participants. In parallel, the diminishment of the external threat depleted the military sacrifice part of its value

as a struggle over the very national existence. Concurrently, the army became a site for political clashes, especially when the dispute over the state's borders sharpened and disagreements over the army's conduct heightened.

Fourth, and crucial, were the cultural and economic globalization of Israeli society from the middle 1980s and the structural changes in the economy in the spirit of the neoliberal doctrines that were introduced (see chapter 4). Globalization strengthened the ethos of the market economy with its characteristic liberal discourse, which challenged the previous collectivist commitments and symbols. Prominent in the liberal agenda were new values such as individualism, privatization, competition, achievement, and efficiency. In this framework, violent conflict was portrayed as an obstacle in the way of Israel's participation in the global economy. Naturally, the market economy discourse also laid down the basis for an increasingly strident critique of the army's resources, as its budget was the largest single proportion of government spending. In practice, in the years 1980–2006, military spending as a proportion of GDP dropped by more than 50 percent, while GDP rose by about 200 percent, with most of the cutbacks directed at private consumption

The overall result of these four processes was the erosion of the army's role in defining the social hierarchy. The value of one's contribution to the state by means of military service was no longer necessarily the criterion that would determine the distribution of social goods and justify social domination, as individual achievement replaced the test of statism. Equally, groups that do not serve in the army, or who make a lesser contribution – such as the Ultra-Orthodox Jews, Palestinian citizens of Israel, and women – made certain achievements that were not dependent on the test of military service but rather were based on their own political power, wrapped in the liberal discourse of citizenship. Nothing was more symbolic of this than the decisions made by Yitzhak Rabin's government (in the early 1990s) to drop the requirement for military service as a basic condition for employment in the public sector, and to make the payment of child benefits no longer exclusive to ex-servicemen.

Military service lost even more of its value as the vertical military hierarchy no longer provided the professional, value-based socialization required by an economy characterized by the emergence of flat-hierarchy high-tech organizations. Reserve duty also became a heavier burden in both absolute and relative terms, and it began to hamper



reserve soldiers both from effectively contending in an increasingly competitive labor market, and from fulfilling their roles as fathers within a more equal division of labor in the family. In short, competition was arising between the “military time” and the “civilian time.”

### **The “Motivation Crisis”**

Alongside protest activities, the change in orientation among the secular Ashkenazi middle class could be seen in the form of pressure to lessen military sacrifice or to increase the rewards for it. One mode of action was reflected in the cultivation of internal pressures of various kinds to divert resources from military reinforcement to private consumption (including reducing tax burdens). This reduced investment in security (as a proportion of GDP) from a peak of 31 percent in 1974–6 to around 17 percent in 1986–90 and around 10 percent during the 1990s.

A second mode of action could be seen in the gradual forsaking of the army, and especially a reduction in motivation for combat duty – the “motivation crisis” syndrome, as some aspects of this were termed in public discourse during the middle of the 1990s. This trend had a number of aspects: a slow and continual decline in general willingness to enlist, and particularly to enlist in combat units; fewer volunteers for officer training; a rise in the number of potential recruits purposely trying to alter their medical profile – which determines the soldier’s qualification to perform his/her duties – as a means to avoid combat duty (see also chapter 6); a rise in the number of enlistees requesting to serve at a base close to their home; and a significant increase in the number of young people dropping out before and during their service, ostensibly on mental health grounds. Secular Ashkenazim were at the forefront of this crisis, joined by the upwardly mobile Mizrachim, who adopted a pattern of motivation similar to that of the secular Ashkenazim. Among the latter, the collective agricultural sector – the kibbutzim and moshavim, who were symbolically identified with having made a vital contribution to the IDF was especially affected by the erosion of the IDF’s status following Lebanon, and displayed attenuated motivation.

The state exacerbated the motivation crisis by its own actions. Not only did it contribute to the erosion of symbolic rewards by directing

the IDF to politically disputed missions in Lebanon and the territories, it also began to reform the conscription system from being inclusionist to selective. Two processes are particularly worth mentioning. First, in 1985 the reserve army was reformed and the burden of reserve duty was reduced. The main thrust of the reform was gradually to transfer the cost of reserve duty from the National Insurance Institute to the army. Previously, the daily cost of a reserve soldier (primarily compensating him/her for loss of earnings) was not borne by the security budget, and so the reserve army was managed largely in isolation from economic considerations. The reform provided an incentive for the army to rein in its usage of reservists and to divert resources to other purposes. This process was part of a broad cutback in the security budget in the framework of the “Economic Stability Plan,” which, in 1985, eliminated the hyper-inflation, and heralded the gradual shift to a “market society” (see chapter 4). Indeed, beyond its budgetary implications, the reform meant that the reserves began to be managed according to the perquisites of the market economy, and a price tag was attached to the service of reserve soldiers. This resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of overall reserve duty days, and an easing of the burden of reserve duties. To illustrate: in 2001, reserve duty was funded on the basis of 3.8 million days per year instead of 10 million in 1985, before the reform. At the same time, the number of days served by reservists dropped from an average of 26 days per year in 1990, to 16 in 2000. On top of that, only a small percentage of the population participates in a significant reserve service. In short, the reform of the reserves brought about for the first time a semi-selective recruitment model, which deviated from the universalist principles of an inclusive “people’s army.”

However, this is a case of trying to right one wrong with another: the army’s inefficiency, characterized by the wasteful recruitment of reservists, was resolved by increasing inequality in the reserves. The cutback in reserve duty days weighed most heavily on combat units, where the middle class was bearing most of the burden, in terms of both the reservists and their employers. The burden placed on non-combat forces, with their larger representation of other social strata, was lightened as reserve duty days were reduced and cheaper, civilian alternatives to reservists were found. A new contradiction thus emerged from the directives of the market economy: economic savings for the army at the cost of an increased financial burden on the middle class, itself already faced with a high tax burden and the

contradictory pressures of the market economy. Consequently, from the middle of the 1990s, reservists were organized to claim their rights, as detailed below.

Second, selectivity encompassed the compulsory army as well. Numerically speaking, the defection of secular Ashkenazim, together with the expansion of the non-military Torah-study route (see more below), and the disqualification of poorly educated draftees, largely owing to the growing human reservoir following the mass immigration in the 1990s from the former Soviet Union, led to a reduction in recruitment rates: since the year 2000 less than 60 percent of Jewish men have been serving full military service, and this number continues to drop.

Naturally, growing selectivity amplified the enlisted persons' bargaining power with the IDF, especially as selectivity also cracked the military's image as an inclusionist "people's army," the boundaries of which overlaid those of the Israeli-Jewish community, and thus further devalued its status. Several patterns of bargaining can thus be observed.

*Personal bargaining:* Since the 1990s, soldiers have begun to negotiate with the army in person or via their families or other networks. These negotiations can determine the individual's role in the army, the conditions under which he/she serves, restrictions on his/her service and military function, and even the very fact of his/her serving at all. The strengthening of liberal values and their partial infiltration into modes of action among governmental institutions, have empowered the individual's standpoint and put him/her in a stronger negotiating position, sometimes with the assistance of the legal system. The media has featured many stories of artists, athletes, and models who chose not serve in the military, as it would interfere with their careers.

*Military parenting:* This can be seen in the increasing and quite open involvement of parents in affairs of the army. Parents, among them bereaved parents, even get involved in matters such as training accidents, operational accidents, the political justification of missions, and military service conditions. This involvement is effective because many of the parents are themselves army veterans or reservists who "know the system."

*The political selection of missions:* This can be seen in the strengthening of the phenomena of both explicit and selective, and "gray" conscientious

objection, and the appearance of political movements that ideologically endorse it.

*Economic bargaining:* Military duties became conditional on economic remuneration. The most striking illustration is the “revolts” in the late 1990s among reservists (such as pilots) arising from a lack of insurance cover, and consumerist-style associations of reserve soldiers demanding easier conditions, as well as appropriate financial compensation for their service. Pressure to increase the monetary rewards for reservists and their employers were partially answered by improved compensation for reservists (especially those serving for longer periods of time).

*Redistributional bargaining:* This involved pressure to redistribute the burden, especially the demand in the 1990s to recruit yeshiva students. It was a rearguard action to piece together the remnants of the republican principle of civic duty, if not by increasing the rights of those who bore the burden or negating the rights of those who did not, then by making greater demands on the latter. Amendments to legislation only partially met this demand, however.

To a large extent, these patterns of bargaining embodied a retreat from “obligatory militarism,” which sees compulsory military service as an unconditional contribution to the state, and the adoption of “contractual militarism,” that is, making service conditional on its meeting the individual’s ambitions and interests. The very activity of protest groups and the “motivation crisis” undermined the status of militarism in Israel. At the same time, demilitarization found its expression in the opening of a new cultural space for voices challenging the centrality of the military and the state of war in Israeli’s experience.

### The State’s Response

This interlocked process – protest, de-militarization, and the motivation crisis – produced two contradictory effects along two different life cycles. While the long-term effect was a realignment of the social composition of the IDF, the short-term effect was to reduce military control over human and material resources, thus limiting the military’s freedom of action in the realm of statecraft. The more the political disputes over the use of military force intensified, the more Israel’s capacity to use force declined because the state bureaucracy

and the military establishment had to calculate carefully the expected political outcomes. Accordingly, Israeli statecraft, in which the military had long played a central role, was channeled into non-military pursuits.

The visible result was the de-escalation of the Israeli–Arab conflict – that is the level of friction between Israel and its Arab neighbors was reduced so that the level of social investment in security, in both material and human terms, reflected the fact that military sacrifice was perceived as less legitimate than it had been before. The IDF, protective of its internal integration, social status, and its decreasing human and material resources, found itself being driven increasingly to adjust to a civilian set of considerations, under pressure from civilian groups. It was precisely because it was a “people’s army,” with the resources, prestige, and the professional mobility of the officer corps in the civilian labor market that this status entails, that the IDF was sensitive to shifts in the profile of the social legitimacy it enjoyed. The IDF therefore cooperated with the political powers in managing de-escalation. In addition to attempting to cool down the conflict, the government and the army were geared to divert resources (including legitimation) from the Egyptian conflict to the Palestinian one, through which the main battle over the “Land of Israel” would be determined.

The first move was the peace treaty signed with Egypt in 1979 at the price of Israel’s full withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula. Central to this move was the IDF’s interest in decreasing its human and material costs by eliminating the Egyptian threat and gaining American aid to help rebuild the army. Nonetheless, the government reversed the de-escalation process by launching the First Lebanon War. A battle against a demonic (PLO), yet inferior enemy, could have annulled the effects of the 1973 war on the IDF’s position as much as it could have defeated the Palestinian national spirit, had it ended with a glorious and swift victory. But the war concluded with the withdrawal of most of the exhausted Israeli forces from Lebanon in 1985, under political pressure by protest groups but in return for generous American aid, and was accompanied by a cut in the defense budget and the downsizing of the military industries. Later, the Labor Party under Yitzhak Rabin displayed greater flexibility than the previous Likud-dominated government in taking advantage of international and regional developments (the fall of the Soviet Union and Iraq’s defeat in the Gulf War), which weakened the PLO’s power alongside the IDF’s inability to rule the Palestinians militarily. The result was an acceleration of the

diplomatic processes, with the Oslo Agreement (1993) at the center. Resentment of the human and material costs of war also played a role in Israel's unilateral and complete withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and in the military's support for diplomatic overtures with Syria in 1992–2000.

However, the demilitarization and the peace process, which involved territorial concessions, gave rise to a counter-reaction amongst peripheral and religious groups, just as they eroded the IDF's social and autonomous status and motivated it to rehabilitate its position. So, the strategy of demilitarization could only be an interim rather than a long-term measure, which helped to reduce pressures from the political leadership and the IDF. Thus, the second contradictory effect, a long-term one, was a change in the military's social composition, which also empowered the army to resume belligerency.

### **The Ethno-National Challenge**

With, on the one hand, the declining interest of the elites in military service and, on the other hand, the downturn in the image of the omnipotent Ashkenazi *warrior-Sabre* in wars, other groups were able to enter the political scene and challenge, directly and indirectly, the hegemonic military symbols. The *ethno-national ethos* was at the center of the challenges issued by the more peripheral groups. Ethno-nationalism strengthened in response to the aftermath of the Six Day War, in which the Israeli-Jewish community renewed its encounter with historically venerated sites such as the Old City of Jerusalem and Hebron. For religious and rightist cycles, the occupation was a stimulus to reassert their identification with Jewish tradition (see chapters 1 and 2). Traditional Judaism, which invoked the primordial in the building of the Israeli-Jewish community, became for many a crucial factor in re-demarcating the boundaries of Israeli society.

In this way, citizenship came to be based not on individual rights deriving from the individual's belonging formally to the state, but on rights rooted in the membership of a collective community, whose primordial identity was Jewish. Groups expected to achieve status by merely belonging to the Jewish collective – status was no longer seen as dependent on historical or contemporary contributions, military or otherwise, as had been associated with Ashkenazi dominance and legitimized by the statist, republican discourse. This led to the

Mamlachtiyut-informed republican ethos being challenged not only by the liberal, market-oriented discourse, described in chapter 4, but also by an ethno-national discourse. Introduced originally by the Likud and Gush Emunim, the ethno-national discourse became a magnet for less mobile Mizrahi and religious groups – who had been marginalized and thereby alienated by statism – and offered them unconditional, meaningful partnership in shaping the “common good” of the Jewish-Israeli community.

In the spirit of this change, the main type of challenge to the Ashkenazi hegemony in the army was posited by groups who had been disappointed by their inability to gain the recognition or attain a worthy status in the army, namely Shas, a Mizrahi Ultra-Orthodox movement. Set up in the 1980s, Shas successfully demanded that yeshiva students’ exemption from military service would increase but at the same time would not be at the cost of the privileges awarded to ex-servicepersons. This presented an alternative to the centrality of the army and the Gordian knot that had been tied between soldiering and citizenship. Shas contributed to the institutionalization of the military exemption given to yeshiva students under the heading of *Torato Omanuto* (“the study of Torah is his livelihood”). It made a political commitment to uphold the exemption and even to expand it.

The exemption of Orthodox men from the army was a part of the religious–secular status quo established in pre- and early statehood (see chapter 1). A few hundred young people were exempted in the early years of the state, as Ben-Gurion’s gesture to the Ultra-Orthodox rabbinate during the early 1950s towards rebuilding the Orthodox yeshivas after the devastation of the Holocaust. In the 1990s this number climbed to around 10 percent of potential recruits. Furthermore, Shas refused to bow down to hegemonic secular militarism as the Ashkenazi Ultra-Orthodox parties did, instead unhesitatingly presenting the route of studying Torah as no less worthy, if not more so, than the military one. Shas thus constructed an alternative pattern of rewards for an increasingly Ultra-Orthodox population in the form of a huge project of Mizrahi yeshivas. This route offered greater material and symbolic rewards than military participation, which, for such young people, had meant either “dropping out” or taking a marginal position in the blue-collar segments of the military. However, the ethno-national groups not only challenged the Ashkenazi hegemony in discourse and politically; they also increased their practical hold on the IDF.

## The “Army of the Peripheries”

Five groups (hereafter referred to as the “new groups”), which had previously been relegated to a peripheral status in the army’s ranks, came to fill the vacuum created by the secular Ashkenazi middle class’s partial abandonment of combat units: Mizrachim – at first the relatively socially mobile Mizrachim, and later the less mobile ones; the national religious youth; new immigrants, mainly those from the former Soviet Union and Ethiopia; Druze and Bedouin citizens of Israel; and, more slowly, women. This change in the army’s composition began in the 1980s, although it sped up during the 1990s alongside the Oslo Process and the withdrawal from Lebanon.

These new groups perceived the army as a sphere in which they could construct new routes of mobility and legitimately attain various civil rights, whilst proving that they too were capable of the elite groups’ achievements in combat. This was quite often a direct challenge to Ashkenazi secular dominance. As many of their members held ethno-national values, these groups viewed military duties as a means to fulfill their ideological values by protecting the borders of the “Greater Land of Israel” against the perceived hostility of the Arab world.

While the Ashkenazi and Mizrachi middle class reformulated their military contribution and gradually staffed positions in the elite and the sophisticated technological units, the new groups increasingly staffed “blue-collar” combat positions in greater numbers, in the following ways.

*Women:* The lack of high-quality manpower, as defined by IDF officers, was instrumental in the advancement of women in the army. Demands from women’s organizations, and the “motivation crisis,” spurred on the army to expand the recruitment of women, who, until the 1980s, had been restricted to auxiliary roles. Field positions had been slowly opened up to women since the First Lebanon War, and women were gradually being given greater access to combat roles. The watershed was Alice Miller’s petition to the High Court of Justice in 1995. The court accepted her complaint regarding the rejection of her application to the pilot training course, and these courses were consequently opened up to women. In 2003 it was decided that women serving in combat positions would have to serve for 36 months, like their male counterparts, instead of 24 months.



*The Mizrachim:* The army was relatively open to Mizrachim from the 1980s onwards, though their mode of integration reflected changes in their internal stratification. The most mobile Mizrachi groups, who entered the upper ladders of the middle class, had internalized the republican principle from the outset, understanding that military service was a tool for social mobility, and accordingly deepened their hold on the army. However, during the 1990s, many Mizrachim began to attain mobility in the middle class without regard to their military achievements, thus devaluing the significance of military service. Mizrachi youth from the upper echelons of the middle class began to adopt similar attitudes to their Ashkenazi friends: in other words, their motivation towards the army declined. On the other hand, for Mizrachi youth from the lower strata of the middle class, military service remained an important test of citizenship. In fact, these Mizrachi renewed the traditional military ethos of the sacrificial service elite. This could be seen as an act of defiance in the face of the secular Ashkenazi service elite, and – in operational terms – led to this group's increased presence in combat units and among officers. Mizrachim, then, were “climbing down the escalator” – increasing their grasp on senior positions while these steps forward were paralleled by a devaluation of the military status.

*Immigrants from the former Soviet Union:* In a similar way to the Mizrachim, immigrants from the former Soviet Union saw military service as a symbolic “entrance pass” into Israeli society, and even as a test for gaining formal citizenship. This also applied to Christian immigrants (who came to Israel as part of mixed-religion families), who found the army to be a fast and convenient route for converting to Judaism, or at least an entry point to Israeli society based on their military contribution. Immigrants from the 1990s exploited the “motivation crisis” to gain promotion through the ranks. By the early years of the twenty-first century this group comprised about 20 percent of the ground forces.

*Immigrants from Ethiopia:* For young immigrants from Ethiopia, military service not only provided access to an Israeli identity, but was also a way of improving their self-confidence and even finding a certain feeling of superiority over their counterparts. This was based on their self-image as more self-disciplined soldiers, who were prepared to serve far from their family homes, and to accept the military hierarchy.

*The Druze and Palestinian citizens:* From the 1980s the IDF began to make a greater effort to persuade Bedouins – who were separated from the Palestinian minority and not subject to the draft – to volunteer for combat duty – and not only to serve as trackers, which had been their traditional role in the military. These efforts resulted in the establishment (in the early 1990s) of a patrol battalion that served during the Intifada on Israel's border with the Palestinian Authority in the area of Rafah in the Gaza Strip. The Bedouins' motivation was manifold: an ambition to attain equal rights through signing up to the army; an attraction to military activities, channeled into serving in the IDF; and seeing service in the army as a profession at a time of unemployment and economic instability. For the state and the army, recruiting the Bedouins was not only a way of dealing with a lack of manpower but also an attempt at holding back increased Islamization among that group.

Men from the Druze community are subject to compulsory recruitment, and from the 1990s some of the restrictions regarding their service were lifted, and they began to be integrated into combat units alongside Jewish soldiers. For the Druze, unlike the Bedouins, fighting the Palestinians is a tool in shaping an Israeli, and not an Arab, identity. In return, the state provides preferential rewards in comparison to those offered to Palestinian citizens of Israel.

*The religious:* A major part of the army's changing social architecture could be seen in the increasing number of “knitted skullcaps” in the army from the 1980s onwards, central to which was the gradual cognizance among religious Zionist youth that the time had come to lay down a challenge to the secular Ashkenazi nation-founding stratum. The foundation of the *yeshivot hesder* (“arrangement academies”) – a special program, begun in 1965, that enabled Torah study in a yeshiva alongside combat service in homogeneously religious companies – helped to overcome the rabbis' earlier reticence, which centered on an anxiety that religious youth would be exposed to the secularizing influence of the army. For this group, the main symbolic return for military participation was carrying out the mission of the renewal of the Jewish hold in the perceived holy lands. To a large extent, the settlement project in the West Bank by Gush Emunim, which was imbued with religious meaning, turned Ashkenazi religious Zionism from a marginal sector, before the 1970s, into a central political and cultural stream. The increased recruitment to the army formed a

complementary layer to the activity of Gush Emunim, which after the 1973 war had ideologically led the Jewish settlement project in the West Bank (see also chapters 1–3).

This process expanded after the First Lebanon War and coincided with the “motivation crisis” discussed on pp. 124–7. Gradually, more and more settlers of the West Bank and Gaza Strip joined the ranks. As the numbers of religious combat soldiers grew, their rabbis had a stronger position of power from which to negotiate with the army to gain influence on the army’s values and leverage to enable their military service to fulfill their ideological mission.

### **The Political Impact of a Multicultural Army**

With the change in the army’s social composition, military service gradually came to be based on social groups who had internalized the fundamentals of military culture and were supportive of the army’s role in the territories and elsewhere. In contrast, the criticism of the IDF and the restrictions placed on its functioning after 1980 were largely the result of secular Ashkenazi organizational activities. These organizations strove to subject the army’s behavior to a logic that was at least partially non-military, and even when it was military, it contradicted the army’s organizational rationale. This formed the common ground of movements such as Peace Now, Yesh Gvul, Soldiers Against Silence, and Four Mothers. The IDF therefore played an active role in creating arrangements that would actually make the army a multicultural site and thus encourage members of the new groups to join the forces.

In order to minimize politicization of the ranks, and in attempt to remain in consensus, the army began to remove reservists from friction zones. The First Lebanon War laid bare the political collapse of the model of a middle-class-based reserve army. The middle class levered its military participation into political involvement – mainly in the shape of protest organizations – which contributed to the fracturing of the army’s professional autonomy. The lesson that had been learnt was implemented in Lebanon from 1985 to 2000, as the fighting was increasingly carried out by the conscript army, which was easier to control. A similar pattern was repeated successfully during the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

The ethno-class stratification of the IDF, unlike in other armies, is considered a taboo subject. Indeed, in keeping with the discourse

that portrays the “people’s army” as being above ethno-class divisions in Israeli society, no official statistics are available regarding the representation of different groups. Although the IDF’s claim to a “people’s army” is no longer tenable, as less than 60 percent of the Jewish population completes military service, the army clings to the rhetoric and doctrine of the “people’s army,” the source of its preferential status in Israeli society. Mapping the casualties in the Al-Aqsa Intifada provided an indication of the change in the social composition of the army since the first week of the First Lebanon War (June 1982), in which most of the military forces, both regular soldiers and reservists, were active.

In the first week of the Lebanon War, about 48 percent of those killed were secular Ashkenazim, who had previously manned core positions in the military. In contrast, in the Al-Aqsa Intifada, only about 28 percent of the fatalities came from these groups, with soldiers from the more peripheral and religious groups taking their place. If we calculate the fatality rates of the core of the secular middle class – the Ashkenazi groups together with the Mizrahi middle class – the drop is from about 68 percent to around 46 percent, while the demographic weight of these groups remained almost stable, so demography alone may not account for this change. This picture was repeated in the Second Lebanon War, with the exception that the kibbutz youth increased their share. Part of this trend resulted from the efforts by the kibbutz movement’s leaders to counter the decline of this group in the IDF and the kibbutz youth’s over-presence in the still attractive elite units, which were overburdened in the war.

The change in the casualties map gave the army more room for maneuver in the direction of autonomous action. By the time the Al-Aqsa Intifada erupted in September 2000 at the Palestinian initiative – following the failure to arrive at a final agreement during the Camp David talks in the summer of 2000 – the army’s composition was based mainly on the new groups. As a result, the IDF could deploy force with renewed legitimacy. Indeed, the army systematically acted to escalate its response to the uprising by excessive response to the Palestinian hostilities, thus leading to many Palestinian casualties and to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. A peace coalition, which might have attempted to curb the IDF politically, energized by protests flourishing from within the military ranks, as in previous wars, did not emerge. Given that the instigators of political protest were mainly ex-soldiers, especially reservists, and their families, the social realignment had a crucial effect on the reshaping of the bereavement ethos,

from protest, which typified the First Lebanon War, to the acceptance of the sacrifice submissively, with conciliation, forgiveness, and even pride.

Even if this was not its intention at the outset, the army saw in the conflict with the Palestinians a good opportunity to halt the decline of its lofty social status. Just before the Intifada the IDF had hurriedly and unilaterally retreated from Lebanon on the government's orders, with the Hezbollah's militias snapping at its heels. Moreover, since the middle of the 1990s the army had been dealing with the "motivation crisis." And as if this were not enough, not only did the army's primary mission – fighting in Lebanon – come to an end, but this itself intensified the "threat" that the market economy would eat away at the army's resources; and indeed, the budget proposal of the year 2001 included a relatively deep cutback in the army's spending. The first years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada tempered this decline and put it on hold. Nonetheless, even the Intifada was not effective in entirely deflecting this process, which led to the Disengagement Plan.

### **The Disengagement Plan**

In 2003 the army could point to real achievements in reducing the number of terrorist attacks carried out by Palestinian organizations. Paradoxically, this was also the year that saw a rise in public criticism over the IDF's performance in the occupied territories. Two years later, the result was the unilateral withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the north of the West Bank in what was termed the "Disengagement Plan."

A combination of several challenges was at the center of the decline in the army's legitimacy. Critical was the erosion of the legitimacy of the army's financial and human resources indicated by the upper-middle class's (direct and indirect) pressure to cut the defense budget and to reform the conscription model in a way that would reduce the burden. Consequently, in 2004, while the IDF was fighting, the government ratified cuts in the budget, while simultaneously providing tax relief to the benefit of the middle class and above. Later, in 2005, the government adopted a reform plan that would reduce the load on army reserve soldiers by reducing the exemption age to forty, deploying reserves in emergencies only, shortening the period of service, and releasing thousands of soldiers from the service. A similar reform was

adopted with regard to compulsory service in an attempt to gradually shorten it from three to two years.

The legitimacy of fighting was eroded at the same time. Israel's increasing globalization brought with it openness to the normative judgments passed by global institutions. Limits in the use of force were more deeply recognized with growing criticism of the IDF's conduct in the occupied territories. Normative restrictions were then increasingly placed on the use of firearms, such as house destruction, conduct at roadblocks, air bombing in civilian concentrations, several practices of policing and more. In addition, the years 2003–4 saw the strengthening of the refusal movement, not necessarily in terms of numbers, but qualitatively, first, in the shape of the higher-ranking officers and members of elite units who joined the movement and, second, in high-profile media coverage of the movement.

These trends gradually narrowed the army's freedom of action once more, and, in particular, reduced its resources, thereby increasing the need to find alternative modes of fighting/policing. Against this background the IDF cooperated with the political leadership in carrying out the withdrawal from the Gaza Strip, with the evacuation of the Jewish settlements serving as a model that would decrease the IDF's friction with the Palestinian population and the costs involved in protecting the settlements. Politically, the army joined the "no partner" thesis of mainstream Israeli politics that underscored the unilateral initiatives.

Over the course of one week in the summer of 2005, the IDF unprecedentedly evacuated thousands of Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip and the northern West Bank. The army's evacuation tactics relied on the concentration of large forces of soldiers in the settlements being evacuated, creating a significant relative quantitative advantage for the army over the settlers, who were expected to oppose their evacuation aggressively. Furthermore, not only was the evacuation swift, but the army maintained the unity of its ranks, even in executing a politically controversial mission. Early predictions that the evacuation of settlements would result in massive refusals within the army's ranks, mainly among the national religious conscripts who identified with the settlement project, proved completely false.

It could be argued that the effective functioning of the army rested largely on the religious networks' interests in preserving their mobility within the IDF's ranks. Mass refusal accompanied by violent clashes between the army and the uprooted settlers (whose youth gradually

seized positions within the ground forces) would have endangered the achievements the “knitted skullcaps” had accomplished since the 1980s and would raise questions about the ability of the group to continue to deepen its hold on the army and rise to the very top, in the spirit of the group’s leadership.

Despite, or maybe owing to, the IDF’s effective performance, the Disengagement distanced from the army a section of the religious recruits, for whom the destruction of the settlement enterprise threatened to return religious Zionism to the status of a sector and thus also threatened the identity of considerable numbers of the conscripts. A new form of “motivation crisis,” this time among the religious, was monitored at several levels.

### **The Civil Agenda and the Second Lebanon War**

The Disengagement coincided with the trend towards de-escalation to generate a renewal of the “civil agenda.” More than ever, this agenda threatened to cut back the IDF’s resources and divert part of the defense budget to welfare or tax cuts. Significantly, following the elections of 2006, the most civilian leadership in Israel’s history took the reins, with Ehud Olmert as prime minister and Amir Peretz, the former leader of the Hisatdrut and a dovish politician, as a defense minister. The term “civilian,” related not only to the background of the leaders but to their political agenda as well – i.e., the “convergence plan” of withdrawal from most of the West Bank and the cutback in the defense budget. However, it was the “civilian” leadership that retaliated to the abduction of two reserve soldiers by the Hezbollah in July 2006 with a large-scale operation that escalated into the Second Lebanon War.

This month-long war, in which Israel launched massive airstrikes on the Lebanese civilian infrastructure while Hezbollah launched Katyusha rockets into northern Israel, gradually escalated to include the city of Haifa. As Israel’s much-hyped high-tech army failed to stop Katyusha rockets from landing in its cities, a ground invasion of southern Lebanon took place. After a month, the UN brokered a ceasefire resolution and the war ended with the deployment of the Lebanese army and a multinational force along the border.

This war ended, more than any past war, with a strong public sense that the IDF had failed in its mission. The civilian population had suffered heavier casualties and damage (which, of course, were

dramatically lower than that of the Lebanese population) than at any time since the 1948 war, and the IDF had seemed ineffective at preventing it. Ground clashes between the IDF and the Hezbollah forces further exposed the IDF's weakness, inflicting heavy losses, and revealing the low level of the forces' preparedness and the command's performance. The embroilment of the IDF in a long "policing war" in the occupied territories, which distanced it from the real battlefield, the regular cutback in its resources, the gap between the legitimacy of using force and the legitimacy of investing resources in the use of force, which resulted in hesitancy in calling up the reserves and launching the ground operation, and finally the failure to acknowledge the limitations in using force, were among the factors contributing to the IDF's malfunction.

In sharp contradiction to the Al-Aqsa Intifada, organizations of reservists and bereaved families engineered the protests that brought about the appointment of a government committee to investigate the war. For multiple reasons, the army in effect gave up on the reserve system in its traditional form and granted low priority to training and equipping reservists. When the war erupted and the reserve divisions were mobilized and hesitantly sent to fight for ambiguous goals, it became apparent that the IDF simply violated the "psychological contract" established with the reservist. Within the terms of this contract, the reservist is always ready to be called up, while the IDF's part is to ensure that the reservist will be trained, equipped, and utilized effectively. The IDF and its political supervisors thereby lost part of the autonomy they had regained during the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

### **The Political Supervision of the IDF**

Complaints regarding the weakness of civilian control of the army are often heard in the public and academic discourse in Israel. Nevertheless, a study of the political–military relations in Israel reveals an apparent paradox: within a period of about seventy years, the more the militarization of Israeli society and politics increased, the more successful politicians were in institutionalizing effective control over the IDF. Militarization passed through three main stages: (1) accepting the use of force as a legitimate political instrument during the pre-state period (1920–48); (2) giving this instrument priority over political–diplomatic means in the state's first years up to the point in



which (3) military discourse gradually predominated over political discourse after the 1967 war. Each stage was accompanied by a gradual increase in resources devoted to war preparation and an amplification of force-oriented preferences reflected in foreign policies. Even ostensibly diplomatic arrangements, the most important of which were the Oslo Accords, were formulated in military terms.

At the same time, political control over the IDF was tightened. Inculcation of the principle of subordination of the armed forces to the political leadership during the pre-state period gave way to the construction of formal and informal restraints on autonomous military action. During the 1980s the principle of political control over the army was further institutionalized when a state commission of inquiry held the political powers liable for the massacre perpetrated by the Christian phalange in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut, and forced Defense Minister Ariel Sharon to resign. Other areas (such as the defense budget) were later monitored, with greater involvement of the Knesset and civilian agencies.

The militarization of politics has contributed greatly to this monitoring of the army. It has made the army interested in being portrayed as a universal, apolitical organization that does the government's bidding, and has created a dependence on the political leadership as the army's supplier of resources. And, paradoxically, the very increase of military figures taking up eminent positions in politics, has contributed to the tightening of operative control over the IDF. Fewer and fewer spheres of military action have remained autonomous or hidden from the public eye. Institutional monitoring by civilian agencies has become much more powerful since the First Lebanon War, and has been backed up by public monitoring, as social movements have stepped into the arena. Assisted by the press, groups such as soldiers' parents and reservists have amplified their scrutiny of traditionally professional issues, thus undermining the IDF's autonomy at several levels. This has included journalists' and parents' investigations of accidents in military operations and training; reservists' critique of the distribution of the military burden, generating legislative attempts at limiting the IDF's powers to call up reservists; homosexuals' and women's successful struggle to lift limitations on their military promotion; press scrutiny of budgets, nominations, and military performance; and more. While previous political supervision of the army had been mainly concerned with formal, institutional aspects, from this point on it also took the form of wider public supervision carried out by social groups.

Nevertheless, militarization means the supremacy of military thinking over political-civilian thinking. In other words, the military view of political reality has become the main anchor of Israeli statesmanship. Consequently, though the army became subjected to “over-surveillance” by civilian institutions, these institutions were not provided with more capacity to prevent military escalation that does not serve political goals. As Israel’s political-military history since the 1980s indicates, the army did not rebel in a determined fashion against the authority of the political echelon, but rather took advantage of its weakness (as during the Al-Aqsa Intifada when the political leadership explicitly refrained from enforcing restraint over the IDF), or exploited the freedom of action afforded it by politicians on the grounds of the primacy of political military thinking.

### **Forecasting Premises**

It is safe to predict that in the near future the military will continue to maintain, at least in part, its centrality in the Jewish-Israeli society, whether because of the collective memory of its central position in the past or the visibility of the friction between Israel and the Arab world. To a large extent, the IDF will face the typical difficulties of functioning in a “twilight zone” of neither full-scale war nor full peace. Similarly, it seems safe to envisage a consistent decline in the scope of military participation and of defense expenditure despite the trend of temporary resource increases after wars. The gradual shift to a selective draft and the possibility that conscription will be abolished altogether in the fairly near future are the main options that are predicted. As discussed, since the late 1990s the IDF has shifted to a semi-selective model of conscription, although the mandatory service has not been formally ended. With the reforms in the conscription model and the aftermath of the Disengagement and the Second Lebanon War, this trend will intensify. Simply put, the IDF has gradually and systematically lost the confidence of various groups since the turning point of the 1980s: the Ashkenazi upper-middle class in the politically disputed First Lebanon War and the first Intifada, the national religious groups in the Disengagement, and the middle-class reservists in the Second Lebanon War. It is reasonable to assume that in the wake of these wars, the erosion of confidence will increase the difficulty of drafting and activating the reserves.

With the drying up of the valuable symbolic rewards that the IDF can offer to its recruits, the professionalization of the IDF seems the most likely avenue. Professionalization would provide the army with several advantages: (1) a trade-off between increased monetary rewards, claimed by both reservists and conscripts, and decreased personnel; (2) professionalization of ranks by basing the model on service by relatively few, for relatively long periods, to ensure that they maintain fitness, in return for monetary compensation; (3) de-politicization of the ranks by “purchasing” services rather than recruiting soldiers, thus mitigating previous ethical orientations. Soldiers of this “professional army” would not suffer from pangs of conscience when carrying out their assignments.

In common with the experience of other Western armies, the realignment of the social composition of the IDF toward further reliance on religious and peripheral may aggravate the militarization of the ranks. A volunteer army would draw the bulk of its personnel from Israel’s lower middle class and religious sectors. Material rewards, the potential for professional and social mobility, and militaristic values already attract more recruits from these groups to the military than from other parts of the population. Ending conscription would sharpen that bias. The result could be an army filled primarily by politically conservative groups, providing the familiar linkage between lower-class position, religious, and rightist orientations. The predominance of these groups in the army would inevitably heighten militarism and aggravate tension between the IDF high command and civilian elites, who would distance themselves from the army and the implications of its aggressive actions.

This implies a contradiction between the military as a magnet for the peripheral groups and its gradual decline as a central institution in the perception of the dominant social class. While the middle-class groups are likely to distance themselves from the IDF and to seek to decrease its resources as part of the neoliberal, hegemonic ethos of “small government,” for the more peripheral groups the IDF is likely to remain attractive for the symbolic rewards it can offer. Even labor immigrants (from Thailand and East Europe for example) may in the medium term acquire a selective entry ticket to the military as part of their naturalization process. Two simultaneous, contradictory processes – demilitarization and remilitarization – then, will affect the military’s functioning.

With the rise of “identity politics,” i.e., activity by culturally excluded groups aimed at reclaiming the acknowledgment of their distinctiveness, tensions are likely to become more acute in Israeli society as a whole, and in the military in particular, as different cultural groups compete for resources. This can be seen already in the accelerated promotion of women in the military in 2000, which led military and civilian rabbis to demand, successfully, that restrictions be imposed on the physical proximity of men and women in field units. Similarly, the flagrant presence of gays/lesbians in the IDF seeded homophobic trends from about 2005 onwards.

## Summary

This chapter’s point of departure was the need to get to the root of the fluctuations in the IDF’s social status, which embodied a shift from the mythological “people’s army” to an army plunged into a state of crisis with the civilian society, itself in a crisis of identity. Relations between the military and society in Israel have taken a cyclic course. Within a period of about twenty-five years, those relations have passed from the post-1967 climax of militarization to the demilitarization of the 1980s–1990s, and then back to remilitarization, as the conflict with the Palestinian Authority since 2000 indicates. Crucial to each phase was the social composition of the military, which determined the attitude of the groups within it to military service and to the burden entailed in waging a protracted war.

Militarization was driven by the rewards the Ashkenazi groups reaped from military service, central to which was their ability to translate their military dominance into legitimate social dominance owing to the army’s role in defining the social hierarchy. When these rewards lost part of their value, with the burden of military sacrifice actually increasing rather than decreasing, what can be termed a “progressive motivation crisis” emerged. It was led by groups from the secular Ashkenazi middle class. At first the military way lost some of its legitimacy (especially after the First Lebanon War), as seen through the appearance of protest groups; later on, support for the allocation of material resources to the army declined (mid-1980s); and, finally, abandonment of the army was expressed in the various ways in which people distanced themselves from service (1990s).

The de-escalation of the Arab–Israeli conflict led, in the short term, to the Oslo Process and the withdrawal of militarism. In the long term it brought about the state’s renewed ability to manage autonomous militaristic policies, largely because of the reconstruction of the army’s social composition in favour of ethno–nationalist groups who displayed more loyalty to the military way. It was a gradual shift from the “people’s army” to the “army of the peripheries.” As the first years of the Al-Aqsa Intifada showed, the state regained much of its internal autonomy by reconstituting the equation between sacrifice and reward, this time by drawing on religious and peripheral groups. Nevertheless, the Israeli state shifted and modified its mode of warfare and initiated the partial withdrawal from the Palestinian-populated territories, starting with the “Disengagement Plan” from the Gaza Strip. Paradoxically, although the army gained more freedom of action as a result of the social realignment of its ranks, its resources were contracted by the market-oriented pressures. This worked to re-narrow its space of operation, especially when it comes to costly moves. Since the deemed fiasco in the Second Lebanon War has not reversed this trend, the decline of the IDF looks more certain than ever. The road to the volunteer–professional army is almost inevitable.

Cyclicity, which has typified Israel’s history, is at a crossroads, now that the third cycle – remilitarization – has run its course. However, the cycle is neither endless nor one-directional. In Israel, at least, the relations between the new dominant groups of the future military and the dominant groups in society will determine the profile of the fourth cycle – back to the first or back to the second.

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