

The Decline of the Reservist Army

Yagil Levy

Every spring, with great pomp and circumstance, Israel celebrates the contribution of the reservists to the country's security, and political and military leaders laud the contribution of reserve soldiers to national security. In 2011, however, discordant notes marred the festive event, namely the ongoing protest by organizations of reservists about the gap between the nation's commitments and their fulfillment. The protest by reservists was heard while the President of Israel and the IDF Chief of Staff visited the Ze'elim training base and during a stormy debate in the Knesset.

The IDF reserves, formerly the backbone of the military's force, is now at a crossroads, and it appears that even the IDF command and the political echelon are not sure how to reshape it. This essay argues that a combination of political and economic costs involved in operating the reserves is accelerating the decline of this force, and is part of the general move towards the transformation of the IDF from conscript to professional army.

The Rising Costs of the Reserves Model

The IDF's reserves model is expensive, both politically and economically. Initially the opposite was the case: the ethos of "nation in arms" ensured that reservists would serve in their capacities with full political obedience. At the same time, reserve duty was also economical, as either the employers or the reservists themselves bore the brunt of compensating the reservists for loss of income. This was the case before the full compensation system was implemented by the National Insurance Institute of Israel (NIII), particularly after 1967.

The political costs rose after 1967. Starting with the three-week waiting period before the Six Day War, while the mobilized reservists were disquiet

Prof. Yagil Levy is a member of the faculty at the Open University.

in the face of the government's hesitation in going to war, the political cost of mobilizing the reserves slowly started to dawn on the decision makers. Reservists have political bargaining chips, both because they are enlisted civilians living simultaneously in both worlds¹ and because of their natural position in the middle class – whether originally (because they reflect the standing army of yesterday in which there was a much higher representation of the middle class than today) or because of social mobility. This potential cost figured among the leading considerations in the decision to avoid a mass mobilization of the reserves on the eve of the Yom Kippur War in light of the approaching elections and after the pointless but expensive and much-criticized mobilization of some of the reserve units just a few months previously, given the concern about a possible Egyptian attack.² Refraining from this mobilization in no small way shaped the outcome of that war.

The various groups organized by reservists that arose after 1973, from Motti Ashkenazi (who led the anti-government protests of army reservists at the end of the war with the demand for resignations of the government for its misconduct of the war) to Peace Now, contributed to the breakup of the military decision making monopoly among the political elites and expansion of the political discourse in a way that gradually eroded the government's autonomy in making military and political decisions. This process grew stronger after the 1982 Lebanon War. The length of that war, the expansion of its objectives, and its entanglement in the quagmire of a war of attrition encouraged new reservist movements that for the first time included selective, organized disobedience. Foremost among these were Yesh Gvul ("There is a Limit") and Soldiers against Silence, alongside the older Peace Now organization. The protests they generated made a decisive contribution to the unilateral redeployment in Lebanon in 1985, two years after the government directed a partial withdrawal from Beirut and the Shuf Mountains to the Awali River. "We left Lebanon because of the reservists," said Minister of Defense Moshe Arens, referring to their protests.³

From this point onwards, decision makers grasped the idea that the deployment of reservists comes with a significant political price tag that narrows the scope of autonomy of the political decision making process. Thus when the first intifada erupted in 1987 and the right wing parties in government wanted to pressure the army to put down the civilian uprising

with force – an approach opposed by the left – Chief of Staff Dan Shomron told the government that the uprising had a political solution but not a military one. In thus seeking to mitigate the army's role in putting down the uprising, Shomron sought to prevent the dissolution of the army, which comprised essentially an even number of soldiers from the left and the right, especially at a time when the deployment in the territories to a very large extent depended on reservists, "alumni" of Lebanon. His statement to the government almost certainly tempered the potential opposition of left-leaning soldiers by lending their activity the sense of a necessary temporary measure not meant to decide the confrontation; this would be achieved diplomatically through negotiations. The restraint of the army paved the way for a partial withdrawal from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in the form of the Oslo Accords. Moreover, Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin testified that the concern lest the government fail to fully implement a general reserves mobilization in a controversial war played a role in his decision to embark on the Oslo process.⁴

The reservists' protest embodied some of the growing sensitivity among Israeli society to military casualties. This was expressed well by Soldiers against Silence, a group of released reservists who demonstrated opposite Prime Minister Menahem Begin's house against the war of attrition in Lebanon and carried signs with regularly updated tallies of the dead. This sensitivity made the army formulate a policy of casualty aversion that tried to minimize putting soldiers at risk and even avoided undertaking risk-laden operations, similar to comparable processes that have occurred in Western armies particularly since the war in Vietnam.

One component of this policy was to try to keep reservists away from sensitive hotspots. Indeed, the IDF's guerilla war in Lebanon in 1985-2000 relied on regular army personnel. According to the testimony of Moshe (Chico) Tamir, one of the commanders in Lebanon, this dependence on regular conscripts also minimized news coverage of the front.⁵

This was likewise the case with the al-Aqsa intifada of 2000-2005. Reservists were deployed in the heart of the combat primarily in Operation Defensive Shield (2002), in which the military reoccupied part of the West Bank cities, only after the legitimacy of the fighting was established on the basis of the activity of the regular army forces for close to two years. Despite the impressive response by reservists to the mobilization, not surprisingly, the protests about the nature of the missions and the division of labor and

compensation resurfaced once the operation was over, even as the “war for our homes,” as the fighting against the Palestinians was described in the public discourse, continued. For example, the government’s decision to extend reserve duty from 30 to 37 days after Operation Defensive Shield passed, but over much opposition, and a subsequent proposal to lengthen annual reserve duty was rejected.⁶

An additional element of casualty aversion was manifested in the formulation of a new military doctrine. Since the 1990s, the army has hinged its new doctrine on technology based on standoff fire: departing from the traditional approach to combat until the 1980s, the main principle involves moving the fire – not the forces – into enemy territory. The doctrine was built on the acquisition of high capabilities of destroying targets by aerial and artillery fire, with emphasis on precision armaments and without ground troops in enemy territory. The new doctrine was implemented for the first time in the 1990s in Operations Accountability and Grapes of Wrath against Hizbollah. Similar to the Revolution in Military Affairs promoted by the American army in the 1980s, the IDF’s new doctrine was in part meant to reduce the number of casualties by intensive use of technology (the “shock and awe” technique), so that in context of the new political constraints it would be possible to shorten the duration of fighting and generate a rapid decision.

This approach was manifested in the Second Lebanon War, which represented a significant break in the relations between the army and the reservists. The fighting relied on aerial bombardments serving as standoff fire. The reservists were called up only after 16 days of fighting.⁷ The hesitation in mobilizing the reserves expressed the dual political price: the concern that a high casualty toll, especially of reservists, would erode public support for the military action and damage the legitimacy of the government and the army,⁸ and the understanding that from the moment the reservists were called up the government’s freedom of movement would be constrained. This is how Chief of Staff Dan Halutz put it when trying to persuade the government to embark on a comprehensive rather than a graduated ground operation at the end of the war: “There are no middle courses here, of doing half, a quarter, or a third in order to satisfy some of our desires...It’s all or nothing, because there are also people behind this willingness and there are reservist ORBATs ready to go and we can’t just keep their hands tied saying, ‘wait, wait.’”⁹ In other words,

there was an echo to the legacy of 1967, meaning that the government could not allow itself extended waiting that could conceivably be accompanied by unrest on the part of the reservists.

This political cost did in fact reveal itself as relevant in light of the protest by the reservists after the war. Reservists joined bereaved parents and other groups that protested the army's flawed performance during the war. The protest intensified the constraints of the army by solidifying the expectation that the government would avoid risking soldiers' lives for nothing. Such a risk is present when the government has no political ability to complete the military operation and under circumstances in which the government cannot carry out the operation because of the army's lack of preparedness, even if the justification for the operation is not in doubt. Not coincidentally, a high estimate of casualties, including among reservists, played an important role in the government's postponing a ground operation in the Gaza Strip for a long time. The government authorized it only once the conditions were ripe for implementing a firepower approach that would reduce the exposure of IDF soldiers to danger in exchange for increasing the danger to the residents of Gaza.¹⁰ Against the background of similar political consideration, reservists were barely called up to participate in the 2005 disengagement from Gaza, as this politically controversial task was assigned to the regular army.

A reservist battalion serving on the Israeli-Egyptian border in 2011 demonstrated anew the political cost of deploying reservists. At the start of their reserve duty, soldiers and officers in the battalion made it clear to the sector commander that they would not participate in "hot returns," the procedure authorizing IDF soldiers and border police to return asylum seekers (such as Sudanese refugees) to Egypt and turn them over to Egyptian police after brief questioning to make sure they were not seeking political refuge but were in fact trespassers. Reservists took this stance when it became clear to them that those returned are liable to encounter violence at the hands of the Egyptian police. The regional brigade commander acquiesced to the soldiers' request and instructed that while on duty the battalion in that sector would not use the controversial procedure, which is carried out routinely when the regular army Caracal Battalion is stationed there.¹¹ This is a demonstration of how reservists can limit, even if only temporarily, the army's autonomy.

Even before the Second Lebanon War, protests by reservists sharpened the sense that there was a “reserves crisis,” as this phenomenon has been dubbed since the 1990s. The sense of crisis impelled the government, under pressure by reservist organizations and the reserves lobby in the Knesset, to approve reforms in the mobilization model. The formulation of these reforms started in a committee headed by Chief Reserves Commander Brig. Gen. Ariel Hyman and continued in the Braverman Committee, appointed by the government to propose a reform of the reserve system. The reforms were finally formalized with the passage of the 5768/2008 Reserve Duty Law. The law limits the state’s authority to call up reservists and subordinates it to more explicitly defined rules than in the past. For example, it was determined that no reservist would be called up for the purpose of operational employment more than once during a period of three consecutive years (Paragraph 7, C, 2). This directive represented the political cost of deploying reservists by the very statement that operational employment would ordinarily be based on regular army forces whereas reservist deployment would be the exception.

The political cost of the reservist structure rose together with the economic cost. The first withdrawal from Lebanon in 1985 allowed the government to make the reservist structure selective in part, though not necessarily as the result of an explicit or even conscious decision. As part of the 1985 extensive cuts to the defense budget, it was decided to transition gradually the budgeting of reservist days from the NIII to the IDF. Previously the cost of reservist days, particularly compensation for the reservist’s loss of income, was not borne by the defense budget and therefore the reservist structure was managed with no regard to economic considerations. As a result of this decision the army had a new incentive to reduce reserves days and use the savings for other purposes. In addition to the budgetary significance, the reserves were thus subordinated to the principles of a market economy, and for the first time an economic price tag was attached to reserve duty. The result was a significant cut in reserve duty days and a relief of the burden of service. For example, the budgetary basis for 1985, prior to the change, was 10 million reserve duty days annually. As a result of the cuts, reserve duty days fell to 3 million for 2006.¹² The downward trend was even felt in years when reserve units were deployed, especially during the two intifadas.

However, the reduction in reserve duty increased the inequality in the division of the service burden insofar as the army identified alternatives to the administrative but not the combat roles. About one-third of reservists bore some 80 percent of the burden as of the early 2000s, and only 10 percent of those obligated to perform army service (the total number of people eligible for reserve duty is about half of all males in Israel in the reservist age bracket) did annual reserve duty in excess of 10 days.¹³ In other words, a very low percentage participates in what was once considered the institution that defined Israeli manhood.¹⁴ The ethos of “the people’s army” has ceded to the ethos of the marketplace. This growing inequality was the background for the organizing by reservists through various organizations (the Battalion Commanders Forum was the pioneer, followed by the Hapashim Forum and BALTAM) with the demand for a more equitable distribution of the burden and compensation for those serving, pressures that resulted in the Reserve Duty Law.

The economic cost limited the training of reservists to fulfill their missions in emergencies, and reservist training was cut significantly starting in 1989. At the same time, the training of regular army units was slashed starting in 2002 as the result of a difficulty in recruiting reserve units to replace the regular army units deployed in the Palestinian arena. This was yet another blow to the fitness of the reservist structure fed by the regular army units, in addition to the damage to the fitness of the regular army units themselves. From 2003 until 2005 the IDF reported to the political echelon that continuous damage was being done to the training of the reserve ground forces because of budget cuts.¹⁵ In light of this, further development of the standoff fire approach became an entrenched fact of life thanks to budgetary limitations that resulted in damage to the fitness of the ground forces. In turn, adopting the doctrine and reshaping operational plans on the basis of standoff fire further eroded the investment of resources in the ground forces, as investing in it became redundant given the new alternative. Therefore, once the Israeli government decided to respond with force to the abduction of two reservists in June 2006, a response that became the Second Lebanon War, an aerial assault was the primary and preferred – practically exclusive – response. The reservists were called up late, and the circumstances of the mobilization and the execution gave rise to protests.

The Reserve Duty Law, a result of the “reserves crisis,” raised the economic costs of deploying reserves by determining special compensation for reservists because of compensation for loss of income. As early as 1998 another law first determined that reservists would be compensated not only for loss of income but also for the service itself (“special compensation”); the new law formalized the practice and added the “special compensation” by means of the tax returns. The idea of a professional army began to become institutionalized.

In short, the political leadership and the army command internalized the political and economic costs of calling up the reserves. This understanding lay the groundwork for the process that followed, which gradually led to a reduction in the function of the reserves force. This is not to claim that the decision makers were fully conscious of the process, rather that this internalization of constraints shaped the strategic culture of the army, thereby delimiting the sphere of available decisions. Thus, gradually, the hands of the army became tied in terms of using the reserves. Its use became entrenched in economic bargaining and increased political bargaining, making the performance of some operations conditional on the values of the reservists called up for duty.

Looking Ahead

The Reserve Duty Law and the massive investment in training the reserves seemingly marked a change in the approach of the army and the political echelon regarding the importance of the reserves. However, this force is destined to decline as its costs continue to rise.

The political cost will rise as long as the missions of the army are politically controversial, be it regarding what is targeted or the cost of achieving a controversial objective. This controversy is intensified given the growing public sensitivity to casualties. This sensitivity enhances public criticism about the army’s performance and makes the army and the political echelon behave with utmost care before calling up the reserves.

This cost is joined by the economic price tag. The pressure by reservists to improve the compensation package to make sure it covers the full cost of service did not cease even after the law was passed. A survey by the army’s Behavioral Science Department showed that only one-third of those serving in combat units feel that the benefits and compensation package are significant.¹⁶ Moreover, in the dialogue between reservists with the

army and government one hears over and over again of discrimination against reservists, especially commanders, in the workplace. To many employers, reserve duty is no longer social capital that the reservist brings to his place of civilian employment, rather the cause of negative yield. Over time the difficulty in confronting this phenomenon will increase the pressure to compensate and reward reservists.

Another source for pressure of this type is the expansion of the rate of inequality in bearing the burden. The Reserve Duty Law institutionalized the transition to a selective service model. The meaning of this is that young people who insist on being exempted from reserve duty will in most cases be discharged from service even if the formal obligation remains in place. Moreover, not only has the army's agreement to discharge those who are no longer in the regular army from military service been institutionalized, but the law even lays the groundwork for encouraging such discharges by means of two mechanisms. First, limiting reserve duty to training for the purpose of fulfilling the soldier's function during emergencies and operational employment winnows out those in various administrative positions. Second, obligating the army to ensure the level of fitness of reservists encourages the removal of those in whom the army will not invest to keep fit. From a different direction, the Brodet Commission, appointed by the government after the Second Lebanon War to formulate the desired size and composition of the defense budget in the short and long terms, recommended civilianizing many auxiliary roles, including those staffed by reservists.¹⁷ This supports the incentive to minimize the employment of reservists.

On the other hand, while the Braverman Committee and the Reserve Duty Law sought to temper the inequality by reducing the scope of mobilizations, the army has shown consistent opposition. Recently, Deputy Chief of Staff Yair Naveh made this explicit: "Our need for missions along the border requires us to enlarge our ORBAT of employment... Personally I posit – and the Chief of Staff agrees – that it is preferable to harm the Reserve Duty Law rather than to harm training."¹⁸ This is an example of the contradiction-riddled pattern of the state's handling of the reservist structure: on the declarative level, it recognizes its importance in emergencies and makes an effort to compensate those who serve, but it also exacerbates the inequity, making symmetrical compensation impossible.

The upshot is that the army will have to increase the monetary compensation. However, as it does so, it will tend to choose fair compensation while reducing the scope of the reserves to keep costs down, to the point that there will be an inevitable transition, as part of a spiral of compensation and selectivity, towards a professional army. The need to professionalize the reserves force will support this trend. Furthermore, making the reserve forces professional will keep down the political costs required for its deployment as long as the pattern of relations is established that turns the contractual relationship between the army and its people from a republican contract at the level of state-group, which grants reservists the right to express their political voice in the name of their contribution to the army, into a employment contract at the level of army-individual. Such a contract would weaken the infrastructure for political protest coming from within the ranks of the reserves. Governments will always prefer the economic to the political cost, particularly if the economic cost balances out the political one.

The Second Lebanon War offered a demonstration of this. The government decided to compensate the reservists who took part in the war (for at least 8 days) with a special compensation called “expense reimbursement” of NIS 400, plus another NIS 50 per day from the ninth day of service onwards.¹⁹ This compensation was beyond that set by law for loss of income. In past wars, in which reservists were called up for much longer periods and for much more difficult service, no compensation beyond the formal compensation mechanisms that always existed was ever offered. This special compensation may be read as a mechanism to dampen protest by the reservists (which, however, was not needed after Operation Cast Lead, a situation viewed as an achievement). Moreover, the compensation was approved in August 2006 after the reserve units were released and the reservists’ protest about the war began, initially focusing on the low level of fitness in the units. The more the mobilization is based on hiring rather than calling up, i.e., the greater the extent to which the monetary compensation plays a central role, so the state and army bypass the need to confront demands, expectations, and protests of a political nature or that may spill over into the political arena. This compensation, and later the monetary compensations enacted by the Reserve Duty Law put into place a system that will become more entrenched the more selective the service becomes, and bolsters the hiring profile over calling up

the reservists and lowering the potential for a political voice. The civilian political consciousness will play a secondary role, and the economic cost thus balances out the political one.

In the long run, the reserves structure will grow smaller and be based on a professional model founded on the service of the relatively few, gradually on a volunteer basis for relatively long periods of time, which will ensure their fitness, in exchange for adequate monetary compensation, similar to a model that several Western nations have adopted on top of the ruins of mandatory service. Israel is marching in that direction. The professional autonomy of the army and its political operators will be better off for it, but democracy, in which the voice of the reserves represented a critical cornerstone by its very ability to restrain the use of the army, will not.

Notes

My thanks to Aleh Mikanowski from Hapashim Forum (Forum for Soldiers who Serve in the Reserves) for his useful comments on the draft of this essay.

- 1 Nir Gazit, Edna Lomsky-Feder, and Eyal Ben-Ari, "Reservists between Worlds," *Maarachot* 394 (May 2004), pp. 87-94.
- 2 See Benny Morris, *Casualties: The History of the Arab-Zionist Conflict 1881-2001* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), p. 357; and Uri Bar-Joseph, *The Watchman Fell Asleep: The Surprise of Yom Kippur and its Sources* (Tel Aviv: Zmora-Bitan, 2001), pp. 225-26.
- 3 Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor, *Captives in Lebanon: The Truth about the Second Lebanon War* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, Tel Aviv, 2007), p. 319.
- 4 Yoram Perry, "The Relationship between Society and Army in Israel in Crisis," *Migamot* 39, no. 4 (1999): 394.
- 5 Moshe Tamir, *A War without a Sign* (Tel Aviv: Maarachot Press, 2005), pp. 10-11, 274.
- 6 These moves are documented in the Hapashim Forum at <http://miluim.ipaper.co.il/1411>.
- 7 *The Commission of Inquiry into the Events of the Campaign in Lebanon – Final Report*, The Prime Minister's Office, Jerusalem, 2008, p. 250.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 411, 526.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 180.
- 10 Yagil Levy, *Who Governs the Army: Between Supervising the Army and Controlling Militarism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010), pp. 168-70.
- 11 Anshil Pfeffer, "Reservists Opposed to Forced Return of Infiltrators to Egypt and Procedure Is Stopped," *Haaretz*, April 22, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/1225775.html>.
- 12 As may be concluded from "Damage to Employees as a Result of Serving in the Reserves," Knesset Research and Information Center, Jerusalem,

- 2003, and "Assessment of the Budgetary Cost of Implementing the National Insurance Institute Bill," Knesset Research and Information Center, Jerusalem, 2007.
- 13 Ariel Hyman, "The Reservist Structure, the IDF and Israeli Society: Past, Present and Future," *Maarachot* 394 (May 2004), p. 5.
 - 14 As demonstrated by Sara Helman, "Militarism and the Construction of Community," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 25, no. 2 (1997): 305-32.
 - 15 The State Comptroller, *Annual Report 58A*, The Office of the State Comptroller and the Public Ombudsman, Jerusalem, 2007, pp. 87-97.
 - 16 IDF Behavioral Sciences Department, *Stances of Commanders and Class A Reservists 2011*, 2011, at <http://portal.knesset.gov.il/Com4bitachon/he-IL/CommitteeHistory/24052011.htm>.
 - 17 *The Report of the Committee Examining the Defense Budget*, The Prime Minister's Office, Jerusalem, 2007, p. 105.
 - 18 Yoni Shoenfeld and Noa Horowitz, "In Coming Years, We'll Call up Reservists More, Not Less," *Bamahaneh*, May 25, 2011, at <http://www.idf.il/1137-11284-he/Dover.aspx>.
 - 19 The IDF, *The Reservist's Handbook*, 2006, p. 7, http://www.aka.idf.il/SIP_STORAGE/files/4/59004.pdf.