

Tzahal and Israel's Future Defence Challenges



- Tzahal is the Hebrew acronym for Tzva haHagana leIsrael, Israel Defence Forces, officially set up in 1948 out of the paramilitary group Haganah and including the paramilitary groups Lehi and Irgun, which served as military defence forces of the Jewish community during the British Mandate.



- *Haganah Combatants*



- *Lehi Logo*



Irgun Logo

- Its roots date back to the period of the late Ottoman Empire, when the Bar Giora defence organisation was founded to protect Jewish settlements. During the Mandate, several paramilitary groups were founded with different missions and allegiances. Ben-Gurion brought them all into the IDF and dismantled the units that were unwilling to accept the integration.
- The mission of Tzahal is to protect Israel facing unique security challenges as well as Jews in the world. The name IDF carries the idea of defence, “haganah”, recalling the main paramilitary organisation active during the Mandate.
- The head of IDF is the General Chief of Staff currently Benny Gantz, who works under the supervision of the Ministry of Defence.
- The IDF conscripts both men and women, with a compulsory military service of 3 and 2 years respectively. Reservists’ also constitute an important resource for IDF. Unlike other armies, officials start their carrier with common forces, which creates a sense of equality among soldiers and officials serving in the army.
- The IDF constitutes one of the most important social institutions, able to integrate diverse social groups, providing for education and career opportunities and being central to the social discourse both for the compulsory service and for the constant security threats.

Equality in IDF



- One of the first battles was women’s integration in the IDF. Although subject to compulsory conscription, women were traditionally assigned to infantry posts or other minor tasks. Since the 1996, after a Supreme Court Ruling, women have progressively made their career in all IDF branches, including aeronautics and combatant units. The same goes with the border police, formally not part of the IDF, in charge with maintaining security in urban and rural areas.



Bedouin soldiers

- Non-Jewish citizens usually do not serve in the army. Druze, Circassians and many Bedouins do however serve in the army. Until the late 1980s, members of minorities would serve in the Minority Unit, but the IDF decided to integrate them in regular units of all branches, including intelligence).



Father Nadaf with Benjamin

Netanyahu

- Arab Israelis traditionally do not serve in the army, and are often active among Bedouins and Druze to discourage military service. However, an increasing number of Christians are voluntarily undergoing the military service for integrating into Israeli society. Father Gabriel Nadaf, a Greek Orthodox of Nazareth, is the spiritual leader of Christians' integration into Israeli society, encouraging military service. Recently, also Christian girls have joined the IDF.



- The *haredi* minority (ultra-Orthodox) traditionally opposes military service. The Supreme Court has recently ruled out the exemption policy, and the government is successfully designing policies for integrating *haredim*. There is a *haredi* unit, which respects strict dietary standards and sex separation; *haredi* soldiers rarely serve in regular units, although in the aeronautics this situation is changing.



- National religious Israelis serve in the IDF, which allows them through special regulations with some Talmudic academies to combine military service with religious studies.



- Since 1990s, the IDF does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, with an increasing number of soldiers and officials openly lesbian or gay.
- The IDF has also special regulations for allowing people with specific physical needs to serve in the army.
- Vegans have the right to non-leather uniform boots and to vegan food.
- The IDF also serves as a social opportunity institution, offering education and opportunities to any soldier. Some special programmes recruit talented students for technological research within the IDF, which has tremendous civilian use. The same goes for other special branches, including the Intelligence, the legal units, the medical units etc.
- Indeed, the IDF is more than an army, but can be considered a social fabric, where specificities are valued and integrated in order to enable pluralistic life.

Mission and Challenges



IDF Spirit

- The IDF has a code (known as IDF spirit in Hebrew) that combines international, Israeli law and Jewish heritage. Beyond discipline, loyalty and responsibility, core principles of the IDF include personal example, respect for human life and dignity as well as sense of mission. These principles create high moral standards.
- Among the main challenges Israel has to face, there is the combat on terrorism in the asymmetric war against terrorist organisations. The IDF practices have contributed to develop moral codes in asymmetric war, whereby terrorist organisations do not abide by the principle of distinction between combatant and civilian, for impeding armies from defending themselves.



Benny Gantz

- IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz has exposed the following security challenges awaiting for Israel in the next years: potential increase in terrorist threats from North and South due to regime changes in the region; cyber war threats directed against institutions, banks and citizens; large-scale de-legitimisation campaigns leading to international lawsuits against IDF officials and soldiers.

Interview with Kobi Regev

Defence Attaché, Israeli Embassy to Italy

What is the mission of the Israel Defence Forces?

The IDF mission is to defend Israel, its citizens as well as Jews in the world. There is a growing consensus in considering the IDF as the assurance of Israel and of the Jews, because Tzahal is committed to defend every Israeli citizen and to save every Jew in the world. If Jews are in peril around the world, the IDF will protect them.

Does IDF have international support?

We do have support, mainly by Jewish communities in the world, as well as from many other groups. This support enforces our spirit and mission, although the voices we hear are critical.

Beyond its first mission devoted to Israel and the Jewish world, the IDF also carries a universal mission, bringing aid in situations of crisis all over the world: it is the first arriving in situations of natural disaster, building entire hospitals in maximum 24 hours, distributing aid and helping people. The last case was the Philippines, where Israel was one of the first and most active actors in crisis response.

What is characteristic of IDF?

All armies exist to protect citizens of their states. Tzahal is a moral military, with a moral mission. You need to consider the reality Israel faces: we are surrounded by hostile neighbours and this implies we need to carry out activities under challenging conditions. Take for example the military activities we carry out when Israel is under attack by terrorist organisations. Our goal is to attack legitimate military objectives, but in order to do this you have to distinguish between civilians and combatants, and sometimes you have to distinguish between terrorists that represent a threat to the security of Israel from innocent civilians standing a few meters from him.

You said the IDF has a moral mission: how does moral values become part of soldiers training?

Tzahal understands that moral values are part of our history and of our Jewish heritage. Our commitment as human beings first and as soldiers clears doubts of what we have to do. There is a strong relation between the soldier and the commander based on trust, whereby the soldier knows not only that the mission s/he has to carry out is tactically important, but also that it has been scrutinised in its moral implications. This relation of trust is the result of a long process, and it is possible to destroy it very easily.

But the IDF code also encompasses the “last decision” rule, whereby soldiers may deem not to carry out a military action under specific conditions.

Tzahal, as an army, works on the basis of orders, that are the result of a long process of considerations, analyses, as well as of trust.

However, I have never heard of a soldier who could not carry out an action because s/he could not do it. As I said, soldiers and commanders are bound by a relation of trust, so that when they receive an order they know that it is the right thing to do. I am very proud that trust is actually the essence of the relations among soldiers and commanders in our army.

Still, I recall it happened in 2nd Lebanon War that soldiers decided at the very last moment not to attack certain objectives.

Officers decide on a certain mission and the soldier on the field implements a policy, which starts with the high rank of the army and ends up in his/her specific mission, following a chain of orders. For instance, in the context of the policy against terror organisations, the army may decide to attack a net of terror, whereby a soldier is ordered to bomb a specific objective in a specific day an hour. This order is the result of tactical, legal and moral considerations and is defined by certain conditions. The soldier who has received the order may realise that on the field conditions are different, and therefore s/he may decide not to act. This means that soldiers may not carry out an action if conditions on the ground are different, but this does not mean that soldiers can refuse to comply to an order out of moral considerations exclusively.

One of the most common critiques against Israel is that the IDF violates international law, however the IDF has legal advisors dealing with legal issues.

There are many different questions related to a certain decision: moral issues, policy issues, strategy, tactical and legal issues. Regarding the law, there are several aspects to be taken under considerations: internal, national as well as international. Tzahal plans actions in conformity to Israeli law as well as international law. There is a planning committee for every action, and legal advice is part of the decision.

Each action is the result of in-depth analysis; you have to consider the regional context and the challenges that Israel faces: a tactic error in the Middle East might lead to major falls in the strategy. We act in a very complex situation and we need to continue acting according to our code.

What are the future challenges of Tzahal?

We are living in a crucial moment; we are in a process of change with significant geopolitical consequences, full of risks as well as of opportunities. Tzahal, as an army, has to look first at the risks, in order to be ready for every possible scenario. For instance, consider Israel's Northern border: although Israel is not involved in what is happening in Syria, the war has tremendous consequences for Israel's citizens of the North: often missiles fall in Israeli territory from Lebanon.

In general, the whole Middle East is radically changing, and we need to be ready to respond to a wide range of hostile possibilities, also because Israel is the common enemy of several actors in the Middle East that may eventually unify.

Israel is however providing humanitarian assistance.

Indeed, more than 250 civilians from Syria, from all parties, have so far been hospitalised and treated in Israeli hospitals and returned to Syria.

What is the social importance of the IDF?

When you walk in the street in Israel, you can think that almost everybody was is or will be in the army. The army is part of the Israeli social structure, of the social discourse, and of the social ethos.

In last years we have also many *haredim*, the ultra-Orthodox, who have traditionally not been part of the army. The IDF has created haredi units, with 1500 haredim in aeronautic. Israel is a complex and diverse society, and the army is sensitive to specific cultural needs.

The IDF has always been one of the major actors in integrating Israeli diverse social groups. Is it still so?

The *haredim* used not to serve in the army, but now they are increasingly doing so. Arabs also do not have to serve in the army, for several reasons, but Bedouins and Druse serve in the army, as other minorities. The IDF is committed to the principle of equality among all citizens of Israel and therefore it integrates diversity. For instance the newcomers, the *olim hadashim*, are offered specific courses of Hebrew and Israeli culture for supporting their integration in society. Not only this, but the IDF also provide for education in all fields. The army supports individual growth and people gain from the army as the state gains from the military service. The IDF is based on an equal opportunity system: people coming from all cultural, social and economic backgrounds have same opportunities. IDF is known for its technological investments, but actually Tzahal primary source of strength is people.

What about gender equality?

In Israel women have to serve in the army as well as men. Once men and women used to have different tasks, but in recent years there are an increasing number of women in combatant units, combatant women in aeronautic. We now have a female officer, general Orna Barbivai, and she is the first woman to be head of human resource.

What about military cooperation between Italy Israel?

Italy and Israel have excellent relations built in many years of cooperation and based on common values and interests. This cooperation also includes policy issues and industrial relations, which means that there is a profound trust between the two nations.

Anything you want to add?

Personally, I would like to say that for me serving in the army is not a job. I consider it is as a service to my country. I am part of the State of Israel and I contribute to the State. I took part in Second Lebanon War, when the residents of the North were under constant attack. I recall I phoned my sister and parents, who live in Haifa, telling them I saw the rockets fired from Lebanon and falling in Haifa and that I myself took part in the system of defence. Before coming to Italy, my family and myself lived in an army basis in the North, where many missiles fell, and I would run to the F16 directed to stop the rocket fire. I am very proud of being part of Tzahal and contributing to the defence of the State of Israel.

Interview with Josef Reissman

Major in Aeronautic Forces, IDF

What are the defence challenges Israel has to face in the near future?

The face of the Middle East is changing and the first problem Israel has to face is the new geopolitical reality, which has significant external challenges. The whole army, and aeronautic in specific will need to find military solution to prevent external threats, which means to be ready to prevent or react to several different risks.

Any major external threat?

We are not able to predict the future, but major challenges may come from the Northern and Southern borders. The question is not what challenges we will have to face, but how we will face them; in this respect I believe that technological development is the major solution. Israel is a small country, and we cannot rely on a wide number of soldiers, including the reservists. Therefore, we need to develop other forces, which lie in technology.

In this field, Israel and Italy have developed military relations.

Israel and Italy have strong diplomatic ties, and this reflects also in military cooperation, which goes beyond the two armies. Military cooperation also involved industrial and technological fields. I can say that three, four years ago we started working on some common projects, and then relations have developed in long-term cooperation. For example, we are buying planes from Italy.

Is there any specific project you are working on?

I am currently managing a project of cooperation with Italy that also involves industrial relations. The project regards developed trainer aircraft, and Italian trainer aircrafts are the most developed. In specific, we are working with the Italian firm Alenia Aermacchi, our main partner in the project.

Any other field of cooperation?

Italy and Israel cooperate at policy level as well and the two armies have also common training sessions. It means not only that the two states have strong diplomatic ties, but also that there are strong relations among people, based on common values and goals. This is very important in any field and in the military/defence field in specific.

One of the challenges that Israel will have to face is the battle of information, related to military issues, but in public diplomacy. Is Tzahal working on this?

I am not a diplomat; I am a soldier, so it is not my field of expertise. As a soldier and as an Israeli I can say that we are respectful of public sensitivity, and this means sometimes we are too delicate. In public diplomacy we are afraid of showing things how they are, because this may hurt public feelings, above all about what happens with civilian population under attack or in the battlefield. No doubt that diplomats will maybe have to talk more about what happens, about the reality as it is, about how we live and about the threats upon us. But this does not mean we will change our approach, because we will continue being sensitive on certain issues: in Israel we do not show cruel images of war or of terrorist attacks, because we perceive this is disrespectful of public sensitiveness.