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Miriam Minsk
University of Pennsylvania

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Saluted for Service: Benefits of Arab-Israeli Enlistment in the Israel Defense Forces

Miriam Minsk

Introduction

He frequently asked his father about the latter's experiences fighting in the 1982 Lebanon War under the Israeli flag. He spent time at school and at home discussing his enthusiasm for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and his adventures to come. He celebrated with his family and friends the night before he hopped on a bus to the training base. Like thousands of young Israelis every year, he boarded the bus with a nervous apprehension and an excitement for the future.

But he was not from Tel Aviv, Haifa, or Modi'in. He was from Sakhnin, a largely Muslim town in the Lower Galilee. And his name was not Ya'akov or David. His name was Ameer Abu Ria. He was a Christian Arab.¹

While military service is mandatory for most Jewish Israelis, Druze men, and Circassian men, it is not required for certain non-Jewish citizens of Israel.² Sources report different numbers of Arabs who voluntarily serve in the IDF, likely because there is no universal definition of Arab Israeli or Palestinian. Some sources include Bedouins, who volunteer in relatively great

numbers, while others only report the numbers of Arab Muslims and Arab Christians who serve. A 2003 journal article stated that 5,000 Palestinian volunteers enlisted in the IDF annually, and clarified that the Druze were not included in this figure because of their required service.³ In 2017, an NBC News article reported that, in 2013, fewer than ten Arab Muslims joined the IDF annually, and these numbers have now increased to dozens of annual volunteers.⁴ The Arabs who enlist voluntarily do so even though one of the IDF's primary missions is to protect Israel from its Arab neighbors. This paper will explore the financial, economic, social, and personal benefits of voluntary Arab enlistment in the IDF, and will explain why some Israeli Arabs choose to serve in the army of a nation that many Palestinians view as an occupier of a land that is rightfully theirs.

This paper draws upon a wide range of sources including a documentary, books, journal and newspaper articles, and an interview with a former Israeli soldier. The documentary, Naomi Levvari and Saar Yogev's *Ameer Got His Gun*, was released in 2011 and follows Ameer as he prepares to voluntarily serve in the IDF; participates in basic training; and begins his role as a member of the border police stationed in Hebron, a Palestinian city in the West Bank.⁵ Ameer's family has a tradition of voluntarily enlisting in the IDF, as his father fought in combat, and his grandfather and five uncles served as well. Rhoda Kanaaneh's book, *Surrounded: Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military*, provides more case studies of Palestinian soldiers in the IDF.⁶ Kanaaneh, a faculty member in the department of anthropology at Columbia University and a member of the editorial committee of *The Journal of Palestine Studies*, interviewed a diverse selection of Palestinian soldiers to learn about their experiences. In his book *Minorities in the Israeli Military, 1948-1958*, Randall S. Geller, a lecturer at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and at Emmanuel College, explores the only mandatory draft registration for Arabs in Israel's history.⁷ Gershon Shafir, Professor of Sociology at the University of California, San Diego, and Yoav Peled, Associate Professor at

Tel Aviv University in the Department of Political Science, discuss the “third-class” status of Palestinians in Israel in their book *Being Israeli: The Dynamics of Multiple Citizenship*.⁸ This paper also incorporates ideas from articles published by *Ha'aretz*, *Arutz Sheva*, and *The Times of Israel*, three of Israel's mainstream national news sources, and looks at personal stories of other minority soldiers in the IDF that give a picture of how their service affected multiple individuals.

This paper begins by providing an overview of the mandatory military service in the IDF and its exemptions as well as an explanation of the “third-class” status of Arab-Israeli citizens.⁹ The next section lays out the financial benefits of voluntary service for Arabs. This portion will explore the means through which the IDF attempts to recruit Christian Arabs and Bedouins and ways in which the IDF helps facilitate a better life for soldiers who have completed at least 12 months of service. The paper will then acknowledge the personal contradictions and dilemmas that Arabs who serve in the IDF inevitably face, but that ultimately provide them with opportunities for growth, identity development, and stability. This paper will conclude that the Arab-Israelis who voluntarily serve in the IDF demonstrate the inclusive capacity of the Israeli state vis-à-vis its diverse citizenry. To this end, Israel provides these Arabs with benefits that both help them financially and offers them the opportunity to carve out a place for themselves within Israeli society. The potential for Arab members of the IDF to be more integrated into Israeli society and make a good living should prompt Israel to consider a more expansive vision of citizenship in ways that could lead to a more harmonious future for its diverse population.

Before proceeding, it is important to distinguish between the terms Arab-Israeli, Palestinian, Bedouin, Arab Christian, Arab Muslim, and Druze. For the purposes of this paper, Arab-Israelis are defined as Arab citizens of Israel who live in Israel proper, not in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip. They technically have rights equal to those of Israel's Jewish citizens but are still

often discriminated against in all facets of life. Palestinians are those who lived in Palestine pre-1948 or the descendants of those who were exiled during Israel's War of Independence. Today, many Palestinians live in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, in which case they do not have Israeli citizenship and are not viewed as equal to Jews or Arab-Israelis. Some Palestinians live in the diaspora, and some Arabs with Israeli citizenship may also define themselves as Palestinian. Most Bedouins do not consider themselves Palestinians as they are members of their own tribes, but many are Israeli citizens.¹⁰ It is also necessary to acknowledge that not all Arabs in the Middle East practice Islam; there are many Arab Christians and Druze in Israel as well.

Background

Since its foundation in 1948, Israel has had a mandatory draft at the age of 18 for its male and female Jewish citizens. Males are required to serve for 32 months, and females for two years.¹¹ The duration of service for women will be extended to 28 months beginning in 2018.¹² Only after serving in the army are Israelis able to enroll in universities to continue their studies if they so choose. This mandatory army service creates a patriotic Israeli society and forges a bond between Israeli citizens who defend their country from surrounding Arab countries that deny its existence. The IDF also serves as a melting pot for immigrants as every soldier in the army shares in the communal experience of putting on a uniform and serving his or her country. There are, however, many exemptions to the mandatory draft including those who are not physically or mentally able to serve, women who are pregnant or have children, religious women who decide to participate in a form of national service instead, religious men who are studying Jewish texts, and some minorities.¹³ Minorities that are exempt from military service but are able to volunteer to serve include Muslim Arabs, Christian Arabs, and Bedouins, some of whom immediately received citizenship after the 1948 War of Independence, and others who were awarded citizenship if they met the

requirements of the Nationality Law of 1952.¹⁴

The first IDF draft in 1948 excluded minorities and instead just required Jews who were citizens of Israel to serve in the military. A mandatory draft was created in 1956 for the Druze,¹⁵ the descendants of a small, thousand-year-old population that was rooted in Islamic culture but no longer considers itself Muslim.¹⁶ The draft was initiated in response to the Druze leaders' wishes, according to then-Director General of the Defense Ministry Shimon Peres. Peres' claim that Druze leaders supported the draft, though, was far-fetched. Instead, many of the Druze did not support the draft at the time, and those who did support it did so for political reasons, such as not losing their seat in the Knesset, Israel's parliament. The Druze were unsympathetic toward Israel at the time because the government was solely focusing on developing and strengthening Jewish communities in Israel, and they felt excluded. The mandatory draft was created so that it would appear as if Israel was including minorities in its military, although the country's motive may have been to create division among its minorities by separating the Druze from Arab Muslims and Arab Christians.¹⁷ The Circassians, a mainly Sunni Muslim group which left the Caucasus when Russians conquered their land, were also drafted by the late 1950s.¹⁸ There are currently fewer than 2,000 Druze serving in the IDF, and the number of Circassian soldiers is negligible.¹⁹

A little-known fact about Israel's history is that in 1954 there was a mandatory draft registration for Arabs administered by Pinhas Lavon, the defense minister at the time. The draft was proposed to equalize all of Israel's citizens and prevent Israel's Arab citizens from constantly facing discrimination.²⁰ The Jews in Israel were surprised and confused by this mandatory draft, and much of the General Staff, including Chief of Staff Moshe Dayan, did not approve of the idea.²¹ Still, for the short time period in which this draft registration was mandatory, many Arab youth responded positively and some welcomed recognition as citizens with equal rights. A

few months after the draft registration was announced, 90 percent of those required to register did so. Arab parents were less enthusiastic than the youth about the draft because they needed their children to help manage family farms and because they were worried that their children would assimilate into the Jewish culture of the IDF.²² The draft was never implemented because, according to Lavon's then top-secret documents, he was worried that formally teaching minorities to use weapons could be dangerous for Israel. This fear was pervasive in the Israeli government so Arabs have never performed mandatory service in the IDF.²³

Today Arab-Israelis are still viewed by many Jewish Israelis and other observers as "third-class" citizens, behind first-class European (Ashkenazi) Jews and second-class Middle Eastern (Mizrahi) Jews, and are not treated equally by the Israeli government. All Arabs lived under strict military control from 1948 until 1966, and Palestinians still do today in the West Bank and in Gaza.²⁴ The Israeli government does not provide Arab-Israelis with enough resources for them to create and maintain their own economy, so more than 60 percent of Arab-Israelis, many of whom are overqualified, work for Jews.²⁵ While Israel has laws that prevent employment discrimination, it permits employers to deny employment to anyone they deem to be dangerous, which ends up including most Arab-Israelis.²⁶ These Arab-Israelis, who feel oppressed and are not provided with any chance to improve their daily lives, get stuck in a vicious cycle that prevents them from elevating their socioeconomic status.

IDF Recruitment and Material Benefits

The IDF has recently increased its efforts to recruit Bedouin and Arab Christians to enlist. Prior to 2014, Arab Christians who were looking to serve had to actively seek out an opportunity to volunteer. In 2014 the IDF began initiating the conversation with the potential Arab volunteers and sent out material encouraging enlistment to those who are 16 and a half years old which made it easier for Arab Christians to voluntarily join the IDF.²⁷ This

practice stopped briefly but resumed in 2016.²⁸ The government's hope is that more Arab Christians will volunteer to serve if the IDF reaches out to them first. As a Greek Orthodox Priest in Israel said in a *Times of Israel* article, this effort by the state is an important step toward integrating the Christian communities in Israel into the greater Israeli society.²⁹

Like Arab Christians, Bedouin youth receive letters from the IDF that encourage them to enlist and lay out the wide range of opportunities to serve, beyond the elite tracking units for which Bedouins typically volunteer. The IDF provides special opportunities for Bedouin males to only serve for only two years, and awards its participants with truck-driving licenses because transportation is a popular and high-paying job field.³⁰ These efforts on behalf of the IDF demonstrate the military's desire and willingness to be inclusive of Israel's diverse communities.

In addition to recruitment efforts, the IDF puts a strong emphasis on supporting their minority soldiers during and after service. The head of the Populations Administrations in the IDF emphasized that the military helps Bedouin soldiers find jobs and assimilate into Israeli society after their service is complete. Minority soldiers, for example, have priority when applying to jobs in the Israeli police force.³¹

Those who decide to enlist receive many material benefits from their service. All IDF soldiers, Jewish or Arab, who have completed at least 12 months of service are recognized as "released soldiers" and are entitled to a security deposit that can be used towards university, professional courses, marriage, buying property, or starting a business.³² Additionally, a discharge payment is awarded to soldiers who complete 12 months of service.³³ The state also offers substantial discounts, particularly pertaining to real estate, to Arabs who have served. Permits to build houses and own land are expensive, especially due to Israel's restrictive zoning laws around Arab land, so cheaper options are sought after by Palestinians. Some Arabs have received benefits such as the chance to pay \$10,000 for a plot worth \$100,000.³⁴ For those who

volunteered to serve, the process of acquiring a building permit is also easier than it is for Arabs who did not enlist in the IDF. This immediate financial assistance helps Arabs, like all soldiers, work their way into Israeli society even without stable employment right after military service.

The IDF can also help veterans find well-paying jobs in the Jewish-dominated fields after army service. Arab volunteers are aware that Israeli employers often look to hire those who have completed army service, whether or not the job is related to the military. Their military service provides Arabs with many opportunities to meet other soldiers and their families who may be able to help them find a job after leaving the IDF.³⁵ Mahir, a former Palestinian soldier who served in the IDF, was interviewed in Kanaaneh's *Surrounded: Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military* about the professional connection he got as a result of his military experience:

By chance, I ran into a guy I knew from reserve service who worked in the City Council in Haifa and he gave me the job I have now. Service in the military can open many doors, in terms of trade, commissions, becoming a representative of a company, and others. Because you've served in the military, you find Jews more willing to give you work, and there is more trust.³⁶

Soldiers who are finishing up their army service are encouraged by the Ministry of Defense to reach out to their fellow soldiers when looking for jobs post-army.³⁷ These jobs provide long-term stability that Arabs may not get without the experience and trust that comes with having served for the same country as their Jewish employers.

The IDF's active recruitment process demonstrates Israel's desire to better integrate Arabs into Israeli society and grant them more opportunities to reach true equality within the state. Arab citizens should accept Israel's invitation to serve in the IDF as the military ensures that they receive appropriate benefits for their service and helps position them for success later in their lives.

Personal Growth During Military Service

Despite all of these benefits, relatively few Arabs volunteer to serve in the IDF. In fact, serving in the IDF is looked down upon in most Arab communities. In February 2017, an Arab Christian soldier was threatened on Facebook by someone against Arab service in the IDF: “We know who you are, where you serve and where your parents live. When you finish your patrol of the old city, we will wait for you at the mosque, where we will stab you.”³⁸ This was not an isolated incident; Arabs in the IDF are subject to much scrutiny within their communities.³⁹ Ameer’s family in *Ameer Got His Gun* was also targeted because of the family’s history of service in the military. Bombs and rocks were often thrown at their house, and his family’s car was once burned by an opponent of army service.⁴⁰ The threats have been so extreme that the IDF allows Arab soldiers to change into civilians clothes before leaving their bases on breaks, as opposed to wearing their uniforms when they leave their bases as is typically required.⁴¹

The frequent threats that Ameer’s family received did not stop them from serving because of the family’s loyalty to Israel and belief in the personal benefits of military service. During Ameer’s conversations with his father leading up to his enlistment in the IDF, his father emphasized that army service will help Ameer “become a man, build a stable personality,” and learn to be “dependable.”⁴² The fact that Ameer’s father trusted that the IDF would provide his son with these opportunities for personal growth reflects his own positive experiences serving in the army. Ameer’s father’s IDF service inspired him to be a strong individual; he was someone who could proudly wear his military uniform in his hometown where he was the only Arab to enlist in the Israeli army.⁴³

Like Ameer’s father, Mohammad Kabiya, a Bedouin and a former member of the Israeli Air Force, strongly believes in volunteering to serve in the IDF. He could not understand why Arab Israelis often sympathize with Hamas, a terrorist organization who has military control over the Gaza

Strip, when they constantly attack Israel and put both Jews and Arab citizens in severe danger.⁴⁴ In fact, he believes that as an Israeli it was his obligation to serve his country, and said in a *Daily Mail* article that the Arabs “who refuse to serve are the real traitors.”⁴⁵ Because of Kabiya’s tenure in the IDF, he was better able to embrace his identity as an Arab Israeli: “I am proud to be a Bedouin fighter. And I am also proud to fight in the Israeli army. I am proud of being Bedouin, Arab, Muslim and Israeli.”⁴⁶ Kabiya’s IDF service taught him to take pride in every aspect of his identity, both his status as a “Bedouin fighter” and as a soldier in the Israeli army. He learned that these identifications are not mutually exclusive, and in this way, his IDF service helped to define his place as an Arab in Israeli society.

Not all Arabs who have served in the IDF agree that their experiences were profound or life-changing. Ameer’s uncle, for example, believes that his army service was a “waste of three years of [his] life.”⁴⁷ He tells Ameer that during his army service, only 1,000 out of the 24,000 people living in Sakhnin were willing to speak with him. He is still “hurt” by the fact that his friends with whom he served no longer keep in contact with him because of his status as an Arab.⁴⁸ Ameer’s uncle was not able to look past these negatives from his experience serving. He succumbed to the pressure he felt from his community that was so strongly against serving in the IDF. For Ameer’s uncle, serving in the IDF confirmed his identity as an Arab who has and wants little connection to the Jewish state; even if that did not directly contribute to the peacemaking process between Arabs and Jews, it was an important personal learning experience for himself.

While Arab-Israelis often have little interest in integrating themselves into Israeli society or serving in the IDF, Israel should recognize the opportunities presented by those who are interested in military service and focus on making it a good experience that can improve those individuals’ lives and help build better relations between Jewish and Arab-Israeli communities. During Ameer’s basic training, his Jewish friends joked around in front of

him about exterminating Arabs. This kind of conspicuous racism made the transition into the army uncomfortable for Ameer because the military seemed unwelcoming.⁴⁹ After his basic training, Ameer had a positive experience serving in the border police in Hebron and was respected by his fellow soldiers for catching multiple Arabs who were carrying knives around the city. Close to the end of *Ameer Got His Gun*, though, he was upset by the fact that the Jews with whom he had formed close friendships during his service refused to visit him in Sakhnin because they considered it an unsafe place for Jews.⁵⁰ While Ameer was able to form strong relationships with the Jews in his unit during his service, there is still work to be done to ensure that Arabs who want to socially integrate themselves into Israeli society have a clear path to do so.

Elinor Joseph, an Arab Christian from Haifa who was recognized in 2010 for being the first Arab woman to serve in a combat unit in the IDF, took steps during her service to ensure that she was further integrated into Israeli society. Joseph's father served in a paratroopers unit and he always hoped she would serve also, but she was very hesitant to do so because her friends disapproved. She ultimately decided to enlist because she recognized the importance of protecting her country, family, and friends. When she joined the border police, Joseph was surprised that she was so respected by her colleagues, and was thankful for the close relationships they were able to form. Her transition to serving in a combat position was initially challenging because she was upset to leave the community of which she had been a part during her time in the border police, which speaks to the IDF's ability to facilitate strong connections between Jews and Arabs in an intimate setting. In an *Arutz Sheva* article Joseph reflects on being an Arab soldier in Israel's military: "I know I am part of the Jewish State's army, and therefore, when we speak about that, I listen and learn. I got used to it and I respect it, although I do not delve too much into the country's identity. I have my own identity and I will respect that of the country."⁵¹ Serving in the IDF helped

Joseph “[get] used to” Israel’s identity as a Jewish country, and she learned to “respect” the fact that Israel is a Jewish State.⁵² Her open-mindedness is clear, and her willingness to accept the perspective of Jewish Israelis demonstrates that Arabs who voluntarily enlist in the IDF have an opportunity to facilitate cross-cultural cooperation between Arabs and Jews. Not only did Joseph’s army experience benefit her on a personal level and provide her with the opportunity to make close Jewish friends, but it also proved that a more homogenous Israeli society is possible if Arabs take initiative to volunteer in the IDF and break down the barriers between Jews and Arabs in Israel.

Conclusion

Ameer’s family, Mohammad Kabiya, and Elinor Joseph are exceptions in the grand scheme of minority Israelis.⁵³ The majority of Arab-Isrealis do not choose to enlist because they view Arab service in the IDF as treasonous. Arab communities often accuse those who do choose to serve of killing their own people and sometimes threaten Arab IDF soldiers with death. Furthermore, many Arabs who do serve in the IDF face discrimination from Jewish soldiers, are selected for units that are not highly respected in the army, or serve in minority-only units that do not provide them with the opportunities to build strong relationships with Jewish soldiers at all.

The stories of Ameer’s family, Mohammad Kabiya, and Elinor Joseph and the benefits that the IDF offers for soldiers who voluntarily enlist demonstrate that there is potential to change the overriding climate. By encouraging more Arabs to serve and finding ways to ensure that their service is meaningful, Israel can do a better job of promoting the development and growth of its Arab citizens. This can only help strengthen Israeli society and can be one of the small foundational pieces of creating a lasting peace between Arabs and Jews in Israel.

Miriam Minsk is a freshman from Rockville, Md. She is a bioengineering major and is interested in medical research. She is considering moving to Israel one day, but for now she loves going to the new Goldie's on campus and pretending that she is already there.

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