

## Military Elites in the Army: Shifts in the Concept of the People's Army

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This article addresses transformations, and reflections, of military elites in the army on the “people’s army” as known in the Israeli political spectrum. The article falls within the scope of army-society relations, a research field that emerged with the rise of the modern state. Much has been written about this issue in the Israeli context, particularly about social transformations in the Israeli military establishment, including changing military elites.

Some research approaches confuse social transformations in the army with changing military elites. This confusion stems from dealing with the concept of military elite as a static condition, including in relation to determining its role, functional definition, and social hierarchy without looking at the fluidity of these elites. What was elite in the past may no longer, or is not necessarily, so in the present. This is associated with society perceptions of the concept of the elite, not with ready-made theoretical templates of this concept. Hence, this article does not draw a distinction between social transformations within the army and changing military elites. Rather than seeking to claim asymmetry of these transformations, the article is informed by a cautious research approach to conclude that a dramatic change is taking place among these elites.

Israeli approaches and Arab theses on elites share two perspectives of transformations within the Israeli army. Some are of the view that social and elite shifts in the army are planned by groups, which used to be marginalised in times past, particularly by (truly divergent) religious groups, including religious Zionists and religious Zionist educational and political institutions. On the other hand, the current situation is seen as an outcome of social processes, witnessed by Israeli society over recent decades, also reflecting on the army and its military establishment.

This article is premised on the hypothesis that social transformations within the army are not exclusive of the Israeli army. Transformation is indicative of a normal social process that affects all armies in both democratic and nondemocratic regimes. The impact of this transformation is greater in democratic states, particularly those in which the army provides a framework to support, access and take a place in the nation building process. In this context, the army serves as an open framework for social, economic and political mobility. It is linked to the professional conduct of combatants on one hand, and vision of society or groups within society of the significance of military service in that social, economic and political mobility on the other. Distinctively, Israel is a product of a settler colonial enterprise, launched in 1948. By itself, Israel also established a case of settler colonialism in 1967. For almost five decades, the settler colonial enterprise has contributed to transformations within the army and military establishment. Building the nation and a colonial regime are two key factors in interpreting social transformations within the Israeli army, military elite, and fluidity of the concept of military elite.

It is in this context that the so-called “theocratisation of the army” has evolved in the Israeli debate. In recent years, this raging debate has been deliberated in many books and studies by Israeli researchers. Some are of the opinion that what is at stake is deliberate theocratisation of the military establishment, peaking in the 2014 war on the Gaza Strip. By contrast, others believe that the so-called “theocratisation of the army” is nothing but a practice maintained by the army to represent social groups, which had an increasing presence in the army over the past two decades. In religious matters, identification with these social groups stems from the army’s concern to preserve itself as the people’s army.

### Rise of the religious Jews within the army

All military sociological treatises coincide that the elites who led all units of the Israeli army were from among those designated by Baruch Kimmerling in Hebrew *Ahasulim*, an illusion to secular Ashkenazi Jews.<sup>1</sup> In all

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1 Kimmerling, Baruch, *Demise of the Rule of the Ahalusim*. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2001 [in Hebrew]. The book was later translated into Arabic by the Palestinian Forum for Israeli Studies (MADAR) under the title of *Nihayat al Haymanah al Ashkinazi (End of the Ashkenazi Hegemony)*.

army units and arms, the majority of military officers were members of this elite group. Residents of Kibbutzim as well as agricultural and civil communities provided a social repertoire of Israeli army officers. Regardless of their political and ideological orientations, most chiefs of staff were also members of this group. This social privilege of the army was reflected in the close link between the army elites and mostly socialist left-wing Zionist movement. It was also mirrored in the Israeli domain of knowledge, which placed a special focus on examining the army's relation with the civilian political establishment and impact on the security and military decision-making process. Strikingly, this domain of knowledge has shifted to investigating the relation between the army and religious groups. In recent years, the term "theocratisation of the army" has been gained ground as a reflection of transformations in social sources of the army officers and elites. Does the interest shown by Israeli sociology in the questions of religion and the army derive from a social and elite change in the army?

In the first place, it should be noted that the old elites, as the right wing wishes to call (though this is not the place to discuss or criticise the term), have not abandoned their role in the Israeli army, but changed their perspective of military service. The old elites view military service as a stage of socioeconomic mobility. Hence, IT, cyber and intelligence divisions, rather than combat units, are the most prestigious as before.

According to data released by the army, over three years (2014-2016), willingness to enrol in combat officer courses declined from 33 to 23 percent. Compared to 54 percent two years ago (2016), as low as 40 percent of Israeli army combatants believe that persons who serve in combat divisions contribute more to military service and the state.<sup>2</sup> Against this background, the old elite conscription in the army has changed at two levels: (1) View of the army as an entry-point to civilian life (an official and legal channel) and personal success (personal socioeconomic mobility); and (2) the concept of elite regiments in the army has shifted from direct and conventional combat units, such as the infantry, armour and paratrooper corps, to IT military arms of various types. The increasing proportion of religious Jews in the army and among army officers also emanates from a voluntary decline and desire of the old elites to enlist in other units, which have become more prestigious in the neoliberal context in Israel.

Officer B, commander of a special forces unit, published an article in the *Maarachot* journal of the Israeli army on the conscription of religious Jews as officers in various army units. According to Officer B, in the 1980s, religious Zionists had a miniscule presence in combat units. Today, they feature prominently in all divisions.<sup>3</sup> As Officer B puts it:

I was recruited into a special forces unit in the 1980s. All but two recruits were secular. In addition, residents of kibbutzim and civil communities figured prominently among the recruits. The period of training lasted for one and a half years. During this time, the two religious recruits, who were residents of Gush Etzion, put off the Kippah. No officers in the unit wore the Kippah. Eighteen years later, I came back to command the unit. The structure of the unit recruits changed significantly. 40 percent of team officers and 30 percent of high command officers were religious Zionists. Even in pre-recruitment exams, religious Zionist recruits were highly visible.<sup>4</sup>

The information released by Officer B is rare. This was the first time data was published on the number of soldiers and officers wearing Kippahs. According to Officer B, the proportion of religious officers in the infantry officer course jumped from 2.5 percent in 1990 to 31.4 percent in 2007, but dropped to 26 percent in 2008 (end of research data). Since 2001, religious officers have comprised 21-31 percent. By contrast, graduates of the formal religious education system were as low as 13.7 percent. In other words, religious officers in the infantry corps reflects the highest proportion of religious troops in the army.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, research shows that this increase in the number of religious officers is attributed to transformations in the nationalist religious movement's perception of the state and army, as well as the role played by religious pre-military academies. According to Officer B, 80 percent of combat unit soldiers are graduates of

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2 Assaf Malhi, "Israeli Elites Abandon the Army", *Globes*, 30 July 2018, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001247993>

3-B, "The Position of Religious Cadets (Kippah Wearers) in the Tactical Command of the Israeli Army". *Maarachot*, 432, (n.d.), p. 50-57, <http://maarachot.idf.il/PDF/FILES/0/112470.pdf>

4 Ibid, p. 51.

5 Amos Harel, "Number of Religious Officers in the Infantry Corps has Risen Twelfefold over the Past Two Decades". *Haaretz*, 15 September 2010, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/1.1221220>.

these academies. In comparison to 9 percent of all army officers, religious officers of combat units are as high as 25 percent. This highlights that members of the nationalist religious movement mainly enlist in combat units.

The data above clearly shows that army pre-military academies (*Mechinot*) have played a pivotal role in increasing the number of religious troops in the army.

**Table 1: Number of pre-military academies and cadets in selected years<sup>6</sup>**

	<b>Number of pre-military academies</b>	<b>Total number of cadets ((annual average</b>
1997/1998	6	700
1998/1999	10	850
1999/2000	15	1000
2002/2003	18	1170
2003/2004	21	1240
2004/2005	21	1325
2005/2006	23	1300
2006/2007	25	1515
2007/2008	25	1600

The number of religious pre-military academies rose from only one in 1967 to 12 in 1980, jumping to 30 in 1998.<sup>7</sup> Religious military schools, and pre-military academies in particular, have served as a connecting link between the religious youth and army as national-religious value. Based on Judaism, these youth believe that the Torah teaching is a supreme value in their lives. These schools have acted like an informal agent between Judaism and the army, as did other formal agents, including the religious military establishment within the army.

In an interview with *Haaretz*, a soldier who attended religious pre-military academies of religious Zionism said: “In every synagogue of religious Zionism, the sentence ‘The State of Israel, The Beginning of our Redemption’ is heard”.<sup>8</sup> Redemption is meant in its religious Messianic sense. The soldier adds: “The religious community, even if it does not believe in the complete Land of Israel, it has faith in the settlement enterprise. Putting the pieces together, we can understand the current situation. Conflict over the land is construed by a greater portion of religious Zionists, including religious soldiers, as Messianic-redemptory one.”<sup>9</sup>

The secular-religious debate replaced the ethnic controversy (Mizrahi vs. Ashkenazi) among the army elites. This may be attributed to a wide array of reasons. Contrary to the Mizrahi impact, change dominated the army as the Ashkenazi Jews accessed the military. In the history of the Israeli army, the position of chief of staff was held by 17 Ashkenazi and five Mizrahi Jews, the last of whom was Gadi Eizenkot. Four of the former seven chiefs of staff were members of the Mizrahi community. This highlights that the Mizrahi Jews have occupied senior positions in the army, as in politics (with the exception of the position of prime minister). However, access to the military has not introduced a ground-breaking change within the army. Interest in Mizrahi Jews in the army was limited to a representational, statistical aspect. On the other hand, enlistment of religious Jews has led to changing some internal practices of the army. Consequently, research has gone beyond the representational aspect to the values of the army, placing a particular focus on the status of women.

6 Tamir Libel and Reuven Gal, “Between the Army-Society Relations and Religion-Army Relations”. In Reuven Gal and Tamir Libel (eds.). *Between the Kippah and Skullcap: Religion, Politics and Army in Israel*. (83-113). Moshav Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing, 2012, p. 97.

7 Ze’ev Drori. “The Distance between the Kippah and Skullcap: How does the Israeli Army Face the Process of Theocratization?”. In Reuven Gal (ed.). *Between the Kippah and Skullcap: Religion, Politics and Army in Israel*. (115-150). Moshav Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing, 2012, p. 124.

8 Kobi Ben-Simhon, “God Saves”. *Haaretz Supplement*. 21 October 2014, p. 26.

9 Ibid.

## Theocratisation of the army or a social transformation

As the people's army, demographic shifts in social foundations of the Israeli army, particularly the extensive presence of religious Zionists and, to a lesser extent, orthodox Jews, in the military and security establishment, have produced a new domain of knowledge in Israel. This investigates the relation between religion and the military establishment. Earlier, the relation between civilian-political and political institutions, or between the latter and society, dominated research agenda in Israel. That was part of global knowledge that emerged in democratic states in the 1960s. Later, studies have investigated the relation between the military establishment and political regime in authoritarian states.

Literature on the visibility of religion in general, and religious Zionists in particular, in the military establishment can be grouped under several approaches.

A narrow approach envisages religious presence as a product of a rational process, by which the nationalist religious movement attempts to exert influence on the army. Religious Jews are viewed as a political-religious-social group that seeks to impose its agendas on the military establishment. Along the lines with this approach, Tamir Libel and Reuven Gal examine the different manifestations of theocratising the Israeli army. Accordingly, the concept of "people's army" substantially reflects the argument (or price) that Israeli army is adapting its social and cultural distinctive features to match the social foundations that take part in it. It also implies the idea that the Israeli army is the people's army, providing a tool for increasing motivation of Israeli society to enlist in the Israeli army, with all the consequent social and economic prices this approach entails.<sup>10</sup> Tamir and Gal focus their attention on demographic shifts in the Israeli army, limiting and linking the process of theocratisation of the army to the rising number of religious soldiers and officers. In addition to encouraging rabbis of religious Zionism to enlist in military service, mechanisms of this process have involved the growing role of religious military schools and pre-military academies.

An intermediate approach is of the view that theocratisation of the military establishment derives from ideological and theological shifts within the nationalist religious movement,<sup>11</sup> as well as from a more recent transformation within the orthodox movement. In January 1999, the first military division, namely, the Haredi Nahal Battalion, was established. Still, orthodox religious interpretations continue to play a role in obstructing a large-scale integration of members of the orthodox religious community in the army.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, for religious Zionists, military service reflects both a religious and a nationalist value. Religious military schools strike a balance between the state and religious nationalist movement. While the former aspires for a unified national army free of separate religious orientations, the latter wants to preserve its religious idiosyncrasy within the military establishment, which is dominated by seculars. Religious schools offer students a period of 58 months of religious education, intertwined with military service, ensuring that religious education is integrated with military service/values.

A common approach, which the author also upholds, views theocratisation of the army as a process, which was initiated after 1967. It was part of a broader process, which involved theocratisation of, and an attempt to repossess and monopolise, Zionism and the state.<sup>13</sup> This process also implied transformations within the Zionist settler colonial enterprise. Israeli society does not see theocratisation of the military establishment as a negative phenomenon or a deviation from the national standard, but essentially as a reflection of the Jewish identity and heritage.

Religious Jews have enlisted in the army as a result of an intersection between the Israeli occupation of the

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10 Tamir Libel and Reuven Gal, "Between the Army-Society Relations and Religion-Army Relations: Different Facets of the Process of Theocratisation". In Reuven Gal (ed.). *Between the Kippah and Skullcap: Religion, Politics and Army in Israel*. Moshav Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing, 2012, 83-113.

11 Boaz Cohen, "A Religious Order in Military Uniform: Military Service and the Religious-Nationalist Community". *Perceptions of Israel's Reconnaissance*. Vol. 22, 2013, p. 325-358.

12 Zev Drori, *Between Faith and Military Service: The Haredi Nahal Battalion*. Jerusalem: The Floerheimer Institute for Policy Studies, 2005.

13 Ian Lustick, *For the Land and Lord: Jewish Fundamentalism in Israel*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2004.

Palestinian territory in 1967 and role of the army in protecting the land and settlement activity. In the eyes of religious Zionism, the 1967 occupation was seen as a miracle and part of redemption and return to the real Land of Israel.<sup>14</sup> The West Bank, including Jerusalem, Hebron and Nablus, are central religious regions in Judaism. The occupation and settlement activity were construed from the perspective of a religious discourse, which was overwhelmed by a Messianic nature. In the aftermath of the war, religious Zionist Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook (junior) launched an appeal to religious school students, demanding that they achieve Jewish national goals, namely, settlement and conscription in the army. The latter is a tool of settlement activity and consolidation of Jewish control over the “Land of Israel”.<sup>15</sup>

In the Israeli army, the rise of new social foundations, particularly nationalist religious Jews, can be linked to the declining role of old Jewish elites, which Kimmerling terms as *Ahasulim*. This acronym was created by Kimmerling to refer to the old, secular, socialist, nationalist Ashkenazi Zionist elite. The *Ahasulim* elite gained victory in 1948 and established the State of Israel. However, their role was done not only as a social class, but also as a dominant political elite.<sup>16</sup>

Kimmerling provides an account of the process and reflections of the political demise of the *Ahasulim* elite. Kimmerling’s argument can be taken a step further to examine the paradox, which led to an end of the *Ahasulim* domination. Having passed with flying colours in 1967, this elite planted the seeds of its antagonist. The *Ahasulim* continued to claim historic victories, most notably in 1967. However, contrary to their 1948 victory, the *Ahasulim* elite envisioned that they would not be able to replicate the settlement experience in the West Bank, as it had done inside the Green Line after 1948. Therefore, they did not oppose nationalist religious Jews’ domination over the army military elites. In the context of the settlement enterprise, the army has served as a central tool that protects settlers and maintains occupation of the West Bank – the essence of the concept of the real “Land of Israel”. The 1948 elites looked for consolidating their enterprise by seeking territorial legitimacy. They viewed the 1967 occupation as an extension of the 1948 enterprise, rather than as the beginning of a new one. It would lay a solid foundation for the 1948 territory occupation, furnishing a space for legitimisation in the surrounding Arba milieu by means of negotiations over the 1967 territory. That turned out to be so. The seeds of legitimacy the *Ahasulim* elite had planted in 1967 were not only brought to fruition at the level of political legitimacy of the 1948 enterprise, but also changed the essence of that enterprise. Albeit within a nationalist framework, religious Zionists entered the West Bank as pioneers of the new settlement enterprise, giving it a religious character with a Messianic hue. The antagonists, whom the *Ahasulim* elite had sown following the 1967 occupation in the context of the colonial enterprise, subsequently put an end to the *Ahasulim* hegemony.

In recent years, determined efforts have been made to theocratise the military establishment. This pursuit was not triggered by a potentially controversial demographic process at the level of the army’s military bases: Is it an organised process or a natural outcome of the transformations mentioned above? This process has been accompanied by attempts to theocratise military symbols and rituals. Along this vein, an attempt was made to change the opening passage of *Yizkor*, the communal prayers that are said in memory of the soldiers of Israel. The text used to begin with the phrase “May the People of Israel remember”. At the behest of religious Jews, however, Chief of Staff Benny Gantz changed it into “May God remember”. While the former is national and irreligious, the latter is typically religious. Following public pressure, Gantz established a committee to examine the issue. With the exception of the Chief Military Rabbi, the majority of committee members recommended that the word “God” be omitted from the text and that the old text be restored. In addition to the conflict over the symbolic status of remembrance in the army, in recent years, exclusion of women in the army has emerged as a result of the prevalent religious discourse and dominant presence of religious personnel in many military units.

According to Ze’ev Drori, theocratisation is driven by the army’s concern to preserve its legitimacy and status. The army is open to all social and cultural groups of the Jewish community. It seeks to manage this cultural diversity by meeting cultural needs of each cultural group and providing clearly defined organisational structures that fulfil these needs. Consequently, religion got its foot in the door and was placed as part and parcel

14 Yoel Bin-Nun. *The Miracle of Bringing the Diaspora Together: Israeli Jewish Power*. Tel Aviv: Yeditot Aharonot Book Publisher, 2011 [in Hebrew].

15 Ze’ev Drori. “The Distance between the Kippah and Skullcap: How does the Israeli Army Face the Process of Theocratisation?”, p. 124, supra note 7.

16 Kimmerling, Baruch, *Demise of the Rule of the Ahasulim*, supra note 1.

of the organisational culture of the army. As Drori postulates, religious considerations have been influential or as influential as professional military considerations.<sup>17</sup>

Besides the socio-political shifts in Israeli society which impacted theocratisation of the army, Odi Libel and Lupech Omer argue that the presence of religious Zionism in the army reflects a conservative intellectual military counter approach. Out of nostalgia, this approach seeks to restore the classic army, after it had experienced transformations that delivered it to a postmodern military. This dichotomy is not limited to opposition of the postmodern military army, but also involves Israeli society at large. Religious Zionism represents an intellectual approach that is at odds with postmodernism within the Jewish community.<sup>18</sup> The postmodern military takes expression in the transformation of the army into an establishment that delivers non-combatant military activities, increasing impact of civil society groups on the army commanders, army compliance with international conventions on war, interest in the media or virtual triumph over actual victory in the battlefield, attempt to keep troops away from the battleground, reliance on remote technologies, preference of air warfare to classic war on land, and social sensitivity of the army's social foundations and fatalities.

Theocratisation of the military establishment has prompted military commanders from within to warn against religious extremism in the army. In 2011, Avi Zamir, Commander of the Manpower Directorate, sent a letter to the Chief of Staff, calling for putting an end to religious extremism in the military establishment and army.<sup>19</sup> In his letter, Zamir was informed by a report authored by Gila Klifi-Amir, Advisor to the Chief of Staff, arguing that the army's new social foundations impose extreme religious perceptions on the army. According to other reports, religious military personnel prevailed and took hold of the Education Division of the army. These distribute educational materials to soldiers and organise educational encounters, which highlight religious concepts. In effect, the State Comptroller referred to this phenomenon in the army's Educational Division. All the more so, Avichai Rontzki, Chief Military Rabbi, moved around and used a religious discourse to encourage troops before engaging in the Gaza war 2008-2009. This was not a function of Rontzki as Chief Military Rabbi, however.<sup>20</sup> Later, the army introduced a special education division, which would promote the Jewish identity among troops. To this avail, the army is seen as a "Jewish army" in a religious sense.<sup>21</sup>

### **From the people's army to the "populist" army**

In recent years, social dynamics have made the Israeli army more sensitive of populist attitudes in Israeli society. This does not mean that the army necessarily embraces these attitudes at all times. They have become more sensitive to society trends. A striking example is the case of Elor Azaria.

Azaria was put on a high-profile trial, which reflected on the status of the army in Israeli society. Azaria case could also mark a turning point in different intersections between the army and Israeli society. It seems that Azaria trial unveiled the most critical question: Is the Israeli military a modern army or a militia? The debate does not so much concern the army's structure, selection of officers, war plans, and training patterns. All these indicate that the Israeli military is a modern army. This issue involves a key component, namely, the source of legitimacy and inspiration of the Israeli army personnel. Azaria's prosecution revealed countless fractures in the body of this component.

In several respects, a modern army is different from a militia in terms of the component of legitimacy and source of inspiration. In the army, personnel obey military orders, which determine the use of violence. Directives mostly relate to threats that put the lives of military personnel at risk during a military mission. By contrast, in a militia, personnel are subject to an ideology, which governs the use of violence in the field. In a modern army, personnel are inspired by the mission set by an elected political regime. This sets the goals

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17 Ze'ev Drori. "The Distance between the Kippah and Skullcap: How does the Israeli Army Face the Process of Theocratisation?", p. 141-142, supra note 7.

18 Odi Libel and Lupech Omer, "Get back to where we were: Dark blue Kippah Wearers in the Israeli Army as a Conservative Opposition to the Postmodernist Army." In Reuven Gal (ed.). *Between the Kippah and Skullcap: Religion, Politics and Army in Israel*. Moshav Ben Shemen: Modan Publishing, 2012, 151-203.

19 Kobi Ben-Simhon, "God Saves", p. 24-26, supra note 8.

20 Ibid, p. 24.

21 Ibid, p. 26.

of the military establishment by an informed investigation of public risks and threats. Orders are issued by a superior commander within a clearly defined military chain of command. Militia members are run by an unelected, but ideological, chain of command which identifies goals on the basis of the militia's ideology. Orders originate from the militia commander, who has charisma and derives inspiration from his ideological power as well as intellectual and personal appeal. Additionally, in a militia, personal relations play a significant role in setting the general pace within the militia movement. On the other hand, a political contract outlines the orientation of, and sets the pace within, a modern army.

The case of Azaria has unveiled a militia dimension within the Israeli army. Azaria's trial is probably an indication, rather than a product, of this dimension. At first, the events that sparked debate over Azaria's case need to be laid out. In March 2016, two Palestinian young men attempted to carry out an operation against Israeli occupying soldiers in Tal Rumeida. A soldier was stabbed and fire was opened on both Palestinians. One young man was killed. The other, Abdul Fattah al-Sharif, was injured by live ammunition fired by soldiers. He was not dead, but sustained critical wounds, which paralysed his movement. After the military operation was declared ended, a soldier of the Kfir Brigade, who had not engaged in the event since its beginning, shot Al-Sharif in the head and killed him. Meantime, Emad Abu Shamsiyyah, a member of B'Tselem, was taking footage of these events. Having been released, the video provoked considerable debate, controversy and even conflict in Israel, marking an unprecedented incident in the history of the army.

Azaria's case uncovered many characteristics of the Israeli army as well as shifts in the relation between the army and Jewish community. It further unveiled the militia dimension of the army. Arguably, the militia component of the Israeli army evolved from the fact that it was the people's army. This idea implies a far-reaching overlap between the army and political and intellectual mood of society. It has gone from being a protective idea to being a burden on the Israeli army as a modern army within a state, where the army should be attached to the superior political echelon and governing legal apparatus. The ethos of the people shifted to a factor that has influenced the army, its approaches, and the way it dealt with things. The threat not to send children to the army placed the army under pressure to take positions consistent with the people's orientations. This so-called populist character of popular discourse also distinguishes the political level in Israel. If the leadership becomes populist in conformity with the people, why should not the army act similarly?<sup>22</sup> In the context of Azaria's trial, Tzipi Livni wrote: "These days are witnessing a conflict between the truth and lies, between values and chaos, between a moral army and an army that acts at the direction of the public mood."<sup>23</sup>

Immediately after the video went viral across the globe, Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon, then Minister of Defence, and Chief of Staff released a statement, denouncing the shooting and confirming that the soldier's conduct was incompatible with the Israeli army's morals. Ya'alon described that conduct as an act of bestiality. Political analyst Amos Harel explained that the Minister of Defence was driven by the fear that the event would impact the conduct of Israeli troops. He was also concerned at the escalation, which would potentially result from releasing the video in Palestinian society.<sup>24</sup> Particularly after the Minister of Defence had declared his position, Eizenkot renounced his firm stance because of pressure. In early April, Eizenkot declared that the soldier was innocent until he was proven guilty. Meantime, a popular and political campaign was launched in support of Azaria. Netanyahu called and expressed support to Azaria's family. Opposition politicians (Avigdor Lieberman at the time) and government coalition (the majority of ministers and coalition members) joined forces to support Azaria and attack Ya'alon for his position, which they viewed as sacrificing and leaving the soldier alone in the battle. Both directly and indirectly, Azaria's case led to the overthrow of Ya'alon and appointment of Lieberman as Minister of Defence. Members of the Likud and Jewish Home parties supported the appointment of Lieberman for many reasons, including Ya'alon's stance towards Azaria's case.

At any rate, Azaria's case brought to light a number of conflicts within the Israeli army and its relation with the political echelon and the people. The case is just a reflection, rather than a product, of these conflicts. In the

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22 Amos Harel, "The Prosecutors of Azaria: The People Army vs. the People's Representatives". *Haaretz*, 6 January 2017, [Haaretz.co.il/news/politics/premium-1.3220799](http://Haaretz.co.il/news/politics/premium-1.3220799) (last accessed 15 March 2017).

23 Quoted in Noah Bortstein, "Azaria Case: The Mizrahi Narrative". *Haaretz*, 1 January 2017, [Haaretz.co.il/news/opinions/premium-1.3220131](http://Haaretz.co.il/news/opinions/premium-1.3220131) (last accessed: 15 March 2017).

24 Amos Harel, "There was No Need for an Explosives Expert to Examine the Vandal". *Haaretz*, 31 March 2016, p. 1.

past, while Israeli soldiers were put on trial in similar cases, others were not. However, even with respect to those soldiers who were prosecuted for extra-judicially killing Palestinians, such protests did not take place, as they did in Azaria case. In other words, the public and populist discourse are no longer willing to allow the army and military elites to lead these issues individually and independently. Israelis no longer accepted the military or political leadership's statements and justifications of the importance of these measures to safeguard the image of the Israeli army. Hence, Azaria trial signalled a paradigm shift: the people want the army to behave and think in a populist fashion as they do. In this context, Israeli army commanders have recently warned against a slackening of moral standards among members of Israeli society. For example, in a speech on the Holocaust Remembrance Day, Chief of Staff forewarned that racist indicators in Israeli society were similar to those which prevailed Germany on the eve of the rise of Nazism.<sup>25</sup> Right-wing political leaders, including Netanyahu, attacked and considered these statements as stultifying the Holocaust.<sup>26</sup> Long before Azaria case, Eizenkot said he did not want an Israeli soldier to discharge rounds from his rifle on a Palestinian girl wielding scissors.<sup>27</sup> In response, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Tzipi Hotovely, viewed the Chief of Staff's statements as a hostile political attack on Israel given that, at an international level, Israel had already been accused of these actions. In the face of these right-wing denunciations, once more, Minister of Defence Ya'alon backed the statements made by Eizenkot and Golan.<sup>28</sup>

Secondly, class struggle and communitarian conflict between the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews also demonstrate transformations experienced by the Israeli army both internally and in its relation with the people or the public. In parallel with the debate over Azaria case, a more aggressive controversy was in place. Although it was not plainly shown in the media, that heated debate was (deliberately, rather than haphazardly, I believe) maintained on social media platforms. As the controversy put it, Azaria, who was a Jew of Mizrahi descent and lived in the poor city of Ramla, was used by Ashkenazi army elites as a scapegoat to enhance their image around the world. Mizrahi activists, including those who did not back Azaria's conduct, stated that the issue involved a discriminatory law enforcement due to the Mizrahi descent of the soldier. In countless similar incidents, soldiers were not subjected to such treatment as Azaria was.<sup>29</sup> According to Bortstein, Azaria case laid bare the hierarchical structure and communitarian conflict within the army. Those who stood by Azaria in his trial were old Ashkenazi elites, one of whom was Ya'alon. On the other end, Mizrahi Jews backed Azaria in the belief that his trial was staged because he was of Mizrahi origins.<sup>30</sup> Rami Kimchi elaborates that, in support of Azaria, protests against the judiciary and army command comprised lower caste Mizrahi Jews who lived in development towns and poor cities, such as Ramla.<sup>31</sup> Real or imagined class struggle in and between the army and community groups unfolds the militia dimension of the army. Azaria case showed that secular, left-wing Ashkenazi Jews abandoned military service in army units, which involved friction with Palestinians or hard duties, such as border patrols. They preferred service in prestigious divisions, including cyber units, elite intelligence, etc. Police and border patrols would remain a duty of the Mizrahi Jews and members of vulnerable groups. Yagil Levy, Israeli expert in army-society relations, indicates that the army has transformed into a caste-communitarian one.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of how valid these claims are both statistically and realistically, the picture drawn contributes to recruiting proponents of Azaria, who were also so wrathful of

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25 Raanan Ben Tzur, "Chief of Staff: It is scary to have processes that occurred in Germany 70-80 years ago". *Ynet*, 5 May 2016, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4799480,00.html> (last accessed: 15 March 2017).

26 Shlomo Zesna, "Netanyahu: Golan's statements stultify the Holocaust", *Yisrael Hayom*, 8 May 2016, <http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/379607> (Last accessed, 15 March 2017).

27 Yoav Zitun, "Eizenkot to High School Students: I don't want a soldier who empties a full magazine at a girl holding scissors". *Ynet*, 17 February 2016, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4767370,00.html>.

28 Lilach Shoval, et al., "Storm of the Chief of Staff: Support and Condemnation". *Yisrael Hayom*, 19 February 2016, <http://www.israelhayom.co.il/article/358083> (Last accessed, 15 March 2017).

29 For a report on the communitarian-ethic debate over Azaria's prosecution, see Eness Elias, *Haaretz Supplement*, 22 July 2016, p. 9.

30 Noah Bortstein, "Azaria Case: The Mizrahi Narrative", supra note 23.

31 Rami Kimchi, "The Mizrahi Elephant in Azaria Trial", *Haaretz*. Also see Noah Bortstein, "Azaria Case: The Mizrahi Narrative", supra note 23, [Haaretz.co.il/news/opinions/premium-1.3258866](http://www.haaretz.co.il/news/opinions/premium-1.3258866) (Last accessed, 15 March 2017).

32 Yagil Levy, "The Israeli Army Transforms into a Caste-Communitarian Army". *Haaretz*, 16 January 2017, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/premium-1.3239407>.

the military command elite, pulling them together on communitarian grounds. All the more so, members of the public who stood by Azaria refused conscription after he was convicted by the military court in Tel Aviv.

In addition, Azaria case demonstrated that the Israeli army was dominated by new groups, who broke away from old and conventional elites that used to lead the military establishment in Israel. It divulged the New Right Wing's desire to seize control of the army, particularly military values, and introduce new sources of legitimacy and inspiration, including religion and populist ideology. The fact that the majority of members of the government coalition stood by Azaria, called for giving amnesty after conviction, and portrayed the army, or military elites in particular, as if they were abusing the "poor" family evidently reflects the desire that the army act at the direction of the public and New Right Wing. Some threatened to refuse conscription if the army did not change its approach, further demonstrating the public perception of the army: A militia that does whatever it wants. Media reports also unveiled a militia dimension in Azaria case. During the events in Hebron, settlers' influence on army soldiers and officers was evident. Sometimes, soldiers are subject to orders issued by settlers. Although this was not a new incident, Azaria case clearly demonstrated this reality, revealing the militia dimension of the Israeli army by obeying orders from ideological leaderships, including settlers, and providing assistance to abuse Palestinians.<sup>33</sup>

Many reserve officers and generals criticised the army conduct over the course of Azaria case. Some, including Uzi Dayan, even delivered testimonies at court in favour of Azaria. In their criticism, these officers claimed that the army would not provide protection to soldiers if they commit violations, which they described as executive, not value-based or ethical. Secondly, officers claimed that Azaria trial would prevent soldiers from opening fire when they are exposed to danger in fear of prosecution and because the army would abandon them to their fate. Using a militia technique, the army refuted these claims by publishing statistical data, showing the number of Palestinians killed in the aftermath of Azaria trial. The army proved that the case did not impact soldiers' motive to use arms against Palestinians. Counting Palestinian bodies to prove that Azaria trial did not affect the army is clearly a militia-like thinking and conduct.<sup>34</sup>

More than any other incident, Azaria case and trial created a rift in the holy status of the Israeli army. Together with others, the case pushed the Israeli army further into a militia-oriented framework. In the context of Azaria case, people took to the streets, protesting against the army, its sources of legitimacy, military doctrine, and code of ethics. During demonstrations outside the military court in Tel Aviv, protestors chanted slogans, inciting violence against the Chief of Staff. That was the first time in the history of the army that involved deadly incitement in order to force the Chief of Staff to step down. In the protests, participants chanted: "Beware, Gadi. Rabin is looking for a friend." According to media reports, the incidents associated with Azaria trial reflect a community split over the status and role of the army.

In addition to Azaria trial, other cases have emerged, articulating a militia-like approach within the Israeli army. As illustrated by Azaria case, the army has attempted to resist this inclination, albeit largely unsuccessfully. For example, religious Zionist rabbis seek to prevent women from integrating into combat units, including the first experience of integration in the armour corps. De-legitimation also targets Israeli human rights organisations, such as Breaking the Silence, which criticise army practices in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Combined, these approaches demonstrate militia dimensions within the Israeli army, all nourished by the notion of the "people's army". So let it be as the public want.

## Conclusion

This article has addressed the question of elites within the Israeli army. In this context, conclusive remarks should be made:

1. The proportion of religious officers, particularly in combat units, is clearly on the rise. However, this does not indicate a dramatic change within military elites. The majority of chiefs of staff have been

33 Rogel Alpher, "Ovda Programme Report on Elor Azaria Exposes Eizenkot", Haaretz, 1 December 2016, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/tv-review/.premium-1.3139136>, (Last accessed, 15 March 2017).

34 Yagil Levy, "The Danger of Counting Dead Bodies", Haaretz, 26 February 2017, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/opinions/.premium-1.3885276> (Last accessed, 15 March 2017).

irreligious. Not a religious officer has yet held the position of chief of staff.

2. Recruited through pre-military academies, religious conscripts have impacted the way the army deals with the question of religion. In addition to certain units with religious personnel, the army's internal policies are subject to a code of conduct that identifies with the values of religious staff. Still, the army continues to deal with this change in line with the perception of the people's army and need for religious combatants and officers, who provide leverage for army units.
3. The conscription law is ironically consistent with the idea of theocratising the army. Primarily promoted by irreligious parties, the conscription law ultimately helps to recruit members of the orthodox religious community. From a religious perspective, these are more extremist than members of the nationalist religious movement. The process has given rise to the so-called Haredi-nationalist movement, a more extremist combination of both groups mentioned above.
4. Among the old elites, the significance of military service has shifted from a political to socioeconomic issue, exerting impact on and changing the concepts of elite army units from direct, conventional combat regiments into IT divisions. Members of the old elites are engaged in the latter in pursuit of individual economic benefits following military service. On the other hand, religious Zionists engage in service of a settler colonial enterprise in the West Bank. When they were part of these units, the old elites were concerned with maintaining the 1948 enterprise. When it took hold after 1967, a new colonial enterprise was produced in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, embracing a redemptory religious discourse. Religious Zionists considered this enterprise as theirs. They were of the view that the primary goal, rather than legitimacy, of the Israeli army derives from this enterprise.