In the Name of Insecurity

Arab Soldiers in the Israeli Military

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Arabs serving in the military are in a very difficult situation. They always mistrust you no matter what you do. “An Arab is an Arab wherever he is.” This is what I hear. It’s like the saying goes, “He trusts you and accuses you of betrayal” (m’ammnak u-mkhawwnak).

Jamil, soldier with four years of service.

The military conscription of Jews in Israel along with the exemption of most Arab citizens of the state has played a key role in the production of a hierarchal citizenship system. Within the framework of an ethnicized “military mentalité,” “non-Jews” who do not serve in the state security apparatus are denied a host of state benefits and rights as well as the sense of full national membership enjoyed by the “community of warriors.” The state actively uses the criterion of military service to exclude Arab citizens, while Jewish citizens who do not serve in the military can access the (lesser) benefits of alternative national service. In addition to exclusion, military enlistment has also served the complimentary function of co-opting small segments of the Palestinian population in Israel by promising to reward their military service with membership, benefits and rights otherwise denied. However, this attempted manipulation has been fraught with conflicts and contradictions.

This article explores the tensions between the state’s conception of Palestinian citizens of Israel as security threats by definition on the one hand, and the attempt to integrate a small number of them into the security apparatus (the military, border guard and police) on the other. Arab soldiers are trusted with the enforcement of state security, and yet signs of mistrust linger within the military – both at the formal and informal level. I argue that Arab soldiers are forced to continually prove and re-prove their trustworthiness, and in effect, the rewards they receive for their military service are severely circumscribed by the Zionist goals of the state. Their experiences illustrate the ethnic limits that are embedded in other mechanisms of governance in Israel.

The Military and Its Good Arabs

Since the founding of the state of Israel, the military has been seen as “the workshop of the new nation.” The goal of universal conscription was to create and socialize “new Jews.” Through participation in the military, Jewish citizens of Israel become incorporated into the security ethos of the state and “the logic of the socio-political order [is]... reproduced.” The military field has also been used to manage those at the margins of this socio-political order, the remaining Palestinian Arab minority in Israel.

Ian Lustick argues that “there is a highly effective system of control which since 1948 has operated over Israeli Arabs” that is based on policies “specifically designed to preserve and strengthen... the segmentation of the Arab community, both internally and in its relations with the Jewish sector.” The military has played a leading role in this segmentation policy. One of the primary means by which Israeli governments have cultivated the ostensibly and “endemic animosity” between the Druze and other Arabs, as well as between Bedouin and other Arabs, was through selective recruitment to the military. Kais Firro argues that this system was intended to produce “good Arabs” (Druze, some Bedouin and a few others who serve in the military) in opposition to “bad Arabs” (the rest). The recruitment of Arabs in
the military was not simply to add their strength to the ranks of the “Israeli Defense Forces.” From early on, supporters of the “Minority Unit” in the military argued that “the unit served an important social goal that transcended its military utility.”

But Arabs in Israel are not born structurally “good” from the point of view of the state. After all, they are “a minority group that lives in a political framework - the state of Israel - that was established against its will,” and at its expense and the expense of other Palestinians. As “non-Jews” in a state that continues to emphasize its Jewish character, they cannot be considered automatically loyal in the way that Zionism assumes of its Jewish citizens. The few “good Arabs” need to be conscripted, trained, tested and remolded in order to subdue their structurally suspicious status as “non-Jews” - a feat which can only have limited success by definition. Indeed, Jewish security requires and depends on the embodiment of Arabs as a source of insecurity in order to justify the continued centrality of the security apparatus. If Arab ethnicity functions as a signifier of insecurity, and membership in the military as a signifier of security, then the Arab soldier in the military is a security enforcer who must fight against the very insecurity he embodies and of which he cannot entirely rid himself.

During his tenure as Minister of Defense, Moshe Arens was a strong advocate of drafting Arabs, particularly Bedouin, into the military to “discourage them from turning into Islamic radicals.” Similar statements to the effect that drafting Arabs can counter their otherwise sure path to political radicalization are commonplace in Israel. Hisham Nafa’a points out that the statement of a high ranking military officer that the recruitment of Druze aims to prevent them from joining Hamas and from becoming terrorists implies a conception of an Arab as “a terrorist, perhaps currently dormant, but his ‘terrorist-ness’ could be activated at any moment!” Suspect Arabness casts its shadow even on “good Arabs” serving in the military.

Institutional Doubt

According to Alon Peled’s analysis, one of the principal arguments used by Israeli governments “to justify the historical exemption of most Arab citizens from military service” was that their recruitment would “breach security.” Senior military and ministry of defense officials “shared a consensus that [Israel’s] Muslim citizens were simply too unreliable to be enlisted,” and “questioned the loyalty of Muslim and Christian citizens and argued that allowing them in the military would amount to assisting a fifth column to penetrate its ranks.” Indeed Israeli governments have feared that Arab military service or even alternative national service would raise their “expectations for state benefits and equal rights” and “contribute to political irredentism.”

Although small numbers of Arab soldiers have volunteered for the military since its formation, the persistent suspicion of these soldiers is manifest at the institutional level through the very process of enlisting, which differentiates between the drafted soldier who has the duty to serve regardless of his personal beliefs or political affiliations, and the Arab or “minority” soldier who volunteers to enlist and must prove his loyalty and trustworthiness by providing two recommendations, usually from military personnel. This contrasts sharply with the difficulty Jewish citizens of Israel face in refusing service on ideological or political grounds: they
are pressured, intimidated and frequently accommodated with clerical or non-combat posts in order to avoid their outright refusal of military service. Within a Jewish nationalist framework, their Jewishness labels them as automatically loyal and soldier material, while Arabness labels a citizen automatically disloyal and not soldier material.

In addition to the added requirement of recommendations, Arab volunteers undergo rigorous ethnicized “security” checks. One Christian man I interviewed was asked to identify himself and his family members in photos of political demonstrations that were legal and peaceful before being turned down by the military as “incompatible.” Indeed, the very definition of compatibility with the military carries ethnic significance. An Arab potential volunteer is routinely disqualified if background security checks reveal he has relatives across Israel “proper’s” border (e.g., in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Lebanon). A Druze policeman I interviewed who had seven years of service (in addition to the three years of mandatory military service) reiterated what several others told me: “It is my impression that the security check [he used the Hebrew term tahkîr bithônî] for minorities, including Druze, is more intense. This is at the initial stage. Later on, if you try and rise in rank, they dig around more and more. For Jewish soldiers, the check is only a formality on paper.”

Although the Druze and Bedouin have been constructed as relatively more trustworthy than other Arabs, the history of their recruitment in the military shows that this has been a gradual and incomplete project. A gap of distrust and the view of Druze and Bedouin as a potential Arab “Trojan horse” in the Israeli military has been evident throughout their history of service.

Mandatory conscription of Druze was introduced in 1956, and a policy of encouraging Bedouin recruitment was in place. However, for years to come, Druze and Bedouin – not to mention other Arabs – were placed in segregated units under Jewish officer command, denied participation in Israeli-Arab war combat and limited in rank. Although “minority” soldiers were allowed positions outside the segregated brigade (but not in the air force or in intelligence) starting in the 1970s, and all units were declared open in 1991, the largely segregated units continue to exist and “minority” soldiers continue to be placed in them. In 2001, Sergeant Husam Janam petitioned the Supreme Court because his demand to transfer out of the Druze infantry unit had been denied, suggesting that, in practice, this right to serve in other units continues to be severely curtailed.

The continued predominance of “minority units” highlights that these soldiers are not just Israeli soldiers, but “minority” Israeli soldiers, since “Israeli” on its own is used to mean Jewish. Promotions and assignments are also ethnically organized. Samir, a veteran of the Bedouin educational military track told me: “They sent me to an officer’s course and they assigned a psycho-technic exam on the Adha holiday, and I still got a very high score. But because the military is divided, the Bedouin area [used Arabized Hebrew il-mîrḥâv il-badawî] did not have a position [used Hebrew word têkon] that year. The officer in charge tried to help me and told me to wait a year, maybe next year there would be an opening.” Asri Mazariv, the brother of Major Ashraf Mazariv of the Bedouin patrol unit who was killed in January 2002, told Ha’aretz that Ashraf was not accepted by Ofek, the “prestigious project aimed at cultivating
company commanders.” He explained, “Even though Ashraf was considered an excellent commander in his unit, as far as the IDF was concerned, he always remained a Bedouin... As a Bedouin you can’t raise your head too high. If you climb too high, they’ll smack you down again right away.”

This ethnic logic also permeates benefits such as the Bedouin educational military track mentioned above, in which Bedouin teachers are given credit for military service in exchange for teaching at a school in military uniform. Ethnicized memorials such as the memorial to the Fallen Bedouin near the Battouf valley or the Druze military cemetery in Isifya, all point to the ethnic logic of the military.

Indeed, the Arab soldiers I interviewed identified precisely these issues – limited promotions and closed units – as continuing to circumscribe their military service. While some were critical and disillusioned by the ethnic barriers and glass ceilings, many of the soldiers I interviewed rationalized these limitations as either 1) a result of the paucity of qualified Arab soldiers; 2) in a process of gradual change that requires patience; or 3) a result of individual and isolated cases of discrimination rather than a matter of military policy. However, none of the 34 soldiers, policemen and border guards I interviewed between 2000 and 2002 believed there was full equality in this area. Even Hasan al-Hayb, the mayor of Zarazir and a former officer of the Bedouin Trackers in Northern Command, told me: “The military is orderly. Any person who proves his capabilities will advance...There is discrimination among some of them and promotion is not 100%... there isn’t even one Druze air force pilot.” When it comes to the absence of Arabs in the highest ranks of the military, the soldiers mostly agreed that the state in its current situation cannot trust Arabs with sensitive state secrets and decision-making power. For these men, the military seems to hold the promise of a meritocratic system but ethnic considerations mar and distort it.

When Lieutenant Colonel Omar al-Hayb was accused of spying for Hezbollah in 2002, his identity as a Bedouin was a central component of the case. The head of the military general command emphasized that this is “an isolated case, and must not be used to reach conclusions against all Bedouins in the country. The contribution of Bedouin to protect the security of Israel was considerable and ongoing and proven since the establishment of the state until today.” The centrality of Hayb’s inescapable Bedouin identity to the military and to the Israeli public becomes clear when compared to a situation in which an Ashkenazi Jew is accused of espionage: It would seem absurd if military spokespersons then urged the public not to generalize the soldier’s betrayal to the entire Ashkenazi Jewish community. Moshe Arens described the trial as “being accompanied by a feeling of anxiety and injury by many in the Bedouin community,” and he added that Israelis should express their support for the Bedouin community in this hour of crisis. Al-Hayb’s defense attorney highlighted the years of military service and ranks of the defendant’s clan members and the number of them killed during their military service. The accused’s brother, Hasan al-Hayb, stated in an interview that the shock of the accusations were difficult not only for the family and for the people of his village Zarazir, but also for “all Arab Bedouin villages.” It is clear for all the involved parties that ethnic affiliation is paramount: Omar al-Hayb is not an Israeli soldier – he is a Bedouin Israeli soldier.
Another soldier I interviewed who had been suspected of breaching security and who was subsequently released, described the significance of ethnicity in his case: “They came and took me in the middle of the night from the house like any other Arab. It didn’t matter to them that I had served in the military or not. Why did they accept me into the security system [used the Hebrew term marikhit habitahun] in the first place? Once they even gave me a lie detector test while I was in uniform [used Hebrew madim]. To them I was an Arab just like any other Arab.”

Unofficial Policies?

Like many of the men I interviewed, Samih (labeled a “Muslim”, i.e., non-Bedouin soldier) found deep contradictions in the military. At the time of the interview, he had served five years in the army and three years in the border guard. He stated, “There is no Ashkenazi and Russian, and Arab and Jew - in any case, you can’t talk like that in the military. There are rules and it’s not up to you to do as you like. A soldier is a soldier regardless of his background. In the end, we are all in the same ditch.” However, Samih believed that there were individuals within the military who did not follow these egalitarian rules: “I have friends who were highly qualified and went to officer training but they were flunked because the [Jewish] officer in charge was right wing.” He also described the way in which the rule of exclusive use of Hebrew was unequally enforced: “This officer came shouting at me for speaking Arabic with my friends. Right around me were soldiers speaking Russian and Amharic, but it was only Arabic that bothered him.” Moreover, the level of daily discrimination experienced by soldiers once out of uniform or once they have left service seems comparable to the rest of the Arab population. One Bedouin soldier from an unrecognized village in the south told me: “We say to each other: today you are a combatant, tomorrow you are an Arab [used Hebrew hayom ata kravi, mahar ata aravi].”

In addition to stories of “isolated cases” and “individual racists,” many soldiers described discrimination resulting from corruption. Farid, a Christian policeman, told me: “There are people with college degrees [used Hebrew to’ar rishon] who don’t get promoted, and men who aren’t worth a shekel but their relatives are so and so and they are the ones who get promoted. The security system [used Arabized Hebrew ma’rekhet il-bitahon] is like a mirror of the state – when you are inside it, you can see all of the dirt. If you want to get close to an officer, lie to him. Maybe the Jewish policeman doesn’t have to do this, but we do.” Another soldier described sanctioned ethnic control and corruption in different units: “The Druze control the border guard [used Hebrew mishmar gvul], the Tiberias station is in the hands of the Christians, and tracking is for the Bedouin. If someone from a different group tries to come in, they find a way of getting rid of him. Everyone knows from his background what unit he will be successful in.”

Many interviewees also described a more informal and daily level of mistrust in the military. One Druze policeman described the way in which “they look at you differently” if anything happens: “To them you are a mercenary [used Hebrew sakhir herev] - I’ve heard this word both in the army and in the police force.” Another Christian policeman said: “When something happens, I start apologizing. Like when that guy from Abu Snan blew himself up at the train station in Nahariya, I said things to the policemen with me, things that I don’t
want to say, so that they don’t put me in the same category with him... I would say things like: ‘Those Arabs, they don’t know anything but violence’ [used Hebrew alimut]. Or during the demonstrations in October [2000], they would ask me ‘What’s going on with the Arabs?’ [used Hebrew mah koreh ‘im ha’aravim]. Of course I have to say the things they want to hear.” Another border guard told me: “We can’t really talk about politics there. You have to be very careful what you say and whom you say it to. There are some good Jews in the army; some of them are better than the Arabs that serve. But not all of them.”

While these cases of discrimination or corruption can be seen as individual, isolated, informal and somehow random, they can also be understood as systematic results of the state power structure. Hisham Nafa’s analysis of an incident in which two Jewish officers from an elite unit beat a Bedouin soldier is relevant here. Rather than see the case as a random aberration or as an exception to military rules, Nafa’ argues that Israeli racist policies against Arabs in the Occupied Territories “will necessarily and directly cause the same behavior in relationship to Arabs here.”30 I would add that the overwhelming Zionist strategy of segmentation and the ethnicizing logic of the state and the military underwrite both formal policy and informal patterns of discrimination in the military.

**The Promised Land**

The cooptation of certain Palestinians for military service has been built on the promise to reward them – or to spare them the punishments other Arabs face – both materially and symbolically. At the economic level, possible attractions include increased benefits, tax releases, subsidized loans and education, as well as increased job opportunities both within the military and in other security industries. Some soldiers can purchase land plots at subsidized prices in limited locations. However, job opportunities for released “minority” soldiers remain meager. A March 2001 government report identified job placement as a major problem facing released Bedouin soldiers.31 According to one Bedouin soldier, “The illusion of opened doors made me decide to enter the military. But as soon as the uniform comes off you turn back into an Arab.”

Moreover, the dire economic state of Druze villages is comparable to that of other Arab villages in which the male population is not drafted. Druze lands have not been spared confiscation; the rates of state expropriation of land are comparable to and sometimes exceed that of other Arab villages.32 This was made a central rallying cry for the conference on the cancellation of Druze conscription, held in Yarka in November 2001. It illustrates that the ethnic-based Judaizing goals of the state in the end override any attempts at co-opting non-Jews.

The symbolic opportunity supposedly provided by military service for a fuller sense of membership and belonging to the Israeli collective also seems circumscribed. An activist on behalf of unrecognized villages described to me how he felt his service in the border guard allowed him to speak with “a full mouth” [used Hebrew term peh maleh] and helped him win the ear of state officials in fighting for his village’s recognition. The sought after symbolic rewards in this case – the potential for gaining legitimacy and voice among the “community of warriors”33 – could produce material ones. This
man hopes that his ability to state, “I am a veteran and my brother gave his life in Lebanon,” will result in the “listening ear” of state officials. This could potentially mean running water, electricity, health care, schools, etc. He believes his success has been limited: “So far I think my military service helped me to a certain degree. I can clearly see the change in the behavior of officials as soon as I say ‘I just came back from reserve duty [used Hebrewmilu’im].’ One official heard this and immediately gave me an invitation to a very important meeting. But I can’t say for sure, since they haven’t recognized our village yet!”

It appears that the waving of Israeli flags above homes slotted for demolition in unrecognized villages and the tens of years of service of family members are not significant enough to prevent their demolition. The goals of the Jewish state call for the removal of the Arabs living in unrecognized villages, just as they call for the confiscation of Arab lands, including that of Druze. Moshe Arens describes this as a “non-policy” on the part of the state.34 Yet, these contradictions clearly demonstrate the supremacy of one set of goals: “a policy of creating a homogenous nation-state, a state of and for a particular ethnic nation, and acts to promote the language, culture, numerical majority, economic well-being, and political interests of this group.”35 The individual soldier may be able to achieve certain material and symbolic gains as long as they do not conflict with the ethnic goals of the state. In the end, the military, like other state institutions, is a tool “in the hands of the dominant ethnic nation to promote its goals and interests.”36

It is noteworthy that Arab volunteers are often required to make advance commitments to serve in frontal field units,37 usually farther from home, and in which casualty rates are higher. Moreover, while prior to the 1980s Arab volunteers entered the military as regulars, since then it is expected that they serve the mandatory three years voluntarily as recruits with meager stipends. These requirements push Arab soldiers’ service into the frame of sacrifice for the Jewish state, rather than increased opportunity for the Arab citizen. A few soldiers explained to me that they are trying to transcend the limitations that Arab civilians face and upgrade their citizenship status. Their successes and failures reflect the parameters of the ethnic policies of the state.

Hassan Jabareen argues that one of the reasons for rejecting military service is that “national or military service of Arabs in Israel is liable to make them more Israeli, but is certainly liable to make them less Palestinian and Arab.”38 However, my research suggests that rather than being ignored, from the point of view of the state, to date, the ethnic identity and minority status of Arabs in the military remain primary, and they powerfully shape soldiers’ experiences. By constructing Israeli and Arab as perpetually oppositional and by emphasizing the latter in “minority” soldiers, the military system ensures that these Arabs never become full Israelis.

These dynamics are highly visible in the example of Arabs in the military, but are in no way exceptional. The military, like other state institutions, produces subjects it assumes are destined to be the source of threat and insecurity, who are then asked to fight these “inherent” characteristics. “Good Arabs” and “bad Arabs” are perhaps better understood not as two separate categories, but as co-existing in every Arab in Israel. State disciplines – whether carried out by educational, judicial, or health delivery systems – thus attempt to produce
subjects who are self-alarmed by their own existence: Students reading about Arab enemies of the state in their history textbooks, defendants denying that they disliked state actions, and patients using contraceptives that will lower their demographic threat to the state. Said Ighbariyyi, who helped me extensively with my fieldwork in the Triangle, told me: “If the state really intended to Israelize us, two-thirds of us would have already been lost among them by now, dissolved into their society. But the state has never been interested in really Israelizing Arabs. It is not possible. It would mean the failure of the principle of a Jewish state.” The experiences of these Arab soldiers illustrate the difficulty of ever being a “good Arab” in Israel and can serve as yet another critique, perhaps from an unexpected group, of the ethnic logic of the state.

End Notes

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1 Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the interviewees.


3 Sara Helman, “Militarism and the Construction of the Life-World of Israeli-Males: The Case of the Reserves System,” in E. Lomsky-Feder and E. Ben Ari, id. at 194.


6 S. Helman, supra note 3.

7 Ian Lussick, Arabs in the Jewish State: Israel’s Control of a National Minority (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) at 25.

8 Id. at 122.


12 A. Peled, supra note 4, at 147.


16 A. Peled, supra note 4, at 137.

17 Id. at 137-138.

18 Id. at 140-141.

19 While I recognize the danger of categorizing soldiers according to these state-sanctioned affiliations, for the purpose of this article, I list these affiliations in order to
demonstrate that my interviewees came from all sections of the Arab community.

All of my interviews were conducted in Arabic, except for one interview in which I asked questions in Arabic and the interviewee insisted on answering in Hebrew. However, interviewees who spoke in Arabic often used some Hebrew terms. I point to these language choices in my transcripts since they often suggest certain political genealogies of power.

A. Peled, supra note 4.


Interview took place in February 2002. One Druze man has recently graduated from the air force pilot training course.


“Israel Gave the Case More Weight than It Deserves and Hezbollah Will Announce Its Position at the Appropriate Time,” Al-Sinnara, 23 October 2002, at 6 (Arabic).


A. Harel, supra note 14.


S. Helman, supra note 3.


Id.

A. Peled, supra note 4, at 138.


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