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# Israelis' Perception of the IDF

A Split Between it as an Armed Force and as a Public Institution

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December 2015

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## Abstract

The paper attempts to shed light on Israel's trust in the military based on public opinion surveys conducted over the last decade. Our findings illuminate the complexity of the Israeli-Jewish public perception of the IDF. We identify a split between public perceptions of the military as an armed force and its perception of it as a public institution. These two different perceptions co-exist in public opinion, and do not necessarily influence each other. The findings warrant our assertion that public trust in the IDF continued to be high and positive throughout the decade, despite widespread criticism of various aspects of its functioning as a public organizations.

## Keywords

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## *in the Military – A Brief Glance*

Trust is considered the precondition for political order. It is a necessary condition for both civil society and democracy. It is produced by democracy and helps to sustain it. But there is an inherent paradox in the relationship between democracy and trust. On the one hand, the legitimacy of political and administrative institutions is based largely on trust.  On the other hand, an essential element of democracy is "the healthy lack of trust" in, or at least skepticism towards, those who hold the power.

As for trust in the armed forces - in a democracy, it is their responsibility to gain the public's trust. A military that is not trusted by the population may have difficulty justifying its expenses, and even its existence. Thus, the level of trust that citizens have in their armed forces is one of the key parameters of civil–military relations.

Two decades ago, Burk and Moskos (Burk 1994) found that in postmodern societies the public's attitude toward its armed forces is characterized by skepticism, apathy, or both. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, people no longer consider defense a national priority. Threats have become diffuse and nebulous. Also, humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, by their nature, are less dramatic than conventional conflicts. The upshot is that the military has become less visible and less central in people's opinion. The widespread elimination of compulsory military service further reinforces this trend.

Nevertheless, as the armed forces in Western democracies have become increasingly directed towards peacekeeping missions and humanitarian aid in the last two decades, their popularity has grown somewhat higher than it was during the Cold War. Peacekeeping missions, generally tasked with guaranteeing stability and assisting populations in disaster areas, are regarded as noble causes by the public, although in the long run they could become more difficult to justify if casualties are incurred or their mandates are only vaguely defined (Boene, Dandeker et al. 2000; Manigart 2001; Manigart 2003; Dandeker 2006).

Research on public confidence in the military is a sub-branch of the literature dealing with trust in state institutions. Findings indicate a decline in public trust in state institutions in western democracies in recent decades that has reached today's low levels (Hattis Rolef 2006). Be that as it may, armies seem to inspire greater confidence than do other national institutions in most European democratic countries and other states (Manigart 2001; Hattis Rolef 2006; Beetham 2007). A survey conducted in European countries in 2000 found that of sixteen national institutions, the public's highest level of trust was in the armed forces (Manigart 2001; Manigart 2003).

Another European Union (EU) study showed that even the minimum level of confidence in the military exceeded 60%, with the lowest level in Spain (65%) and the highest in Finland (91%)  (Manigart 2001).

Furthermore, a comparative study conducted by David Beetham for the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) on trust in various state institutions (parliaments, political parties, legal systems, police and armed forces) found that trust in the military was the highest compared to other institutions in all regions: East Asia (64%), the EU (61%), Africa (52%), Eastern Europe (44%), and Latin America (35%) (Beetham  2007).

The main caveat regarding most research methodologies done in the field is that they all employ one overarching question on trust and do not examine the wide range of factors that trust is built upon. Thus,

they do not differentiate between trust in the military's combat capability, trust in its commanders, or trust in its ability to cope with the threats that characterizes the low intensity conflicts that have become so important during the last decade. Our study examines trust in the IDF by employing a series of questions that examine a wide range of factors that comprise the concept of trust.

## The Israeli Context

As background to our discussion of Israeli civil-military relations, what follows is a brief history of the IDF and its changing status in Israeli society.

 The IDF was established in May 1948, with the founding of the State of Israel. The fledgling government decided almost immediately on universal compulsory service for Jewish men and women, a decision that transformed Israeli society into a "nation in uniform" (Ben-Eliezer 1994). The IDF symbolized the nation's spirit, strength, and ethical standards. As a state institution, it was assigned several roles. Lissak (2001) noted that it was not only an armed force but also an agent of modernization and integration into the developing society. It was tasked with absorbing new immigrants, fostering education, reducing socio-cultural gaps between ethnic groups, and promoting good citizenship. Since then, military service has been the ticket into Israeli society and the pathway to social mobility.

Since the early 1970s, the IDF's lofty status and Israel's image as a "nation in uniform" has gradually changed. The shift has paralleled global socioeconomic trends, and changes in Israeli society and the nature of war (Inbar 1990; Ben-Meir 1995; Ben-Ari, Rosenhek et al. 2001; Cohen 2001; Peri 2001; Ben-Eliezer 2003; Levy 2003; Cohen 2006).

The reasons for these changes are many and diverse; suffice it to note that liberal ideology gradually surpassed the socialist ideology and state collectivist orientation (Levy 2009). Liberal paradigms increased the demand for transparency regarding different aspects of the military's functioning (Shani and Kuchik 2007). In war, the boundary between the frontlines and home front became increasingly blurred, the homefront more vulnerable, and the army's ability to provide full protection against missile attacks, which increased in the last decade, was more limited. Decades of wars and limited conflict sharpened criticism of the army and increased refusal to serve, including conscientious objectors from both the right and left of the political spectrum (Weiss 2010). The army's involvement in highly controversial, politically-loaded "national missions," such as the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, also enhanced public criticism.

These trends have resulted in a gradual increase in public and media criticism of the IDF's budget management, force application, ethical conduct, combat proficiency, and so forth (Shani and Kuchik 2007; Doron and Lebel 2003).

The change in the IDF's status in Israeli society is also reflected in the new control mechanisms imposed on it. The media has become an active player in the public discourse on security issues and is often acerbically critical of the army's conduct (Peri 2001; 2004). A growing number of social movements (reservists, feminist movements, civil right organizations, bereaved families, etc.) have confronted the IDF since the 1990s (Doron and Lebel 2003; Doron and Lebel 2004; Cohen 2008; Levy 2010). Government ministries have established new monitoring mechanisms to inspect the army's modus operandi: including transparency, budget management, legal restrictions on force application, etc. (Levy 2010). The army's special status vis-à-vis other government agencies has been truncated.

Despite frequently heard claims that the IDF's status is deteriorating, a comparison of the public's trust in other state institutions and the IDF shows that the latter's status remains generally high and stable, and

outscores any other major institution in Israel. For example, according to a 2011 survey, 94% of the Israeli public expressed confidence in the IDF compared to 84% in the President, 64% in the Supreme Court, 59% in the police, and 36% in the political parties (Hermann, Atmor et al. 2011; Vigoda Gadot and Mizrahi 2010). Similar results appear in a previous study (Tiargan and Eran Jona 2015) and show that public trust in the IDF remained high throughout most of the last decade (excluding the period following the 2006 Second Lebanon War).

Therefore, the main questions we will address in this paper are: What is the meaning of the public's "trust" in the IDF? Is it a homogenous concept? Do Israelis' perceive differently various aspects of the military's conduct and professionalism?

"Trust" is a concept not simple to define, and the elusiveness of the concept poses a genuine research challenge in order to understand its components. As a first step, we offer a definition: *Trust is an individual's or social group's belief that someone or something is reliable, honest, and effective. It is based upon knowledge, beliefs, experiences, ethos, stereotypes, and social norms. It is subjective and made up of conscious and subconscious layers.*

## Methodology

The study is based on a series of public surveys conducted between 2001 and 2010. The data was gathered during periods of quiet as well as periods of high and low intensity conflict.

The target population included Israeli adults aged 18 and over who live in exclusively Jewish or mixed residential areas. A total of 20,215 interviews were conducted in forty surveys.

The questionnaires included permanent core questions and questions related to changes in the security situation and actual IDF operations.

The surveys focused on three key issues: how the Israeli public perceives the security situation (short- and long-term threats, the current situation compared to other periods, etc.); public resilience; and the level of trust in the IDF (based on various parameters).

This paper focuses on the third issue: various parameters that measure trust in the IDF, such as trust in the IDF's commanders, evaluation of soldiers' ethical conduct and level of professionalism, military capability, ability to protect the homefront from a wide range of threats, deterrence capability, care of individual soldiers, respect for human dignity, level of economic management, and credibility.

Since the surveys presented here were designed for organizational needs, not all questions were asked in every year and some of the questions were asked consecutively, according to the organization's requirements.

# Findings

## *Perceptions of the IDF as an armed force*

We conducted an analysis of the percentage of the respondents who answered positively to surveys carried out each year from 2001 to 2010. We repeated the analysis for the two main questions that examined trust in the IDF.

According to Table 1, the assessment of the IDF's professional level and combat proficiency was very high and stable over the years. A significant majority of over 80% of the respondents expressed trust in the IDF's professionalism and its combat proficiency. In 2004, 89% of the Israeli public trusted IDF professionalism, and the numbers stay high both in 2006 (88%) and 2010 (83%).

Similar figures appear regarding the second question that examined trust in the IDF's combat proficiency (84%-79% between 2003-2010). Moreover, we found high percentage of trust in the IDFs' ability to protect in emergency situations (79% in 2003 and 84% in 2004).

**Table 1: Percentage of respondents who answered positively to the statements.**

|  | Feb.-March 2003 N=796 | June 2004 N=425 | January 2006 N=520 | June 2006 N=618 | February 2010 N=460 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Trust in the IDF's professionalism |  | 89% | 88% |  | 83% |
| Trust in the IDF's combat proficiency | 84% | 83% | 84% | 86% | 79% |
| Trust in the IDF's ability to protect you and your family in an emergency situation | 79% | 84% |  |  |  |
| Trust in the IDF's ability to protect against terror attacks | 52% |  |  |  |  |
| Trust in the IDF's ability to protect against Qassam rockets |  |  | 44% | 46% |  |

Although the Israeli public holds the IDF's combat proficiency in high esteem, we found that it has little trust in the IDF's ability to protect it from specific threats that characterize limited conflicts. In January 2006, at the peak of the Qassam rocket attacks on southern Israel, only 44% of the public expressed confidence in the IDF's ability to protect the homefront.

Two main reasons were found for the public's perception that the IDF was unable to protect the homefront from Qassam rockets (an open question asked in January 2006, n=520). The first is based on the nature of the threat: they are homemade, primitive rockets, easy to operate and difficult to spot; the second blames the decision-makers at the political level who restrain the military's ability to eliminate the threat. Both explanations exonerate the IDF of responsibility for protecting the homeland and lay the blame on external factors.

A similar picture emerged for other threats in a limited conflict, such as suicide attacks in the Second Intifada when only 52% of the Israeli public agreed with the statement: "I trust the IDF's ability to protect me and my family from terrorist attacks" (February – March 2003, n=796).

## Perceptions of the IDF as a public institution

Alongside the trust in the army as an armed force, we examine the attitudes towards its functioning as a public institution. We explore the attitudes towards different questions connected to the notion of trust in the IDF regarding its day-to-day performance. Table 2 presents the results from two surveys conducted in 2001 and 2010.

The findings indicate that the Israelis' public attitudes towards the IDF performance are relatively low in all parameters. In the 2001 survey, less than half of the Israeli public trusts the IDFs' credibility in reporting accidents (46%). Similarly, 44% agree with the statement that the IDF prevents soldiers from abusing others, and only a minor group perceives the IDF as an economically efficient organization (23%). In the 2010 survey, only 44% agree with the statement that the IDF is an economically efficient organization.

**Table 2: Percentage of respondents who answered positively to the Statements presented.**

|  | November 2001 N=580 | February 2010 N=460 |
|---|---|---|
| IDF credibility in reporting accidents | 46% | |
| The IDF prevents soldiers from abusing other soldiers | 44% | |
| The IDF is economically efficient | 23% | 44% |

The findings indicate relatively critical attitudes held by the Israeli public towards the army with regard to a variety of issues related to its functioning as a public institution. The findings are not surprising, since as mentioned above, during the previous decade there was increasing public criticism of the IDF and its performance with regard to numerous issues. These included criticisms for its wasteful budget, improper care for enlisted soldiers, lack of transparency in its investigations of accidents and failures, gender discrimination and inequality towards women, and more.

Thus, we see that attitudes towards the IDF are complex. Although the Israeli public holds the IDF's combat proficiency in high esteem, we found that it has little trust in its ability to protect it from specific threats that characterize limited conflicts.

Moreover, we have identified a split in the public's perception of the IDF. Although public trust in it as an armed force is extremely high, public attitudes towards the IDF's performance as a public institution are much lower.

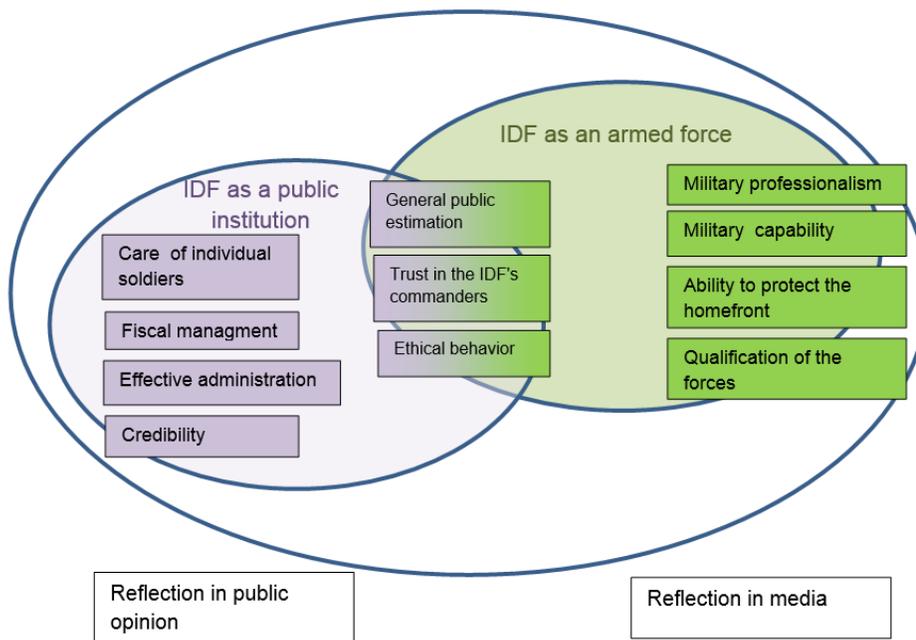## *Israeli's Perception of the IDF: An Organizing Model*

Statistical analysis of the relationship between the variables (Factor Analysis) revealed a division into two distinct categories. The first relates to trust in the IDF as an armed force. There is a correlation between the following variables: military professionalism, military capability ("trust in the IDF's combat proficiency"), ability to protect the homefront against threats ("Trust in the IDF's ability to protect against Qassam rockets"), and force qualification ("The IDF is capable of fulfilling its missions").

The second set of correlated variables relates to the IDF as a public institution. These include the following: effective administrative care of individual soldiers and respect for human dignity ("The IDF prevents soldiers from abusing other soldiers"), fiscal management ("The IDF is an efficient financial organization"), and credibility in conveying information (on military accidents, for example).

Between the two areas, we found intersecting and tangential areas of trust in the IDFs' commanders, ethical behavior of troops in combat and routine assignments, and in the general public estimation of the IDF. Since these parameters are inherent in both areas, their meanings can vary depending on the security situation and public discourse. In other words, sometimes they relate to the IDF as an armed force and other times to it as a public institution. For example, a soldier's ethical conduct may be judged differently in different contexts. Moreover, public perceptions are constructed within the historical and social contexts that have shaped Israel's defense policy and the goals of the security institutions. Those perceptions are frequently reflected in the media and in public opinion - two spheres that do not always convey the same picture.

The research findings led us to suggest certain key variables that establish the public's trust in the IDF. Figure 1 presents an organizing model.



**Figure 1: Trust in the IDF: an organizing model**

# Summary and Discussion

The paper attempts to shed light on Israel's trust in the military based on public opinion surveys conducted over the last decade (between 2001-2010). Our findings illuminate the complexity of the Israeli public's perception of the IDF. **We found a split between public perceptions of the military as an armed force and its perception as a public institution.** Whereas most Israelis express trust in the army operational and combat capabilities, trust towards other aspects of the military conduct is relatively low. Israelis express critical attitudes towards its efficiency and its conduct as a public institution. The IDF was criticized for its wasteful expenditures, for improper care of enlisted soldiers for the way it investigates accidents, and more.

It was striking to find that these two different perceptions of the IDF co-exist in public opinion, and do not necessarily influence each other. The split in the public's views of the IDF can be seen, on the one hand, as functional for safeguarding the public's democratic ability to criticize its institutions, and, on the other, as a mechanism that recognizes the IDF's status as an armed force and a central state organization of Israeli society.

Moreover, the findings indicates that, despite the view that the IDF's status in Israeli society is undergoing a linear process of decline, Israelis' perception of the army as an armed force – during the last decade - has been stable and positive.

How can we explain this split, namely, that the public expresses both criticism of and trust in the IDF simultaneously? We believe there are number of explanations: the fact that Israeli society still faces significant security threats; new technological breakthrough, such as "Iron Dome," that enhance trust in the military; relatively low numbers of Israeli casualties during recent military operations; and the psychological need by the Israeli public to believe that, during a decade of seemingly endless wars, it has a strong armed force protecting it, that it can rely on.

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