The military is in crisis, despite a cease-fire

As the Gaza war became Israel's longest, it has taken its toll, leading to fewer reservists responding to call-up notices

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Israeli soldiers on maneuver during the war. *Photo: Alex Lerner/Shutterstock.com; Artwork: Anastasia Shub*

The cease-fire and hostage release deal couldn't have come too soon for many of Israel's soldiers fighting in Gaza.

Following October 7, 2023, Israeli reservists were so motivated to fight in what they saw as a war of survival that many volunteered before receiving draft orders, pushing the call-up response rate to over 100 percent.

But for months, it's been tougher to get reserve soldiers to show up for draft orders, especially among those who have done several tours, sometimes totaling hundreds of days. Last June, some units reported that just 60 percent were showing up. In November, unnamed Israel Defense Forces sources told media outlets there had been a 15 to 25 percent drop.

The IDF Spokesperson's Unit could not provide a general number to confirm the decline. But no one was surprised by the inquiry. International IDF spokesperson Nadav Shoshani wrote in a message that the problem is still marginal, but "it is a challenge."

Conversations with reservists – mostly off-the-record, since most of them are still in and out of active duty – military analysts and mental health professionals turn up a clear, painful, tough list of consequences to fighting Israel's longest war, which make it harder and harder for reservists to go back.

The reasons are remarkably consistent. They include a rotating litany including family, finances, exhaustion and fear – the natural outcome of war, especially a long war, anywhere. And then there are problems related specifically to this war, in this country, in this situation.

The general problem: War is hell

For a start, soldiers are exhausted. This catch-all term contains a wide range of underlying causes: family stress, economic hardship, losing time in academic studies, mental health trouble and trauma, and fear of dying this time, if they made it through last time.

Family pressures tend to come up first in all conversations. One high-ranking officer, a lieutenant colonel who has served as a reservist on and off during the war, said the spouses are often unable to bear another round of duty. Of the 295,000 reservists the IDF says have been called up during the war, 118,000 are parents (115,000 are fathers). "I've heard about wives who stood up and said to their husbands, 'You're not going back'" – particularly if they have aged out of mandatory reserve service but volunteer anyway. "The wives sometimes say, 'You don't have to go, so don't.'"

Michael Milshtein, who now leads the Palestinian Studies Forum at Tel Aviv University's Dayan Center and was previously head of the Palestinian department in IDF intelligence, observed that often, the reservists want to go back home just as much: "Family is the DNA of Israel," he said.

Spouses left holding down all the household and childcare, as well as their jobs, often face additional financial pressure due to their missing spouse. Reservists get a salary, but those who are self-employed still take a major hit. According to a report published last month, 75,000 businesses closed since the start of the war, 59,000 of them in 2024 – the highest number since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The same report estimated that about 5 percent of the self-employed reservists have lost their businesses. Regular employees increasingly get the message from the workplace that employers are losing patience with their long-term absence.

The declining rate of reservists coming to serve has repercussions that go far beyond the IDF and Gaza.

Family and finances, therefore, can't really be separated. And neither of them can be separated from the vast problem of mental health. Dr. Shiri Daniels is the national director of counselling for Eran, a nongovernmental organization that offers anonymous immediate mental health assistance, for soldiers and others. She says the group has received at least 40,000 requests for help from soldiers – not including those who contacted the group after completing their service. This is at least a 100 percent rise from previous years.

Other nonprofits like Natal, the Israel Trauma and Resiliency Center, have seen a similar or more dramatic rise. Daniels reports mostly terror and trauma among soldiers in earlier phases of the war, while now people contact them more with depression and severe emotional distress – including family difficulties. One reservist told a hotline volunteer that sometimes he wished he had been killed in Gaza, because he lost his business, his wife wants to divorce him and he feels lost.

Israelis are also jittery about the worst possible effects. Last July, Natal reported a 145 percent rise in people contacting the organization with suicidal tendencies. And in recent weeks, the IDF reported that 21 soldiers committed suicide in 2024 – the highest number in a decade.

There's not necessarily a rising suicide trend in the IDF. The higher number is largely explained by the largest reserve call-up in Israel's history. Alan Apter, a professor of child psychiatry at Reichman University and at Schneider Children's Medical Center, is a renowned expert on suicides. He said that Israel normally has a particularly low suicide rate compared to other countries. The reason, he explained in an interview, is "first of all family cohesion." Suicide rates in general, and among conscripts, declined in the first months of the war, according to the Health Ministry. Experts say this is a common wartime effect.

Still, mental health experts worry about the future – after the war. Even pauses between tours of duty can cause soldiers to begin confronting their doubts or demons. PTSD can set in then, or years later. Daniels said this manifests with sleep and concentration difficulties, memory problems, uncharacteristic aggression or a tendency to shut down. She sees people with survivor's guilt and moral injury too: the trauma suffered by those witnessing or responsible for destructive acts against others, even "the enemy."

Milshtein also saw soldiers experiencing trauma after "their own friends [were] hurt, and things they see happening to the other side too. It's etched in your mind. Some are in direct confrontations with civilians ... families and children. Even if after October 7 empathy for them is very limited, the images of destruction and explosions and shooting seep into your consciousness. Only psychopaths could be indifferent to that."

With such a tough toll on family relations, could the war erode one of the pillars of mental health in Israel over time, or even affect suicide rates? "The family is a very central part of our social resilience," says Daniels, "so damage to family resilience can turn into a risk factor. It's logical."

And how much mental health trouble goes unreported? Milshtein and others indicated that there is much more legitimacy and openness to talking about the issue in the army today. Maybe, but Haaretz reported this week that soldiers are regularly taunted, threatened or otherwise discouraged from seeking support from within the system.

Daniels also pointed out that some soldiers use the Eran helpline anonymously precisely to avoid the army mental health officer, because they want to keep serving and worry about being declared unfit.

This country, this war

The hardships deterring some from fighting are severe – and they would likely appear in any war this long and intense. But other factors behind the eroding motivation are unique to Israel, and to this war.

Some reservists are ground down by the injustice of sacrificing while the vast majority of draft-eligible ultra-Orthodox men hardly get drafted at all. Israel's High Court of Justice ruled last year that the state must start drafting the Haredim, after decades of delay. But out of roughly 80,000 who are eligible, only a paltry few hundred were actually drafted. The government, meanwhile, is frantically hammering out a law to make the mass exemption permanent for as many Haredim as possible.

One 34-year-old infantry reservist who has done three tours in total, two of them in Gaza, and has been notified of a fourth, explained why the Haredi issue is so frustrating. He fought as a conscript in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge in 2014.

"I know that if there had been an effort to draft more people then, we would have seen results," he said, referring generally to the army's capacities. Ultra-Orthodox Israelis drafted then "could have been operative already. That's one thing that influences how people see it," he said of his peers' deliberations about whether to show up.

"On October 7," said the three-tour reservist, "everyone understood you were doing it [to defend] your home. And now there's a sense of: What are you doing it for? You're a frier [sucker] and they aren't drafting Haredim."

Surveys strongly concur: Last September, in a poll by the Institute for National Security Studies 58 percent of Jewish respondents said the legislation that would give a permanent exemption to many Haredim would damage their motivation for joining combat service. By November, that portion rose 10 points, to two-thirds.

What is it for?

Perhaps the most striking reason for declining motivation, though, is the one most specific to this war. Some reservists in Gaza just aren't sure what they're fighting for.

"There's a general sense that the structure isn't holding up. Discipline isn't what it should be. We don't feel that there's a plan for the day after and for the next day. It's not very clear what we're doing – there's a sense that each division commander does what he thinks, because there's a sort of vacuum. If the soldiers ask, they say 'It's complicated, you don't understand,'" said the reservist.

The higher-ranking officer, too, noted that it's harder to get reservists to go back to Gaza than to the northern front. In Lebanon, soldiers know they're trying to help Israelis get back to their homes. But in Gaza, he said, "it's getting worse – there's less and less sense of an end point."

Maybe the real question, then, is why reservists do go back. The reservist explained that "by the summer, soldiers had much less faith in the major war aims, and there was no progress with the hostages." After that, he said, the primary reason was personal: "We forged very, very strong personal contacts during the war. We depended on one another, and we're the only ones who understand each other. As Israeli society and the war itself changed, what motivated us to come was the idea that 'I won't let my guys go into Gaza alone.'"

He spoke of a crisis of trust. When the six hostages were killed by Hamas in August after they reportedly heard the IDF nearby, his unit was in Gaza. "We got the sense that we're not doing anything good. Then we had operations [whose purpose] we didn't understand," he said. "People get killed in these operations, and we didn't understand the tactics or the strategy."

The loss of faith in the war aims has ricocheted around Israeli society and the army alike. Last month, the INSS found that only 56 percent of Jews would encourage a family member who has already served in the reserves to go back again. The August survey found that just 57 percent of Jewish Israelis would encourage their kids to get drafted at all. From June to November, the portion who said they would not encourage them nearly doubled (from 7.5 to 13 percent).

The headwinds of war are working against morale in the long term. If the war ends tomorrow, Israel will need years to rebuild its own social and apparently military contract back. If the war restarts the next day, the decline in morale will spread.