

“Iron Swords” Women of Valor

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The Gaza war has demonstrated how female soldiers could, and did, fight courageously in the front lines, alongside male soldiers. It was a forthright response to all those who belittle and oppose, sometimes vehemently, the role of women in combat and their claims for equality.

On the morning of October 7, 2023, Israel awakened from a long and somewhat sweet dream of "absolute strategic superiority" to a security (and political) nightmare that it has not yet overcome. The IDF (Israel Defense Forces) was able to halt the murderous attack of Hamas and even move the battle

to enemy territory, according to the old Ben-Gurion doctrine, but at an enormous price of 1500 dead, mostly civilians, 628 regular and reserve military personnel (up till May 15, 2024). Among the fallen were 52 women. Both the IDF and the general Israeli public discovered the female



Female fighters of the IDF (Source: IDF website)

fighting capabilities in light of the prominent role of women in combat, which was characterized by heroism, initiative, resourcefulness, and excellence, both on the part of female soldiers, officers, and policewomen and on the part of civilians who took part in the in defense as well as medical staff who saved life in the kibbutzim and other civilian communities that were attacked. The story of women's participation in the defense of the realm thus came out, albeit with a severe price tag.

There has been a longstanding dispute over women's service among the Israeli public. Still, this debate is conducted mainly on the issues of civil rights versus conservative and religious views while practically ignoring an important component, namely the needs of the army. The IDF fully understands women's abilities in combat and combat support roles. Today, against the background of a long-standing debate, there is a willingness to examine the suitability of women for a variety of positions that were closed to them based on the amendment to the Security Service Law: Equality in Service (Amendment No. 16a 2001), which determined that every woman has the right, equal to the right of a man, to fulfill any role in military service according to her personal abilities. Indeed, the number of women in combat units who have

proven their abilities in the current war is increasing, and they have demonstrated professional skills and courage. Women are currently integrated into combat roles in the Border Defense Corps, armor, air defense, search and rescue units, Unit 669, "Oketz" ("Sting" canine operational unit), "Skylark" airborne artillery assistance, fields-artillery, Border Police, electronic warfare and Intelligence gathering and collection.

The Iron Swords War honed women's ability as a fully equal sector. Several women have even joined as pilots and skippers, and for the first time, women are assigned to special units. In recent years, roles for women have been added amid a public debate within the IDF and in the political arena that reached the courts as well, with the help of civil society organizations such as the Dvora Forum and other groups working to strengthen and promote the status of women, including in the army. The prominent role of civil society organizations in the Iron Swords War may also lead to enhanced equality. On the other hand, the political strengthening of extreme religious parties challenges these processes because of their desire to religionize more elements of the Israeli experience. There is no doubt that the "Iron Swords" war sharpened the ability of women as a sector equal to the male one, and here are some examples of their heroism, as reported in the media:

In the Zikim training base: On that Saturday morning, 90 recruits from the Home Front Command, who had just enlisted, were there. Their superiors immediately realized that a massive massacre might take place, given the lack of soldierly readiness of the new recruits. The instructors then sheltered them, fought unaided with an excess force of terrorists, protected the new recruits with their own bodies, and saved them. Seven of the commanders were killed, including three officers and NCOs: Adar Ben Simon, Eden Levy, and Or Moses. Their commanding officer, Lt. Yannai Kaminka, a young man, also fell in this battle.

The all-women tanks of the "Caracal" Battalion of the Southern Brigade in the Border Defense Corps: Upon receiving the initial report of what was happening, they hurried on the road-wheels of their tanks in the direction of the Gaza Strip Envelope, already in the morning of October 7. They managed to halt the terrorists at the entrance to Kibbutz Holit, thereby saving several other communities.



A female field fighter (Source: IDF spokesperson)

The "Caracal" battalion commander, a mixed gender unit, Lt. Col. Or Livni Ben Yehuda, led her fighters under fire to the occupied outpost "Sufa." As the senior officer in the field, she conducted the battle until the outpost was returned to Israeli control. Or, who was the first female cadet in the infantry officers' program, was decorated back in 2015. Both the army and

society at large have thus "discovered" the female fighting force, following the prominent role of women in combat, which was characterized by heroism, initiative, ingenuity, and excellence.

The IDF Chief of Staff accepted the initiative to assign female soldiers to combat units, and the successful functioning of the armored fighters in the Gaza Strip Envelope surprised elements within the army who initially opposed the integration of women in the armored forces. However, the public's support for the integration of women has risen significantly. The insistence on integrating female soldiers into armor units was achieved through a determined social and legal struggle over the past few years that had even reached the Supreme Court. The question of their integration on the battlefield is still being examined. Women participated in the ground fighting in Gaza in various fields: A mixed force of the Home Front Command's Rescue and Training Brigade fought alongside infantry units in scanning buildings and locating weapons. A precedent was created when reserve soldier Sharon, aka "Sharas" Perry, joined the combat engineers voluntarily, becoming the first woman to operate heavy D9 engineering equipment in the Gaza territory. It should be noted that, until that battle-field emergency, women were only allowed as instructors in the School of Military Engineering but not in active combat. Their status is still under observation. However, the urgent need on the battlefield prevailed.

Medical teams: Some 70 women have been in service in Gaza, including medical doctors, paramedics, and other medical staff; they are attached to the combat forces and work



Medical field officers (Source: IDF spokesperson)

intensively to treat and evacuate the wounded. According to experts, a combination of rapid, at-the-scene treatment of the wounded and an immediate supply of "full" (fresh) blood in the field has led to saving the lives of seriously injured soldiers who, in the past, did not survive until evacuation. The

women of the medical staff, both reserve and regular service, serve long and intensive periods, working under fire with a sense of mission to save lives.

The Observers - an "Ungrateful Role": The story of the spotters in Nahal Oz is tragic and unique for the worse, even in the catastrophic complexity of October 7. Since the observation systems were installed along the country's borders, the line is largely manned by young female soldiers in regular service. On October 7, Hamas paralyzed the communications, broke into the base, and began a gleeful killing spree. Sixteen of the spotters were killed, including the commander, Capt. Shir Eilat who attempted to fight the invaders. Only in the afternoon did a fresh force arrive to rescue the soldiers and the wounded. Five spotters were abducted to Gaza; one, Noa Marciano, was later murdered in captivity. Observer Ori Magidish was rescued by the IDF. According to testimonies, the observers warned about unusual activity near the fence for a while, but the commanders did not take their warnings seriously.

The issue of the commanding level's disregard for the warnings of the observers will undoubtedly be investigated in depth to draw needed lessons as part of the overall investigation into the October 7 failure. Still, it is worth examining the question: Does the direct command's response, which did not address at face value the observers' reports of unusual behavior by Hamas on the part of the commanding echelons, reflect disapproval based on gender and hierarchy? Indeed, these young women (aged 18-20) are soldiers in their initial regular service. However, they are highly motivated and well-educated high school graduates with relatively long training. One observer claimed it was an "ungrateful job" because they were doing intense and strenuous shift work, compensated by only a few vacations and a short time off. In the past, too, there have been allegations of harsh conditions of service, including "disrespectful treatment by commanders" and punishment for disciplinary problems. Although they are aware of the weight of responsibility as "the eyes of the state," when they reported unusual activity in the observation areas as part of their duties and even expressed to their friends fear of infiltration from the Gaza Strip, their words were overlooked.

- **The Border Protection Corps** began to look for lessons derived from the October 7 events: changes in the training program have occurred, including improving conditions of service and, hopefully, improving access on the part of the observers and spotters to the command echelons. At the same time, some of the observers noted that despite the difficulties at the beginning of their service, they "fell in love" with the most responsible and satisfying role. Ori Magidish, who was released from Hamas' captivity, also returned to serve in the IDF, she said, out of a "sense of mission to serve the country." It should be noted that this is not the first time that women have encountered such treatment, as is evident from the distant historical stories of radar operators in the Battle of Britain during World War II – an extremely vital service staffed only by women, who sat day and night in front of primitive screens, certainly compared to today.
- **The NCO alert:** The story of the Non-Commissioned Officer from Unit 8200 is a single but significant episode that deserves an in-depth study of the circumstances that led to the intelligence failure despite the availability of quality information. However, here, too, it is worth examining the question of gender combined with the hierarchical gap between the NCO, who is not an officer but an expert on Hamas and had limited access to the senior echelon in her unit, and, as reported by the media, the blocking of warning information up the ladder of information and decision making. The NCO read and translated valuable intelligence material received in mid-2022 that included an operative and detailed plan for a large-scale attack on the southern communities (identified in intelligence jargon as the "Jericho Wall"). As an expert who specialized in the Arabic language and culture, she understood the meaning of the headline: "The Flood of Al-Aqsa," which Hamas gave to the plan of attack. She trailed Hamas' activity, and from all the available listening material that flowed to the southern base, including certain war inspiring Qur'anic verses, she recognized the value of this material as an advance warning for an attack. The signal traffic analysis officers garnered and processed this information and evaluations but never reached senior

appreciation levels or the unit's leadership. As was reported, she did appeal to both the divisional and the Southern Command intelligence officers, but to no avail. There may have been some issues of gender and rank, as the NCO was a junior female functionary who was supposed to tackle a group of ego-based, self-confident men, which turned out to be an impassable barrier for a young, non-commissioned officer. However, it should be mentioned that this female NCO's professional opinion was shared by male associates who spoke Arabic, but none proved capable of overcoming the system blockages. This seemingly professional failure would probably be scrutinized by an inquiry to be eventually launched.

- **Activities of Women in Regular and Reserve Service:** In the fighting on both fronts, intensive activity continues in all IDF units. In the Air Force and Intelligence Corps, Regular servicewomen, including mothers, continued maneuvering in a busy shift schedule. Some of them are assisted by Red Magen David (MDA) "milk bank," which has expanded its activity in collecting donor breast milk for distribution to babies in need of breast-milk, including mothers of young babies who nevertheless volunteered to return to duty.
- It should be noted that the number of women serving in the reserves has increased substantially since certain professions were opened to women. They were required to commit themselves to active service after their official discharge. In 2022, the share of women in the overall reserve service increased to 17% out of the entire body of reservists. In the current war, thousands of female reservists served in Gaza in various positions, in addition to combat and medical roles, logistics, communications, technology, and more, per the developing needs resulting from the prolonged employment of forces in the Gaza Strip. Many of them volunteered due to the turmoil and shock following the events of October 7 and the lack of military preparedness, which led to a general mobilization of civil society in many fields, as well as extensive volunteering of reservists, including some who hurried back to Israel from a stay abroad.

The public debate regarding women's combat service:



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The first exposure to women's heroism in the war against Hamas brought about a sense of a breakthrough in consciousness regarding women's abilities on the battlefield. Gen. Yehuda Segev, former chief of the personnel division of the IDF, chaired a committee that recommended equal service for women in the IDF (2007); this, despite some vehement opponents among senior officers and civilian and religious pressure groups. Segev noted that the performance of female soldiers, who have proven that they can charge and attack without fear, constitutes a decisive answer to those who oppose and detract from women's service in combat units. Over the years, and especially after the Joint Service Ordinance was enacted in 2016, the debate was focused on the disagreement

between conservative and religious elements, who see the very presence of women as contrary to Jewish law and offensive to their faith, and the women themselves, who wish to serve in combat units based on gender equality and equal opportunities. However, the debate almost completely ignored the main factor, namely the need for capable soldiers in the military. By the way, even though rabbis are involved in the debate over women fighters, it turns out that the number of religious recruits who graduate from the state-religious education stream increases yearly.

It turns out that some young women, who graduated national religious education system, though exempted by law from service, but could volunteer if they so choose, prefer military service to available civilian national service. Some of them, about ten percent, wish to serve in combat units. The current war proved that the army needs professional and motivated women in various occupations due to a workforce shortage. Prolonged reserve service of combatants, many casualties ejected from the circle of combat, and preparations for prolonged fighting, possibly in several arenas, increase the urgent need to reinforce the number of fighters and other military professions. Extending reserve and regular service and recruiting preparatory students before graduation attests to the distress that training suitable women may address.



Female IDF fighters (Source: IDF website)

Equality of burden and status of women:

The war in Gaza has brought back to the public arena the question of equality of burden-sharing and the need to recruit ultra-Orthodox men. This idea is also supported by some religious circles. This is due to the sweeping exemption they have received until now, and the number of exemptions from service increases yearly. The recruitment of Haredim (ultra-orthodox) into separate units, such as Netzah Yehuda (Judea Eternity) battalions, did not significantly increase the number of recruits. Still, it did create havoc due to the attitude of rabbis and some of the recruits to the question of the presence of women in IDF bases. Abusive incidents were reported when female soldiers were asked to "vanish from view" during encounters with ultra-Orthodox units. Assuming that the number of ultra-Orthodox recruits to the IDF increases, clear procedures should be established that will prevent harm to women or their opportunities in the IDF.

Today's IDF must be a "big and smart army" with much manpower. Women constitute about half of the country's population, and even if some of them do not enlist for religious reasons, etc., the IDF, for its part, cannot give up on female recruits. Their rights and status in the army must be preserved, and it is hoped that many will reach the decision-making levels, even at the highest echelons. At the same time, women, on their part, cannot and should not give up

military service, which in a combat-challenged society like Israel is still an important entry ticket to senior positions in the economy, society, and politics.

Postscript: since October 7, 52 IDF female fighters have been killed in defense of the realm. May their memory be blessed!