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In recent years, particularly since the Second Lebanon War of 2006 and the socioeconomic protest of 2011, public discussion of issues related to the functioning of the IDF, which plays a central role in Israeli society, has deepened and widened. The same pertains to the size of the defense budget and how it is allocated. We devoted this month's index to several topics in this sphere.¹

The IDF’s status in Israeli society: The first question we looked into was the extent of pride in the army. It appears that the debates and the criticism leveled at the IDF from various directions have had no influence on its strong status among the Jewish public. Ninety percent responded that they were very proud (62%) or moderately proud (28%) of it.² In the same vein, when we asked the interviewees to tell us in which of three institutions—the Supreme Court, the IDF, or the Knesset—they had the greatest confidence, the army’s undisputed status was unmistakable: 61% of the Jews said it was the institution in which they had the most confidence (21% chose the Supreme Court, and only 3% the Knesset). An exception was a group who defined their political position as moderate left or left; here a clear majority (70% and 80%, respectively) had the most confidence in the Supreme Court. The Arab interviewees, as in previous surveys, put the Supreme Court first (31%); far behind came the Knesset and the IDF (2% in both cases). Sixteen percent had an equal degree of confidence in the three institutions and some 30% in none of them.

Despite the declining rates of conscription in recent years, a majority of 80% of the Jewish public confirmed the validity of its characterization as the “army of the people.” On the question of whether to continue with widespread conscription or change the IDF to a professional army, currently a clear majority of the Jewish public favors continuing the existing situation (74%). Interestingly, among the younger age groups the rate of those preferring that the IDF become a professional army is almost double the rate among the older age groups (28% vs. 14%).

Assessment of the IDF’s functioning: The IDF’s great popularity does not exempt it from criticism. Only 60% of the Jews agree with the opinion that today’s IDF is a

¹ In this survey some of the questions were only asked of Jewish interviewees because of their irrelevance to Arab respondents or to avoid hurting their feelings.
² Even among those defining their political position as moderate left or left, over 80% of the interviewees said they were proud of the IDF.
“small, smart” army. Moreover, we found a wide gap between assessments of the IDF’s combat-operational capability and of its administrative-organizational capability. On a scale from 0 (poor) to 10 (excellent), the IDF as a combat-operational body received an average grade of 8.41—or, in the terminology used in the schools, “almost very good,” not excellent but quite high. For its administrative-organizational capability, however, it received a much lower average grade of 6.92; in school terms, not quite “almost good.”

We then looked into perceptions of the environment in which the army operates.

The level of security danger: It turns out that, notwithstanding the repeated warnings of political and military leaders about the severe threats facing Israel and its need to deal with them, only about one-fourth of the Jewish respondents (26.5%) view Israel’s current level of danger as very high. About one-half (54%) see it as high, 11.5% as quite low, and 5% as very low. There has been, however, a certain increase in the sense of danger since May 2014, when 68% viewed the level of danger as very high or moderately high compared to 80.5% at present.3 Among the Arab interviewees only 42% saw the threat level as very or moderately high.

In this context we asked: “Some claim that the heads of the IDF and the defense establishment purposely exaggerate when describing the security threats to Israel so as to get increases to the defense budget or at least prevent it from being cut. Do you agree or disagree with this claim?” The Jewish public is not unanimous on this matter: while 51% of the respondents totally or moderately disagreed with this claim, no less than 39% moderately or strongly agreed with it.4

Allocation of the national budget: These disagreements, along with the relatively low average assessment of the army’s administrative-organizational capability, perhaps explain the fact that many in the Jewish public view the defense budget’s portion of the entire state budget as too large (41%), with the rest divided between those who consider it appropriate (26%) and the small minority who regard it as too small (20%). Among the Arab interviewees, 53% think the defense budget’s portion is too high.

3 For the May 2014 Peace Index data, see: http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=275&monthname=May
4 The differences in the answers to this question according to political camp were large. Among those who defined themselves as on the right, close to 60% disagreed with this claim—compared to 43% of those locating themselves in the center and 35% of those defining themselves as on the left.
The tendency to view the defense budget as larger than necessary is apparently explained by the Israeli public’s enhanced sensitivity, which we already detected in 2011, to social needs for which no satisfying answer has been given. Indeed, when asked “Do you agree or disagree with the opinion that in the current situation Israel should transfer funds from the defense budget to social budgets such as welfare, health, and the like?” a majority of 56% of the Jews responded positively (37% negatively). As for the Arabs, a still larger majority (69%) thought such a budgetary transfer should be made.

The pension conditions of career soldiers: The readiness to support transferring monies from the defense budget to social budgets is apparently affected by the view that the defense budget is not always used properly. Thus, 38% of the Jewish public thinks the pension conditions of career soldiers are too generous; only 8% say they are not generous enough. Thirty-seven percent view the size of the pensions as appropriate. Furthermore, the Jewish public is quite divided on the question: “Is it true or not true that if there is a downgrade of career soldiers’ salary and pension terms, good people will not remain in the career army and Israel’s security will be harmed?” Forty-nine percent responded to this question positively, 44% negatively.

The IDF’s responsibilities and functioning: Some commentators claim that the IDF’s longstanding and constant engagement with routine security tasks in the territories detracts from its ability to carry out its original mission—combat in the battlefield—successfully. Hence we asked: “There is an opinion that the IDF’s heavy engagement with routine security problems in the territories damages its ability to concentrate on training and preparation for a large-scale war. Does this opinion appear right or not right to you?” A majority of the Jews (58%) saw this claim as “Not right at all” or “Not so right”; a third (33%) saw it as moderately or very right.

We also asked in this context: “Recently there have been reports on a considerable number of cases of Palestinians who were shot by IDF soldiers in the territories/Judea and Samaria. Which of the following two explanations for the uptick in incidents is more accurate, in your opinion: that Palestinian anti-IDF activity has recently increased, or that recently there has been a stronger tendency of soldiers and officers to open fire with the aim of hitting the target?” A definite majority of the Jews (75%) chose the first explanation for the recent increase in Palestinian casualties. In other words, they do not pin the blame for the killings on the IDF, of which an overwhelming majority of the Jews— with almost no difference according to political position—are proud.
Negotiation index: 46.8 (Jews 43.5)

Graph of the month: Recent years have seen an ongoing debate on whether the defense budget’s portion of the total state budget is appropriate, too high, or too low. What is your opinion on this question? (% responding “Too high,” Jews, according to political camp)

The Peace Index is a project of the Evens Program for Mediation and Conflict Resolution at Tel Aviv University and the Guttman Center for Surveys of the Israel Democracy Institute. This month’s survey was conducted by telephone on July 27-30, 2015, by the Midgam Research Institute. The survey included 600 respondents, who constitute a representative national sample of the entire adult population of Israel aged 18 and over. The maximum measurement error for the entire sample is ±4.1% at a confidence level of 95%. Statistical processing was done by Ms. Yasmin Alkalay. http://www.peaceindex.org