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## Israel's Moment of Truth

by

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Israel is currently in the midst of a huge debate on how – or even whether – to draft the *haredim* (the country's ultra-Orthodox Jews) into the army. The government created the Plessner commission to suggest solutions, and host of other magic formulas have been also been raised recently. But the Israeli public has not yet internalized the full magnitude of the issue nor its implications. Below is a brief summary of the primary problems and a proposal for their systemic resolution, an alternative to the Plessner commission's symptomatic recommendations.

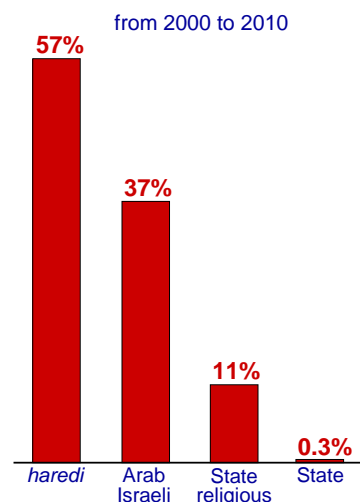
Why does Israel even need a "citizen's army"? Because Israel is the only country in the world whose citizens are facing physical threats to their very lives. The Islamic wave sweeping the Middle East indicates that this threat will not be reduced in the foreseeable future. Why mandatory conscription to the army instead of a professional military? Because to defend this little island of 8 million people in a sea of hundreds of millions in the throes of a fundamentalist reawakening, we need the best minds that we have, the types of people who do not even consider joining professional armies in other countries. It is these people who provide the real qualitative edge that the Israeli army has over other armies.

Another existential problem: the achievements of pupils in the country's Jewish non-religious and religious (not including *haredi*) State schools in basic core curriculum subjects is below the average achievements of pupils in every single western country among the 25 that are relevant for comparison. And what about the rest of Israel's pupils? The education provided Arab-Israeli children is reflected in achievements below those of children in Third World countries like Jordan and Tunisia. The *haredi* boys do not even study any core curriculum subjects after 8th grade.

Already today, the Arab-Israeli and *haredi* children comprise about half of the pupils in Israel's primary school system. While the number of children in the Jewish non-religious State schools was nearly constant over the past decade, rising by less than one-half of one percent, the number of Arab-Israeli pupils rose by 37 percent and the number of *haredi* pupils rose by 57 percent between 2000 and 2010.

Today's children are tomorrow's adults. Children whose scholastic achievements in core subject areas are below those of children in every one of the First World countries will find it very difficult to reduce the productivity gaps between the First World and Israel that have been steadily growing since the 1970s – and this refers to the children who are receiving the best education in Israel. What about the other half, the children whose achievements are below those of Third World children, or those who do not even study core subjects? The kind of economy that they are being prepared for is quite clear.

### Increase in Israeli primary school pupils



source: Dan Ben-David, Taub Center and Tel-Aviv University  
data from the Central Bureau of Statistics

However, a Third World economy cannot support a First World army, and without this, we will be facing an existential threat. Israel is nowhere near being a Third World country today – it is indeed the “Start-Up Nation” that is still pushing the human technological envelope forward. But if we do not wake up tomorrow morning and smell the roses, it should be fairly clear what kind of a country we will be leaving our children.

The Plessner commission’s recommendations regarding the conscription of *haredim* are very problematical in a number of ways. They completely ignore the related non-military – but existential – issues raised above while the commission’s military-only focus also misses the point. The Israeli army does not need thousands of additional men who will sleep at home every night and cost the country huge sums, just because the majority of *haredim* will already be married with children at the age that the commission recommends drafting them. And the country certainly does not need to finance unnecessary make-work civil service positions as the currently recommended alternative option to *haredi* military service. A real solution must be fair and it must provide a comprehensive solution to the primary problems.

I propose that the country give a draft amnesty to all *haredim* who are today at the age of 9th graders and older. They should be provided with any assistance that they want in upgrading their education so that they will be able to integrate into a modern economy. As for all pupils in 8th grade and below – those who still receive some education in core subjects – they will have to study a core curriculum all the way through 12th grade. They should then be drafted into the army, at the same age and under the same conditions as every other conscript (this will provide the country with four years to get organized before the first *haredi* men will be drafted under this arrangement). If *haredi* Jews abroad can work with women, so should *haredi* Israelis in the labor force and in the army. This is one of the core principles of a modern country. Period.

There is no need to send draft dodgers to jail. Simply search for all of the public money that enables lifestyles of non-work and draft evasion and completely close all of these faucets. There will be demonstrations, but when the money runs out, the lives of Israeli *haredim* will begin to resemble the lives of *haredim* in other countries.

The army will choose who it wants to draft and the rest should serve their compulsory enlistment time in the police. A country with about a quarter of its GDP hidden in a huge shadow economy (compared to 9 percent in the United States) is a country that needs to begin enforcing its laws, and it needs the personnel that will enable it to do so. Thus, the *haredim* will receive the education that a modern country must provide all of its children, and this is how they will serve their country and begin to feel a part of it.

As for the Arab-Israeli children, the problem is not a lack of interest in education but a lack in the additional resources that the country needs to provide, so that these children will receive what their parents are sometimes unable to give them. At the age of 18, the Arab-Israeli children must also serve their country – in their case, this should be in the police force. A significant portion of the additional tax revenues from the newly uncovered sources should be directed towards the *haredi* and Arab-Israeli communities, so that they will directly see and feel the implications of living in a country with rights – and with obligations.

There exists a democratic-demographic point of no-return, after which it will not be possible to find a majority in the Knesset to pass the laws needed for the change in direction that will save the State of Israel. But today, over three-quarters of the Knesset Members belong to the government coalition, a unique majority unseen here in decades. This is a coalition that could guarantee that there will be a future for Israel. We have leaders who have demonstrated what bravery is on the battlefields. It is time that they put aside the polls, rediscover that courage, and channel it towards navigating Israel through the political minefields towards the safe harbor that our parents sacrificed so much to build and that our children will need for surviving here.

This is Israel's moment of truth.