

Enlistment in the Israeli Defense Force Among Americans of Israeli Origin

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Abstract

Recent years have witnessed significant growth in the number of Americans of Israeli origin who partake, voluntarily, in enlistment programs and join the Israel Defense Force (IDF). About 120 to 150 Americans of Israeli origin enlist, annually, through Garin Tzabar, a dominant enlistment and support program for soldiers from abroad. The study focuses on two sister programs that operate among Israeli communities in North America: Garin Tzabar, and Tzofim Tzabar – an Israeli-based youth movement, which cultivates Israeli identity and encourages repatriation. Based on interviews with recruits, potential recruits who opted not to enlist, and officials of both programs, the study asks: how do people, IDF recruits in this case, make decisions to join highly patriotic, high-risk transnational activities? And how do national identity, sense of loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice for the ‘homeland’ are internalized among descendants of immigrants? It concludes that more than for patriotic reasons, the decision to enlist reflects a desire to become ‘real’ Israel, to avoid or postpone college studies, and to experience a unique adventure. The study also the crucial role of Garin Tzabar in recruits’ decision and that membership in the youth movement propels and normalize IDF service.

Introduction

Americans of Israeli origin, like many others of foreign background, often have a complex sense of belonging and adhere to more than one set of values, norms, and commitments (Glick Shiller and Fouron, 2001; Levitt and Water, 2002; Wessendorf, 2013). Semester abroad programs, organized heritage tours, and volunteering journeys to the ‘homeland’ are only a few of the manifold ways in which descendants of immigrants express and investigate their complex sense of belonging (Espiritu and Tran, 2002; Kibria, 2002; Wu, 2005; Saxe and Chazan, 2008; King, Christou, and Luthra, 2011). Americans of Israeli origin are not different. What distinguishes them, however, is that many decide to go beyond such common and riskless experiences and to partake in a long and high-risk commitment. They enlist, voluntarily, to the Israel Defense Force (IDF).¹

¹ Conscription in Israel is required from all Jewish citizens over the age of 18. Jewish Israeli citizens who live abroad and left Israel while under the age of sixteen, can delay military service and eventually be exempted when they reach 28 years of age. This is as long as they stay in Israel for no more than 90 days in a calendar year between

While commonly lionized for their sense of loyalty and willingness to sacrifice, this research seeks to examine more closely the recruits' narratives for enlisting in an effort to better understand individual motives and social contexts of enlistment. The study asks: how do people, IDF recruits in this case, make decisions to join highly patriotic, high-risk transnational activities? And how do national identity, sense of loyalty, and willingness to sacrifice for the 'homeland' are internalized among descendants of immigrants? The case of IDF service of Americans of Israeli origin offers an extreme case of transnational engagement which has been overlooked thus far. Its extraordinariness can offer new insights on the formation of strong transnational attachments and participation in high-risk transnational activities.

The study focuses on two Israeli-based affiliated programs that operate among Israeli communities in North America: Garin Tzabar² – a program that facilitates service in the IDF – and the Israeli Scouts youth movement in North America – Tzofim Tzabar – whose many graduates enlist in the IDF after high school graduation. Garin Tzabar recruits, on an annual basis, between 350 and 400 new soldiers of Jewish background, worldwide. Among them, about 120 to 150 are Americans of Israeli origin, mainly the children of immigrants. With over 2500 alumni and massive growth in recent years, Garin Tzabar has grown to become the primary address for Americans of Israeli origin who consider IDF service. Affiliated with Garin Tzabar is the Tzofim Tzabar – the Israeli Scouts youth movement. With over twenty chapters across North America and more than 2,500 members in a weekly program, Tzofim Tzabar has become a major social hub for Israeli children, youth, and their parents (Cohen 2007b; Lev Ari and Cohen,

ages 18 and 28 (Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, 2017). The normal length of service is currently 32 months for men and 24 months for women.

² In Hebrew, Garin Tzabar means "Seeds of Sabra." Garin means "seed" or "core," and in the context of youth movements can also refer to a group of young people engaged in a social activity. Tzabar means "sabra," an Israeli-born Jew.

2012, 2018). The program seeks to cultivate Israeli identity and regards ‘return’ to Israel as the highest fulfillment of youth of Israeli origin.³ In certain chapters, about 40% of high school graduates join Garin Tzabar.

The paper is based on 36 interviews with Garin Tzabar recruits of Israeli origin (mainly Tzofim graduates), non-recruits – Israeli Scouts’ graduates with a similar potential to enlist, and program officials. It concludes that more than for patriotic and altruistic stances, individuals list other reasons, often overlap, for their enlistment. For one thing, they view IDF service as a condition to become ‘real’ Israelis, a mechanism of inclusiveness that will compensate for their long absence. For another, they perceive IDF service as an alternative to college life, a unique experience that will supply them with an alternative toolkit, and as a means to explore alternative future routes.

The study also explores the social context and organizational support that normalize and facilitate the idea and decision of regarding IDF service. It follows two aspects. First, the study follows the messages conveyed by the youth movement – Tzofim Tzabar – to potential recruits. And second, it looks at Garin Tzabar and the encompassing support it offers, and explores the impact it has on recruits’ decision making.

The Case: Israelis Abroad, Garin Tzabar, and The Israeli Scouts Youth Movement

The enlistment of Americans of Israeli origin to the IDF touches two raw nerves in Israel: Immigration to Israel and emigration from it (Gold, 2002; Cohen, 2007a, 2007b; Rebhun and Lev-Ari, 2010; Harris, 2012). Immigration of Jews to Israel has for long been regarded as the Zionist highest fulfillment. In Hebrew, Jewish immigration to Israel is known as *Aliyah*, ascent,

³ Regardless their country of birth, Israel’s Law of Return (1950), by its very notion, regards Jews who come to Israel not as immigrants but as returnees or repatriates. They return to a homeland even if they never lived in it before (Harpaz and Herzog, 2018).

walking-up – both geographically and spiritually – to the land of Israel. It has always been a primary component in the growth of the Jewish population and of maintaining the Jewish majority in Israel and the occupied territories. Emigration (derogatorily referred to in Hebrew as *Yeridah*, descent, go down from Israel), conversely, was condemned as destructive to the national project. Emigrants (*yordim*) were seen as abandoners, who selfishly prioritize material interests over the collective commitment and collective well-being. Overall, an approximate 600,000 Israelis live abroad, about seven percent of Israeli citizens, the majority in the U.S. (Cohen, 2011; ICBS 2017c).

Since the late 1980s, the attitude to emigrants, both in the public discourse and the policy level, has shifted and become more inclusive and tolerant (Cohen, 2007a; Harris, 2012). motivated by political and economic interests, Israeli governments began to reach out to expatriates, mainly high skilled, and offer attractive repatriation programs. In addition, the children of emigrants have become a point of interest to the state, which regarded them as potential candidates of *Aliyah* (immigration to Israel), who should not be blamed for their parents' decision to leave. Consequently, an impressive array of institutions, some co-sponsored by Israel, have mushroomed abroad with the purpose of celebrating and cultivating Israeli national identity and Hebrew learning (Cohen and Gold, 1997; Gold, 2001; Cohen, 2007b; Lev Ari and Cohen, 2012, 2018; Tubin and Gans, 2012).

The longest-running program tailored to the needs of Americans of Israeli origin has been the Israeli Scouts – Tzofim Tzabar. Established in 1977 by the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption (MOIA), Israel Defense Force (IDF), and Israeli Scouts youth movement the North American branch offers weekly activities to children and adolescents (ages 9-18). The curriculum is centered around Israeli-related subjects, such as Israeli culture, history, geography,

demographics, and politics, all are being taught exclusively in Hebrew through games, simulations, and discussions. Organizationally, Tzofim Tzabar in North America is part of the Israeli Scouts Youth Movement (Tenuat HaTzofim), the largest and oldest secular youth movement in Israel with more than 70,000 members enrolled. It is compartmentalized into eleven regional leaderships in Israel, and Tzabar leadership in North America is considered the twelfth. Emissaries from Israel, usually Tzofim graduates after a few leading roles in Israel, run Tzofim Tzabar from New York and coordinate the activities across North America. In addition, coordinators are sent from Israel to the chapters abroad for a period of two years to work with a local parental committee and run the local activities. Today, Tzofim Tzabar is incorporated in “Friends of Israel Scouts, Inc. – Tzofim” (FOIS), which encompasses the various abroad-programs, operated by the Israeli Scouts in Israel (see figure 1).

Another program running under FOIS is Garin Tzabar, which provides young Jews outside of Israel, ages 18-24, the necessary support system for IDF enlistment. Enjoying the support of the state of Israel, Jewish organizations abroad, and private donations, the program offers an all-in-one package, which addresses the various needs recruits have before moving to Israel, during and after the army service, including: preparation seminars in North America, administrative assistance with state services and IDF bureaucracy, housing arrangements, language learning if needed, and more. Participants are divided into groups of 20-30 members, each is called Garin and housed in a Kibbutz. A Garin Coordinator, hired by the Kibbutz, looks after the Garin members, assists in solving problems, and organizes social gatherings. Garin Tzabar is not a military unit, it is a supporting program whose participants are placed in over forty units, including the most combative and prestigious. The IDF authorities classify soldiers whose parents reside abroad as “Lone Soldiers”, and thus, Garin Tzabar participants are entitled

to economic and other benefits during and after their service. Once made Aliyah, participants are obliged to conscript as any other Jewish Israeli for a period of 24 months (women) to 32 months (men).

Garin Tzabar is regarded today as the main channel of abroad enlistment in the IDF, “the largest IDF immigrant program in Israel,” according to its website.⁴ Despite largely recognized as an IDF-recruitment program, program officials usually avoid describing it as such and prefer foregrounding its role in facilitating Aliyah and return migration, perhaps to avoid legal and moral questions pertaining recruitment to a foreign army. One way or another, Garin Tzabar has gained great popularity among Jewish (and Israeli) communities, mainly in North America, and augmented from a minor phenomenon of 20-30 participants annually in the 1990s and early 2000s to about 350-400 in recent years worldwide (see Figure 2). Among them, about 200-250 come from the United States. Among participants from the U.S., about 120 to 150 members (60%) are the children of Israeli immigrants (the others are non-Israeli Jewish Americans).⁵ Among Israeli-Americans, about 50 (35-40%) are graduates of the Israeli Scouts – Tzofim Tzabar.

⁴ Retrieved in 2/23/2019 from: <http://www.israelscouts.org/about-garin-tzabar>

⁵ All numbers are based on discussions with current and former senior officials of the program.

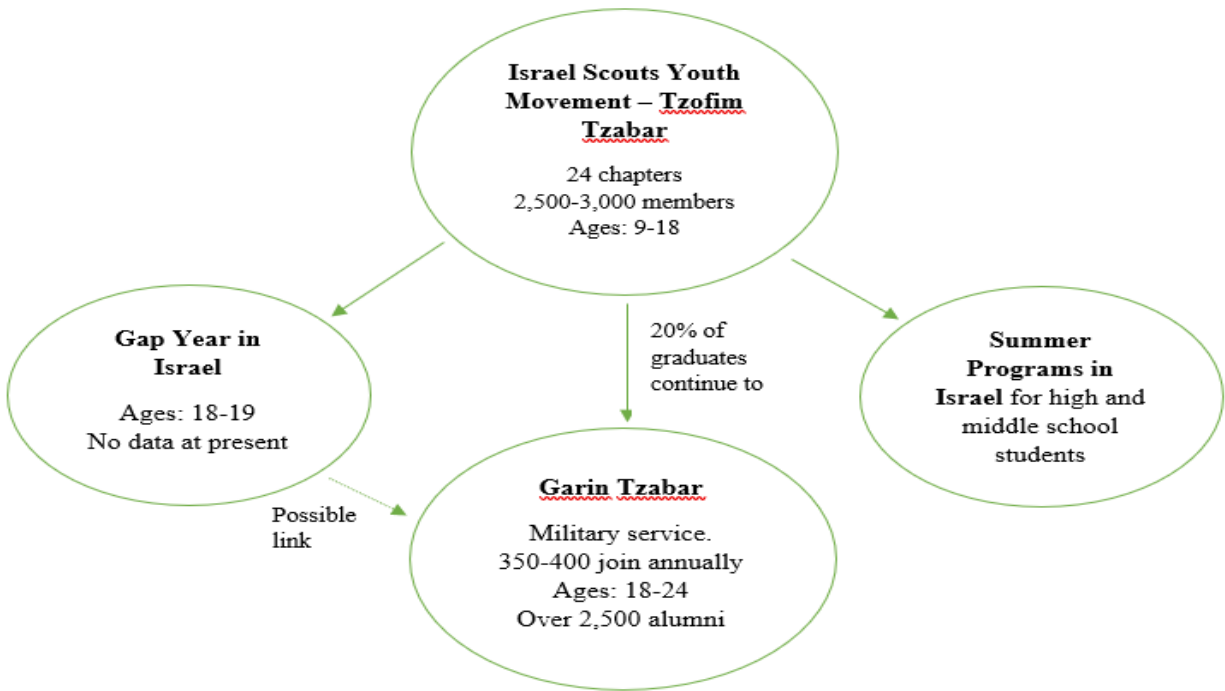


Figure 1. Friends of Israel Scouts (FOIS)

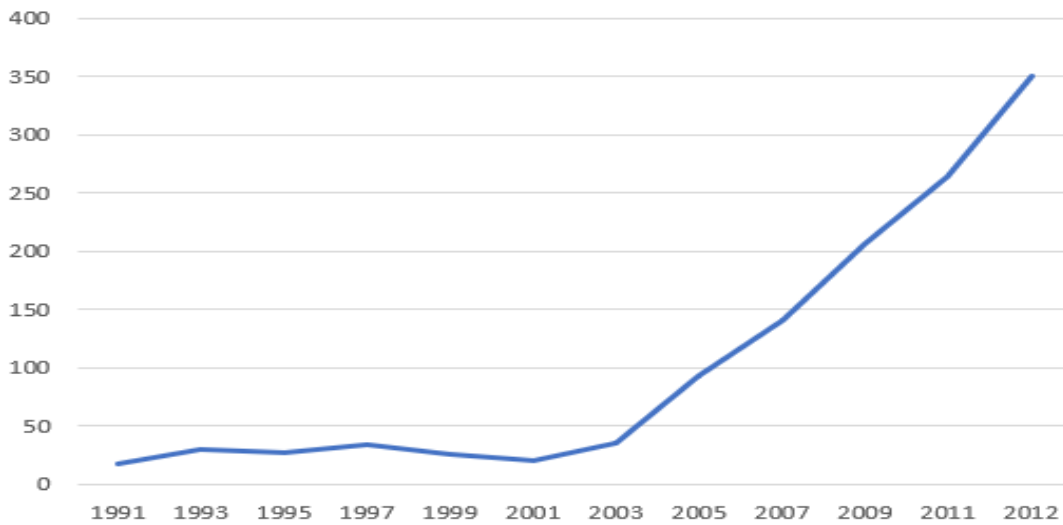


Figure 2. Participants (per year) in Garin Tzabar

Data and Sample

The study draws on interviews with IDF recruits who enlisted in recent years through Garin Tzabar. Participants in this group are either Tzofim Tzabar graduates or not, but the priority was given to the former. The interviews focus on their narratives, starting with their family migration story, experiences in the youth movement – Tzofim Tzabar (if applicable), social circles, and the considerations they had about IDF enlistment. In order to better understand what distinguishes them from others who did not enlist, the study embraces the idea that narratives of ‘non-volunteers’ should also be taken into account (McAdam, 1986; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993; Munson, 2010). Ergo, interviews were also held with individuals who had a *similar potential* of enlistment but opted not to. Participants in this group (non-volunteers) consist of Tzofim Tzabar graduates who continued with their life without IDF enlistment (see sampling scheme in figure 3). A third and small group of interviewees includes officials of both Garin Tzabar and Tzofim Tzabar. These respondents present the organizational perspective, their means and goals, and an ‘understanding from above,’ which the recruits (and non-volunteers) often lack.

The study includes 36 semi-structured interviews with 23 Garin Tzabar participants, 7 Tzofim Tzabar graduates who did not enlist (non-volunteers), and 6 program officials. Among Garin Tzabar participants, 14 are women, 9 are men. All men were/are in combat or special units, while the women serve in highly demanding and prestigious positions such as instructing roles (e.g., shooting, artillery, tanks). 13 of the 23 Garin Tzabar participants were in the Israeli Scouts youth movement during high school. 6 were either born in the US or arrived before the age of two, 5 arrived between ages four and six, 6 at ages seven and nine, 3 at ages ten and eleven, and 2 at age thirteen. 19 have both parents Israelis, 4 has only one. All enlisted between December 2014 and December 2017. Of the seven who *did not* enlist (non-volunteers), all are

Tzofim Tzabar graduates with two Israeli parents. they all finished high school between 2015 and 2017 and are now college students. The data also include two couples of siblings (one of twin brothers). In each, one enlisted and the other did not. The officials who were interviewed include a former director of the Israeli Scouts youth movement in North America (Tzofim Tzabar), former director of Garin Tzabar in North America, former Tzofim Tzabar’s chapter coordinators, and Garin Tzabar coordinator in a kibbutz.

A few other characteristics. the vast majority of recruits and non-volunteers grew up in secular environments, went to public schools, and visited family and friends in Israel every summer or every other summer. They are all either U.S. citizens or permanent residents. In most cases, both parents had college degrees prior to migration and the move was driven by a short-term job relocation offer or a business opportunity, usually of the father, in sectors such as hi-tech, finances, and security. Despite eventually extending their stay, both parents and children often hold a “myth of return” (Cohen and Gold, 1997; Lev Ari and Cohen, 2012) and a “permanent sojourner” mentality (Uriely,1994).

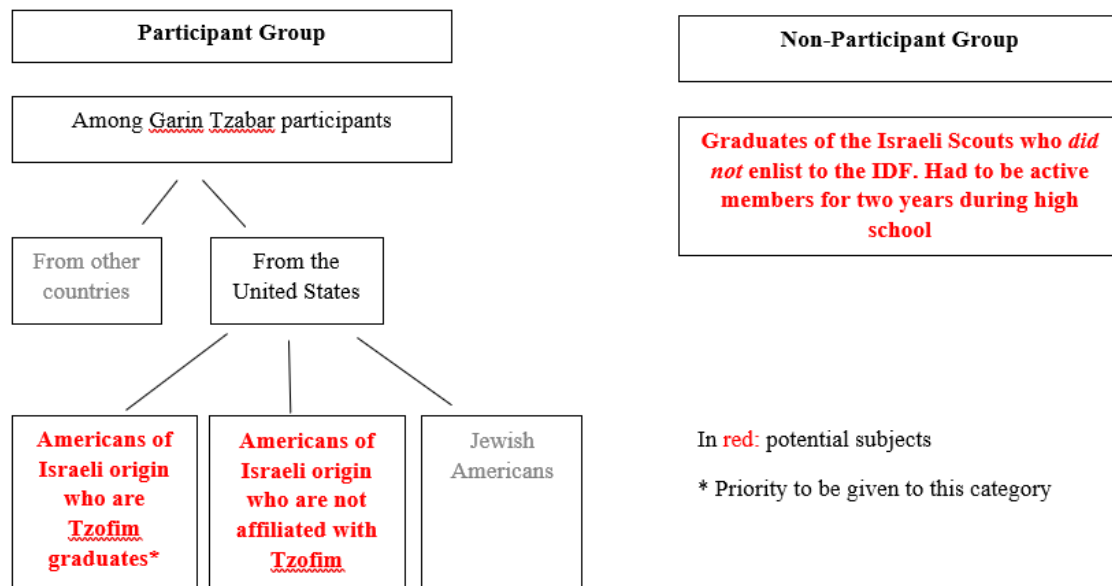


Figure 3. Sample scheme

Preliminary results

What may be surprising in Garin Tzabar participants' accounts is the low volume of patriotic or altruistic stances as the main cause for enlistment. Yes, they recognize, unanimously, the importance of IDF for Israel's existence and survival, both historically and at present. Yet, they rarely regard it as a major reason, or a reason at all, for their decision to enlist. Many explicitly reject and dismiss as clichés expressions such as "I felt an obligation to defend my country" or "Israel needs me." They view such reasons as naïve and pompous. Barak, who serves in a special unit, responds:

The country doesn't need me. It is very exaggerated, it's like old school Zionism. I'm not like that. People who say that are flying a bit too high. It's not like in the old days, like in the Six-Day War [1967 War] when everyone came [from abroad] to save the country. Today people recruit because they see their friends do so, they see photos of friends and think "wow, it's so cool, I want it too."

Most recruits also indicate the lack of political-driven motive. The majority admit they had very little interest in Israeli politics and the Israeli-Arab conflict prior to enlistment. In most cases, despite gaining some understanding, they still have little interest in such issues. Now a student in Israel, Ella, a former soldier recollected:

[in Hebrew] I couldn't depict the map of Israel in my head, I didn't know to locate, like, the major cities and sites ... Israel was so amorphous to me ... This whole problem, like with, how do you say, [switch to English] the Palestinians, [back to Hebrew] like, all the big problems, I didn't know anything about it ... I know better now, but still, I don't care about it so much. I'm not into politics.

So, if not for a strong sense of commitment, how do recruits narrate their decision to join the IDF? Also, what do recruits have in common, and what distinguishes them from others alike who chose to continue to college? The sections below survey two main individual motives for enlistment: enlistment as a boundary-making act, enlistment as an alternative rite of passage. After exploring the main individual motives, two following sections explore the roles played by Tzofim Tzabar and Garin Tzabar in mobilizing people into IDF service.

Boundary Making – Becoming “Real” Israeli

The most recurrent theme in recruits’ accounts is a strong belief that one’s capacity to identify as Israeli relies upon IDF service. In their accounts, they give support to the idea that boundaries, in this case either ethnic or national, are marked by forms of participation (Barth, 1969; Warikoo, 2005; Wimmer, 2013). Among 23 soldiers interviewed, sixteen echoed the idea that full membership in the Israeli brotherhood is conditioned upon IDF service. Growing up abroad, they view IDF service as a means to make up for their long absence. Liat, a former IDF soldier who left Israel at the age of five, explains:

I wanted to enlist because I felt like a fake Israeli, I wasn’t a real Israeli. I felt uncomfortable telling people that I’m Israeli, that I speak Hebrew and that I was born there if I’m not serving like everybody else. It’s not that I wanted to be a soldier per se.

Q: So, in a sense, the army was a means to an end?

A: Yes, just another ‘tick,’ like, “I also did it so you can’t say nothing” ... If you live in Israel you don’t have to serve the army to be Israeli. But I had been living in the US for a longer time than in Israel, so could I really call myself Israeli if I left when I was five and I barely remember anything?

Sarah, a former recruit-training officer says: “I felt like I wanted to go to Israel and to experience life there and to be able to say that I am Israeli and no one can take it away from me.” Now, a student in Ireland, Sarah recalls her experience in a recent visit to Israel, a memory that reflects what she expected to gain from her service:

[in Hebrew] Whenever people see me, they start speaking in English and I don’t know why. They said it is my accent, that I look like an American, but it really, [switch to English] it makes me angry! It makes my blood boiled! [back to Hebrew] especially because I served in the army. And it’s not like I have an accent. Can you hear it?

For many, however, serving in the IDF is more than a mere item in a checklist, that once you completed you can call yourself Israeli. For them, military service is embedded in a broader discourse of return. Returning to Israel (whether one was born there or not), in that sense, is impossible without military service. Micheal, a combat soldier, who left Israel at the age of seven, shares his thoughts:

You know how everyone says that military service is your ticket into the Israeli society. If I want to live in Israel in the future than I just have to do it. That's what they make you believe in, rightly or not ... I would never enlist in the US Army because military is just not what I want to do. I did not make Aliyah for the army. I made Aliyah to Israel. For me, the army is the medium.

Marking the boundary, for some, goes through denouncing others who come to Israel and skip service. Roy, who left Israel when he was six and now serves in a special unit, shares his opinion:

The fact that I came here to serve makes me an Israeli as anyone else that lives here ... I know people who come here and don't serve, like, they go straight to college here, and it makes me a little upset. You know, you go on the street here and everyone you see share this experience, everyone served. It's part of the identity here, I love it, it's beautiful. Anyone you see here gave their share to the country.

Ma'ayan, a 22-year-old left Israel when she was eleven. After a demanding service as a special unit as an operator of unmanned vehicles, she shares her thoughts about those who skip service:

In my opinion, you can't come here [Israel] without doing military service. I mean, you can, practically, but the second question that anyone will ask you after "what's your name" is: "where did you serve?" I didn't want to say that I didn't serve ... For me, it's part of what being Israeli is all about. I couldn't see myself living here without it.

Q: What do you think about people like you who come here and skip service?

A: I don't like it. I have a friend from Tzofim [the Israeli Scouts] that moved to the US [from Israel] when she was fifteen, and now she came back [to Israel] to study and she found a way to skip service ... It's not like I'm a better person but I think she should enlist like everyone else who grew up here ... coming and living here without serving in the army? It's a bit of a turnoff.

Among the seven interviewees who did not enlist, only one questioned the interplay between IDF service and claiming Israeli identity. The others seem to hold a similar view as their counterparts who did enlist. Elad left Israel when he was seven. Now, a college Senior in the US, he describes how his decision to go to college, and not enlisting, has affected his identity:

Enlisting was always on my mind. IDF service was very appealing to me and deciding not to go switched many things for me. Before, I was very into the "don't call me American, I'm an Israeli" mentality. But now, here I'm Israeli, but then I go to Israel, and I didn't enlist so I can't tell you what platoon I was in so suddenly I become American ... army service in Israel is a bottleneck. Everybody has to go it through, and you can start a conversation with any Israeli with "where did you serve?" It's a classic opening: where

are you from, and where did you serve. Now, I can tell you where I am from in Israel, but when they start talking about the army, I'm out.

To sum this section up, it seems that IDF service – with all the dangers, difficulties, and costs it pertains – is less a manifestation of strong patriotic beliefs but rather a form of participation that compensates for years of absence. It is conducive, purportedly, to full belonging in the Israeli nationhood.

College or Military: a Question of Alternatives

As eighteen-year-olds who faced high school graduation, both recruits and non-recruits stood in a crossroad: whether to continue to college – the default option for many Americans – or enlist in the IDF. Those who went with the latter option often expressed a reluctance from going to college at that point of their life. Some did not feel ready, others did not do well at school and sought a way out the expected path. Others excelled and got college acceptances before deciding to pick a different route. For some, IDF service was a great opportunity to acquire new adventures, friends, and skills, which they did not think they could get in college. Overall, fourteen of the twenty-three recruits indicated on varying degrees of unwillingness or unreadiness to attend college as a push factor to join the IDF.

Gilad, who left Israel at four and now serve as a Deputy Company Commander in an infantry unit, says:

Look, I wasn't a good student, to say the least. I didn't find myself there. I left school in the eleventh grade and homeschooled the rest of high school. Slowly I alienated myself from the American world. I lost interest in the friends I had, I realized that they deal with bullshit and have no aspirations. I told myself, it's not like I have a special talent or ambition to study, so I really had no intention to go to college. So, it was a great opportunity to break away from the pack.

Nirit, on the other hand, had great grades at school. However, growing up in the stressing expectations of Silicon Valley, she looked for a way out:

I didn't feel ready for college. The whole thing with deciding what I want to do stress me out. I wanted to be a paleontologist, so I met with one and he told me that I am 150 years late to do what I want to do, so I didn't know what to do. And in Silicon Valley, their mindset is, like, you have to go to high school and then college and there's no break, and it has to be perfect. So if I'm not going to Princeton or Yale or Cornell I'm worthless. So, for me it was too much so "yayyy, I'm going to Israel, bye bye."

The motivation to go to college is perhaps the salient difference between those who enlisted and those who went to college. Whereas fourteen of twenty-three IDF recruits did not want to go to college, six from the seven interviewees who went to college (recall that all are Israeli Scouts' graduates) indicated that they had a clear sense about what they want to study and a desire to do so. Five considered IDF enlistment but once accepted to college their decision was clear, despite some remorse.

Two couples of siblings were interviewed. In each couple, one sibling opted IDF enlistment while the other went to college. All four were active members in the Israeli Scouts. Their narratives underline how IDF service, or more broadly, participation in high-risk activities, could be, simply, a matter of alternatives. Barak and Tomer, twin brothers, were seven years old when they left Israel. They both describe a vivid and happy upbringing in the U.S. and rich social lives. They both were also very active in the Israeli Scouts. Barak explains his decision to enlist:

I got accepted to XXX [college], I thought to myself "that's it, you got what you wanted." But after a while, I realized that it's not for me, not now. I don't really want it, it's not my way, I didn't know what I want to study... I always thought about becoming a soldier and if I will not do it now it will probably never happen. I didn't know what I want to study, so what for? Only to have a degree? The college can wait.

Tomer, on the other hand, had always known that he wants to be a doctor. Now a Senior, he acknowledges the primary difference between his decision and his brother's:

Yes, I thought about it seriously [enlistment], I still do. But I knew that I want to go to college and study biochemistry. It's like, I had this vision of what I want to be. Many friends I had in Tzofim [Israeli Scouts] enlisted, the majority did not know what they want to do in college ... [I]t makes a lot of sense to me, cause if you don't know what to study why not doing something more meaningful? ... [S]o that was the motivating factor for me, and for Barak, too. Because I knew what I want to study while he had no clue. He

got accepted to schools but then he realized that he has no idea what he wants to study and that he will be better off going to the army.

Ella and Omri, sister and brother, left Israel when Ella was nine and Omri was seven. Ella later joined the IDF while Omri went to college and study mechanical engineering. Whereas Ella never felt at home in the US – “there was no ‘click’” – and didn’t find herself at school – “I felt school was irrelevant” – Omri had a different experience:

That [enlistment] was a consideration for, I think, a decent amount of time ... [S]o Ella, she didn’t feel like she fit entirely. I think even in the Tzofim community she didn’t entirely feel like she found herself the way that I’m saying, so yeah, she had that as a motivator to move back I think, and also she didn’t really know what she wants in life. I think whereas I, from the time I was a kid, I pretty much knew I wanted to do and like knowing my school path was a huge impact on why I stayed. cause if I didn’t know what I want to do, then going to school right now would be a huge waste of time and money.

More than a mere gateway from college, many recruits thought of IDF enlistment as an adventure, a unique experience, an opportunity to meet new people, become more mature and independent, and learning skills for life. They often found these as more appealing and worthwhile than attending college. Rona, an instructor in the Combat Engineering Corps, echoes a similar feeling:

I wanted mainly just like to be independent and to learn about myself ... I really really didn't know what I was getting into ... I knew I'd be like super independent if I was there. And I just didn't want to go to college immediately.

Sarah gauged the experience of IDF service compared to attending college:

I realized that I could always go to school. That's not an option that going to go away from me. I wanted to be in Israel, to live in Israel, to experience Israel as a young person, and I wanted to meet people, and I was thinking that for my own future, everybody says that you make your best friends in the army so if I want to have any sort of future in Israel so I should serve in the army like everyone else does. to have the true Israeli experience in the age it's supposed to be and how everybody does it. I was looking for, like, a very real Israeli experience and I knew that the best way to do that was through the army.

Some thought that IDF service will prepare them better for life and be more beneficial, career-wise, than attending college. Shani, for example, enjoyed her upbringing in America. She did

well in school and in the Israeli Scouts. Now an officer in an international cooperation unit, she explains:

What pushed me to enlist was the feeling that people who do so are more mature. They know how to cope with their life better than people who go to college. I felt that if I would go to college I'll be lost ... in high school, the more I looked at my future options the more I realized that the American education system doesn't have much to offer for me, and that the IDF would fit me much better, in terms of professional development and the like. I thought it would be much more beneficial for my future life than to go, like everyone else, to school and continue with that mentality ... college doesn't teach you how to cope with personal and professional difficulties, they don't get a lot of experience, they graduate, and they are still kids. It's like high school 2.0. I thought that the army will give me tools and skills for the professional world that I wouldn't get in college.

To conclude, the question of whether to go to college or join the army reveals how often the decision of IDF enlistment derives from the lack of better alternatives and from the image of IDF service as an authentic experience, an expanding horizons journey through which one can gain new friends and skills. As children who grow up in the affluent suburbs of major cities, the children of Israeli immigrants are channeled, like their American friends, to academic studies. The unwillingness to follow this path is one of the main factors that lead many to Israel and the IDF.

Tzofim Tzabar and the Question of Returning to Israel

Those who attended Tzofim Tzabar cannot separate this experience from the decision to enlist. They regard their time in the youth movement as a fundamental contributor to their Israeli identity and decision to enlist. They describe a rich and empowering experience and regard Tzofim as a second home, a place in which they felt belong and surrounded by friends "like them." They depict a holistic experience and regards Tzofim as much more than a weekly program. Ma'ayan describes the significance of Tzofim in her and her friends' lives:

I was strongly engaged in Tzofim, it was my life, and people at school, they all knew that we [she and her friends] are Israelis and that we care about it. On [Israel] Independence Day, we used to do this event in the school library, it was open for everyone, and we

made, like, a small Western Wall and brought Israeli food. We colored our cheeks white and blue. Tzofim was my home, I grew up there, I breathed it, I ate it, I slept it, I did everything there.

Barak describes how encompassing the experience of Tzofim was:

When we lived in Boston, I was very American, I had a heavy American accent [when speaking Hebrew]. When we moved to XXX I started with Tzofim and suddenly all my friends were Israelis. And then the Shachbag [Tzofim members of high school ages], only the Shachbag, I always sat only with the Shachbag. At school, in lunchtime, we had the Jew Table, it was only us Israelis. We were sitting together and laughing. We were all also together in Tzofim and our chapter was very Israeli cause it's an area that you always have new guys who come so they bring Israel with them. So, we all live in the same two-three neighborhoods, go to the same public school, and to Tzofim ... we were also meeting after school. It felt like Tzofim the whole week, not only on Sundays. So Tzofim really connected me to Israel, but the connection was through my community, that was Israel for me ... so I didn't feel like I'm doing it voluntarily [enlisting]. In the last three years in America, I didn't feel American, I felt Israeli in America. So I just felt that I'm doing it like everyone else.

In Tzofim, the question of IDF service is embedded in a broader discussion about returning to Israel. According to the movement's goals, Tzofim Tzabar openly seeks to create "an educational arena for graduating members to deal with the question of returning to Israel".⁶ Since Tzofim is candid about its goals, the attempt here is not to prove that point. Rather, the aim here is to see how this educational arena works, to surface the messages that Tzofim – an influential actor in its members' upbringing – conveys, and through which IDF service and return to Israel are normalized.

Oded, a former Director of Tzofim Tzabar in North America, explains the notion of *Hagshama* (fulfillment), a key notion in the movement's lexicon, which referred to the image of the ideal graduate or the ideal path one should choose:

The meaning of Hagshama in Tzofim Tzabar is that adolescents, who did not choose to live in the U.S., will decide independently whether to go to a gap year in Israel, go to Garin Tzabar, or stay in the U.S. All are legitimate decisions, but *they* have to decide. The purpose is to allow a sort of correction. Because they did not choose to live in the

⁶ Retrieve in 3/29/19 from: <https://www.israelscouts.org/our-objectives-english>

U.S., their parents decided for them, we want to give them the tools to choose their course independently, whether to move to Israel or stay in the U.S. and go to college.

Na'ama, now a soldier in an IDF's international cooperation unit, recalls how Tzofim venerates those who enlist:

When you are younger, you see how all the teen years members honor the older guys from the chapter who go to Israel, it's exciting... every year there is a Shachbag (high school age members) camp in California, about 800 people. And the tradition is that in the ending ceremony they call to stage, one by one, each twelfth grader who is about to make Aliyah, shake their hand and honor them. And I remember watching it as a kid in the ninth grade, the tenth, the eleventh, and then [in the twelfth] they finally called me to stage cause I was part of the Hagshama, it is very exciting.

Q: And what about those who do not make Aliyah? Are they also called to the stage?

A: No, no. Because those who make Aliyah are the ones who take the courageous step, we're not going in the path dictated to us, we're doing something different, brave.

Inbal, a former soldier, and a college student in the U.S. at present describes the underlying expectation that she sensed in Tzofim:

They don't push you or tell you to make Aliyah. There is nothing coercive in it. But the way they talk about it, the way it's framed, and the emissaries from Israel, they are all so talented and patriotic, it's very encouraging. They will never discourage or go against someone who wants to go to college, never, but if you say that you want to enlist in the IDF, then you are honored, then it's like "wow, that's great."

Shani, now an IDF officer, also echoes Tzofim's expectation, but for her, the underlying manifestations were not only verbal. She finds some parallel lines between some practices in Tzofim and her IDF experience:

I felt a lot of pressure when it came to IDF enlistment. I don't think it's right. They constantly propagate it. It's not like they tell you "Enlist!" It is more, like the way they talk about IDF service, with much appreciation, how important it is, how moral the IDF is, stuff like this. Also, it's funny to think about it, but we used to stand in formation and do scouts drills every Sunday before we could realize the military context of it, we wore khaki uniforms with different ranks.

Tzofim graduates generally described positive experiences. However, from a more mature perspective, as the years go by from their time in Tzofim, some have become more wary about

how the movement tried to influence their lives. Now, a Senior of journalism and politics, Rachel, who spent nine years in Tzofim and did not enlist, says:

They teach you to love Israel, that it's important to return home, to help Israel. I was little so I didn't know that it's an education brainwashing type of thing. It affects you, it really does ... today, as a student I understand it better but as in high school, you are not aware. They have an agenda that Israel is the best and to join the IDF is awesome. You don't understand the symbolism in it. Now, I understand that they wanted something extra from us. We thought it is normal [enlisting], and this is what they wanted us to think ... we had these conversations with the Merakezet [Chapter Coordinator] from Israel, she was talking with the twelve graders and if someone was, like, thinking of IDF she would say "oh so you should go to Garin Tzabar, just come to the seminar and see how you feel about it." In Tzofim, that's the most celebrated thing you can do [enlisting]. I also considered enlisting and for quite a while, because I thought this way.

Chapter Coordinators oversee the operative and educational aspects of the chapter. In cases of good matching, when a Coordinator becomes beloved by the high school members their influence can be very significant. Gilad, for instance, recalls his view of the Chapter Coordinator in the twelfth grade: "I gave him a lot of credit. We worked together a lot. I admired him." Elad, a former Chapter Coordinator who came from Israel to one of the largest chapters in the U.S., explains the Coordinator's role in the intersection of Tzofim and Garin Tzabar:

Don't forget that they have a Merakez [Chapter Coordinator] from Israel. This is very important. The number of times they came to me to ask about army service, it was insane ... we were instructed to encourage them to try Garin Tzabar only if they consider enlisting. If they bring it up so we were told to refer them to Garin Tzabar because this is the best platform for lone soldiers in Israel. So, when it comes to practical aspects, yes, that was my advice. But in terms of the mental-personal part, I didn't think my job is to encourage them to enlist no matter what. My goal, the way I saw it, was to ask them the hard questions before making such a serious decision.

Tzofim Tzabar, in conclusion, has an educational agenda that regards a return to Israel, and consequently, IDF service as its highest educational culmination. The program fosters excitement and expectations about future enlistment among its younger members and provides role-models – older chapter members and Coordinators from Israel – to follow. For many Tzofim

members, when the time to decide comes, IDF service is as normal as going to college, perhaps, it is even the right thing to do.

Garin Tzabar, “It Is So Convenient”

Garin Tzabar is just one of approximately a dozen programs that offer support to lone soldiers but by far the biggest and most encompassing one. Out of approximately 3,500 “notable lone soldiers” – the definition of soldiers who have no parents or whose parents reside abroad – approximately 1000 are affiliated with Garin Tzabar.⁷ Garin Tzabar offers two significant advantages for prospective recruits. First, the group aspect. Participants arrive and reside in Israel in small groups of twenty members with whom they foregather before in preparation seminars. In the case of Tzofim members, many already know one another from years of growing up together in Tzofim chapters and camps. Among 23 Garin Tzabar interviewees, about half had known others in the program prior to the preparation process – older siblings, older friends, and friends from their chapter’s age group.

Another strength the program proudly propagates is the comprehensive support system that it caters. Whereas soldiers from abroad who come by themselves spend about a year only to cope with the state and army procedures before enlistment, Garin Tzabar participants arrive to Israel three months before enlistment to an absorption period that includes educational tours, a shortened military screening and recruitment process, and adaptation activities to life in Israel

⁷ For a comprehensive overview of lone soldiers’ definitions, rights, procedures, and supporting programs see Schmutz (2018). For numbers of lone soldiers see The State Comptroller and Ombudsman of Israel, “The Treatment of Lone Soldiers” (2018). According to Tzofim’s website, Garin Tzabar supports 1,200 lone soldiers (retrieved in 4/1/2019, Tzofim’s Garin Tzabar soldiers excel in Aliyah parameters “חיילי גרעין צבר של תנועת הצופים מצטיינים (במדדי העלייה לישראל)”). Given that Garin Tzabar recruits about 400 new soldiers every year and that soldiers serve an average term of 2.5 years, a more conservative estimate would numerate 1,000 soldiers supported by Garin Tzabar.

and the Kibbutz. In many soldiers' accounts, these two factors – the social group and the support system – are interlocked.

Rona, a Tzofim graduate, lists her reasons to join Garin Tzabar:

Why Garin Tzabar? Because I already knew the people, that's why that's the main thing. And it's, like, the easiest way, like, they give you a place to live and they're supposed to help you, like, prepare for the Army. Like, we have the Perek-Klita (Absorption Period), the three months where they're supposed to prepare you for the Army. So, I was, like, this seems like the nicest Choice. Okay. I'm going to, mainly because I knew the people who were there.

Roy, another Tzofim graduate, states how crucial was what Garin Tzabar offers:

I'll tell you what, if it wasn't for Garin Tzabar, I don't think I would enlist at all. It's just, it's like a very simple way to enlist. The fact that I had a group of twenty Americans in the Kibbutz with me, if I had to be on my own, I wouldn't do that.

Ella, another Tzofim graduate, gives her perspective:

I wasn't aware of other programs, it was the only one they told us about. But it's so convenient. You just need to enroll and to do exactly what they tell you to do. They register you to Tzav Rishon and Yom Hame'a [Army pre-drafting procedures], they pick you up, they drive you back, everything is so organized. And in the Kibbutz, we had the three best months of our lives [the absorption period] ... my best friend did the whole process with Garin Tzabar half a year before I did so she told me everything and advised me. She told me all about Garin Tzabar and it really motivated me ... I don't think I would have enlisted without Garin Tzabar. It's very hard to take action. It's a difficult question to answer.

Ben, who didn't attend Tzofim, describes how he learned about Garin Tzabar and the impact that the preparation seminars had:

I found Garin Tzabar on google and it seemed like it was the perfect fit. You know, it's a program that was designed for the children of Israelis who didn't grow up in Israel. That's it. I'm the child of an Israeli, I didn't grow up in Israel. That seems like the perfect thing for me ... I started doing seminars for Garin Tzabar ... I actually really enjoyed it. you know the people who were there were not like a hundred percent of the people that I would usually find myself hanging around. they were very very Bay Area. very California people. I come from a fairly, you know, not California background. Yeah, so, you know, but they were nice and it was, I guess it was really attractive to me the idea of being around people who, you know, everybody had the same goal, which is to get to Israel, do army service, and then see what to do from that. I just thought it seemed like the right place to be.

Nirit, who left Israel at thirteen and didn't attend Tzofim Tzabar, indicates the role the preparation process played out:

You are sitting there with other guys who are in the same situation and you slowly start to connect again. I had some friends of Israeli background, but none thought of enlisting, and at school it was all about college, so I started thinking like "well, maybe I shouldn't do that [enlisting]." But then, once I started to befriend with people in the seminar, I felt like I'm reconnecting again with Israel, like, I started to feel that it is the right thing to do.

Garin Tzabar caters a very accessible path to IDF service. Instead of coping with the mazes of bureaucracy, cultural difficulties, and language barriers by themselves, participants in Garin Tzabar enjoy a strong social network while relying on the organization support and guidance on all aspects of the immigration and drafting procedures. For Tzofim graduates, in all cases, Garin Tzabar was not one alternative of many, but the only path worthy of consideration.

Discussion and Conclusion

The engagement of Americans of Israeli origin in IDF service derives rarely from a desire, or a sense of necessity, to protect and fight for the 'homeland.' More commonly, the decision to enlist reflects a different desire – to be accepted to the Israeli brotherhood. For Garin Tzabar participants, IDF service functions as a mechanism of inclusiveness, a form of participation that marks a boundary of belonging. In a broader context that accounts for the centrality of military institution in Israel, IDF service has, for long, served marginalized groups and individuals in Israel to claim social status, prestige, and rights (Levy, 2003). It seems that Americans of Israeli origin internalize this mechanism and are acting accordingly.

The capacity of IDF service to act as a mechanism of inclusiveness rests on the idea of the people's army. The idea that everyone serves is rooted deep in Israeli consensus, even though since its inception two large groups are exempted from service: Arab citizens of Israel and the Ultra-Orthodox. Together with a growing number of non-exempted Israelis who skip service, the

recent decades have witnessed the erosion of the people's army idea. In recent years, less than 50 percent enlist, and among recruits, 20 percent fail to complete a full-term service.⁸ Nonetheless, remarkably, the accounts of Garin Tzabar members resonate the perception of the people's army, that everyone serves. This perception seems to derive its strength from the exclusive power, or the monopoly, that the family unit and the youth movement have in echoing the hegemonic, outmoded, Israeli narrative.

Often linked with the ambition to become legitimate Israelis is the general reluctance of the American middle-class path of pursuing a college education that characterizes many recruits. Either for feeling unready, negative experience in school, or stalling decision-making, many opt IDF service as an alternative. In a sense, being embedded in a transnational social field bears a privilege – an alternative path for those who wish not to follow the pack and who would, otherwise, attend college, reluctantly, or carry forward their life without a college education. Having access to both worlds, to two different rites of passage, allows them to postpone decision making, steep in new adventures, and explore alternative future trajectories. This privilege – the privilege to disconnect, experience other worlds and gauging future options – is preserved for immigrants from developed countries, or of affluent backgrounds, cases in which the costs of repatriation are relatively low.

For Tzofim graduates, the educational and social process that they have undergone during their years in the program prepared them to consider military service as a completely normal and appropriate path. Their identification with the State of Israel is so self-evident that IDF service is not perceived as remote or eccentric. Tzofim officials underline that the program's goal is to

⁸ See Introduction to The Army-Society Project of the IDF and the Israel Democracy Institute by Nevo and Shor (2002). For recent data see: "The Myth of Compulsory Military Service in Israel" in: <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/The-myth-of-compulsory-military-service-in-Israel-569779>

allow adolescents a safe and neutral space to consider the return to Israel. Setting aside whether Tzofim enables such a place, can Tzofim separate repatriation from IDF service? On the one hand, it is not possible, since a long-term return requires enlistment by law. On the other hand, Tzofim offers shorter experiences in Israel, such as a Gap Year. However, such programs can facilitate future enlistment for those who felt unready to enlist in the first place.

The link between Tzofim Tzabar and Garin Tzabar allows a convenient and easy transition and enlistment experience. It is based on prior relationships with past, current, and future Garin Tzabar participants and strong organizational support. Thus, Garin Tzabar has become attractive to other groups and established itself as the primary address for other Israeli- and Jewish-Americans beyond Tzofim. Does the support that the program offers have altered the recruits' characteristics? Does it draw individuals who otherwise would not enlist? The data in this article cannot answer this question, however, the fact that many interviewees were doubtful about whether they would have enlisted without Garin Tzabar gives a certain indication.

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