Women in the Israeli Army

The image of the fierce woman warrior has stirred minds since ancient times. Women warriors participated in the Trojan War on the side of Troy. According to Herodotus, the Greeks captured a band of Amazons and sent them home in three ships. According to another legend, Hippolyta, the queen of the Amazons, owned a golden belt, which Hercules himself went after - it was his ninth feat, described by Homer in the Iliad. Roman historians also wrote about the Amazons, mentioning the significant conquests of women warriors in Asia, Libya, Phrygia, and Cilicia. If you consider the evidence of the Spaniards, the descendants of the Amazons even made it to South America. Some historians argue that it was the name of their tribe that gave the name to the broad and full-flowing river there.

Woman warriors have always been the tradition of the Jews as well. Jewish women’s participation in defense of Israel has a long historical tradition, rooted in the biblical heroine Deborah. She defended her country from foreign invaders. This tradition has been enshrined in law since the founding of the State of Israel. David Ben-Gurion, one of the state’s founders, called military service the highest form of civic duty, and “as long as men and women are not equal in performance of this honorable duty, we cannot speak of true equality between them.”

In 1948, in the newly formed Israel, the Women’s Corps was established as part of the army, where only female volunteers served. Its first commander was Colonel Shoshana Gershom, born in Russia, who gained combat experience in the British army and in the underground Haganah militant organization. In 2001, the Women’s Corps
was disbanded and replaced by the Women’s Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff headed by Brigadier General Suzy Yogev.

Israel’s use of female soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces, Tzahal, has been used successfully against Muslim fighters, one of whose prejudices is that if a woman kills a fighter, he will not go to heaven. That is why such “militants” simply run when women warriors are on the battlefield.

A decisive legislative step in equalizing the right of men and women to serve their country equally was taken by the Israeli authorities in 1959. The government introduced compulsory military service for both men and women reaching 18. The term of mandatory military service for women is 1 year and 9 months. Still, it is gradually approaching 3 years, the mandatory period of service for men in recent years. Since then, all women for whom the army is not against their moral and religious principles have been called up for military service in Israel. Only girls who already married and have a child are not drafted.

Until recently, girls served in rear units as signal officers, drivers, medics, computer specialists, aviation technicians, and staff workers. Participation in combat was forbidden for female soldiers. Still, female instructors were well represented in tank, sniper, and bomb disposal schools, where they participate in training specialists for combat units.

Women are conscripted into Tzahal for one simple reason: there are not enough men to fill all positions and perform all tasks. Therefore, women make up one-third of conscripts, one-fifth of enlisted men, and one-tenth of reservists. As Bamahane, the magazine of the Israeli Defense Ministry, writes, women now make up to 35% of the Israel Defense Forces personnel, and 90% of military specialties, including combat specialties, are open to women. According to information published in the Israeli media, there are 20% women in the armed forces and artillery, 25% in the rescue service, 10% in the Israel Border Police Magav. There are 25%-30% women in almost every squadron in the Air Force. There are now seven women serving in the Israeli army at the rank of brigadier general, with the number of female colonels rising to 36 in 2018.

The Israeli Border Police was a pioneer in involving women in combat operations. Back in 1995, women were assigned to combat duty for the first time in the country’s history. Since then, the border police have taken significant steps toward overcoming gender inequality. For the first time in Israeli history, a tank manned entirely by female soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces was recently sent to the Egyptian border. The tank is commanded by a female officer and will be deployed on the front line of the Egyptian border. Remarkably, the Israel Defense Forces uncertainty about whether or not the integration of women into the armored corps has been successful persists.

The ablest and most courageous female soldiers in the Israeli army are united in the Caracal Battalion, which carries out essential combat missions. In Hebrew, a caracal is a sand lynx, a cunning, agile, cautious, and robust animal. The Caracal soldiers patrol the borders with Jordan and Egypt, covering the city’s perimeter of Eilat, located on the Arabian Gulf coast of the Red Sea, and can be regularly found on the roads in the south of Israel, where they prevent terrorist infiltration into the central densely populated areas of the country. The record of the Caracal Battalion includes hundreds of terrorists eliminated and thousands of smugglers, drug dealers and illegal immigrants from African countries apprehended. They turned into being true Amazons, brave, determined, skilled, bold, and selflessly devoted to their country. Getting into the Caracal Battalion is not an easy task because the number of applicants exceeds ten times the number of places in the battalion. The recruitment age for the Caracal Battalion has a limit of 26 years. The sniper squad is clearly respected at Caracal.

Women warriors also occupy a unique position in the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad. Female spies are involved in many covert operations around the world. “She gave more to Israel than all its leaders,” was how Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir once described the feat of the Israeli spy who was executed on the orders of Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat. The fascinating stories of the legendary Heba Salim and two other Israeli women spies who worked for the Mossad were recently published by the Egyptian publication SasaPost.

It should be noted that the number of women in Israeli combat units has steadily increased over the past two years, following the Israeli command’s decision to open several elite courses to women, until now available only to men. Among other things, the Gefen Course designed to train officers of the elite units was opened for women.

However, along with this, the scandal of women serving in the Israel Defense Forces continues unabated in Israel. Several religious leaders oppose this practice, believing in particular that women in the army deprive young religious men of any motivation to serve. There have even been statements that a woman should stay home to serve in the kitchen. It even came to a point that in 2018 Chief Rabbi of Safed Shmuel Eliyahu demanded that the Chief of
the Army General Staff should resign, accusing the latter of promoting “radical feminist ideas.”

There is a split in society over this: there are supporters and opponents of women’s service. Some users of social networks create special accounts in support of women. One example is girlsdefense on Instagram. Judging by the number of likes and comments, Israeli female soldiers aren’t suffering from the lack of male attention.

“The Israel Defense Forces must rely on professionals, and the selection of people should be based on professional qualities, not on gender,” said Brigadier General Suzy, Women’s Affairs Advisor to the Chief of Staff.

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