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Why Israel Doesn't Send Women Into Combat

MARTIN VAN CREVELD

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The experience of Israel is often used to support the case for sending American women into combat. Israel, after all, has a reputation for military strength; if women have proved to be useful in combat there, it surely reinforces the argument for their inclusion in US combat forces. There is, however, a serious problem with this analogy. No Israeli woman has served in combat since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. Even though the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has very often faced overwhelming odds, we in Israel are very proud that Israeli women have never deliberately been exposed to the risks of combat, not even in the most desperate situations.

The Myth of the Amazons

Women have never taken a major part in combat—in any culture, in any country, in any period of history. The myth of the Amazons is just that—a myth. The few women who did join armies and fight did so disguised as men, and when discovered were usually summarily discharged. A handful of such cases are known, including some during the American Revolution and the Civil War.

On the other hand, women have always taken part in rebellions and insurrections. In fact, as Marx once said and as the Vietnam War proved, the extent to which women are swept along is a very good index of whether a revolutionary movement will succeed. But once a revolutionary movement has succeeded, an established state does not send its women into combat. This rule holds true for the Israeli armed forces.

Before 1948 the Jewish community in Palestine fought the British to gain our independence. In that struggle, women played an important and active part. Women served in the Palmach, an underground paramilitary force. Women went on undercover missions, and often smuggled weapons because British soldiers were more hesitant to search women than men. Women often were used for carrying messages and for surveillance work. In fact it was the practice of Palmach to send a young man and woman together to do surveillance work. If caught, they could always play the role of loving couple. Thus, women did play a role in the underground before the establishment of the state. Even then, when Palmach undertook a larger military operation, for example, a retaliatory raid against some Arab village, the women would be left behind.

It was only when isolated settlements were attacked by Arab irregulars, and later by invading Arab armies, that women fought shoulder to shoulder with the men. This was a matter of home defense. When a remote kibbutz of 100 or 200 people was attacked by a regular force, it was a desperate situation that required everyone to fight. Even so, the number of women who actually handled rifles or threw hand grenades was very small. I am unaware of a single Israeli woman who has claimed, "I was in combat in 1948. I handled a rifle. I threw a hand grenade. I fired a machine gun." There may have been a few such women, but for the most part they existed only in the Arab imagination. More typically, women were kept very busy looking after the essential needs of combat, such as nursing, preparing and bringing up supplies, communications, and looking after the children; after all, these were civilian settlements under attack.

Basic Training for Women

The first thing the IDF did after it was established on 26 May 1948 was to exclude all women from combat. While women do serve in, and in fact are drafted into, the IDF, their role is to provide essential auxiliary services in order to free men for combat. Furthermore, the IDF does not have mixed units on the American model; rather, women form part of a separate Women's

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Corps, known as CHEN. Originally CHEN was an acronym meaning Women’s Corps; it also happens to mean “grace” in Hebrew.

For administrative and disciplinary purposes, women are subject to other women. Far from treating men and women draftees equally, the IDF has whole volumes detailing exactly what may or may not be done to or with women soldiers to prevent them from being harassed or otherwise maltreated. For example, women soldiers may be disciplined only by female officers; women soldiers may not be touched by male MPs; and women soldiers may not be treated by male doctors unless there is a woman present.

What weapons training women receive in the IDF is almost entirely symbolic. At best, they will receive enough training to enable them to defend themselves, if necessary, and even that is very often omitted. For example, my daughter, who is 19, spent only ten days in basic training. She was one of a select group of women pre-designated for certain slots because they had specific qualifications for these jobs. This group was put through a very short basic training course so that they could immediately go on to their jobs. True, most female draftees will spend considerably more time in basic training, but that is only because their ultimate assignments are not yet determined.

Women Draftees

Israeli women, like Israeli men, are subject to the draft. However, the draft is not applied equally to men and women. The IDF drafts about 90 percent of Israeli men between the ages of 18 and 21, but only about 60 percent of the women. This is because the IDF will take all men regardless of education, putting them through remedial courses if necessary; women who fall below a certain educational standard are simply not accepted.

Also, men serve longer than women—three years as opposed to two. Unless they are discharged for disciplinary reasons or are found unsuitable, both sexes are expected to serve out their term. In practice, however, the forces have a surplus of women draftees, so women are often given an early discharge.

Women who are married, pregnant, or have children are exempt from the draft. Further, as a rule, women who have served their term are not recalled for reserve duty, the main exception being a few vital hand-picked personnel.

Although women officially can be called up through age 34, very few serve in the reserves after age 25. Conversely, Israeli men are required to serve in the army reserves until age 51, and must report for one month of training each year until they reach that age.

Women who join the professional standing forces after their two-year conscript service are treated equally with men, with three exceptions. They are subordinate to the Women's Corps; they do not participate in combat; and, as a result, they cannot rise above the rank of brigadier general. These distinctions apart, the IDF treats its male and female career soldiers equally. It does not distinguish between women soldiers who are married or single, with or without children.

Because Israeli women do not serve in combat, and because the vast majority serve on rear bases on which they live or to which they commute, even pregnancy is not much of a problem. Most pregnant soldiers are able to go on with their jobs, just like civilian women who are pregnant and working outside the home. Also, Israel, like most Western countries except for the United States, grants women maternity leave. A woman, whether in or out of the military, is free to take up to a three-month leave either before or after childbirth. While on leave, 75 percent of her salary is paid by Social Security.

Duties of Female Soldiers

Apart from their work in the Women's Corps (that is, training and supervising other women), women in the IDF serve successfully in many varied and essential fields, including nursing, social work, clerical activities, psychological testing, intelligence, communications, and radar. Although there are no women pilots, the IDF does employ women as instructors in some combat-related activities, such as driving tanks and heavy self-propelled artillery pieces. This policy was first instituted during the late 1970s against a background of breakneck expansion and sharp manpower shortages.

Considered purely from a technical point of view, there is certainly no reason why a woman cannot learn and subsequently teach how to drive a tank. Male trainees, however, do not always readily take to female instructors who,

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through no fault of their own, will never see combat and are unable to apply what they teach. As a result, the policy has not been an unqualified success.

Regular combat units deployed in the field—for example, the Infantry Brigade or the Paratrooper Brigade—usually have a very small number of women attached to them, two or three per battalion, who perform administrative work. Should fighting break out, these women are immediately evacuated from the combat zone—although not always successfully. When Israel came under surprise attack during the 1973 War, a few women were killed by missiles that hit bases in the Sinai. Generally, however, the IDF does its utmost to prevent such situations.

Women and War

The differences between the Israeli and American societies are numerous, deep, and striking. One of the most admirable things about American society is the way in which issues such as women in combat are debated publicly, in such depth, and on the basis of the best professional knowledge. Israel can't afford to do it in this way, at least not in the case of the military.

Asked about their impressions of women in combat, Israeli officers are united in their view that it is no place for them. This is because, unlike most Americans, Israelis are familiar with combat; they know that the favorite American method of breaking war down into Military Occupational Specialties distorts the issue. For example, women can certainly pilot an Apache helicopter as well as men. However, it is equally certain that their weaker physiques will put them at a disadvantage when it is a question of flying that helicopter eight times a day under enemy fire, with the chance of being shot down, wounded, and forced to make their way back on foot.

Combat, in other words, is not merely a matter of doing a job. It is the toughest, most demanding, most terrible activity on earth. It is far beyond the imagination of anybody who has not experienced it. The demands that it makes in terms of physical strength, endurance, and sheer wear and tear are horrendous.

Are there some women who are capable of performing well in combat? Undoubtedly. Are most women physically less capable of doing so than most men? Undoubtedly. And that, in fact, is the best possible reason for excluding women from combat. The added overhead needed to incorporate those few exceptional females would be so large as to make the whole exercise counterproductive. Israel is not the United States. Its defense budget is not \$300 billion a year, but only about \$5 billion. Nevertheless, the IDF maintains land forces that, once the United States carries out its projected defense cuts, will be larger than America's. Even so, experimenting with women in combat is a luxury Israel simply cannot afford. □