Israel's military indoctrination of children

Israel is one of the world's most militarised societies, routinely recruiting children as young as 13 to perform military service in defiance of international law, writes Stephen Lendman*.

The modern roots of Zionism go back to its founding at the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland, in 1897, its programme being the "establishing for the Jewish people of a publicly and legally assured home in Eretz Yisrael". Five decades later, this was accomplished by dispossessing indigenous Palestinians, denying them the right to their land, creating a new Jewish identity, legitimising Jews as rightful owners, and using superior military force to support the state against defenceless civilians who were no match against their powerful adversary.

Leading up to and after its war of independence, Israel stayed politically and militarily hard line, negotiating from strength, choosing confrontation over diplomacy, and naked aggression as a form of self-defence and occupation in order to seize as much of historic Palestine as possible and secure an ethnically pure Jewish state. These policies were called "Israelification [and] De-Arabisation" to preserve a "Jewish character".

In his book, The Making of Israeli Militarism, author Uri Ben-Eliezer says writing about Israeli militarism involves "ventur(ing) into an intellectual minefield", given Jewish history under the Nazis and the perception of Israel as a safe haven. Yet, decades of Arab- Israeli conflict have produced seven full-scale wars, two Intifadas, and many hundreds of violent incidents.

Ben-Eliezer believes that, beginning in the 1930s, militarism "was gradually legitimised within the Yishuv, the Jewish community in Palestine, then within the new state [it was] crystallized into a value, a formula, and an ideology." Over time, it acquired a
dynamic of its own, and then, during the 1948 war, it "acquired full legitimacy" and became decisive in setting policy.

Politics and militarism were wedded to create a militaristic view of reality. Thereafter, it was institutionalised to the point that "the idea of implementing a military solution to [political problems] was not only enshrined as a value in its own right, but was also considered legitimate, desirable, and indeed the best option."

Today, militarism is a "cardinal aspect of Israeli society", its quintessential element under the 1986 National Defence Service Law that requires all Jewish Israeli citizens and permanent residents to serve. The law covers both men and women, with exemptions only for Orthodox Jews, educational inadequacy, health, family considerations, married or pregnant women or those with children, criminals, and other considerations at the Defence Ministry's discretion. In addition, most Israeli leaders are former high-ranking Israel Defence Force (IDF) officers, politics and the military being inextricably connected.

Little wonder, then, that Israel is a modern-day Sparta, a nation of about 5.6 million Jews and another 500,000 settlers that is able to mobilise over 600,000 combatants in 72 hours, equipped with state-of-the-art weapons and the backing of the world's only superpower for whatever it wants to do.

Yet on 2 March 2008, the US McClatchy Newspapers writer Dion Nissenbaum headlined that, "Israelis show declining zest for military service," saying that "....under the surface, something has been slowly shifting in Israel as the nation prepares to celebrate its 60th anniversary on May 14. More and more Israelis are avoiding mandatory military service -- something" earlier considered unthinkable.

According to author and former chief Israeli military psychologist, Rueven Gal, "in the past, it is true that not serving in the military was considered the exception. In more recent times, it became more tolerable and more acceptable to people."
According to 1997 IDF statistics, fewer than one in 10 Israeli men avoided service. Now it's nearly triple that number, or, according to some, even higher, given the resonance of conscientious objectors, refusniks, students unwilling to serve in the occupied territories, and "Breaking the Silence" reservists speaking out about IDF atrocities over the past decade, especially during the Gaza war.

Women are also opting out, around 44 per cent compared to 37 per cent a decade earlier. As a result, Israeli National Infrastructure Minister Uzi Landau has called the IDF no longer a "people's army [but rather] half the people's army." Given Israel's hardline militarism requiring mandatory service, officials are seeking new ways to deter avoidance.

One way of doing this is by indoctrinating Israeli young people to accept the militarism of Israeli society, particularly since various organisations in Israeli, such as the pressure group New Profile, are promoting themselves as being a "Movement for the Civilisation of Israeli Society" away from militarism and a culture of violence. Israeli "feminist women and men.... are convinced that we need not live in a soldiers' state" and should no longer tolerate one.

In July 2004, a New Profile report entitled Child Recruitment in Israel examined how Israeli armed forces and Jewish militias indoctrinate young children to be warriors, a practice it believes is essential to stop.

Child recruitment involves more than having weapons and using them, there being no front lines in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Israel and the occupied territories, IDF soldiers are everywhere. "Many military bases are located inside population centres, and few Israelis ever spend a day without meeting soldiers on duty," the report says.

As a result, a functional definition of child recruitment is as follows, with a child being anyone under 18 recruited by one or
more of the following methods: by wearing an official uniform, having an official document, or in other ways identified as an IDF or related group member, even if not formally; by promoting or supporting IDF actions, actively or through other services; and/or by undergoing practical or theoretical training to perform or assist IDF activities, formally or otherwise.

Armed forces and security groups include Israel's military, its police (including conscripted border police), General Security Services (GSS), and Jewish militias, mostly based in settlements.

The relevant international laws governing the military use of children include Article 38 (2) and (3) of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which state: (2) "State Parties shall take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of 15 years do not take a direct part in hostilities; [and] (3) State Parties shall refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of 15 into the armed forces. In recruiting among those persons who have attained the age of 15 years but who have not attained the age of 18 years, State Parties shall endeavour to give priority to those who are oldest."


The 1990 African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child recognised 18 as the minimum recruitment age. Then, in 2000, the International Labour Organisation’s Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182 condemned "all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery... including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict." The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (2000) also prohibited forced recruiting and raised the minimum age to 16.
Yet, contrary to international law, Israeli legislation takes precedence over these accepted norms and standards. Conscription at 18 is mandatory, at times includes those six months younger, and children under 18 may enlist voluntarily, but aren't used as combatants until coming of age.

Child recruitment is also done informally, the idea being to prepare underage youths for future mandatory service. Ben-Eliezer has written how early Zionist settlers established militant organisations, notably the Bar Giora (named for Simon Bar Giora in ancient Roman times), Hashomer (The Guard), and the Haganah (Defence), which were small in scale but profound in influencing younger minds.

Ben-Eliezer explained these organisations by writing that "the formative years of the younger generation produced an ethos created by local experience: guarding fields and crops, fighting with Arab children, being given a weapon at the age of bar mitzvah [a boy's 13th birthday]. This was the childhood experience of prominent members of the young generation [tempering their outlook] with suspicion, which frequently became hostility, and they reached maturity feeling that a confrontation between [Arabs and Jews] was inevitable."

Before 1948, very young children engaged in military activities, doing so eagerly as a sort of game. As a result, a militaristic worldview developed, especially among youths later becoming leaders. Militant groups formed at this time include Fosh (a Hebrew acronym for Field Units), the Palmach (Striking Force), Stern Gang (Israeli Freedom Fighters, Lehi in Hebrew) and Irgun (the National Military Organisation -- Etzel in Hebrew).

Before Israel's war of independence, recruitment came through a "duty to volunteer". Then it became mandatory after the IDF's establishment on 26 May 1948, replacing the paramilitary Haganah. Today, such recruitment is still called a privilege in Israel, a "noble and worthy action", moulding young minds to be eager when called upon and encouraging them to participate
earlier as well. In the 1948 battle for Jerusalem, Israeli Youth Battalion trainees, aged 16 and 17, were combatants. So were women.

DEFINING ISRAELI MILITARISM: New Profile calls Israeli militarism "a way of thinking, which promotes forceful solutions, usually military ones, as preferable and even desirable ways of solving problems." As a result, security forces are Israeli society's most valued and revered members, "whose needs and opinions come second to none". Israel's first prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, called "the whole nation... an army and the whole land [a] front".

Today's IDF is the world's fourth most powerful military, nuclear-armed with state-of-the-art weapons and technology, an active space and satellite programme, biological and chemical capabilities, and a large per capita military budget, financed generously by Washington.

The military also controls 48 per cent of public land, and recycles its commanders into high government positions, including municipality and regional council heads, mayors, ministers and heads of state. Others get top public administration positions or serve as business executives or directors.

"The unquestioned prestige enjoyed by top military officers emanates downwards, and some of it can still be enjoyed by" common soldiers, the report states. Children see and feel it everywhere in Israel, including from adult family members, from religious leaders, and in school. In addition, imagery and weapons are ubiquitous, including old tanks, guns and fighter jets visible in public places.

Militarised education starts in kindergarten, at home, and on the streets. "The military is physically present in schools and school activities", with many uniformed soldiers teaching classes to programme young minds. Further, teachers, especially principals,
are often retired career officers, and school walls are adorned with names and photographs of fallen heroes among their graduates.

Field trips for all ages are to military memorials on former battlegrounds. Curricula and textbooks reflect militarism, from kindergarten through secondary schools that have mandatory programmes called "preparation for the IDF" that include training. Glorifying military heroes and conquests while vilifying Palestinians are featured.

Symbolic recruitment also precedes conscription. This consists of indoctrinating youths to feel part of the military, mobilised for war, ready for combat, and eager to participate. It also consists of kindergarten and elementary school children sending gift packages to soldiers, especially on holidays, expressing their "gratitude" in personal letters.

A 1974 Israeli teachers' guide entitled "When a Nation Reports for Duty" promotes enlistment by saying that the people as a whole carry the burden of the war effort, and it is divided between those who wear the IDF uniform and civilians who are not directly recruited by the IDF. "Therefore, it should be understood that [every] civilian carries the burden of the war effort," the guide says.

Children learn such values early, and they stick, preparing them for later conscription and a lifetime of military support. At school, children are exposed to ceremonies, commemorations, speeches, field trips to military bases, and holiday celebrations of battles between "us" (Jews) and "the bad guys", earlier Nazis, Egyptians, Persians, and Arabs, and now Palestinians. As a result, children are imbued "to accept military force and war as a natural state and a natural response to conflict situations".

Soldiers in Israeli schools are both former IDF teachers and administrators as well as "uniformed soldiers on duty, stationed in schools as part of the school staff... The presence of former soldiers, especially retired high-ranking officers, in the education
system is considered by many in Israeli society, including government, to be a positive influence on children," reports say, especially since preparing youths for military service is a core educational goal.

In collaboration with the ministries of education and defence, the IDF operates two large-scale youth programmes, the Teacher-Soldier programme that trains soldiers to become teachers and to complement civilian staff despite their poor qualifications, and the Youth-Guide programme that works with underprivileged children, in some cases for Youth Battalions and in others as preparation for military service coordinators.

Soldiers working in Israeli schools are nearly always in uniform, report to civilian and military superiors, promote militarism and wars for defence, and children acclimatise themselves to viewing them as an integral part of their education and a future obligation.

Indoctrinating youths early on blurs the line between Israeli military and civil society, promotes militarism, and makes conscription seem inevitable, necessary and desirable.

PREPARING FOR MILITARY SERVICE: For most male and female Israeli young people, military service is a rite of passage and a natural step in the preparation for adulthood, something that policymakers have been cognizant of for decades.

After the 1973 War, the above-mentioned "When a Nation Reports for Duty" guide explained the role of all Israelis during emergencies and helped children understand it clearly. In 1984, actively preparing youths for military service began when the IDF and Israeli Ministry of Defence published a guide called "Towards Service in the IDF", which explained the privilege of serving in the Israeli armed services, adapting to military and basic training, developing fitness in preparation, the IDF as a positive force in society, and preparing parents to accept their children's role as future soldiers.
Since the run-up to the 1948 War, training for military service was common in Israel, especially through the Youth Battalions, but the 1984 programme included school indoctrination "as part of the ordinary curriculum".

Today's school programme is called "Willingness to Serve and Readiness for the IDF", which is mandatory for three years in Israeli secondary schools, the programme's goal being "preparing the entire youth population to service in the IDF, while strengthening their readiness and willingness to perform a substantial and contributing service, each to his abilities, and emphasising the importance of serving in combat units".

Content includes combat legacy stories on field trips, the ethics of war, familiarisation with different IDF units, physical education and Arabic studies to enlist Israelis for intelligence. The format is regimented, emphasising discipline, and the "Soldier for a Day" programme takes children to a military base for descriptive presentations, especially about elite combat units.

Several civilian programmes also prepare children for future service, including "Preparation for Combat Fitness" courses, "Youth Battalions Special Forces Induction" and "Follow Me". It is common in Israel "to see large groups of young men run about on public beaches, in preparation for military service".

The Naale Programme (a Hebrew acronym for "Youth Immigrating Before Parents") also promotes immigration for foreign Jewish children, encouraging them to come to Israel, attend school and become citizens. It presents military service as a major socialising force, stressing benefits such as acceptance in Israeli society.

Moreover, Article 44 of Israel's 1986 National Defence Service Law authorises the IDF to obtain information about everyone eligible for service. Educators, employers and others asked to help must cooperate. Under Article 43, persons "Intended for Security Service" cannot travel abroad without Defense Ministry
permission, although exemptions are granted with restrictions, such as time limits.

Prior to their conscription, most Israeli young people receive a warrant at home, requiring them to report to a regional conscription bureau in a practice called "first call-up" for initial screening, data verification, medical and intelligence tests and a personal interview. If after three warrants young people do not comply, police intervention may follow.

In addition to regular Israeli secondary schools, there are military high schools that include Mevo'ot Yam, which has 500 students who wear uniforms, participate in parades and learn weapons use in preparation for future Navy service, Israeli Air Force technical schools for cadets preparing for future IAF service, and the Amal 1 network, one of the largest in Israel, which carries out joint military-civilian projects for future Air Force service.

Courses at such schools combine civilian and military studies, children being groomed to become soldiers. This is the case even though Article 77 (2) of the First Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions (1977) prohibits recruiting children under the age of 15. In Israeli military schools, children are "regularly recruited" as young as 13 or 14, a practice that persists because of the pervasive influence of militarism in Israeli society and culture.

In all Israeli secondary schools, mandatory Youth Battalion Training Week simulates army life for those in 11th and 12th grade on military bases. With the children wearing uniforms, this training includes reception, processing, orientation and marches, night and day weapons and field training, and lessons about battle heritage, military ranks, discipline, adapting, service commitment, and the purity of arms.

During the entire training, Israeli children are surrounded by soldiers and treated like them in order to gain familiarity with military life. In groups of about 20, treatment and conditions are rigorous, obedience a must, and for those who disobey,
punishments include extra calisthenics, running and chores like latrine duty.

In times of emergency, Israeli Youth Battalions may be recruited for active service as they were during the 1948 War. For boys aged 16 or older, elite combat unit try-outs are held, initially for two days, and for qualifiers of up to five, involving demanding and exhausting mental and physical fitness tests. The IDF's reference to "substantial service" strongly emphasises Elite Combat Unit enlistment, being the "cream of the crop" destined for the "most exciting fighting activities".

For the few selected, pressure to be accepted is intense because participation is considered a great honour.

Arranged through schools, children are also enlisted to support the IDF, especially during times of emergency or special needs. Besides training, they do laundry, sort uniforms, wash dishes, set dining room tables, clean vehicles, and do other chores, freeing soldiers for military duties.

To support a war effort, children as young as 15 and a half are enlisted for "labour service [to protect] the state or public security or for providing vital services to the population". In all cases, schools cooperate, and during extreme times children have no choice.

Another way in which children are used for military purposes in Israel is in the Israeli Civil Guard, a police- run community-based organisation founded in 1974 to mobilise civilians for protection against Arab militia attacks. Today, the Guard patrols community areas, challenges Palestinians, harasses them, at times shoots them, and performs other services like securing public transportation, educational institutions, open markets and parking lots, as well as helping out at checkpoints.

About 15 per cent of Guard volunteers are children, eligible at age 15 to join with a restricted status that is removed a year later.
Parental consent is also required. The youths are armed, and some schools give extra credit for participating.

Members of Israeli Emergency Squads are mostly adults to be called on as needed, but since 2002 secondary school pupils have increasingly also been enlisted. Although part of Israel's police force, the Squads, set up under Section 8 of the 1971 Police Orders, allow the Israeli government "at times of war or emergency... to declare the Israeli Police Force, or a part of it, a military force which might be employed in military functions for the protection of the State."

In the West Bank, Israeli children as young as 15 guard settlements and do other security work, performing functions that include working in police headquarters and patrolling with arms they're trained to use.

Some of these children "grow up believing they must banish the Palestinians, and act" violently with impunity, including harassing them, beating them, breaking into their homes, destroying their property, and at times killing them.

There's little difference between "training and assigning a child to do work as an armed [settlement] guard [or] assigning [them as] soldier[s] at the front in wartime... The formalities of whether one officially belongs to the army or not are hardly relevant," reports say, given the pervasive militarisation of Israeli society.

Although civilian service is voluntary, children are raised "in a hostile and violent environment in the middle of a confrontation area". In the occupied territories, many believe the land is their land. They must protect it, and the Palestinians are enemies. Under intense social pressure, children are encouraged to perform at a very immature age when they're too young to know the consequences, yet they are conditioned to be militant and obedient.
A last feature of the military use of children by Israel is its use of Palestinian children as collaborators. Israel recruits Palestinian informants, including children, as field agents to provide intelligence, asking them to work as collaborators that most Palestinians call traitors.

Tactics involve detaining Palestinian children, then pressuring and torturing them to comply, much like the tactics Israel used in recruiting for the South Lebanon Army (SLA) after the 1982 Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon. Under Israeli supervision, SLA Lebanese citizens, including children as young as 12, were used as collaborators for intelligence purposes.

During the second Intifada, Palestinians, including children, were also used as human shields by Israel, forced at gunpoint to comply.

Militarised education starts early in Israel in both overt and symbolic ways, the aim being to condition young minds to accept military service as natural, vital, and an honour for Israeli citizens. The "educational system is so committed to [promoting] military service that it [fails] to consider" the harm done to new youth generations, who grow up thinking wars and violence are natural, peace unattainable, Arabs inferior, and Palestinians enemies.

The militarisation of society is corrupting and self-destructive, and the recruiting of child soldiers is criminal and unconscionable. All forms of it must stop. The alternative is unacceptable, illegal and intolerable.

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