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Sharp Rise in IDF Enlistment Among Young Muslim Men

By Tal Lev Ram

- In the aftermath of Operation Guardian of the Walls and the violent riots that erupted in mixed cities, the IDF has presented encouraging numbers that indicate a sharp rise in the number of Muslim men who choose to enlist in the IDF. According to the new data, 606 Arab Muslim citizens enlisted in 2020, compared to 489 who enlisted in 2019 and 436 who enlisted in 2018. The number of soldiers to enlist in the Bedouin reconnaissance unit doubled in the space of two years, from 84 in 2018 to 171 in 2020. In 2017 only 45 people enlisted. Thanks to the surge in enlistment, the IDF now has two platoons in basic training every time, as opposed to just one. In the course of Operation Guardian of the Walls, 29 Muslim soldiers asked to be discharged from military service in response to intense pressure at home. Eighteen of them ultimately decided to remain in uniform and to continue to serve after discussing the matter with their commanders. The other 11 were discharged from service, as requested.
- The prevailing assessment within the IDF is that the upward trend in Muslim enlistment into the IDF will continue—notwithstanding the strains produced by Operation Guardian of the Walls and the violent riots that erupted in mixed cities and in cities, towns and villages across Israel. The IDF counts its 2020 enlistment numbers from July 2019 through June 2020. According to preliminary data currently in hand, no change in the enlistment numbers has been recorded thus far [in the 2021 numbers]. IDF officials said that definitive numbers would only become available in the middle of next year. The number of Muslim soldiers who terminated their service prematurely dropped in 2020 by 7%, down from 30% in 2019 to 23% in 2020. The number of Muslim soldiers who went AWOL dropped by 10% this past year as well.
- IDF officials said that all of the data attest to higher motivation to enlist and to serve in the army. IDF officials said they believe that the rising enlistment rate among Muslim citizens (primarily Bedouins) stems primarily from the

public information campaign that was mounted to raise the enlistment rate, and the personal invitation that was issued to 4,000 young Muslim men to enlist. Among them, 1,200 expressed an interest in enlisting and made contact with the army, out of which 250 ultimately enlisted. The IDF and the Defense Ministry intend to launch a similar campaign this September, just on a much larger scale. More than 10,000 prospective candidates for military service will be sent an invitation to serve, instead of a first call-up order. That outreach effort will be complemented by a public information campaign that will also involve Bedouin IDF reservists. Roughly 75% of all Bedouins who enlist for IDF service live in northern Israel, where enlistment into the IDF has been higher traditionally.

- Enlistment rates have been lower in southern Israel as a result of ongoing tensions between the state authorities and the Bedouin population, rampant crime, the political ascendancy of radical Islamic groups and a range of other factors. Military officials now want to change that trend, and said they expected to be able to enlist several hundred Bedouin soldiers from southern Israel, which will help bolster their sense of belonging to Israel, as well as their families' sense of belonging.