

You're in the army now

Israeli youth face mortality, maturity in Defense Force service

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This article contains excerpts from interviews conducted with young Israeli soldiers while visiting an Israeli military base on Syrian border. The visit was part of a trip to the Middle East in late December through early January for a handful of newspaper editors from around the country. For reasons of Israeli national security, only first names are given.

It's dawn, two days after the New Year, and a small group of young people are huddled together for warmth on the peak of an Israeli-controlled mountain near the Syrian capital of Damascus. The bitter cold whips at their exposed flesh and they are forced to focus and refocus their bleary early-morning eyes in an attempt to take in all the scenic beauty of the sprawling lowlands.

Overlooking much of the Golan Heights, this mountain affords a perfect view of the Syrian countryside and majestic Mount Hermon, the highest point in Israel. The mountaintop on which the American young people shiver is an early warning station for Israeli Defense Forces in one of the most strategically essential regions in the country.

The Golan Heights was Syrian territory until the Six Day War in 1967. Its elevation, overlooking the Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) and Israel's northernmost settlements, spurned a number of Syrian sieges in Israel's early years. In June of that year, Israeli troops overtook the Golan, reaching the outskirts of Damascus before a cease-fire from both sides was called.

Mitch, an IDF spokesman and guide for the group, recalled that the last heavy fighting took place in Golan in a Syrian surprise attack. With a disengagement agreement in place since that time, the region has been relatively peaceful.

Soldiers positioned in the area, however, are always on five-minute alert, Mitch says. Soldiers like 22-year old Niv, a seasoned fighter who served on the front lines of conflicts with Lebanon, and Maya, 19, who has no plans to stick around after her required dues are paid.

"The possibility of dying is not so far-fetched," 18-year-old Shira says being a soldier comes with a host of responsibilities and it gives her the option to try things that "you wouldn't get to do in normal life." Approximately 200,000 young soldiers are enlisted in the armed forces as part of a policy for national conscription - a law enacted in 1959, 11 years after the country gained its independence.

Two exceptions are made, for Israeli Arabs and ultra-orthodox Jews.

Young people like Shira and hundreds more like her are stationed at this outpost on the edge of the Syrian border. Their lives at this base, established in 1993 as an early-warning camp, consist of brutally early mornings, routine artillery drills, fieldwork and a great deal of waiting.

They wait for their time in the military to elapse. They wait for a weekend when they can return home to see their families. Sometimes they wait for fighting to break out with Syria - a constant threat. Nineteen-year-old Chen, whose father and sister are both commanders in the IDF, says the waiting and the threats force children to quickly mature.

"When you're at home, you're a child. When you come here, you can't be," Chen says. "They'll break you." Maya, who has finished her 3 a.m. shift at the base's operations center, agrees.

With increasing tension at the Syrian border, she is on the base more and visits home much less. In peacetime, Maya and the other young soldiers see their families every third Saturday.

Women in the IDF have the opportunity to fill most positions, the soldiers agree. Maya works as a field artillery instructor most days, teaching mainly male recruits how to use their weapons.

1998 marked the first combat certification for a woman in the Israeli army. "Although we recognize the need for this army and recognize fear we have for our country, this is certainly not an achievement or a goal. It's a necessity which this country needs to protect her from her enemies," 22-year-old Sagiv attests.

"In order to defend your friends, you have to kill your enemy," 22-year-old Niv chimes in.

Sagiv and Niv have both experienced life on the front lines. Niv spent almost 30 days in an isolated convoy in a "scary situation," fighting and eating rations for weeks. Only when one returns home from such an experience does he or she realize what has happened, Niv says.

"Fighting is a mechanical thing, there is no philosophical element to it," Sagiv says.

Serving in the IDF is not a service reserved for Israeli-born citizens. Roman, a 19-year-old Russian immigrant, is among the rank's diverse population. After making "Aliyah," a Zionist term for moving to Israel, Roman joined the IDF. His family members, who have yet to

join him in Israel, worry because he is so young and his life is in danger when he fights on the front lines. Roman frequently struggles with this lifestyle but does not regret coming home to Israel. His is a struggle many face, when what they want most is a normal life.

Niv and Maya both look forward to coming to the United States - New York City, to be exact - when their time in the military is up. They agree that it's the norm for young Israelis to take up to a year to travel and have fun upon completion of their tour of duty.

"It's important to be able to clear your mind and relax after this," Niv says. "It's just what many of us do to unwind."

Other soldiers plan to continue their service in the IDF. Chen plans on becoming an intelligence officer after he is finished with his initial training. Shira, who spent her high school years getting to know American culture as an exchange student in Wisconsin, will continue to serve her country as a soldier.

"American teenagers deal with proms and football," Shira says matter-of-factly. "Israelis deal with mortality."

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