The Israeli Army

Between Ethnic Conflict and Social Integration

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December 2021

Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies & Consultations

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Introduction

Ethnic pluralism is one of the common features of most settler societies, where Israel and the US being almost the most obvious model in this respect. The Israeli society is made up of ethnicities whose historical origins belong to more than a hundred countries, not to mention the strategic contradiction with the native society, which is the Palestinian society in our case.

Ethnicity constitutes one of the dilemmas of building the state and defining its identity on the one hand, and building social cohesion or solidarity on the other. In the case of settler state, determining the cultural identity of the state, according to the definition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, faces the problem of conflict between the "common identity" and the particular identity (for every ethnic diversity). In the case of settler society, the problem appears in how to reconcile groups, which are different on the religious, ethnic, linguistic levels or in terms of cultural values, artistic systems and lifestyles.[1]

Emile Durkheim's theory of the division of labor,[2] which we perceive as the most expressive of the problem of state building and society building, divides social solidarity or loyalty into two types: mechanical solidarity based on traditional ties, such as language, race, religion, culture, color, lifestyle, etc., and organic solidarity resulting from functional interdependence. Durkheim concludes that the more functionally a society develops, the more mechanical solidarity declines, and accordingly the state's task becomes to develop organic solidarity at the expense of mechanical solidarity. Here the question arises: What are the tools for developing organic solidarity?
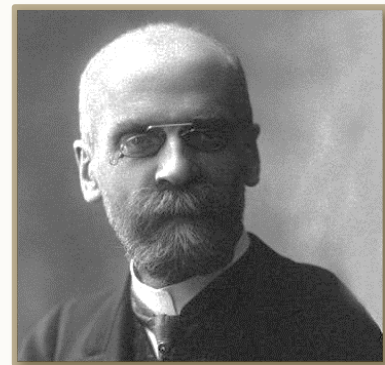
Emile Durkheim

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To answer this question, states use a number of tools to create homogeneity and solidarity, including military institutions, where Israel might be the most prominent in this respect, and this is what we will try to address.

First: The Israeli Perspective on the Army's Role in Social Integration

The Israeli perspective in this regard is based on:[3]

▶ 1. Strengthening the idea of security threat to the state and the society to enhance solidarity among society members. However, this deepens the hatred for the Arab minority, while many Israeli intellectuals tend to believe that the intensity of Israelis' sense of security threat has declined since 2009, which weakens this mechanism.

▶ 2. The high rate of military spending to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Israel affects the spending levels on education, health and other services, which raises the complaints of poor minorities. This leads to minority dissent in the military establishment.

▶ 3. There is debate in Israeli academic circles regarding the role of military establishment in strengthening or weakening nationalism. Some believe that military service enhances national feeling thus increasing antiminority sentiments in the society, while others believe that enlistment leads to the development of common values, and enhances "constructive patriotism" based on inter-cultural balances and "mutual respect" among the sub-cultures.

A field study has compared a sample of Israeli ex-soldiers with another of high school students who have not yet joined the army, concerning their fear and power values. The study concludes the following:[4]

Table 1: Measuring Security Concerns in the Israeli Society; A Comparison Between Civilians and Military Members (1-6 Likert scale)

Statement	Ex-soldiers	High School Students	Difference[5]
Jewish people will not exist without the state of Israel	3.9	4	0.1
We shall live by the sword forever	3.5	3.8	0.3
Cutting defence budget to advance services	4.1	3.7	0.4
A Palestinian state will be an existential threat to Israel	3.5	4	0.5
I fear war in the coming 2 years	4.9	5	0.1
I fear being hurt in a "terrorist" incident in Israel	3.9	4.5	0.6
The level of antisemitism in the world scares me	3.8	4.2	0.4

Table 1 generally indicates the following:

▶ 1. Security fears among those who did not serve in the army are higher than those with military experience. These results mean that enlistment based on "security concern" would not promoting solidarity, in fact security concerns among the two groups exceed 50%, although it is civilians is higher; a result different from the rest of the world.

▶ 2. Soldiers, who had been together for more than 5 days a week (including nights) during three years of military service, tended to be more tolerant towards other cultures during military service, while statements of senior military officers confirm that "Israel's main challenge is not defense related, but social and internal."[6] The refusal of some units or military personnel to participate in the evacuation of some settlement outposts in the West Bank might be an indication

of the problematic relationship between the religious in the military and the governmental authority, as one of the manifestations of ethnic conflict.

▶ 3. Enlisting in the army is unattractive for the Israeli youth: Official Israeli reports show a clear downward trend in army enlistment among Israeli youth, which weakens the army's role in encouraging their integration into society. Official reports show the following:[7]

a. 47.9% of men in the Israeli army did not complete their military service.

b. Recruitment figures for combat units among young people declined from 81% in 2011 to 65% in 2018.

c. The number of mental illness-related exemptions among secular citizens rose throughout 2018–2020 by 49% among the religious and 29% among the secular.

d. Decrease in army enlistment as 25% of males did not enlist in 2007 compared to 26.9% in 2015, 30% in 2019 and 32.9% in 2020.

Second: Ethnic Structure and its Reflection on the Israeli Army

In regards of ethnic diversity, the Israeli society is formed from a large number of ethnicities, as shown in Table 2, and at forefront of ethnic division is religious division; Jews, Muslims, Christians, various sects, nationalities from more than a hundred countries in addition to linguistic, racial and color diversity.

Table 2: Israel Ethnic Composition in 2019[8]

Ethnic origins	Total percentage in the society/ percentage from total ethnicity
First: Jews	74.3
Born in Israel (him/her or their parents)	42
Russia and the former Soviet Union	20
Romania	2.2
Poland	2.05
France	1.5
Germany and Austria	1.17
Hungary, Czech and Slovakia	0.9
Britain	0.74
Bulgaria and Greece	0.65
Rest of Europe	0.87
Morocco	6.17
Algeria and Tunisia	2.8
Ethiopia (Beta Israel)	2.2
Libya	0.9
Egypt	0.74
Rest of African countries	0.47
Iraq	2.5
Iran	2.3
Yemen	2.8
Turkey	1
India and Pakistan	0.7
Syria and Lebanon	0.5

Rest of Asian countries	0.27
North America, Australia and New Zealand	2.8
Argentina	1
Rest of Latin America	0.77
Second: East/West Jews	
Ashkenazim	34.7
Sephardic	43.2
Hybrid	6.1
Blacks: Black Africans - Black Americans	2
Russians (or from the Soviet Union)	14
Third: Religious divisions among Jews	
Secular (Hilonim)	45
Traditional (Masorti)	35
Religious (Dati)	10
Ultra-Orthodox (Haredi)	10
Fourth: The Jews of Israel, according to the individual's place of birth (not the parents')	
Israel	75.2
Outside Israel	24.8
Fifth: Palestinians**	21
Muslims	17.2
Christians	1.9
Druze	1.6
Sixth: Others	4.7

**Including Palestinians in east Jerusalem.

Seventh: Enlistment	
Jews	Mandatory except for some exemptions for religious or health reasons
Druzes	Mandatory for men only
Circassians	Mandatory for men only
Arabs	Voluntary provided it does not include the Air Force or the intelligence services

The table shows that enlistment is regulated by a network of laws and procedures that reflect a "differentiation" in the relationship with the military institution. Thus, each form of enlistment including exceptions, as there is mandatory enrollment applied to Jews with exceptions for religious reasons, or gender-based exceptions as in the case of Druze and Circassians. There is voluntary enlistment that applies to Arabs, however, they cannot join the air force or military security services.

Third: Manifestations of Ethnic Discrimination in the Israeli Army[9]

From the beginning, Zionist planning sought to make one of the army's functions, besides its traditional function, to be a repetition of the American theory of "melting pot."[10] Therefore, the army has participated in the education sector, settlement building, assimilation of immigrants and vocational education, in addition to dedicating the combat doctrine of all fighters to establish a system of common values towards the gradual transformation from mechanical to organic interdependence. However, the participation and interaction between ethnicities within the military institution leads to self-identification. The importance of the comparison between ethnicities increases when considering the criterion of distributing positions of influence and power among different ethnicities, besides the behavioral comparison. All of this is effected by the nature of the historical relationship between these ethnicities, be it negative or positive, which was considered by a previous study of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) a central criterion in determining the view of the different ethnicities, societies or subcultures, towards each other.[11]

When studying the Israeli army experience concerning integration, we find that the most prominent forms of ethnic discrimination within the Israeli army are embodied in the following manifestations:

1. Discrimination Based on Religion

It is clear from field studies on the role of religion in the Israeli army that "Judaism as a religion" is presented to the Israeli soldier partly in a way that leads to integration and partly leading to the opposite result. Religion, on the one hand, is presented as an expression of an "ethnic group," and as an expression of a "theological concept" on the other. The first aspect makes religion a conflicting tool because it creates three forms of conflict:

▶ a. Conflict between Judaism and other religions in society (Islam and Christianity).

▶ b. Conflict between the Jewish sects themselves, which is evident in the plurality of Jewish religious parties based on ethnic cultural diversity and theological perceptions.

▶ c. Conflict between religious and secular Jews.

It is noteworthy that the tendency of "theocratization" of the Israeli army has increased since 1970s through four measures:[12]

▶ a. Increasing organizational and legal procedures that facilitate the enlistment of religious people in the army.

▶ b. A clear increase in the number of religious soldiers exempted from military service in the various military units.

▶ c. Measures taken by the Israeli government to restrict the powers of military commanders to regulate and control the religious sector within the military units.

▶ d. Restricting military leaders' interference in religiously "ambiguous" tasks in society.

These policies have led to an increase in the percentage of religious Jewish officers during the period 1990–2008 from 2.5% to 26% and then to 35% in 2016.[13] The percentage of religious officers in some combat units reaches 50%[14] while women comprise 40% of the total military, and 18% of combat units.[15] These percentages are opposed by Jewish religious movements, which introduces gradual

and parallel emergence of the three types of conflicts mentioned above, thus reducing the chances of integration due to conflicting loyalties, and the emergence of what is known in integration studies as pyramidal segmentary model.[16] In this model, ethnic groups face the problem of conflict between the highest loyalty to the inclusive culture, and the lowest loyalty to the subculture, and in the case of conflict between the two loyalties, the individual often seeks his lowest loyalty, especially in traditional societies. As the percentage of religious people increases with their multiple subcultures (religious sects such as Haredim, Hasidim, Samra, Karaites, and Jesuit Jews...etc.), the potential of conflict between higher and lower loyalties increases.

Concerning religion, it is necessary to recall that there was a unit in the Israeli army called the "Sword Battalion" or Unit 300, whose soldiers were restricted to non-Jewish minorities, especially the Druze. Since 1957, the Druze began to enlist in the Israeli army after the state has accepted them as a separate ethnicity. In 1975, a separate military unit called "Sword Battalion" was established for the Druze, who make up 1.6% of the society,[17] and are the highest among the minority groups to join the army in relation to their population ratio, with 39% of them working in combat units, 18% chosen for "quality" courses, and 17% working in technical units, while the rest are distributed to other professional sectors. During the 60 years since the Druze joined the Israeli army, only one officer reached the General Staff. In 2015, Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot disbanded this 40-year-old unit 40, on the basis the growing desire of a decisive majority of the community to serve in all units and service branches, including elite forces and top technology posts, and there is also inclination to dissolve the

Gadi Eisenkot

Bedouin unit in the army.[18] Druze unity and the tendency to dissolve the Bedouin unity seem to be an indication of the desire to reduce the units based on religious ethnicity.

2. Discrimination Based on the Dichotomy of Eastern Jew/ Western Jew

As we indicated at the beginning, the roots of the Jews in Israel as a settler community go back to more than a hundred countries, with Russians or immigrants of the former Soviet Union comprising the highest percentage of the population (see Table 2), followed by the Jews of Morocco. But if the division was made on the basis of Eastern (Sephardic or Mizrahi), and Western Jews (Ashkenazim), the first group appears to be the largest.

In order to identify the influence of this matter within the military institution, we refer to a significant comparison, which confirms the findings of the UNESCO study cited by the writer above, regarding the way societies from different cultural backgrounds perceive each other, as a result of their involvement in daily interaction. This comparison is represented in a study on the relationship between Mizrahi and Ashkenazim Jews through considering two military units: Golani and the Paratroopers Brigade. The field study, which was based on interviews, reached the following results:[19]

► a. In non-combat positions, soldiers in white-collar jobs are Ashkenazi while those filling blue-collar positions are Mizrahim or Jewish immigrants from the Soviet Union.

► b. In the interviews and comparisons between the Paratroopers Brigade and the Golani Brigade, they distinguish each other by names. For example, whoever has the prefix "Ben" in his name, like Ben-Ami, is believed to be Mizrahi.

► c. The workers in the two units use specific and clearly circulated terms to describe each other. The Paratroopers describe those working in Golani as "Arabs" out of an inferior view, or because their origin is in Arab countries, or they were neighbors with the Arabs. Those working in the Golani Brigade describe Paratroopers as the "yellows."

Paratroopers

Golani Unit

► d. When Paratroopers describe the Golani soldiers, they use behavioral descriptions that fully reflect Mirror-Image phenomenon,[20] such as chaos, helplessness or lack of intelligence, while describing themselves with operationally meaningful descriptions such as achievement, discipline, success and excellence in performance, which reflects a sense of superiority. When the Golani soldiers (the so-called Arabs) talk about themselves, description is based on comparison with the Paratroopers, and vice versa. The comparison appears between "Arabs" and "Yellows," or in the range of

general features such as: Golani soldiers make noise wherever they go, sing and listen to music while Paratroopers enjoy calm and sobriety. They even compare the music performed by each of them, however, it is not a normal comparison, but rather on the basis of superior and inferior. The noise of the Golani personnel is interpreted as an implicit expression of their collective subconscious protest regarding discrimination against them, and this is reinforced by the participation of Golani officers in singing with their soldiers, while the Paratroopers' officers refrain from this, especially since the Paratroopers (Ashkenazi Yellows) sing songs they consider Israeli, while the Mizrahi in Golani sing non-Israeli songs.

▶ e. The contrast in the external appearance of both Golani and the Paratroopers: External appearance is represented in the uniform, the beret, the boots and the way of wearing the uniform, with this being directed through disciplinary orders from the military authority, and therefore it is a mandatory uniform rather than a response to the individual's taste. Paratroopers wear red beret and red boots and wear the shirt outside their pants, unlike other units. In contrast, Golani soldiers wear their pants very low, and they shorten the weapon strap so the top of the weapon can be seen over their shoulder. The way the Golani soldiers dress is contrary to army regulations, which means "it is a rebellion coming from the subconscious that stores a sense of inferiority, as a result of the general mental image of the self and the image circulated by the other party about it."

This field study reveals that the attempt to develop the "conservative traditional Mizrahi culture" towards an "enlightened yellow Ashkenazi" culture reflects a cultural hierarchy that represents an extension of the existing hierarchy in the cultural structure of civil society, which the soldier senses as soon as he leaves his camp. Accordingly, civilian culture and ethnic mirror images[21] nurture cultural self-identity among the military rather than the other way around, making the integrative function of the military less effective.

3. Discrimination on the Basis of Color

Sufficient Israeli studies indicate that about 40% of Jewish soldiers are of African descent, where there is a very small percentage of black Jews of American descent who had trouble adjusting to the Israeli society after leaving the army, which means failure in the integrative function of the army.[22] To demonstrate the difficulty of infusing the lowest loyalty into the highest loyalty, and devoting the neurotic personality of the Ethiopian members of the Israeli army, who represent the main segment of blacks in the army, we point out that the Ethiopian soldiers are most likely to:[23]

▶ a. Be discharged dishonorably from military service.

▶ b. Commit suicide with an army issued weapon.

▶ c. Be incarcerated in military prisons.

▶ d. Desert their military units.

▶ e. Receive lower scores in the preliminary Israeli army placement exam core, which significantly lowers their chances of succeeding in the army since it is the "threshold criterion for recruitment to elite units."

These practices are a reflection of a military structure discriminating severely against Ethiopian soldiers, such as:

• Ethiopians constitute less than 1% of the Israeli army, and the rate of Ethiopian female enlisting is higher than the males' by about 50%, according to statistics of the Ethiopian Jewish Association, which perceives this as discrimination against their men.

• A third of the soldiers of Ethiopian origin commit their violations, especially absenteeism from their camps, in order to obtain funds to help them face their difficult living conditions.

• The first Ethiopian war pilot was in 2018, and the first Ethiopian to hold the rank of colonel was in 2016, although the Ethiopians began migration to occupied Palestine at the beginning of the 1960s, with a noticeable increase during the 1980s and 1990s

- Some Ethiopian soldiers threatened in 2016 in a letter to the Israeli authorities not to return to service in light of officials' statements about the necessity of their commitment to their duties without talking about their rights. The percentage of Ethiopian soldiers who dropped out reached 22.8%.

- The proportion of Ethiopian soldiers who went on to become officers until 2014 was 2.3%, noting that the proportion of men who went on to become officers, as compared with the general population of soldiers is 9.8%. This means that the percentage of Ethiopian ethnicity among officers does not exceed 23.46% of the percentage of officers of other ethnicities.

- The new recruitment process by the Manpower Directorate, set to come into effect on 1/10/2021, depend on cognitive, administrative and adaptive abilities, in addition to intelligence and education level. These capabilities reflect bias towards Western Jews (Ashkenazim) and are viewed by Eastern Jews (Sephardic) with utter suspicion.

- Although Ethiopian Jews constitute less than 1% of the Israeli army, an international report discussed in the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination revealed that 10% of suicides among young Israeli soldiers were recruits of Ethiopian origin. This is evident that their exposure to psychological stress is clearly high as their suicide rate is ten times their overall rate.[24]

The ethnic unrest that erupted between the Israeli police and Ethiopian Jews in Tel Aviv in 2015, which began with the arrest by the Israeli security forces of an Israeli soldier of Ethiopian origin, was an indication of the gap between a sector of the Israeli society and the state authorities, which prompted the Ethiopians to create pressure groups to confront discrimination against them.[25]

4. Russian/ Soviet Minority

Most of the studies of Israeli sociologists indicate a clear discrepancy in the analysis of the structure and trends of the Russians/ Soviets, who immigrated to Israel at different periods since its establishment and in the 1970s and 1990s, and currently constitute about 20% of Jews in Israel. "The Russian tribe, the Russian street, or the Russian Israelis" are the most frequently used terms when referring to them in Israeli literature. The degree of their integration into the Israeli society

can be determined by the findings of Israeli research on civil and military integration mechanisms as follows:[26]

- a. Their image in the Israeli public's mind is that they are rioters, drug dealers, alcoholics, and the most sex traffickers, and that their culture is dominated by the values of power and tyranny.

- b. Their relations with the Jewish religious establishment are troubled, especially since this institution questions their Judaism. Indeed, some rabbis (such as Yitzhak Peretz) demanded to stop their immigration because, according to Halachic Judaism, they are not Jews, especially that most of them have non-Jewish mothers, or one of the parents is not Jew, and that they did not immigrate to Israel until after the collapse of the Soviet empire, that is, more than four decades after the establishment of Israel.

- c. Settlers in the West Bank question their loyalty to Zionism, and this is most evident in the settlements controlled by religious Jews.

- d. Russian Jews reject being affiliated with either of the two largest groups (Ashkenazim or Sephardic), and tend to call themselves "the Russians."

- e. The Arabs of the 1948 occupied Palestine retain a negative image of them, given that the Israeli government provides them with lands, jobs and various services at the expense of what is offered to Arabs, and they are the most opposed to the establishment of a Palestinian state.

- f. The Sephardic hate them because they have become the "largest minority" in the Israeli society, and the Ashkenazim hate them because a high percentage of Russian Jews are qualified and have begun crowding out the dominant Ashkenazi elite. Some Israeli researchers even believe that Russian Jews are the ones who will decide the future of Israel.

- g. They are still attached to their "Russian" language in their daily lives, their communication with the Russian society, and the consolidation of their culture in their literature and media.

- h. Their feeling of the small size of Israel compared to the empire where they have lived, which made them cling to the image of the Soviet Union. Indeed, former Israeli President Shimon Peres said, describing the Russian Jews in Israel that they "thought the Jordan River was another Volga."

Shimon Peres

i. Their establishment of political parties dominated by the Russian element, as if they are "tribal" parties ("Israel Our Home" and others), and 86% of them are affiliated with parties dominated by the Russians. They even demand the dedication of Israeli celebrations on the anniversary of World War II to commemorate the dead of the Red Army who died to "protect the Jews from Hitler."

Based on the foregoing, the task of the army in integrating them into the society becomes more complex, especially with their high population density. However, it should be noted that the rate of their enlistment is high compared to other ethnicities, which tend mostly to refrain from enlistment, as we indicated at the beginning of this study, where their enrollment rate compared to other ethnicities is 10% higher, which provides the army with a greater opportunity for habilitating them. However, the preconception of them among the Israeli public makes their "Israelization" more complex compared to others.

5. The Palestinians of 1948

We do not need to analyze their status as owners of the land, the most vulnerable minority to discrimination, and as the historical contradiction of settlement. What we would like to point out is that the occupation has divided them, in terms of enlistment, into two sections: the first, including Muslims and Christians, is not obligated to serve in the army but is allowed to volunteer, and the second, including Druze and Circassians, is obligated to serve. The percentage of Arabs serving in the Israeli army is estimated at 1% of the Arab population (most of them are Druze and Bedouin, and a limited number of Christians), with a ban on their joining certain units such as the Air Force and Military Intelligence.[27]

Proposing the idea of "the Jewish state" directly means that the Israeli army is not concerned with this group in its efforts to achieve social integration, but rather seeks its exclusion and isolation although it comprises 21% of the population.

Jews are suspicious of the Arabs' loyalty to the "Israeli state," because of their sympathy with other Palestinian communities in various regions, and their loyalty to their people, which was very obvious after the Sword of Jerusalem battle in 2021. This

is a phenomenon that deserves attention, especially in describing Zionist double standards, for on one hand, Israel demands the Jews in the whole world to renounce their loyalty to the countries where they reside, and move to Israel, but on the other hand, it demands from the Palestinians to abandon their loyalty to their people and homeland and be loyal to those who colonize them, otherwise leave for exile.[28]

This means that the army's social integration function is completely absent regarding this group. The army even tends to isolate it due to the strategic contradiction with it.

6. Other Categories in Military Integration Programs

There are two categories that join the Israeli army and must be considered:[29]

▶ **a. Jews abroad**: Jews from abroad are enlisted in the army through limited programs aimed at linking them to Israel and encouraging their return to it, such as:

- The program of veterans, who came from abroad and fought in the first Israeli wars and then travelled abroad, Mahal/ Machal (Overseas Volunteers).

- The Sar-El–The National Project for Volunteers for Israel, to link Jews abroad with the Israeli society.

- Garin Tzabar, which means Israeli native core or seed, is a program for young Diaspora Jews who choose to immigrant to Israel and serve in the Israel Defense Forces.

- Marva program, which offers short-term military training to young Jews from abroad.

- Lev LaChayal is a program designed to support religious students who choose to serve in the Israeli army.

▶ **b. Homosexuals**: In 1983, homosexual Jews were allowed to join the army with a ban on their work in sensitive or intelligence units. This remained the case until 1993, when the ban was completely lifted following a heated debate in the Knesset led by a university professor who had served in the army. In 2006, enlistment in the army was applied to deaf people or those who have hearing difficulties.[30]

Conclusion

It can be said that the Israeli army has failed, in its function of social integration, to curb the repercussions of discrimination within civil society on the feelings of discrimination within the military barracks, and that some manifestations of discrimination within the army silently nourish some aspects of discrimination in society.

The main aspects of discrimination (religion, nationality, color, cultural and social backgrounds) are inherent in the Israeli society, and it seems that the mechanisms of social integration in the Israeli Jewish society and its army are unable to turn into a "melting pot." As a matter of fact, the "Jewish state" program constitutes a departure from civil development in contemporary societies. For these societies tend to have a humanitarian approach in the midst of a sweeping globalization.

It seems to us that the continuation of hierarchical structure in the Israeli society and the depth of hierarchical fragmentation in the ethnic structure nurture mirror-image perceptions and the multiplicity of loyalties, and pave the way for cracks that, if accompanied by regional or international pressure, or severe economic crises, for a sufficient period of time, may extend to the Israeli army itself.
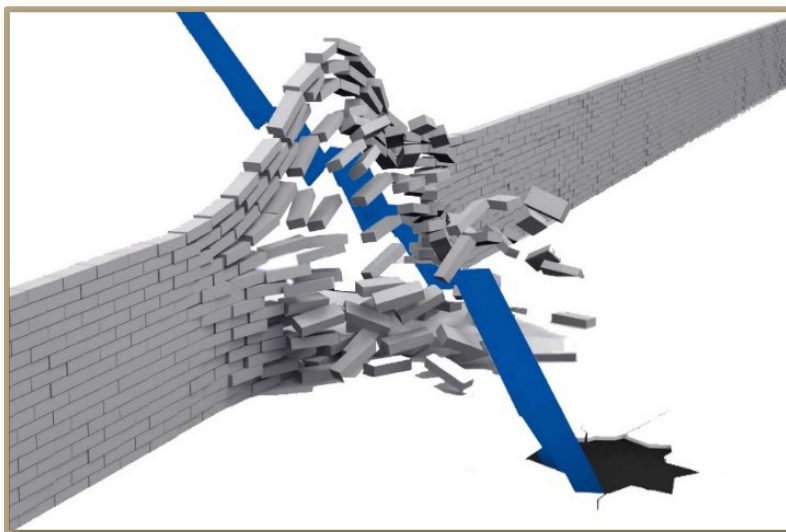
Endnotes

[1] Encyclopedia Britannica defines ethnicity as "the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a 'people.' This distinctiveness is believed to be expressed in language, music, values, art, styles, literature, family life, religion, ritual, food, naming, public life, and material culture." For details, see: Ethnicity, site of Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethnicity

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[11] William Buchanan and Hadley Cantril, *How nations see each other, a study in public opinion* (UNESCO, 1972), passim.

[12] Hanne Eggen Røislien, "Religion and Military Conscription: The Case of the Israel Defense Forces," *Armed Forces & Society* journal, SAGE Publications, issue 2, vol. 39, 2013, pp. 213–232.

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