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## Embodying Refusal: Resistance, Pathologization, and Mental Health Exemption in the Israel Defense Forces

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the cultural elements of obtaining a mental health exemption from military service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). This paper also examines the social inequalities that Israeli militarism creates within Israeli society which can motivate Israelis to avoid or refuse to complete mandatory military service. Often, an Israeli's ethno-class affiliation influences why they might avoid or refuse to serve and affects how they refuse or attempt to gain an exemption from the military. I argue the IDF individualizes refusal and exemption as an attempt to mitigate social, political, and ethical claims and critiques about the military and Israeli society.

Then, using findings from my field research, this paper discusses the practice of gaining a mental health exemption as a way to refuse military service. An individual seeking mental health exemption is required to embody the military's interpretation of the "proper" symptoms of a pathologized mental disorder. I argue the military's attempts to depoliticize mental health exemption by individualizing and pathologizing mental disorders as well as mental health exemption. I consider how mental health exemption can be resistance to militarism and military service. This paper examines how a military pathologizes mental health issues, depoliticizes avoidance and critique of the military, and informs how individuals practice resistance to military service by using the military's own bureaucratic practices.

*Keywords: Israel Defense Forces, pathology, mandatory military service*

“One Out of Seven Israeli Recruits Fail to Complete Military Service” announces the April 2017 headline in Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*.<sup>1</sup> Seven thousand Israelis do not complete the full term of their military service, and this number does not include those who never enter military service at all.<sup>2</sup> The article claims that most soldiers receive an early medical discharge from the military on psychological grounds, although a military source cited in the article says that for many this is just “their way of getting out of military service.”<sup>3</sup> Fourteen percent of young Israelis not completing their military service<sup>4</sup> is a startling revelation for a country requiring mandatory military service for most Jewish Israeli men and women. Since its creation in 1948, Israel has practiced universal conscription into the Israel Defence Forces (IDF).<sup>5</sup> After high school, men serve three

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1 Gili Cohen, “One Out of Seven Israeli Recruits Fail to Complete Military Service,” *Haaretz* (Tel Aviv), 25 Apr. 2017, <<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.785456>>.

2 Cohen.

3 Cohen.

4 Cohen.

5 Merav Perez, “State, Resistance, and Class Reproduction: The Case of Military Service Avoidance in Israel,” *Critical Military Studies* (2018): 3.



years of mandatory military service and women serve two.<sup>6</sup> It is a normal part of Israeli life and a time when each citizen contributes to the security of the Jewish state.<sup>7</sup> Israel’s model of citizenship uses the historical republican ethos that considers a person’s citizenship to be the fulfillment of a contract with the state, which offers civil, social, and political rights in return for a citizen’s sacrifice in war.<sup>8</sup>

What this *Haaretz* article suggests, and what I learned during fieldwork in Israel, is that the “universal” military experience of Israelis is not as common as one is led to believe. Some Jewish Israelis refuse to serve and others do not complete their service for a variety of reasons. Examining why individuals seek exemptions from military service and how they accomplish it can tell us a good deal about Israeli society and militarism. I begin by showing the conditions militarism creates in Israeli society and the military that make Jewish Israelis want to avoid service or refuse to serve in the military. I then examine the context and relationship between militarism, military service, social inequality, and exemption or refusal to serve in the military. Due to the scope of this paper, I limit the study of social inequality within Israel to its ties to military service and militarism. An Israeli’s ethno-class affiliation can influence why they might refuse to serve, which, in turn, affects how they refuse or attempt to gain an exemption from the military.<sup>9</sup> I also examine how the IDF individualizes refusal and exemption in an attempt to mitigate social, political, and ethical claims and critiques about the military and Israeli society.

One can receive a legal exemption from mandatory military service in several ways.<sup>10</sup> Some exemptions apply to collective groups in Israel. For example, ultra-Orthodox Jews known as *Haredim* are exempted from serving in the military as long as they are enrolled full time in a *yeshiva* (religious school).<sup>11</sup> Some exemptions are given based on gender and circumstances, specifically women who are married or pregnant. Palestinian citizens of Israel are not required to enlist.<sup>12</sup> I focus on an exemption process available to all Israelis: Profile 21, a medical designation for individuals deemed “totally unfit for service for medical reason reasons (physical or mental).”<sup>13</sup> Mental health exemption is the most common type of military exemption in Israel.

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6 When one thinks of a “soldier,” the image of a combat soldier comes to mind for most people. However, the roles of conscripts in Israel range from being combat soldiers, to secretaries, to drivers.

7 Most Jewish Israelis are required to perform military service, as are Druze and Circassian men.

8 Yagil Levy, Edna Lomsky-Feder, and Noa Harel, “From ‘Obligatory Militarism’ to ‘Contractual Militarism’: Competing Models of Citizenship,” *Militarism and Israeli Society*, eds. Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010) 147.

9 Note that throughout the paper, individuals are referred to as “they” to include nonbinary individuals as well as to mask the identities of key informants.

10 The various military exemptions are common knowledge to most Israelis; all exemptions described here were also summarized for the author by the organization New Profile.

11 Moriel Rothman-Zecher, “Why I Won’t Serve Israel,” *New York Times*, 11 Jan. 2015.

12 According to New Profile, Palestinian citizens of Israel are not technically exempt, they are just never called up.

13 “Profiles” are medical profiles numbered 21 to 97 given by the military to individuals. These numbers are random but are a scale describing the level of fitness of the individual. Profile 97 means the individual is perfectly health, able to serve as a combat soldier and in elite units. Profile 45 marks the individual as having a severe health problem, causing them to be assigned strictly to Home Front units. Profile 24 deems the person temporarily unfit for service. Profile 21 provides an exemption, although the individual is allowed to volunteer under Profile 24. See Mitgaisim, “Israel Military Profiles,” <<https://www.mitgaisim.idf.il/%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA/english/tzav-rishon/the-medical-profile/#/>>.



I argue that to receive a Profile 21 mental health exemption, the individual is required to embody what the military interprets to be the “proper” symptoms of a mental disorder, most commonly depression and anxiety. The military pathologizes these mental conditions while also pathologizing the individual experiencing them.<sup>14</sup> By individualizing and pathologizing mental health exemption, the military attempts to depoliticize this type of exemption. I examine the process individuals must go through to receive to mental health exemptions to shed light on the military’s bureaucratic power and its ability to construct the environment surrounding refusal. I also show that in some cases mental health exemption can be a form of resistance to militarism and military service.

### METHODS AND REFLEXIVITY

I conducted my fieldwork in Tel-Aviv, Israel, in the summer of 2017. The original purpose of this trip to Israel was to intern with feminist, demilitarization group New Profile. New Profile is a movement of Jewish Israelis who envision an Israeli society not dominated by militarism; its goal is to “civilianize” Israeli society. New Profile’s critique and examination of militarism and military service in Israel is based on a feminist understanding of gender inequality, oppression, and gendered violence. New Profile provides advice and counseling through its Counseling Network to Israelis who wish to be exempted from military service. It was my participation in and observations of this antimilitarism group that prompted my interest in the mental health exemption.

I conducted exploratory ethnographic research<sup>15</sup> and fieldwork that included semi-structured interviews, participant observation,<sup>16</sup> and observation in public spaces. Through this research, I learned what is important to study from the people who live in that culture.<sup>17</sup> For example, I shifted focus from studying the impact of identity and marginalization on military service in Israel to the

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14 The dictionary definition of *pathologize* is “to view or characterize as medically or psychologically abnormal.” Merriam-Webster, “Definition of pathology,” < <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pathology> >.

15 “Ethnographic researchers learn through systematic observations in the ‘field’ by interviewing and carefully recording what they see, hear, and observe people doing while also learning the meanings that people attribute to what they do and the things they make.” Ethnographic research is conducted in the field, where the researcher is an “invited guest” or partner to learn what is going on. Margaret D. LeCompte and Jean J. Schensul, *Designing and Conducting Ethnographic Research: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2010) 2–3.

Ethnography is situated in local time and space. It is a process through which the researcher generates or builds theories of culture and explanations of how people think, believe, and behave. LeCompte and Schensul 12.

Ethnography is also an exploratory process involving continuously generating questions and answers in the field. Although the ethnographer learns from related research about the phenomena in question prior to fieldwork, they proceed as a learner rather than as an expert. LeCompte and Schensul, 197–198.

16 Participant observation involves researchers (the “participant observers”) immersing themselves in the culture while also recording some aspects of life around them. The researcher gains experiential knowledge by experiencing the lives of the people they are studying (as much as possible). H. Russell Bernard, *Researching Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 5th ed. (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2011) 256–258, 260.

17 Ethnography is committed to the accurate reflection of the views and perspectives of participants. LeCompte and Schensul 15-16.



study of the embodiment of mental health exemption because of the prevalence of mental health exemption mentioned by the interviewees/interlocutors.

My research is best described as using a compressed ethnographic design.<sup>18</sup> I conducted semi-structured interviews as well as in-depth consultations with a cultural expert. The cultural expert is a long-time member of New Profile who has a comprehensive knowledge of the history and current state of military exemptions and militarism in Israel. Over the course of two days they explained to me in detail how Israelis can receive exemptions from the military and the various processes for each exemption. The expert also provided a political, ethno-class, and power analysis of each exemption and gave feedback on a draft version of this paper.<sup>19</sup>

My involvement with New Profile helped me connect with and recruit interview participants. I conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews with two individuals with whom I had already established a rapport. These individuals described their experiences with the mental health exemption or that of close friends. One participant had received a mental health exemption herself after beginning military service in the early 2000s. The second participant, who is part of New Profile's Counseling Network, had been recognized by the military as a conscientious objector a few years earlier. She also had close acquaintances who had received mental health exemptions. In addition, living in Tel Aviv allowed me to see firsthand the diversity within Israeli society, from African asylum seekers, to gentrified Jaffa and hipster Florentine, to the Central Bus Station full of IDF soldiers going to and from their service locations. This experience made Israel's complex and intertwined social, economic, ethnic, and militaristic conditions a reality for me.

My research was constrained, however, by my lack of access to different parts of Israeli society. Most significantly, I was limited in my immersion into Israeli society by not knowing Hebrew. Consequently, I was primarily exposed to, and interacted with, people who were English-speaking, either fully bilingual or having learned English as a second language. All conversations and interviews were conducted in English. In addition, due to limited time and access to social circles, all of the interview participants had ties to New Profile, which influenced the direction of the research. The participants interviewed were antimilitarist, practiced some form of opposition to militarism in their daily lives, and shared the belief that militarism and military service perpetuates gender, socioeconomic, and ethno-class inequality in Israel. However, because my research focuses on the process and requirements of receiving a mental health exemption and individuals' experiences and stories related to this form of exemption, the interview participants' views on militarism and military service do not compromise the validity of their experiences and their insights into mental health exemptions.

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18 When resources of time, money, and staff (or in this case, immersion and the qualifications of the researcher) do not allow for a full-fledged ethnography, traditional ethnography can be modified to accommodate these limitations, including the use of cultural experts or "key informants." LeCompte and Schensul 122.

19 A common practice in ethnographic research is to "take the data 'back to the community' to assess its meaning and social validity, make data available, and obtain ethnographic feedback on ethnographic interpretations." LeCompte and Schensul 17.



### MILITARISM AND MILITARY SERVICE IN ISRAEL: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Anthropologist Erella Grassiani captures the essence of militarism in Israeli society as society's comfort and familiarity with the military.<sup>20</sup> One key characteristic of militarism in Israel is the belief in the necessity of a ready military; the presence and conditions of militarism are accepted and naturalized due to Israel's insecurity.<sup>21</sup> One of the interviewees described militarism and the military in Israel as follows: "It's just one of the bodies that you have to go through or use in your life here. You can't have nothing to do with it. If you're living here, you are consuming the services of each office or body of government, and this is one of them." Militarism is embedded in ideas about citizenship in Israel and is present throughout the lives of Israelis. Therefore, understanding the roots of militarism and mandatory military service in the country can tell us much about socioeconomic, gender, and ethnic divisions within Israeli society. A discussion about avoidance and refusal to perform military service cannot occur without understanding the beliefs and conditions that militarism in Israel produces, perpetuates, and reinforces through military service.

Israeli sociologist and historian Oz Almog in his study of the *Sabra*, a term created in the 1930s and 1940s to refer to a Jew born in Israel, discusses the ideal of the native-born male warrior as the "New Jew" of the Zionist revolution.<sup>22</sup> As part of the republican ethos equating citizenship with military service, participation in the military is seen as part of the normal life course of Jewish Israelis that demonstrates an individual's commitment to society and the state.<sup>23</sup> Military service is viewed by many in Israel as a rite of passage to becoming a mature adult and solidifying identity; as such, military service is viewed as natural.<sup>24</sup>

The citizen-state relationship and contract founded in republican ethos was introduced by *Ashkenazi* Jews,<sup>25</sup> the hegemonic group during the creation and early years of the state. Beginning in the 1970s, the Ashkenazi Jews' domination in the political and military spheres began to decline, and the republican ideology once central to the motivation to serve in the IDF was rejected by the Ashkenazi middle class and began to be called into question by marginalized Jewish ethnic groups such as *Mizrahi* Jews.<sup>26</sup> The military's status and the motivation to serve began to decline in 1973 as the Yom Kippur War changed Israeli society and politics. This war was the first time cracks appeared in the image of the Israeli soldier as a hero.<sup>27</sup> The financial crisis brought on by the war, along with

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20 Erella Grassiani, *Soldiering Under Occupation: Processes of Numbing among Israeli Soldiers in the Al-Aqsa Intifada* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013) 3.

21 Grassiani 4.

22 As cited in Edna Lomsky-Feder and Eyal Ben-Ari, "The Discourses of 'Psychology' and the 'Normalization' of War in Contemporary Israel," *Militarism and Israeli Society*, eds. Gabriel Sheffer and Oren Barak (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2010) 282.

23 Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari.

24 Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari.

25 *Ashkenazi* is an Israeli term for Jews who originate mainly from European countries.

26 *Mizrahi* is an Israeli term for Jews who originate from Muslim or Arab countries, sometimes spelled "Mizrachi."

27 Galia Plotkin-Amrami and Jose Brunner, "Making Up 'National Trauma' in Israel: From Collective Identity to Collective Vulnerability," *Social Studies of Science* 45.4 (2015): 528.



the introduction of a materialist-consumer ethos, eroded the Ashkenazi middle class's motivation to sacrifice themselves in the military.<sup>28</sup> Uri Ram argues that economic globalization in Israel, beginning in the late 1970s, changed the social contract from an individual's contribution to state projects in order to obtain social goods and power to individualist concerns.<sup>29</sup>

Israel began to change from a society requiring "obligatory militarism," which was collectivist and seen as an unconditional contribution to the state, to "contractual militarism," a more individualist ethos whereby individuals' interests cause them to negotiate their conditions of service.<sup>30</sup> This shift originated among the Ashkenazi secular middle class, who began to view military service as a site of self-fulfillment and personal development.<sup>31</sup> Other Jewish ethnic groups similarly view military service through the lens of individualism.

Sasson-Levy argues in her study of male combat soldiers' motivations to serve that the rise of globalization has affected mobilization rates in the military as the relationship between the citizen and the state has begun to change from a collectivist attitude to a focus on individualist concerns.<sup>32</sup> This individualistic frame based on self-actualization can create nonpolitical interpretations of military service.<sup>33</sup> Authoritarian practices and coercion of the state are masked within an individualistic discourse that frames military service as a practice of agency and self-actualization.<sup>34</sup> Individualism, argues Sasson-Levy, is used to advance collective and state interests, and conformity and obedience to the state make the body an instrument and manifestation of the militaristic state.<sup>35</sup>

As part of this growing discourse of military service as a route to self-actualization and individual advancement, the military has begun to target youth by developing new incentives.<sup>36</sup> The military now advertises itself and mandatory military service to youth as a means for social mobility.<sup>37</sup> According to New Profile, while the Ashkenazi elites have moved into technology and intelligence positions,<sup>38</sup> the military now promotes military service to those in the lower socioeconomic positions as a place to gain skills and to improve their conditions.

Yagil Levy argues that materialist militarism, defined as the exchange of military service for social mobility within the military and in civilian life, explains the impact of military service on the

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28 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 149.

29 As cited in Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 149.

30 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 146, 160–1.

31 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 156, 160–161.

32 Orna Sasson-Levy, "Individual Bodies, Collective State Interests: The Case of Israeli Combat Soldiers," *Men and Masculinities* 10.3 (2008): 297–298.

33 Sasson-Levy 299, 315.

34 Sasson-Levy 299, 315.

35 Sasson-Levy 316–317.

36 Erica Weiss, "Incentivized Obedience: How a Gentler Israeli Military Prevents Organized Resistance," *American Anthropologist* 118.1 (2016): 92.

37 Weiss, "Incentivized Obedience," 92–93.

38 Weiss, "Incentivized Obedience," 98.



social hierarchy and inequality in Israel.<sup>39</sup> This exchange creates a willingness in society to legitimize war as well as the human cost and resources the society sacrifices to it.<sup>40</sup> The main concept that allows for materialist militarism is convertibility: “the ability to exchange an asset accumulated in the military sphere with a resource or asset in the civilian social sphere.”<sup>41</sup> The following excerpt explains the connection between military service, convertibility, and social hierarchy:

High convertibility rested on the statist, republican military ethos that defined Israeli society’s devotion to the military effort as a supreme social value. Military service became a decisive standard by which rights were awarded to individuals and collectives acting in the service of the state.<sup>42</sup>

According to gender studies researcher Katherine Natanel, militarism and military service link divisions and inequality of gender,<sup>43</sup> class, sexuality, and ethnicity in Israeli society.<sup>44</sup> As an interlocutor<sup>45</sup> in Natanel’s research states, “[The military] basically created social inequality — it intensifies already existing social inequalities in many ways by deciding who to enlist and whom to place where.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Levy and Sasson-Levy argue that soldiers are social agents who reproduce a militarized, class-based social order within Israeli society.<sup>47</sup> Social divisions and inequalities appear in military service and are reproduced by military service. Convertibility and republican ethos help explain the military’s role in perpetuating social hierarchies and inequality in Israel. As the republican ethos that underpinned military service weakened, Israelis began to reimagine and renegotiate the rewards of military service. Groups within Israel are making their participation in the military conditional on improvement of their groups’ status in Israel.<sup>48</sup> Today, there still exists a (perceived) natural requirement to complete military service in Israel, but this is now juxtaposed with a decline in motivation to serve and a questioning of the ability to convert military service to social gain. Therefore, refusal or avoidance of military service by individuals and groups may stem from their position and the conditions they experience within Israeli society. Why individuals do

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39 As explained in Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 164.

40 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 146–147.

41 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 147.

42 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 148.

43 Embedded within Israeli militarism is the idea of the “New Jew” as a male combat soldier, which influences gender inequality in Israel. The republican understanding of citizenship, emphasized by Sasson-Levy, highlights the self-sacrifice of a male combat soldier (p. 298). In an examination of the impact of the military on gender and family in Israel, Jessie Montell finds that military service and biological reproduction are seen as patriotic duties. While the military physically defends the nation, the family physically reproduces the nation. Within the military, the quasi-official role of women is to be morale boosters and nurturers of male soldiers. (See Jessie Montell, “Israeli Identities: The Military, the Family and Feminism,” *Bridges* 2.2 (1991) 99–100).

44 Katherine Natanel, “Resistance at the Limits: Feminist Activism and Conscientious Objection in Israel,” *Feminist Review* 101.1 (2012): 82.

45 Natanel identifies this interlocutor as a member of New Profile

46 Natanel 82.

47 Gal Levy and Orna Sasson-Levy, “Militarized Socialization, Military Service, and Class Reproduction: The Experiences of Israeli Soldiers,” *Sociological Perspectives* 51.2 (2008): 350.

48 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 163.



not serve in the military and how they avoid it are influenced by factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and background, and beliefs about such service.

### EXAMINING MILITARY AVOIDANCE AND REFUSAL IN ISRAEL

The reasons for publicly and explicitly refusing to serve in the military are often influenced by one's privilege within society, as is the case with conscientious objectors. Others privately refuse to serve, affecting their method of exemption from service. Both individuals and groups draw upon the state's own connections and perceptions of citizenship and military service in explaining their refusal to serve.<sup>49</sup> A significant trend in military service and exemptions is the move toward an individualist framing both by the military and by exemptees.

Many academics have studied the various means of and reasons for avoiding or refusing to serve in the IDF and have examined the connections between people's reasons for refusing and their social standing in Israeli society. Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Ben-Ari argue that people resist military service for a variety of reasons and that explicit refusal for conscience reasons depends on the symbolic and material privileges of the individual conscientious objector.<sup>50</sup> Resistance and refusal is not always about liberal conscience, but instead can be for different ethical reasons such as economic considerations, reaction to discrimination, and lack of protection of a person's social or ethnic group by the state.<sup>51</sup> Socioeconomic status and an individual's ethnic group influence the way they articulate and express

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49 There are also cases in which collectives use threats of refusal to protest against social inequalities. For example, in May 2015, Ethiopian Jews undertook mass demonstrations in response to widespread discrimination and police violence against Ethiopian Jews in Israel. The spark that enflamed the community was the beating of an Ethiopian IDF soldier by a police officer, which was caught on tape. The news article "Israel's Ethiopians Call for Integration, Not Isolation, in Israeli Army" highlights the feelings of isolation, separation, and racism against Ethiopians in the military and also in society. Some of the protest leaders interviewed for the article stated that separate programs for Ethiopian "immigrant" soldiers increase their isolation and discrimination in Israeli society. (See Gili Cohen and Noa Shpigel, "Israel's Ethiopians Call for Integration, Not Isolation, in Israeli Army," *Haaretz* 14 May 2015.) I argue that there is a symbolic component in this incident. As the IDF soldier performing mandatory military service is a symbol of integration, citizenship, and sacrifice in Israel, the violence by the police officer, another symbol of the state, is a symbolic, and very real, manifestation of the lack of respect and equality afforded to Ethiopian Jews despite their attempts to contribute to the state. A year later, Ethiopian reservists, specifically combat soldiers and members of elite units, wrote a letter to the army threatening to refuse to perform reserve service because of police violence and racism toward the Ethiopian Jewish community. "We're sick of the state's demand that we continue to honor a contract according to which we are citizens with obligations but no rights." (See Sue Surkes, "Ethiopian-Israeli Soldiers Threaten to Refuse Reserve Duty," *Times of Israel*, 1 Sept. 2016.) These are examples of collective protest and resistance to the inequality and racism that are created and perpetuated by militarism and military service's foundations in Ashkenazi hegemony. Ethiopian Jews were protesting their treatment by the state by refusing to serve and demanding their equality through the republican ethos; they demanded that the social contract created by militarism and the state be applied equally to them. However, according to New Profile, this protest was not resistance to the military's position in Israeli society or to performing military service; instead, the Ethiopian Jews were using an established genre of political activism in Israel — making declarations about threatening collective refusal — to critique and push for integration and equal adoption of the benefits of military service.

50 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 156.

51 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 156.



their refusal. New Profile's assessment is similar, classifying the reasons for refusal as economic, political, ideological, religious, or medical, or not wanting to join an "oppressive, chauvinistic, and violent program."<sup>52</sup> However, New Profile warns that avoidance and refusal is a complicated issue, "not as cut and dry as the media portrays it."<sup>53</sup> It is not just the media that describes avoidance and refusal in simplistic terms; academics tend to associate certain methods of refusal or exemption with particular ethno-class groups in Israel.<sup>54</sup> My main contact within New Profile critiqued academics who describe certain exemptions as solely Ashkenazi or Mizrahi practices, saying that applying specific strategies for exemption to social and ethnic labels in a shallow and absolutist way is inaccurate. While they agree that academics' descriptions of forms of refusal, and the tendency for individuals from specific ethno-class groups to practice certain forms of refusal, do reflect real underlying social hierarchies and power relations, they warn that these groupings are not watertight categories and that "individuals rarely act out the precise stereotype assigned to them." Israelis seeking to avoid or refuse military service as individuals are commonly divided into two groups: conscientious objection and military avoidance,<sup>55</sup> commonly referred to as "grey refusal."

### CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

The most widely studied form of military refusal and exemption in Israel is conscientious objection. Despite the vast amount of literature and publicity on conscientious objection in Israel, it is, in fact, a very limited exemption that often requires the individual to draw upon liberal, Ashkenazi beliefs and privileges.<sup>56</sup> This route to exemption also demands a prolonged and intense interaction with the military establishment. Anthropologist Erica Weiss's ethnographic study of conscientious objection in Israel, *Conscientious Objectors in Israel: Citizen, Sacrifice, Trials of Fealty*,<sup>57</sup> problematizes this type of exception and reveals its limitations of public, privileged refusal.<sup>58</sup>

The process that conscientious objectors undergo reveals how the military both individualizes and attempts to depoliticize them, while forcing them into a legal battle. Those pursuing conscientious objection exemption from military service are required to go before an internal military committee made up of military personnel and one civilian. They must meet the committee's definition and requirements of being a pacifist. For the committee, conscientious objection and pacifism cannot be political, cannot be selective, and must not mention Palestinians or occupation. Further,

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52 New Profile, "Recruitment and Refusal."

53 New Profile, "Recruitment and Refusal."

54 For example, Weiss differentiates between Ashkenazi Jews pursuing conscientious objection and Mizrahi Jews who refuse in nonpublic ways. Erica Weiss, "Competing Ethical Regimes in a Diverse Society: Israeli Military Refusers," *American Ethnologist* 44.1 (2017).

55 Perez 4.

56 These "Ashkenazi" beliefs typically correspond with "international" vocabulary (that is, Western and white vocabulary), with which New Profile notes Ashkenazi and well-off Jewish Israelis are more prone to connect.

57 Erica Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors in Israel: Citizen, Sacrifice, Trials of Fealty* (Philadelphia: U Pennsylvania P., 2014).

58 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*; Erica Weiss, "Beyond Mystification: Hegemony, Resistance, and Ethical Responsibility in Israel," *Anthropological Quarterly* 88.2 (2015): 417–443.



to receive this exemption, individuals must show that they apply pacifist principles to all aspects of their lives.<sup>59</sup> The individual must embody everything “pacifist” before the committee. According to Weiss, this type of “embodied pacifism” receives exemption because it does not challenge the state. Pacifism is seen as psychological, an emotional and physical response, a revulsion to violence.<sup>60</sup> Specifically, the conscientious objection process requires the individual to present pacifist beliefs and behaviors that are pathologized as pacifist before the committee rather than giving philosophical or politicized explanations.<sup>61</sup> The result is an exemption that is individualized, pathologized, and therefore depoliticized by the military.<sup>62</sup> In this way, conscientious exemption is a disability, an incapacity to stand violence, and a physical embodiment of beliefs rather than a political ideology or ethical demand. In Weiss’s words, “They must be excessively delicate, sensitive, emotional vegans that pardon cockroaches.”<sup>63</sup>

The committee’s requirement of embodied pacifism depoliticizes any public moral or political claims or statements made by the conscientious objector.<sup>64</sup> Since 2003, the military releases conscientious objectors from military service on psychological or unsuitability grounds, and not as conscientious objectors,<sup>65</sup> which further limits their ability to politicize or legitimize their stance. Weiss argues that this policy change has also disarmed the symbolic power of resistance.<sup>66</sup>

One type of conscientious objector in Israel, ex-soldiers,<sup>67</sup> draw upon their past participation in military service as a way to legitimize their critique of military activities and justify their now moral consciousness. As Weiss notes, “Israeli sacrifice through military service creates respect and social currency that continues to be relevant” even in refusal.<sup>68</sup> In her study of the group Combatants for Peace, a nongovernmental organization of ex-soldiers who now speak out against what is happening

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59 Since my field research in 2017, New Profile has seen evidence of a change in policy in the Conscience Committee: “They are probably now somewhat more lax about mentioning Palestinians and other conflicts Israel is involved in, but strictly insist on applicants eschewing any motivation that is not strictly individual, political in the broad sense of attempting to influence other people.”

60 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 107,120–121.

61 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 107,120–123.

62 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 120–121. Some objectors who are rejected by the committee, or skip it, stage prison campaigns. Their objection is therefore not depoliticized, but in such cases, the individual’s social privilege and resources for mounting a prison campaign should be considered.

63 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 119.

64 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 121,123,126.

65 Weiss, “Incentivized Obedience,” 95. The military’s pathologization of pacifism is not the same as its pathologization of mental disorders. For example, during a Conscience Committee hearing, an individual must be careful not to present pathologies of mental disorders, which the committee would use to reject a conscientious objection application and instead release the individual on mental health grounds. This insight was given by the New Profile cultural expert.

66 Weiss, “Incentivized Obedience,” 95.

67 The ex-soldier conscientious objector has already completed their mandatory military service but refuses to serve as a reservist, according to Weiss. In many cases, as New Profile pointed out, the ex-soldier may only selectively refuse to serve outside the Green Line (in the Occupied Palestinian Territories).

68 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 60.



to Palestinians, Weiss finds that Israeli conscientious objectors become counterculture heroes within the anti-occupation movement and that their original investment in Israeli society justifies their critique.<sup>69</sup> One of the main arguments central to Weiss's work is that the liberal and public performance of conscience is not separate from the material conditions present in Israeli society.<sup>70</sup> This is seen in ex-soldier conscientious objectors who have gained social privilege and respect from their past military service that allows them to speak and be heard publicly. Meanwhile, today's young conscientious objectors most often come from material and social privilege. Weiss describes them as vegan, coming from good Tel Aviv high schools, and as liberal youth born with social advantages who feel a strong sense of ethical responsibility to Palestinians.<sup>71</sup>

In recent years, conscientious objectors have begun making explicit and public political statements, resulting in their imprisonment for refusing to serve because they do not conform to the military's requirement and version of nonpolitical conscientious objection.<sup>72</sup> These jailed conscientious objectors reject the military's idea of pacifism by making direct political and ethical claims against the military and the state. Nineteen year-old Noa Gur Golan was rejected as a pacifist by the Conscience Committee after two hearings.<sup>73</sup> She refused to enter the IDF on her recruitment day and was jailed for 98 days.<sup>74</sup> Noa situated her conscientious objection and refusal to serve as a critique of the conditions created in Israeli society by the war and the occupation as well as her connection to her Palestinian friends.<sup>75</sup> Another conscientious objector, Hadas Tal, was jailed for directly publicizing and politicizing her refusal to serve. Her refusal was based on her objection to the occupation and the violence perpetrated by the military.<sup>76</sup> Hadas is a pacifist but does not fit the military's idea of a conscientious objector because she critiques the inherent violent nature of the military and the occupation. Conscientious objectors like Noa and Hadas have rejected the depoliticization of conscientious objection and pacifism. Instead, they are using their individual beliefs and values to make political and ethical statements about the military, the rights of Palestinians, and of the right of Israelis to refuse to serve in the IDF. In response to their political demands and public calls for collective action, these conscientious objectors have been jailed. I contend that the IDF did not accept Noa or Hadas's pacifism because they made larger political and ethical claims beyond their individual pacifist embodiment and attempted to mobilize others.

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69 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*.

70 Weiss, "Beyond Mystification," 434.

71 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 84, 86, 102.

72 Those seeking conscientious objector exemptions are not automatically imprisoned if their claims are rejected by the committee. Imprisonment occurs if their claims are rejected and they still refuse to serve or enlist (and do not seek other exemption routes).

73 Bethan McKernan, "'There Must Be Another Way': Israeli 19-Year-Old Jailed for Refusing Military Service," *The Independent* 11 Aug. 2017.

74 +972 Blog, "After 98 Days in Prison, IDF releases Conscientious Objector." +972 Magazine, 30 Oct. 2017.

75 McKernan.

76 +972 Blog, "Conscientious Objector Sentenced to 10 Days Behind Bars," +972 Magazine, 16 Oct. 2017.



## MILITARY AVOIDANCE, GREY REFUSAL, AND SOCIAL REFUSAL

As Weiss cautions, “Conscientious objection is a rather bad indicator of discontent with military service.”<sup>77</sup> The number of Israelis receiving exemptions on conscientious objection grounds is miniscule. Even within anti-occupation and “radical Left” circles and families where this type of exemption is more condoned.<sup>78</sup> The other group of exemptees released based on an individual exemption is military service avoiders. The main difference between this group and conscientious objectors is that they “act privately and ask for exemptions based on individual exemption regulations,” as opposed to objectors who “publicly declare their political or moral refusal to serve ... and are willing to accept the legal sanctions involved with this illegal act.”<sup>79</sup> Military service avoiders practice “grey refusal,” meaning they avoid or cut short their service through available legal exemptions such as Profile 21, marriage or pregnancy for women, or on religious grounds (for women).<sup>80</sup>

Grey refusal can involve individuals exploiting legal exemptions that are not truly applicable to them.<sup>81</sup> Like draft dodging, commonly referred to as *Hishtamtut* in Israel, military service avoiders may take actions to conform to a legal exemption requirement, such as getting married for the sake of an exemption.<sup>82</sup> In Israeli discourse, grey refusal is often viewed as avoiding military service for undisclosed or egotistical reasons.<sup>83</sup> For example, an individual might be accused of using illegitimate means to evade their duty, such as faking psychological problems.<sup>84</sup>

Military avoidance is found across ethno-classes in Israel, among the lower, middle, and upper classes.<sup>85</sup> This form of avoidance, or refusal for some, is seen as a personal act and is not considered ideological or political protest.<sup>86</sup> Although the reasons for avoiding military service through legitimate exemptions vary, they can relate to an individual’s ethno-class. Some on the periphery of Israeli society refuse military service because it would directly interfere with their ability to earn a living.<sup>87</sup> In addition, they avoid military service because they know they will have inferior positions in the military and will not receive adequate remuneration during service and will not accumulate social or economic capital.<sup>88</sup> For example, Perez interviewed a woman who avoided military service because of the military’s low salary and because she would most like be placed in a marginal role such as a secretary.<sup>89</sup> She

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77 Weiss, “Beyond Mystification,” 440.

78 The New Profile cultural expert was quick to address the limitations and very small number of conscientious objection exemptions compared to other forms of exemptions.

79 Perez 20n1.

80 Natanel 84; Perez 20n1.

81 Weiss, “Beyond Mystification,” 418.

82 Perez 12n1.

83 Weiss, “Competing Ethical Regimes,” 58

84 Perez 4.

85 Perez 4.

86 Perez 5.

87 Perez 12.

88 Perez 12.

89 Perez 11.



knew she would not be able to convert her low-status position in the military into symbolic or economic capital in society.<sup>90</sup> Such reasons for avoidance and refusal confirm Levy's argument of materialist militarism and convertibility in Israel.

Another form of avoiding military service is what Meir Amor calls "social refusal," wherein the individual deserts or refuses military service in a nonpolitical manner.<sup>91</sup> Social refusal stems from social alienation resulting in indifference and a desire to not be involved with the military and the state.<sup>92</sup> The deserter "says no to the definition of social commitment expressed through military service."<sup>93</sup> According to Amor, social refusal can take the form of cultural refusal against the institution of the army, which holds symbolic and practical significance.<sup>94</sup> It can be economic refusal against the economic advantages built by the military, and it can be sociopolitical, as desertion may be seen as the only option against the power of the state.<sup>95</sup> Finally, it can also be psychological in nature, reflecting the disconnect between the individual and the demand to "play" the role of the soldier.<sup>96</sup>

Those who practice social refusal are typically punished, that is, jailed, by the military until they are released from military service. Consequently, the majority of Israeli prisoners in military jails are Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and Russian Jews.<sup>97</sup> Mizrahi Jews are an example of an ethno-class group that has individuals avoiding military service based on the inequalities they experience in society.<sup>98</sup> Mizrahi Jews have practiced refusal of military service for decades.<sup>99</sup> Weiss views this form of refusal as a protest against or an attempt to correct their oppression and social inequality by the state and the military.<sup>100</sup> Mizrahi Jews are resisting the demand for their sacrifice in military service because they are denied equal communal and civic membership.<sup>101</sup> Mizrahim internally critique the social contract and inequality, and they practice resistance to military service through grey refusal and social refusal. This is practiced individually, communally, and as a response to collective conditions created by the social division found in and reinforced through militarism. However, Weiss argues Mizrahi Jews who practice grey refusal and social refusal do not publicize their refusal or demand change in the military and state.<sup>102</sup>

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90 Perez 11.

91 Meir Amor, "Social Refusal," website post, *New Profile*, trans. Google Translate, <<http://www.newprofile.org/node/411>>.

92 Amor.

93 Amor.

94 Amor.

95 Amor.

96 Amor.

97 Rothman-Zecher. Also confirmed by New Profile.

98 This is not to say Mizrahi Jews as a group reject military service. While Mizrahi Jews and other Jewish ethnic minorities are overrepresented in military prisons, they are a small minority within their ethnic groups says the cultural expert from New Profile. Meanwhile, the majority Mizrahi, Russian and Ethiopian Jews are supportive of the military and military service.

99 Weiss, "Competing Ethical Regimes," 59.

100 Weiss, "Competing Ethical Regimes," 58.

101 Weiss, "Incentivized Obedience," 98.

102 Weiss, "Competing Ethical Regimes," 58.



Perez, speaking to the impact of the individual's socioeconomic ethno-class during the refusal process, describes how avoiders from lower, marginalized classes attempting to receive an exemption practice noncompliance with military discipline and orders.<sup>103</sup> This often leads to the individual being imprisoned before the military finally discharges or exempts them.<sup>104</sup> Meanwhile, those who pursue institutionalized channels, that is, exemption regulations made available by the military, receive exemptions faster and without any disciplinary sanctions by the military.<sup>105</sup> In essence, grey refusal is "a quieter way of getting out of the army," and the most common way this occurs is through a mental health exemption.<sup>106</sup>

### MENTAL HEALTH EXEMPTION

Many studies of military service and the social conditions of militarism briefly mention mental health exemption/psychiatric discharge/Profile 21. Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel note the rise in people leaving the military or being exempted prior to service for mental health reasons in the context of a declining motivation to serve, particularly amongst secular Ashkenazi.<sup>107</sup> Perez and Sasson-Levy look at men who were released from or avoided military service via psychiatric exemption but, in fact, were resisting military service because of its association with hegemonic masculinity.<sup>108</sup> Their interviewees identified psychiatric exemption as a form of resistance to the hegemonic masculinity promoted within the military.<sup>109</sup> The men interviewed also viewed public, political refusal to serve as drawing on the same masculine ideal of self-sacrifice (much like the idealization of the male combat soldier's sacrifice).<sup>110</sup> Weiss found in her fieldwork that the IDF gives Profile 21 to conscientious objectors by psychologizing their claims rather than making their claims about conscience.<sup>111</sup>

Weiss is the first academic to describe in depth the ability of someone seeking exemption for ideological reasons to get a mental health exemption. She notes that such individuals meet the exemption requirements by putting on a performance that often stereotypes mental health issues.<sup>112</sup> She writes, "Rigid categories actually offer a script for young people to follow. Those who want to evade military service are able to learn the criteria of exemption identities and simulate them."<sup>113</sup>

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103 Perez 13.

104 Perez 13.

105 Perez 13.

106 Rothman-Zecher.

107 Levy, Lomsky-Feder, and Harel 145.

108 Based mainly on the male combat soldier being the ideal Israeli citizen, described by Perez and Sasson-Levy as the "masculine soldier identity." Merav Perez and Orna Sasson-Levy, "Avoiding Military Service in a Militaristic Society: A Chronicle of Resistance to Hegemonic Masculinity," *Peace & Change* 40.4 (2015): 475–476, 478.

109 Perez and Sasson-Levy 475.

110 Perez and Sasson-Levy 477.

111 Weiss, *Conscientious Objectors*, 292.

112 Erica Weiss, "Best Practices for Besting the Bureaucracy: Avoiding Military Service in Israel," *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 39.S1 (2016): 23.

113 Weiss, "Best Practices," 29.



In essence, the government's bureaucratic practices of stereotyping and control can be used against it as "a strategic approach to resisting state control."<sup>114</sup>

In addition to being the most common exemption for individuals, mental health exemption is distinctive in several other ways. For one, it is available throughout the individual's interaction with mandatory military service. One can instigate this exemption during first call-up, after the preliminary check-up prior to enlistment day, or when already a soldier. Mental health exemption is also available to all Israelis: men and women, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, Russian, and Ethiopian Jews. The exemption process also hides from the military individuals' political, social, or ideological critiques of the institution, making it an option for those who do not want to serve for any reason.

The New Profile cultural expert explained to me how a person can receive a mental health exemption and also provided insight into the military's practices and techniques when dealing with individuals attempting to be exempted this way. One of New Profile's main activities is its Counseling Network, which offers advice (although not encouragement, as it is illegal in Israel to encourage people to not serve in the military) about how to receive an exemption from military service. New Profile activists are in direct contact with Israelis who are seeking exemption from military service. The cultural advisor explained the mental health exemption process, including how the individual must present themselves to the military to receive this exemption. The embodiment process required for mental health exemption and its consequences was illustrated by two interviewees who had direct experience either with their own exemption or that of others.

I label this form of exemption a mental health exemption<sup>115</sup> rather than a psychiatric exemption in an attempt to highlight that the most common mental disorders embodied are depression and anxiety, which are more widely understood as mental health disorders than serious mental illness or disorders such as psychosis. I position mental health exemption not as "draft evasion," as described by Weiss, whereby an individual exploits a legal exemption that is not applicable to them.<sup>116</sup> Instead, in most cases, I argue that the individual does not need to feign the mental illness. Based on its extensive experience navigating the requirements for mental health exemption, New Profile has concluded that the IDF medical system operates under the assumption that individuals are faking their mental disorder or physical illness.<sup>117</sup> Therefore, individuals must externalize their symptoms to a point where they can no longer be ignored or brushed aside by the military. As such, individuals must find ways to train themselves to externalize (or perform) what might be recognisable as symptoms associated with a mental disorder. In other words, they must embody the military's pathologized definition of a mental disorder.

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114 Weiss, "Best Practices," 26.

115 In Hebrew, *nafshi* means "mental" as in "mental discharge" and is often used colloquially by Israelis. *Yatsati al nafshi* literally translates to "I came out on [the] mental," a common way of saying "I got a mental health discharge." *Briut ha-nefesh*, which means "mental health," is used more officially and translates to "health of the soul."

116 Weiss, "Beyond Mystification," 418.

117 The IDF is not the only military concerned with fakers and malingerers. For example, according to Howell, the Canadian military viewed soldiers with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as possible fakers or malingerers attempting to avoid military service. Alison Howell, "Ordering Soldiers: Contesting Therapeutic Practices in the Canadian Military," *Madness in International Relations: Psychology, Security, and the Global Governance of Mental Health* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011) 113, 121.



The military uses diagnostic procedures similar to those used by psychiatrists when diagnosing a mental disorder. The IDF's mental health officers (called *kaban*) must be able to confirm, based on the presentation of symptoms, the mental disorder claimed by the individual. In this way, the military pathologizes mental disorders, while also pathologizing the individual. "Pathology" is the study of the essential nature of diseases, a compilation of abnormalities, and also deviations from the norm that constitute or characterize a disease. "To pathologize" is to view or characterize as medically or psychologically abnormal.<sup>118</sup> By adhering strictly to a psychiatric characterizations of disorders and required symptoms, the *kaban* are employing a pathologized understanding of mental illness and disorder. New Profile warns that the *kaban* must conclude that the individual's mental disorder disrupts their functioning in all environments, not just within the military. Mental health exemption is contingent on the military believing that the individual's condition is so severe that they cannot perform the sacred duty of military service.

This pathologized embodiment requires the individual to externalize introverted symptoms. One interviewee described it as "temporarily disabling a psychological defense mechanism." The person must make themselves aware of "everything that is difficult and hard and sad." The individual must first convince themselves of the mental disorder and its severity; doing so will convince the military as well. It is important to note that individuals do not need to be artificial about their mental disorders; instead, they need to lose their natural mental and behavioural defenses against the symptom of the mental disorders. According to New Profile, it is only in this way that an individual can display the pathologized embodiment of their illness.

For example, Diane received a mental health exemption partway through her military service, but she told me that her motivation to leave the army was ideological.<sup>119</sup> For her, as with many others, the link between the realization of a moral demand and a mental disorder were connected. Diane worked as a secretary during her military service, and it was through her office work that she first heard about the military's human rights violations and the IDF's violence toward Palestinians. She did not have any political views at the time, but after reading more about the situation in the military paperwork, she came to believe the military was doing something morally wrong. She felt that she was participating in the background of these violations: "Writing the orders, printing them, spellchecking .... I knew that it [ending her military service] was the right thing to do even though it took me a very long time to feel comfortable where I was." She noted that she considered leaving the army after she began to have difficulty adjusting to her service.

Diane's partner at the time did not serve for ideological reasons but received a Profile 21 exemption. Diane also had a few friends who had not gone into the military, so she knew that not serving for ideological reasons was possible. Diane described her exemption as "easy" because, according to her, the military thought she was a good officer and a good soldier, so no one thought she was lying. Once she decided she needed to leave using the mental health exemption, she started to be depressed. Diane said she probably could have continued to serve, but she told her superiors that she could not be in the army anymore. She knew that her depression was her way to get an exemption. Diane sarcastically

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118 Merriam-Webster, "Definition of pathology," <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pathology>>.

119 "Diane" is a pseudonym.



described the situation, in the minds of her superiors: “There was a nice girl, and no one would want her to be unhappy ... so you go.” Diane was fortunate in that she did not need to go to extreme lengths to embody her depression because her superiors thought she was a good soldier.<sup>120</sup> Diane’s experience with mental health exemption shows how Profile 21 can be used by an individual who morally critiques the military’s violent actions and policies. Diane was not punished by the military for refusing to serve because she hid her ideological refusal by framing depression as the reason she could no longer serve. To the military, her inability to complete her military service was caused by her mental disorder.

### **PATHOLOGIZING MENTAL DISORDERS AND THE INDIVIDUAL**

As stated previously, the IDF adheres to a pathologized understanding of mental disorders. Svend Brinkmann in *Diagnostic Cultures: A Cultural Approach to the Pathologization of Modern Life* problematizes today’s understanding of what a mental disorder is by illustrating that even psychologists developing diagnostic categories and treatments are not able to clearly define what constitutes a “mental disorder.”<sup>121</sup> Instead, Brinkmann raises the idea that so-called mental disorders might not be disorders at all, but instead ordinary human behaviors and reactions to circumstances.<sup>122</sup> For example, individuals might understandably be stressed and anxious if military service leads to financial difficulties, a situation that New Profile has often come across. Gender studies researcher Merav Perez also identifies military avoiders with low socioeconomic status who see military service as interfering with their ability to earn a living.<sup>123</sup> As another example, the military’s violence toward Palestinians and her role in it made Diane realize that she needed to leave the military, and then she became depressed. Becoming depressed and upset because of moral wrongdoing or feeling stuck in a situation that requires you to participate in something you morally and ethically disagree with is, again, a very understandable human reaction.

The military pathologizes both the mental disorder and the individual as a way to control the narrative of the individual’s release from mandatory military service, an example of what Brinkmann calls “the pathologization of everything.” Social problems are routinely individualized, leading to individualized solutions.<sup>124</sup> Political scientist Alison Howell also examines the use of pathologization by a modern military in her study of the Canadian military’s response to soldiers diagnosed with PTSD. She argues that the diagnosis of PTSD in the Canadian military marginalizes critical questions about the military’s operations abroad.<sup>125</sup> The focus on the psyches of individual soldiers excludes broader political questions such as the nature of contemporary military missions, militarism, and the use of

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120 In this case, the superior’s characterization of Diane as a “good soldier” worked in her favor. Often, according to New Profile’s cultural expert, the military makes exemption difficult for someone who they see as an asset. When the individual is a good soldier, “a lot depends on the particular individuals involved and their arbitrary choices and random attitudes.”

121 Svend Brinkmann, *Diagnostic Cultures: A Cultural Approach to the Pathologization of Modern Life* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016) 110.

122 Brinkmann 110.

123 Perez 12.

124 Brinkmann 3.

125 Howell 114.



force.<sup>126</sup> Canadian soldiers are encouraged by the military to reconcile their experiences through psychological help rather than by politicizing traumatic events.<sup>127</sup> Howell finds that the medicalization of trauma is individualized, thereby marginalizing broader political questions and critiques.<sup>128</sup>

According to Brinkmann, responses informed by diagnoses risk individualizing and de-contextualizing the problems people have.<sup>129</sup> The Israeli military’s use of pathologized mental disorders for Profile 21 does exactly this, and in fact, the military also uses individualized and de-contextualized diagnoses to mitigate exemptees’ critiques of the military, militarism, and Israeli society. The military denies its responsibility for producing mental disorders or negatively impacting a person’s mental health. While the military is able to mitigate critiques by pathologizing mental health exemptions, the exemptee is able to veil their resistance through this exemption and create opportunities for resistance. Profile 21 thus can be a subversive way to resist as the individual accomplishes the goal of avoiding military service without being punished. In this way, mental health exemption challenges the military because it can hide from the military the reasons for the individual’s exemption, such as ideological objections or socioeconomic critiques, rendering the resistance unpunishable. Individuals avoid military service based on factors such as ideological incompatibility or socioeconomic inequality by using the available legal options to receive an exemption. As Weiss argues, “the most effective resistance is not critique but intervention in the calculative choice economy.”<sup>130</sup> People resist in the ways that are available to them.

### RESISTANCE THROUGH MENTAL HEALTH EXEMPTION

Mental health exemption allows one to beat the military at its own bureaucratic game. Perez and Sasson-Levy, informed by a Foucauldian analysis, argue that resistance to power takes many and varied forms and may not involve directly opposing the state or an institution’s power.<sup>131</sup> Rather, the individual resists the technique of power that is used against them.<sup>132</sup> Perez and Sasson-Levy’s analysis of an individual’s ability to resist techniques of power appears to be similar to Weiss’s description of resisting through bureaucratic practices. As described before, Weiss argues that bureaucratic practices that stereotype and demand a certain embodiment to conform to an exemption provide a script for individuals to follow.<sup>133</sup>

Like Weiss, my findings suggest that the military’s bureaucratic gaze, while powerful, also limits the military’s ability to control the real reasons why the individual is unable to serve. Although the military may push individuals to perform a pathologized embodiment of a mental disorder, they can veil their objections to military service and pursue a legal exemption from military service. Through

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126 Howell 113, 142.

127 Howell 138.

128 Howell 142.

129 Brinkmann 2.

130 Weiss, “Incentivized Obedience,” 101.

131 Perez and Sasson-Levy 478.

132 Perez and Sasson-Levy 478.

133 Weiss, “Best Practices.”



this process, refusers can get out of the IDF without suffering any legal consequences or punishment. However, as seen in Weiss's study, the use of the military's own bureaucratic practices and scripts by individuals to successfully gain exemption does not change the rules of military service or the grounds for exemption.<sup>134</sup> Weiss also argues that granting individual exemptions does not have political consequences for the military or the state.<sup>135</sup> Individualism allows young people to frame their inability to serve as for the good of the individual,<sup>136</sup> while constraining them from making wider political or ethical claims. However, the cultural expert I consulted said that although each individual exemption is not politically consequential, the military has noted the mass number of exemptions and is concerned.

Mental health exemption can be a way for individuals to refuse to serve in the military without directly stating their refusal, but rather by pathologizing their inability to serve. Of course, in some cases, mental health exemption may not be refusal or avoidance at all. Individuals who wish to serve may receive a Profile 21 exemption due to a mental disorder that precludes them from serving. For these individuals, mental health exemption is not a form of refusal or resistance at all. In all cases, however, a mental health exemption is a rejection of the idea that one must sacrifice oneself to the military. Mental health exemption challenges the military's ability to promote self-sacrifice for the state when people choose their individual needs and concerns over service in the military.

I argue that mental health exemption is one way for an individual to subversively resist and protest the social conditions in Israeli society related to the military, the conditions created by the military and militarism, the cost of military service, or the actions of the state and military against Palestinians. Mental health exemptions can be understood as examples of individual protest and resistance that are connected to a wider protest or critique of the conditions in a society, the military, and the state. As Howell notes in the case of Canadian soldiers with PTSD, by considering the possibility that claims of PTSD could be acts of resistance, a way out of military service, attention could be shifted from the debated "realness" of the individual soldiers' mental states toward focusing on the political effects and context of PTSD claims.<sup>137</sup> I have heeded Howell's call and in this essay have gone beyond focusing on the individual's mental state (or disorder) to discussing the social and political context in which Israelis seek exemption and the opportunities of resistance made available through Profile 21.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Further study is needed to better understand the various experiences of those who have been granted mental health exemptions. Specifically, little is known about how embodying mental illness and distress affects one's mental health. How does embodiment of a mental disorder affect the individual post-exemption? Does the individual experience continued anxiety and depression because of how immersive their embodiment must be? In addition, more data and analysis about the ethnicity, socioeconomic backgrounds, and gender profiles of those receiving mental health exemptions are needed

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134 Weiss, "Best Practices," 26.

135 Weiss, "Best Practices," 26.

136 Weiss, "Beyond Mystification," 425.

137 Howell 121.



in order to expand our understanding of this practice. For example, are men more or less likely to gain exemption because of a mental disorder? Does gender affect the embodiment or performance of mental disorders or how they are perceived by the military? Any further study of mental health exemption should include, and would be aided by, the participation of New Profile. Future studies of grey refusal and military avoidance, the effects of militarism on Israeli society, and current trends within Israeli society would be enhanced by including the participation of organizations that have a wealth of knowledge and are already mobilizing their knowledge of exemption practices.

What makes mental health exemption an important and unique addition to the discussion of refusal, avoidance, and resistance to military service and militarism in Israel is that it can apply to any Israeli at any stage of military service. Thus, this exemption crosses socioeconomic, ethno-class, political, and gender lines, while still being grounded in the reality that refusal of military service in Israel is influenced by the socioeconomic, ethno-class, and political ideology of the individual. The individualized embodiment of a mental disorder required before one can be released from military service is a useful means of analyzing the power of the military and the practices of citizens avoiding and resisting military service. ■■



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