

Article

The Pink Tank in the Room: The Role of Religious Considerations in the Discussion of Women's Combat Service—The Case of the Israel Defense Forces

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Abstract: Women serve in diverse roles in the 21st century militaries of the world. They are no longer banned from combat. The presence of women on the battlefield has raised religious arguments and considerations. What role do religious arguments play in the discussion regarding women's military service? Using media, internal publications, as well as academic articles, the current paper examined this question in the context of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF): a conscription-based military that conscripts both men and women, religious and secular, for both combat and noncombat postings. Using the case of the pilot program in the IDF attempting to integrate women in the Israeli tank corps, as well as gauging the way religious men view this change, the paper argues that religious considerations serve the same purpose as functional considerations and can be amplified or lessened, as needed.

Keywords: military; IDF; female soldiers; religion and the military; religious considerations; religious women's conscription

In November 2016, the issue of integrating women in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) tank corps began to be discussed. The Israeli national religious caricaturist Yossi Shachar published a caricature of a large pink tank, labeled "feminism", threatening a small tank with a frightened soldier inside it, labeled "the IDF" (Shachar 2016). Shachar's caricatures are published routinely in the weekend Tora pamphlet of *Shvi'i*.¹ The caricature was a response to the IDF considering the integration of women in the tank corps. It describes a perspective that can be found within Israeli society: having women in combat is not in the IDF's interests, can be detrimental to the IDF's combat capabilities, and is really a radical feminist ploy. If women will begin to serve in combat, the IDF will become a weak force, unable to protect Israeli citizens. Feminists, according to this view, are willing to risk security in the name of equality (for examples and descriptions of this view see for example: Shafran-Gittleman 2020; Levinstein 2018; Hotam 2017; Aviner 2015; Sagi 2014; Ezra 2018).² As R. Shmuel Eliyahu, the chief rabbi of Safed stated: "in the real military that needs to fight, it is a shame to invest in girls and station them in tanks or in [the] Golani [infantry unit]. Because in the end, this is really about advancing a feminist agenda" (Ezra 2018). In other words, R. Eliyahu believes that training women for combat is a waste of resources and doesn't contribute toward the security effort but to the feminist cause.

Despite such protests, including on the part of retired senior officers (Walla News 2016), the IDF continued to discuss the option of women in the tank corps. In 2018 it began a pilot program seeking to explore this option. After running the program in 2018–2019, the pilot was completed and as of 2020, the IDF is assessing its results (Israel Supreme Court cases 5923/19; 34/20). The pilot program itself

¹ As was this caricature.

² This idea surfaces again and again in various op-ed pieces, semi-academic writing, and other published material. While it is not necessarily the view of the IDF itself, the caricature gives voice to one of the civilian views of the topic.

examined the possibility of having women in tank formations that would be stationed on borders, not maneuvering formations (which is usually the primary use of tank formations). This means that the pilot program examined not only a new type of personnel (women), but the option of a new type of formation that does not exist in the IDF.³

It is widely accepted in Israel by both academics and popular writers that the reason the women who participated in the pilot program do not serve in the tank corps today (as well as in other combat positions⁴) and that no additional programs have begun, is due to religious considerations and opposition from the religious sector (Israeli Supreme Court cases 5923/19, 34/20; [Shafran-Gittleman 2020](#); [Levy 2015](#)). Since many religious men⁵ serve in the tank corps in their own designated units, this position speculates that the IDF fears they will refuse to serve with women and balks at this possibility. The IDF itself has officially denied this is the reason women have yet to join the tank corps (Israel Supreme Court cases 5923/19; 34/20). However, this incident, coming after a number of others, raises the question what role do religious considerations play in the relationship between women, militaries, and religion? Can they constitute a separate category of concerns, worthy of unique attention, or can they be treated in the same manner all other concerns are treated? Understanding the nature of religious considerations can contribute to the way militaries can contend with them. If religious considerations are not inherently different from other concerns, resolving them will be easier than if they are a distinct category of their own, requiring a separate set of tools in order to be neutralized.

Integrating women in combat is not a new phenomenon, and it not an exclusively Israeli issue. It creates different types of concerns and generates arguments that support integration, as well as arguments against it. The arguments and concerns used to support or oppose women's service in combat can be grouped in two main categories: functional and religious.

While functional concerns are common to many militaries and can be understood universally, at least to a large extent, religious issues with women's combat service are more specific and culture-based. Initially, they seem stronger than purely cultural concerns, since religion is considered to be a stronger motivational force than "merely" cultural considerations ([Liebman 1983](#)). Therefore, the current paper begins by presenting religious concerns as a distinct category of concerns.

In this respect, when attempting to better understand the role religious concerns play in the discussion of women's combat service, using a conscription-based force allows for a better examination of this topic. In a conscription-based force, the military is obligated to conscript all soldiers, including religious ones. An all-volunteer force (AVF) can avoid having religious individuals in its ranks, and avoid the issue entirely—those who are not able or willing to serve in mixed-gender units, need not enlist ([Rosman-Stollman 2014](#)). For this reason, the current paper focuses on the Israel Defense Forces, a conscription-based military where both men and women serve, religion is a viable force, and women are allowed to serve in some combat positions. This is by no means an exhaustive case study, and hopefully in the future additional case studies will shed more light on this topic. However, since it is an extreme case, it allows a better look at religious concerns and is a good place to begin the scholarly discussion of this aspect of civil-military relations.

As noted, when discussing the issue of women serving in combat roles in the IDF, arguments tend to split into two main categories. Functional arguments address concerns regarding functionality and

³ Which is curious in and of itself and raises the question why bother having a pilot program for a military role that does not exist?

⁴ While women serve in mixed-gender border combat units, as noted below, these are not seen as "real" combat roles, such as serving in the traditional infantry units (paratroopers, Golani, Givati, NAHAL, special forces, and the like). Men who are stationed in mixed-gender units are seen as serving in less prestigious units, and providing "muscle" for the women who serve in these positions. In other words, for women, these roles are the most combat they can see, whereas for men these roles are considered inferior. (See [Ben-Shalom and Turgeman 2018](#)). As noted below, male soldiers who serve in traditional infantry units regard mixed-gender units as unprofessional and prefer to not work with them in the field.

⁵ Within the context of the current paper, religious men include only the religious sectors who serve in the IDF, mainly religious Zionist men.

combat readiness: are women physically able to be combat-ready and not compromise the fighting force. Religious arguments address concerns such as: it is unsuitable for women to serve in combat from a religious perspective, will allowing women to serve in these positions potentially infringe upon the rights of religious male soldiers, what will the effect of mixed-gender service be on morality among the troops.

As will be demonstrated below, while religious arguments are used mostly in the media and by religious figures, with no official support by military officials, combat-readiness arguments are used more often as the official military position, with the religious establishment willing to relate to these as well. Functional arguments are usually supported by academic, semi-academic, and medical evidence, and comparisons to other militaries. Religious arguments are usually based on a specific interpretation of religious law (*halakha*). At the same time, functional and religious arguments serve different purposes, but both are tools employed by those who support or oppose women's combat service. In this respect, there is no fundamental difference between both types of arguments.

Using internal publications, national and sectoral media, as well as academic and semi-academic papers, the proposed paper looks at the Israeli case and maps out the issues raised within the relationship between the IDF, women (religious and secular) who serve in the IDF in a variety of roles, religious male soldiers, and religious authorities asking: what role do religious arguments play in this dynamic? Are they unique arguments or, rather, essentially similar to other cultural considerations?

The paper begins with an explanation of the categories of arguments, and then presents the Israeli case. After examining the way religious male soldiers view the current situation within the IDF, the paper concludes with observations regarding the reasons why religious considerations are used in the current case and what the implications might be for additional cases.

1. Categories of Arguments

As noted⁶, when discussing women's presence on the battlefield, two main categories of arguments usually surface (See Figure 1). These categories are not present in every military, but both exist in the IDF.

The first category includes functional issues concerning the effect female soldiers can have on battle-readiness: can a force that includes women be equal in battle to a force that is exclusively male? Do women impair the effectiveness of battle formations? Can they perhaps improve performance? If so—how?

Unpacking this category further, “effectiveness” includes both physical and mental abilities. When women serve alongside men, does their presence affect men psychologically? This can be a positive effect: causing them to try harder so as not to seem weaker than the women or restraining men and causing them to moderate their behavior, which is usually coarser in the military. It can also be a negative effect: affecting unit cohesiveness adversely or causing the men to be more protective of the women and therefore less aggressive in battle.

Additional subcategories of effectiveness concern the women themselves: Can women meet physical and mental standards needed in battle? Do mixed-gender units perform well during maneuvers and under fire?

Included in the category of functional issues is the topic of prisoners of war (POWs). Are female prisoners of war “worth” more than male POWs? Will a country be obligated to “pay” more for their

⁶ The following section was compiled from a survey of media, responsa, academic and semi-academic writing on the issue of mixed-gender service over the past two decades (2000–2020). For an in-depth explanation of functional considerations in Western context (see, for example: Cohn 2000; Carreiras 2006; MacKenzie 2015). For an in-depth explanation of both functional and religious considerations in the Israeli context (see: Cohen 1993; Rosman-Stollman 2014; Ettinger 2019; Sasson-Levy 2010). It should be noted that feminist considerations (for and against military service in general and combat in particular) are not included in this survey, as this would require deviating extensively from the topic at hand.

release? How will they be (mis)treated by the enemy? How will this affect their fellow POWs and the civilian population of the country they represent?

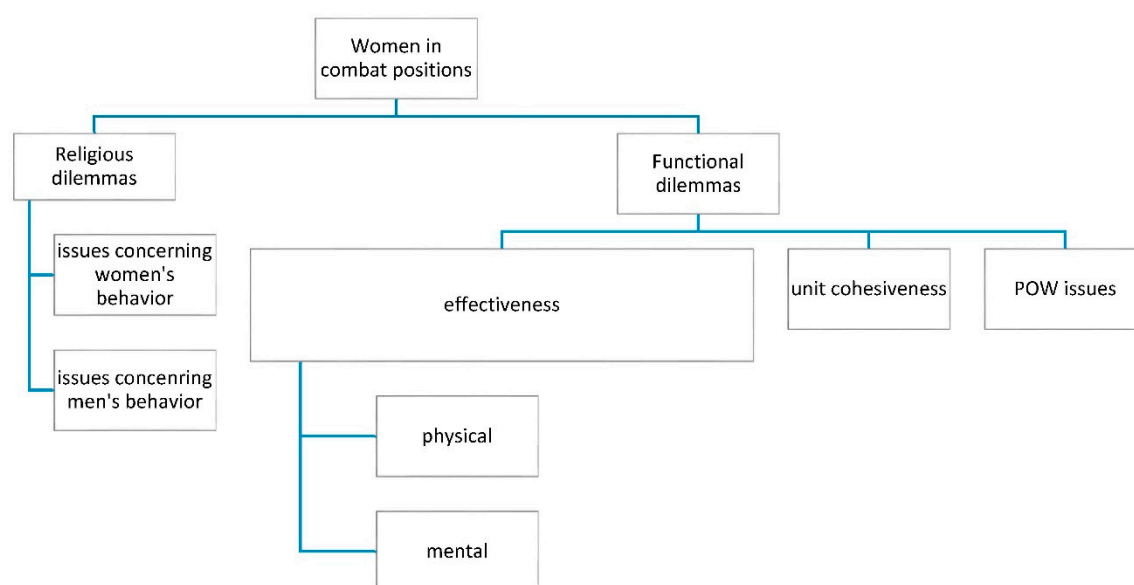


Figure 1. Main categories of arguments.

Unit cohesiveness can be considered a subtopic of functionality. It can be broken down further into subconcerns. Can a military unit achieve true cohesiveness when it includes more than one gender? What are the risks of sexual assault in mixed-gender units and are they greater than in male-only units? Are women soldiers more likely to fear their own unit members more than the enemy?

These are questions every military seeking to include women in combat positions must contend with (Cohn 2000). Consequently, there is no shortage of scholarship—military and academic—exploring these questions (such as: Carreiras 2006; Holm 1992; Solaro 2006; MacKenzie 2015; King 2013; Epstein and Heled 2014; Sagi 2014; Tevet-Weisel and Wiener 2014; Ben-Shalom and Turgeman 2018; Ben-Shalom et al. 2019; Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy 2018). These questions are also debated in the Israeli public sphere, as well as within the IDF itself (Ben-Shalom and Turgeman 2018; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2020).

The second category includes concerns relating to the religious dimension of women's military service. This category has two main subcategories of issues: the effect of military service on the women themselves and the effect on the men serving alongside them.

Religions generally frown on the presence of women on the battlefield (Rosman-Stollman 2018; Shaviv 1983; Min-HaHar 1983). According to the religious narrative that frowns on the presence of women in battle, a woman's place is at home, raising children, and not in the frontlines, taking lives. Women are tasked with "giving life" and nurturing. It is therefore wrong to cause them to be in the unnatural situation of doing the exact opposite. Consequently, a woman in uniform is perceived as immodest, and different religions frame her presence differently. Since the current paper focuses on Israel, we focus on the religious dimension as framed by Orthodox Judaism.⁷

The halakhic discourse regarding women's presence on the battlefield began with Maimonides.⁸ While Maimonides stated clearly that in the context of Obligatory War (*milchemet mitzva*), women are obligated to join the fighting force (if not as part of the actual fighting necessarily) (*Laws of Kings and*

⁷ Since Orthodox Judaism is the dominant denomination in Israel and the most powerful, the current paper focuses on it.

⁸ For a comprehensive explanation of the halakhic background regarding military service as seen through the halakhic prism, as well as women's military service. (see Cohen 1997; Rosman-Stollman 2009).

their Wars, 5), later commentators tried to minimize their presence in battle (for further discussion see: [Cohen 1997, 2014](#); [Rosman-Stollman 2014](#); [Rosman-Stollman 2009](#); [Min-HaHar 1983](#); [Shaviv 1983](#); [Cohen 1993](#)).

In 20th century Israel, when the need for Jewish women in battle was obvious, rabbinic figures became vocal concerning female soldiers during the debate concerning conscription (1949). In this context, the main halakhic concerns included the concept that serving in a military is “conduct unbecoming” a proper Jewish woman (*kol kvuda bat melech pnima*). Additionally, it was seen as immodest to have women in an all-male environment, such as a military base. Wearing a uniform (specifically wearing trousers) and bearing arms—both defined as masculine garb—were likewise seen as immodest. A woman should not be given commands from strange men outside her own family (her father or husband). Moreover, women’s characters are ill-suited for battle. Women are easily frightened and lack sufficient courage to perform well in the field. While none of these points are actual religious edicts, in current interpretation of halakha, they were accepted as facts, thereby turning “soft”, interpretational edicts, into “hard” undebatable ones. They do tie in to the functional arguments mentioned above concerning physical and psychological limitations women have in battle ([Rosman-Stollman 2018](#)).

Accordingly, this substrand of religious arguments focuses on the women themselves:⁹ women should not serve in any military, and certainly not be on the actual battlefield. It is debatable whether or not they may serve in supportive roles, but they should certainly not bear arms. Women who do serve, place themselves in immodest environments and are endangering themselves, their reputation, and their morality.

Furthermore, their presence in battle is detrimental to the troops. Not only is this because, as noted above, women are easily frightened and will demoralize the troops. God frowns upon a military force that does not enforce separation of the sexes so that the fighting force remains morally sound. As stated bluntly by R. Shlomo Aviner, an influential rabbi: “a girl who enlists to the IDF saying she wishes to contribute [to the military and to the country], is truly contributing. [She is] contributing to the destruction of the state” ([Aviner 2015](#)).

A military where women serve will undoubtedly become morally corrupt and will not be awarded victory by God. Therefore, even if a woman chooses to serve of her own accord, she should be banned from service so that her presence does not cause God to favor the opponent ([Shaviv 1983](#); [Min-HaHar 1983](#); [Aviner 2015](#)).

It is important to note that this category of dilemmas does not differentiate between religious and secular women. Looking through the religious prism, all women—regardless of their religious observance—should be banned from the military ([Shaviv 1983](#); [Min-HaHar 1983](#); [Aviner 2015](#); [Rosman-Stollman 2009](#)).

The second substrand in this category concerns the effect on male soldiers in a mixed-gender force. Clearly, the religious perspective is that men are easily morally corrupted by the presence of women in the field. They can also be demoralized, as mentioned above. The focus of this substrand is the men: men in general should not have unsupervised contact with women. Certainly not with unmarried women. God-fearing men, not just soldiers, should not be put in situations where they are alone with women. More than it being an immodest situation, it causes men to find themselves in complex halakhic circumstances and religious authorities do not feel men can be trusted to behave properly when they are alone with a woman ([Shaviv 1983](#); [Min-HaHar 1983](#); [Aviner 2015, 2000a, 2000b](#); [Melamed 2006](#)). As noted by R. Eliezer Melamed, an influential halakhic authority, serving together in mixed-gender units in the military places one in potential problematic situations and is very different from “working together in a store or a bank, or anywhere where men and women enter together”

⁹ Naturally, these arguments are voiced by various rabbis. For a survey of the halakhic arguments concerning women’s military service (see: [Cohen 1993, 2014](#); [Rosman-Stollman 2014](#)).

(and if a person's place of employment presents similar dilemmas, that person should find other employment). Furthermore, it is not permissible to have certain units where there is gender separation and others where there is none: "because we [halakha-abiding citizens] have a duty towards every single person in the collective. Therefore we must demand that it be possible to serve according to halakha [in single-sex units] in every unit in the IDF" (Melamed 2018).

The religious basis for these rules is more substantial, certainly in Orthodox Judaism. While not all religious men abide by the rules set for the separation of the sexes (*yichud*), it is harder to argue that they are based on "soft" halakhic grounds. These rules have further implications concerning the exact type of interaction between women and men: is it permissible for a woman to speak in public before a male audience? For example, may a woman serve as a tank instructor? May a woman sing in public at a military event?¹⁰

Whereas functional concerns can see the issue of women in combat as a cost–benefit issue and note advantages as well as disadvantages, religious concerns do not see women's combat service as containing any positive aspects. It is always undesirable and the focus is on how to manage the situation if it arises (Melamed 2006, 2018; Aviner 2000a, 2000b, 2015; Levinstein 2018). As will be demonstrated below, those who utilize religious dilemmas when questioning women's combat service, can also employ functional dilemmas in their reasoning. Those who utilize primarily functional dilemmas, seldom turn to religious dilemmas. Interestingly, while religious and secular male soldiers play an important part in the considerations of those arguing for and against women's combat service, religious women are excluded from the conversation. When discussing women in combat, "women" are considered a monolithic category: the rabbis quoted here do not actually speak to the women who enlist but rather dismiss what they think are the women's thoughts on the matter (for such an imagined conversation, see Aviner 2015).

With these points in mind, we can now turn to the way these dilemmas are utilized in the discussion concerning women's military service in the IDF.

2. The Use of Functional and Religious Arguments Currently in Israel

The issue of mixed service has drawn much media attention and public discussion in Israel. The Segev Commission (2007) attempted to draft IDF official policy concerning women's service for the 21st century. The Segev Report discusses the functional concerns in depth. It devotes some space to the issue of "the proper integration" (*hashiluv haraui*), which refers to IDF policy regarding separation of the sexes in order to allow religious soldiers to feel comfortable in mixed-gender settings. For example, it maps out how living quarters will be organized, what clothing can and cannot be worn in public (specifically sports attire), and so on. The Segev Report (2007) upholds the proper integration, stressing it benefits all soldiers in that it creates an atmosphere where both men and women's privacy needs are upheld.

At the same time, the report does not voice any religious concerns. Even when listing the reservations of the Military Rabbinate's delegate to the commission (R. Eyal Karim, Appendix 5, Segev Report 2007), these are framed as functional ones: it will be impossible to uphold the proper integration in the field—reality does not allow for separation or women are not all physically able to serve in all positions.

Despite taking care to frame all concerns in functional terms, the issue of religion is explicitly expressed once. Karim noted that joint service on a military naval vessel and in the same closed vehicle "goes against halakha" (p. 97). In other words, the actual citing of halakha as the reason the Rabbinate's delegate opposed the commission's conclusions appears unambiguously just this time. Other reservations are not framed as halakhic concerns, but as functional ones.

¹⁰ For a description of the issue of women's presence in the public sphere in the IDF, the issue of *yichud* and women's singing in public (see: Cohen and Susser 2014).

This tendency continued throughout the next decade. When the military itself discussed women serving in combat, it framed its concerns in exclusively functional terms.¹¹ This, of course, is understandable. What is somewhat surprising, is that the IDF does not refer in any way to the rights of religious soldiers. In other words, the IDF is careful to refrain from juxtaposing women's service with religious rights of any kind. What women can and cannot do in the IDF is always presented in functional terms by the IDF. The military is careful not to portray gender equality as the flip-side of religious rights.

Likewise, in the latest episode concerning women in combat positions, that of the tank crew pilot program mentioned above, the framing of the issue was entirely in functional terms. The State's response to the Supreme Court Case regarding the IDF discontinuing its pilot program for female tank crews (Supreme Court cases 5923/19; 34/20) has no reference to religious concerns. The State (representing the IDF) refers to the women's physical abilities and to their ability to function as members of a tank crew. Likewise, no mention of difficulties on the part of religious male soldiers can be found.

Semiacademic writing, such as articles in the right-wing *Mida* online magazine and in *Maarachot*, the periodical published by the IDF, also take care to focus on functional arguments. For example, Raz Sagi, a retired colonel who serves as the head of the IDF Fortitude Forum, who has published and speaks extensively on the topic of women in combat, argued in an article in *Maarachot* against women in combat. All of his arguments were functional, and did not refer to the issue of the rights of religious soldiers (Sagi 2014).¹² Likewise, an article in *Mida* directly addressing the issue of women in tank crews, focused exclusively on functional concerns, mainly the medical aspect of combat service and on its effect on women's physical well-being. It began with the following:

I worship my wife. What she went through two weeks ago in the Labor and Delivery room, I couldn't do even if I were on a cocaine and diazepam cocktail. I grew up with a mother and two older and independent sisters, and at home I have two lovely daughters. I am not interested in any of them having to experience a military operation from inside a cramped steel box with three other men, even if they are the most wonderful and considerate [men]. Why? Because I love them and care about their wellbeing and health. A tank crew should contain only men, and I have good arguments to support this claim. It is possible that women can join the armored corps and execute all their duties well, but reality teaches us that it will end very badly. Women should acquaint themselves with the world that the YOHALAN [the Chief of Staff's advisor on women's affairs] and [MK] Zehava Galon want to push them into, to ask themselves 'at what price', and understand the consequences of this choice and its effect on their surroundings and on the entire system. (Greenstein 2016)

The writer then went on to discuss what it means to be a tank crew member, how terrible it would be to be a woman in this situation, and how women who choose to serve in a tank are being misled and will pay a very steep price.

During the aforementioned discussion of women in tank crews, two high ranking officers in the reserves who served in the tank corps, opposed women's service in tank crews publicly. Brig.-Gen. (res.) Avigdor Kehalani cited the trauma of war as unsuitable for women (women are mentally unsuited for battle) and likewise pointed out that "a woman's role is to be a mother and to bear children" (Walla News 2016). Maj.-Gen. (res.) Yiftach Ron-Tal likewise focused on functional concerns and highlighted the fact that (in his opinion) no other militaries in the world integrate women in combat postings in the tank corps (ibid.).

¹¹ This can be seen—among other cases—in the State's response to the Alice Miller petition to the Supreme Court, regarding women's service as pilots, see: Alice Miller vs. The Minister of Defense and others, 4541/94.

¹² It is interesting to note that Sagi is a popular speaker, invited to speak on this topic at religious premilitary preparatory seminars (*mechinot*). In general, it seems that those opposed to women's service in combat join forces frequently.

These articles, and others like them, highlight two important points. First, in general those who oppose women's combat service in public and were also the most vocal in connection with the female tank crew pilot program, tend to hold conservative views in general, not just concerning women in combat. For the most part they are old-school military veterans, many times senior officers in the reserves. Their conservative views are not limited to integrating women in the ranks, but include opposition to what they see as "leftist" tendencies, such as disobeying orders in the ranks in connection with political issues (*sarvanut*). They also tend to hold more right-wing political views. They are not religious and therefore it would be odd for them to employ religious terminology. Consequently, their arguments are based firmly on functional concerns. However, the undertones are sometimes more general, such as Kehalani's aforementioned view on women's role in society.

Second, those who oppose the stationing of women in combat frame themselves as champions of women's health and well-being. They are opposing combat service because it is detrimental to the women themselves—women in combat suffer from more march fractures than men; they are in danger of uterine prolapse, as well as other medical conditions; women should not be in battle for their own good and for the good of the country; and so on. In other words, they are opposed to women's combat service because they care about women.

On the other hand, the religious establishment tends to use both functional and religious considerations when discussing the issue. Past halakhic writings addressing women's military service (in general, not combat postings) have always cited halakhic considerations, naturally. Classic cases include articles by R. Shlomo [Min-HaHar](#) (1983) and R. Yehuda [Shaviv](#) (1983) who admitted that the basis for excluding women from the battlefield is social convention. For example:

The issue of "it is not in the nature of women to dominate,"¹³ has no halakhic basis that prohibits [women] going to war. It may teach us that women's participation [in the fighting force] could be detrimental and promote retreat and failure ... ". ([Shaviv 1983](#), p. 69)

However, in this case, social conventions are strong enough a basis and can be seen as halakhically binding. The main religious classic arguments address women's military service in general, not creating a separate category for combat service. As noted earlier, these focus on the fact that serving in a military in any capacity is "conduct unbecoming" a proper Jewish woman, in the broad sense of the concept.¹⁴ The halakhic aspect, in its most basic form, sees women's service as an unnatural situation for women. Women's service also has detrimental effects on the men in the fighting force ([Aviner 2015](#); [Ezra 2018](#); [Melamed 2018](#)). In this respect, the classic halakhic arguments do not use functional terms but are purely religious. Again, they make no distinction between combat and noncombat posts ([Rosman-Stollman 2014](#)).

In the past decade, the main religious voice against women's combat service has come from rabbis who serve in pivotal roles in preservice preparatory seminaries (*mechinot*), as well as the more stringent rabbinic voice coming from Hesder yeshivot closer to the viewpoints of *yeshivot hakav* (the religious seminaries stemming from the Mercaz HaRav yeshiva, founded by R. Avraham Yitzchak HaCohen Kook). These figures have inspired a campaign against women's service in general and women in combat in particular. While the current paper cannot cover all of the writings and public statements of these rabbis, a number of recent examples can be presented in order to demonstrate the most pivotal important points highlighted here. Most famous of these, were R. Yigal Levinstein's words during a class at the Eli premilitary preparatory seminary for men, where he lamented: "they've made our girls crazy!"¹⁵ and spoke fervently of how military service has corrupted the way religious women behave. He also published a pamphlet on the topic ([Levinstein 2018](#)).

¹³ This refers to the halakhic idiom "haisha ein darka lechbosh," meaning that only men can engage in offense in battle.

¹⁴ For a discussion on the halakhic arguments for and against women's conscription (see: [Rosman-Stollman 2014, 2018](#)).

¹⁵ For a link to the full film (see: [Greenwood 2017](#)).

Another example of this position is the establishment of Hotam,¹⁶ a rabbinic organization aimed at integrating religious outlooks in state matters. In 2017, Hotam published a short film on Youtube portraying military service as seriously harming the young religious women who choose to enlist (Hotam 2017). The film focuses on the women themselves and uses socio-religious reasons to explain why military service is harmful for religious women—while they think they will be doing the state a great service by enlisting, in truth the system is only using them to portray itself as pluralistic, it does not understand religious constraints, does not address real concerns religious women in uniform have, forces them to go against their religious beliefs,¹⁷ and in general causes the women to be less religious and less feminine. Religious women would do better to serve in national civilian service. Interestingly, Hotam has an entire section of its activities dedicated to the issue of convincing religious women to avoid enlistment. It continues to publish short films and other material on social media to this effect.¹⁸

In a pamphlet published by Hotam (Ben David n.d.) to encourage women to avoid enlistment, the main arguments can be grouped in two categories. First, military service is not a place for religious women. It is a liberal-feminist ploy to cause religious women to become secular. Second, in general, feminists are left-wing and wish to harm the IDF and cause it to be unfit for combat and this is why they push for integrating women in the ranks. Women, in general, are not needed in the military, no matter how convinced the women are that they are doing a good deed. In truth, postings are ridiculous and superfluous and do not contribute to security. The military is not a place for “proper” Jewish women. They are harming themselves and the IDF when they serve—even in noncombat postings:

First, it is important to understand what true military men think of women’s service. According to their professional opinion, do they think that women are lacking in the military? Do they think the military will function better if more women will serve in it? Many important military professionals are afraid to tell the truth regarding the topic of women’s conscription. Anyone who says a sentence that doesn’t line up with the world-view of feminist organizations, is immediately criticized and ridiculed as being backward and primitive. The media aligns itself with these organizations and make sure he [anyone who speaks out against women’s conscription] is discredited in public. (Ben David n.d., p. 4)

The pamphlet then goes on to describe how military training physically damages women, how they are not truly needed as the IDF has an excess of personnel, and how feminist politicians and organizations “instead of seeing the military as an organization tasked with the security of the nation, see it as an organization that can be a tool to advance politicians, women, and other [adverse] values” (Ben David n.d.). The author quotes military personnel (in the reserves) backing up each claim.

Next, the pamphlet moves on to describe the IDF as an organization that can damage a religious girl’s religious sensibilities, that it is a place where women are molested on a regular basis without the military system being able to address such behavior, that women are unable to maintain the level of religious observance they adhered to during civilian life, and ending with “a letter from a female soldier” and a “letter to a girl who is debating [whether to enlist]”. Both giving a detailed account of how difficult it is to serve as a religious woman in the IDF, but the authors of these “letters” are anonymous (Ben David n.d.). In other words, the pamphlet includes both religious and functional arguments, and the writer draws legitimacy from the “fact” he is quoting military personnel with the proper expertise.

¹⁶ Hotam site: <https://www.chotam.org.il/%D7%A2%D7%9C-%D7%A1%D7%93%D7%A8-%D7%94%D7%99%D7%95%D7%9D/%D7%92%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A1-%D7%91%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%93%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%9C%D7%A6%D7%91%D7%90/>.

¹⁷ In the film, the religious girl who enlists with much motivation is forced to stand for guard duty alone with a man, cannot finish her prayer after meals, and little by little abandons her principles.

¹⁸ The most recent is a film published in October 2020 trying to assist parents in convincing their daughters to avoid enlistment. See: <<https://youtu.be/zSwIg2hI-DE>>.

Another pamphlet published at the same time includes short articles by heads of *yeshivot* and *mechinot* published by LIBA,¹⁹ addressing the integration of women in combat. While the articles focus on religious arguments (women should not be in uniform, their roles lie elsewhere; forcing religious male soldiers to serve with women, goes against their right to serve in single-gender units), they also employ functional arguments (the IDF lowers physical standards so that women can meet them; women hamper the units they join and harm their ability to fight effectively; mixed-gender units are not as professional as male-only units) (LIBA n.d.). This pamphlet, too, consolidates both functional and religious arguments, speaking to both religious men and women, and utilizing the entire range of possible arguments against women's combat service in order to present its case.

Other mediums attacking women's service, are sectoral media publications, mainly the weekend paper *BeSheva* and pamphlets given out at synagogues every weekend, supposedly dealing with the weekly Tora portion (*dapei parashat shavua*), but in truth serving as sectoral newspapers. The pamphlets include responsa on various issues, articles by religious figures, and news that interests the national religious sector. One of the topics that features regularly is how religious soldiers fare in the IDF. Among the topics that surface are the way secular officers treat religious soldiers, levels of kashrut, the banning of beards, and—naturally—mixed-gender service. In these cases, the pamphlets usually focus on the religious male soldiers and on what is seen as a violation of their rights to serve according to their beliefs. For example, in January 2020, the pamphlet *Shvi'i* covered a complaint by reserve soldiers in the artillery corps who recounted how they were expected to camp in the field with female soldiers. This was seen as disregarding their religious convictions. The soldiers said:

we asked and asked [not to train with female soldiers] and nothing helped [. . .] this can't be a military for secular soldiers only, this is the army of the People of Israel. We don't want change and for anything new to happen [to accommodate us], just for them to leave things the way they were until this last training session". (*Shvi'i*, 24 January, 2020, p. 12)

In this piece, as well as the follow-up item published a month later (*Shvi'i*, 28 February 2020, p. 14), the article stresses that serving together with women in the field (specifically sleeping in the same camp in the field) goes against religious beliefs and disregards religious soldiers' rights to serve according to these beliefs. This example mirrors the general tone of articles covering similar cases. All of these publications indicate just how disturbing women's military service is for religious figures from the more stringent end of the national religious continuum.

In stressing how important it is that women stay away from military service, the religious establishment is signaling not only externally, but internally. Women cannot serve in uniform at all, and women who serve in combat are even more damaging to the IDF and the nation in general. It may be that since these religious voices fear they have lost the battle over women's military service in their own camp, since religious women do enlist,²⁰ they are taking a last stand regarding combat service for women, and prepared to attack religious female soldiers so as to make sure that the final line of combat service will never be crossed.

In this respect, the issue of women in combat indicates that the conflict within religious Zionism over religious women's military service has spilled over into the general sphere of the IDF: in an attempt to control women's conscription, the issue of women in combat is playing an internal role. By seeming to discuss a broader topic, rabbis can stress the detrimental side of women's military service and discourage religious women from enlisting.

Interestingly, while the discussion focuses on combat service for women, it pays no real functional attention to women serving in noncombat positions. All of the arguments against women's service in

¹⁹ Libayehudit.org—the organization presents itself as aiming at “strengthening the Jewish identity of the State of Israel” stressing the halakhic side of Judaism and attempting to demonstrate how it is relevant to the current lives of Israelis.

²⁰ The scope of the current paper does not allow for an in-depth discussion of this phenomenon. For further detail (see: Rosman-Stollman 2018; Ettinger 2019).

noncombat roles do not try to hint that women are unfit to serve in these postings. Likewise, there is almost no attention paid to men serving in noncombat positions and on their relationship with the women they serve with.

Religious concerns are very much present in noncombat situations, but rabbis do not voice them. To the best of my knowledge, only one rabbinic text addresses the halakhic difficulties faced by noncombat religious soldiers (Weinberger and Bitner 2007) versus the very many responsa concerning combat soldiers. In the 500 plus pages of this book, one section alone deals with service alongside women and attempts to help soldiers deal with possible halakhically problematic situations. The five short chapters in this section do their best to help noncombat soldiers and assuage their conscience. There is certainly no attempt to convince them to find a different posting, where they will have no contact with women.

After understanding who uses which arguments in addressing women's combat service, we can now examine the way religious male soldiers themselves view the issue of women's military service and women in combat. This will put the official positions in better context and enable us to better understand the role religious argument play in this dynamic.

3. Religious Concerns in Practice

When²¹ using religious concerns to oppose women's service, are rabbis serving as spokespersons for religious soldiers? Are they indeed voicing difficulties from the field? Cohen and Susser (2014) have noted that usually, when rabbis and others stress that women in combat will infringe upon the rights of religious male soldiers, they are giving voice to the extreme point of view, not the mainstream.

In order to examine this point more in depth, this paper collected data from a focus group of 14 male soldiers toward the end of their service. All members of the focus group studied in religious high schools, all but one were still religious. Two did a year of national service before conscription. One enlisted at the end of high school. One studied in a preparatory religious seminary (*mechina*). The rest (ten soldiers) studied in *yeshivot* (nine in the *hesder* program, one in the *shiluv* program). Not all of the soldiers from the *hesder* program served in designated single-gender units.

Since the purpose of the focus group was to gauge feelings in the field, focus group members were connected through a single snowball (rather than a number of snowballs), with hope that the future in-depth study planned will broaden the scope of interviews, using a larger database and utilizing at least three snowballs.

In order to ensure diversity, soldiers were approached only if they added to the range of the group. Of the 14 members of the focus group, nine were combat soldiers, four served in intelligence positions (all studied previously in a *yeshiva*), and one served in a combat support position. Four soldiers served in the paratroopers (in general units, not *hesder* units; two in its reconnaissance units), two in the NAHAL brigade (in *hesder* units), and one in Givati (non-*hesder* unit). Two were tank crew members (one was a tank commander), both in the *hesder* program. Of the combat soldiers, one was an officer and one was in an officer training course. The soldiers serving in intelligence, as noted, all studied in a *yeshiva* before service (as opposed to a *mechina*). All served alongside women to various degrees.

The data from the focus group revealed some interesting findings. First, there was a marked difference between combat and noncombat soldiers, with noncombat soldiers serving alongside women in non-gender-segregated units. Consequently, most of the focus group members met very few women during their service. The combat soldiers met female instructors and administrators. They were usually not impressed with the professional level of the women. It seems that medical instructors were the exception to the rule, being more professional than tank, shooting, and other technical instructors.

²¹ The units mentioned in the following section include the following units: NAHAL, Givati, paratroopers (traditional male-only infantry units), Karakal, and Bardelas (mixed gender infantry units used mainly for border patrol).

One of the members of the focus group was a combat medic, who was impressed by the professional level of the women instructors he met during his training.

Combat soldiers preferred their commanders teach skills over female instructors who were not an integral part of their team. Combat soldiers felt that while the female instructors knew the material, they were unaware of what happened in the field. Commanders were able to integrate hands-on experience when they taught various technical aspects and this was seen as more effective.

On the other hand, female instructors were well-liked by the soldiers. They welcomed the possibility to learn from someone who was not part of their regular chain of command and

... the reason I liked being near the [female] instructors was because they were—for a change - nice and smiled. On the second day of basic training, which was definitely the worst day of my life, we had shooting instruction with Anat. Half an hour of humanity in the midst of black days with horrible commanders. I won't forget her ever ... " (Amir, tank crewmember, *hesder* student).²²

"Girls are much nicer to be with [...] especially when considering combat soldiers, who are much more "gorillas" [*behemot*] and see fewer girls [during service and in general are disgusting]". (Ron, combat soldier, paratroopers, *hesder* soldier)

Ron felt that the soldiers he served with (mostly secular) were vulgar and he felt that it was better for him mentally to be around female instructors.

Asked specifically about their feelings concerning integrating women in the tank corps, the tank crewmembers didn't feel there was a real reason to ban women from tank crews, if they were able to meet professional standards. Specifically, loading the cannon quickly. They noted that there was no minimum weight and height standard for male tank crewmembers beyond qualifications for combat service (whereas women needed to meet minimum requirements for weight and height in the pilot tank-crew program). Some discussion was devoted to a crewmember (who was not in the focus group) who was relatively short (1.55 m) and a bad loader, but a good crewmember.

Most of the members of the focus group felt that in general in the IDF, the main problem with mixed-gender units was these units received poor quality manpower. All of the combat soldiers served alongside mixed units (Karakal or Bardelas) at various stages of their service. They felt both the men and women who were assigned to these units were unprofessional and found it hard to trust them in combat situations. They were unsure if this was a result of the fact the unit was mixed-gender or because these units did not receive "good" soldiers relative to other infantry units (paratroopers, Givati, and NAHAL in their case).

Combat soldiers also noted that, in general, from their experience, when members of their units came in contact with women (generally instructors), the men behaved badly for the most part. This was mainly due to the fact that most men did not serve with women and did not know how to act around them.

The soldiers who served in intelligence came into closer contact with women. In general, they observed that their service was "more like a job in everyday life", where men and women worked together. Accordingly, they did find themselves working alone with women and sometimes found this uncomfortable. As noted, all of these soldiers in the focus group studied in *yeshivot* before their service. They recounted that their rabbis did not truly address the fact that they were going to serve together with women. When the issue was discussed, it was very superficially and in passing. However, one of them noted:

There were certainly situations [my] rabbis said it is better to be with the girls [than with secular men]. For example, in the mess if the boys are talking about girls and the girls

²² All names used here are pseudonyms.

aren't [discussing men, I should prefer to sit with the girls]. (Dan, non-combat, intelligence, hesder student)

In other words, Dan's rabbis felt the women were a better influence and that sitting with them would help Dan avoid religiously problematic situations (in this case: speaking about immodest topics or even just hearing profanity when sitting with the men). Other members of the focus group could not recall any of their rabbis addressing the issue of mixed service in noncombat postings directly.

Naturally, further data are needed and future studies should be conducted with a broad range of soldiers in order to understand the issue in depth. However, for the current paper, these findings are helpful and stress that, for the most part, the religious soldiers did not have strong feelings about women in combat—either for or against. They felt that gender-mixed units were unprofessional, but did not connect this directly to the fact women served there but to the make-up of the units themselves. Noncombat soldiers were inclined to view their service with women in context: at times joint service made them uncomfortable, but serving with secular men was also uncomfortable many times. These findings uphold those of [Cohen and Susser \(2014\)](#) in their study.

4. Discussion

It seems that presently in the field, aside from designated mixed-gender units, very few combat soldiers, religious and secular, serve in close proximity to women.²³ The current objections voiced by rabbis regarding women in combat are therefore not based on actual experiences, but speculation and on the fear of what such a reality might cause in the future. The difficulties joint service raises are both functional and religious, with the functional concerns being more acute. The religious concerns are ones that connect to modesty (in the religious sense) and feelings about personal space and privacy: women and men serving together in the field cannot always find way to maintain privacy. Religious concerns also include the maintaining of physical distance between men and women. In the field, reality will not allow for these restrictions to be maintained.

On the other hand, at this very moment, most noncombat soldiers do serve with women and have done so for decades. This is not a theoretical or proposed situation. In the IDF, noncombat postings include many mixed-gender positions, with intelligence postings requiring the most professional contact with women—religious soldiers who serve in intelligence positions will most certainly serve alongside women, often keeping long hours together in closed rooms. They will have long night shifts together, sometimes being the only man in the room with another woman. In halakhic terms, such service might even be more problematic than being in the same armored personnel carrier or Hummer, with many other crewmembers, in more intense situations where there is little time for small talk and thoughts.

As noted, religious male soldiers serve in these positions and their rabbis know this. This raises the question, why are the same religious concerns voiced regarding combat not heard regarding noncombat postings. Perhaps this is due to the small numbers of the pre-military program students who serve in noncombat postings. Of the approximately 2600 students who enlist every year through these programs (*mechinot* and *yeshivot hesder*), about 20% serve in noncombat postings.²⁴ Perhaps the small number of students who serve in noncombat positions is not enough to generate rabbinic attention. However, this seems to be an unfair conclusion: are not even these small numbers worthy of halakhic consideration?

²³ While it may seem that most combat soldiers in Israel serve in close proximity to women, in practice, their contact is very limited. Not including mixed-gender units, such as Karakal and Bardelas. As noted below, traditional infantry units and armored corps have very little contact with women on a regular basis and certainly do not serve in the same battle formations with women. This is not the case in anti-aircraft units, the air force, and—as noted—mixed-gender units and noncombat units.

²⁴ Author's interview with Leizer (Eliezer) Deutsch, deputy director of the Hesder yeshivot association (*Igud yeshivot haHesder*), 23 December 2010.

Another possible explanation is that noncombat service is not as intense as combat service. Men and women need not share bathrooms when they serve in an office or in an organized base. They do not sleep in close proximity and physical distance can be maintained. However, as noted, desk jobs provide much more close personal contact than combat does. The laws of *yichud* certainly apply much more to noncombat situations. Therefore, it seems that one must search for additional explanations to this phenomenon.

Another explanation might be that the religious establishment is just not aware of the halakhic difficulties noncombat mixed-gender service poses. This may be true for some rabbis, but certainly not for all. It seems that many rabbis are very much aware of the issues at hand, but prefer not to discuss them.

An additional explanation is that the preservice programs fear that if they try to negotiate with the IDF over single-sex service for their male students in prestigious noncombat postings (such as intelligence), they might lose the possibility of sending their students to “good” military jobs. The IDF might prefer to keep the women in these postings and move the religious male soldiers to less prestigious military jobs. It would be possible for the IDF to decide that single-sex service will be limited to certain military jobs, such as the military rabbinate, but that other postings require mixed-gender service. In this case, many young men might prefer to leave their preservice religious program in order to serve in more prestigious roles. If this explanation is correct, the preservice programs understand that while they are able to influence IDF policy regarding combat, their influence might be severely limited in noncombat issues. They, therefore, prefer not to create a problem where there is not one and accept that their students will be in halakhically compromised situations. Since these students are a minority, and most students serve in combat roles, perhaps this is a sacrifice the programs are willing to make. They may try to prepare their students for such postings and be sympathetic, but they realize that they cannot forbid them from serving in noncombat mixed gender units.

If this is so, it seems that religious arguments—like all arguments—can be used at different times for different things. Like in other situations, the religious establishment prefers to pick its battles, concentrating on those that can be won.

This conclusion can be better understood when viewed together with the way the religious establishment views religious female soldiers. As noted in previous publications (Rosman-Stollman 2018; Ettinger 2019), religious female soldiers are slowly gaining legitimacy. While in the past, religious women who enlisted were frowned upon and paid a social price when making this choice, it has become far more accepted for religious women to serve in uniform. While the religious establishment still opposes women’s military service and does so publicly, in many ways it seems to have accepted the shift from below, realizing this is not a battle that can be won (Rosman-Stollman 2018). Public rhetoric is decidedly against religious women’s service in the IDF, as noted above, but in practice, no real social penalties are used against women who serve. Forcing those opposing women’s military service to revert to the pamphlets described above.

It seems that for most religious leaders, the reason to oppose women in combat is internal. For some (though certainly not all) religious soldiers, serving with women is unfathomable because they have grown up with no contact with women who are not immediate family members (Stern 2012; Hermann et al. 2014).²⁵ While this can be seen as a cultural issue, and not religious, some of the soldiers themselves view it as a fundamental halakhic consideration. A portion of these individuals do not meet girls in school or even in kindergarten. They do not go to mixed youth movements. Meeting women in

²⁵ This sector, defined by the acronym HARDAL (Haredi-Leumi), and at times as “dati’im torani’im”, have separate schooling for children above the age of six, frown upon any interaction between the sexes, and encourage strict separation. While not all members of this sector adhere to such strict separation at younger ages, once youth reach adolescence they have no contact with the opposite sex outside their families. For examples of the instructions given by rabbis for this behavior, see (among others) (Aviner 2017; Aviner n.d.; Sifriyat Hava <http://www.havabooks.co.il/sms.asp?id=0>). For an overview of gender-separate education in the religious sector (in general, and not just the HARDAL sector) in Israel (see: Skop 2015). For further elaboration on this sector and how it fits into the Israeli social tapestry (see: Hermann et al. 2014).

the military will be the first time they encounter women in any situation, and they are unequipped to cope with this interaction.²⁶ True, once they are discharged, even most of this group will study at universities or colleges where they will meet women. Some of them will work in positions where they will meet and work with women. However, at that point in their lives, they will be older and married and the circumstances of working and studying alongside women will be different (or so their social group will think). It will not be the same as meeting and working with women when they are 19–20 and have never spoken to a girl in their lives.²⁷ Serving in the IDF, a secular institution very far removed from their civilian lives, is difficult enough for these men without adding the possibility of serving with women. While the majority of religious Zionist men are not in this position, some are. For most of their rabbis, the main goal is to enable their students to get through military service in one piece religiously, and to enable them to return to their civilian lives and continue to be a part of their original communities. Most of these men serve in combat positions. Their leadership wants to minimize complications and therefore prefers to keep women out of the equation.

The other reason to oppose women in the IDF in general and in combat in particular is to deter religious women from enlisting. In other words, the problem is not the religious soldiers themselves, but rather their sisters. It is not the majority of soldiers who are worried about serving with women in mixed-gender units. For the most part, their rabbis are the ones who are worried and they are concerned about how mixed-gender units affect the young women within their own sector. Here, the religious voices hope that when seeing how opposed the mainstream (or what is perceived as the mainstream) is to women's service, religious women will think twice about enlisting. If they do enlist, they will certainly draw the line at combat postings in order to maintain some legitimacy. While some of these considerations may not be conscious ones, they seem to lie at the root of the issue at hand.

5. Conclusions

Religious justifications and arguments serve the same purpose as other justifications: they are a tool. As both King (2013) and Epstein and Heled (2014) have noted, the issue of women's military service, specifically in combat, is first and foremost a political and social issue. More often than not, those who oppose women's service in combat, do so due to social considerations and prejudices (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2020, p. 74). When weighing the issue of combat service for women, many considerations come into play. In this respect, religious considerations are no different. They play the same part functional considerations play. At most, they can be considered cultural considerations.

At the same time, it is important to note that just as functional concerns are flexible and subject to socio-political influences, religious concerns are not as rigid as they sometimes seem. Religious men serve alongside women in noncombat postings. These can be no less problematic than combat postings when viewed in halakhic terms, and yet rabbis do not protest publicly or try to force the military system to adapt itself to halakhic considerations in this case. Such behavior cannot be explained purely in halakhic terms. It seems safe to assume that the religious authorities are willing to negotiate at times, even if this comes at a halakhic cost. Realizing that they will not be able to influence all religious male soldiers to serve in "halakhically-safe" posts (i.e., without women), which are deemed less challenging, and that they would rather focus on the majority of their students (who serve in combat), they choose to avoid discussing the issue. Consequently, religious male soldiers can serve in intelligence postings, despite the halakhic difficulties.

²⁶ For those who find it difficult to believe such people exist, see the interactions in the forum focusing on marriage in the Kipa portal for religious youth. The conversation took place in 2007, but holds true for today as well, if not more so. The posters discuss how difficult it is/is not to date when one has grown up with very minimal contact with the opposite sex vs. growing up with "acceptable" contact (for religious youth): <https://www.kipa.co.il/community/show/2840675/>, June 2007 [Hebrew].

²⁷ Again, this is not the majority of religious men, but a portion of this group is indeed very segregated when it comes to mixed-gender situations.

In this respect, the answer to the question presented at the beginning of this paper regarding the role religious considerations play in the relationship between the IDF, the question of women in combat, and religious male and female soldiers, is rather mundane. Religious considerations can serve as a tool, to be used or not used, by the various actors in this relationship. While this might seem as an obvious conclusion, many in Israel do not accept this. The sheer volume of writing—academic, halakhic, and popular—describing the relationship between religion and the military in Israel, and either hinting or proclaiming outright that the IDF must make concessions (or is in fact making concessions) in order to placate rabbis and/or religious soldiers, indicates that this is perceived as a real issue.²⁸ The findings in this paper show that while it may seem that religious considerations carry more weight than functional considerations and therefore increase tension within the IDF, it does not have to be so. If viewed within context, religious concerns reveal themselves to be no different from other considerations, and therefore can be solved with the same tools used to address other concerns. Contrary to the initial position this paper opened with, indeed, at times they are not religious considerations at all, but rather socio-cultural ones disguised as religious concerns. In these cases, it is not always the soldiers themselves who need to be accommodated, but rather their religious establishment that needs to be the focus of the discussion.

It seems that in the case of the IDF, religious considerations serve two main purposes. They are a result of intrareligious tensions that spill over into the IDF, and they are a way to voice patriarchal views, framed as rights. This is not to say that religious soldiers do not find it difficult halakhically and culturally to serve with women. The reality of mixed-gender units is one that religious soldiers (both men and women) find truly problematic and solutions are needed, as long as the IDF remains a conscription-based force. However, like in many other areas of civilian life in Israel, here too it is possible to find a way to accommodate religious soldiers. Just as halakha has shown itself capable of enabling religious civilians to study in secular universities, work in secular settings, and allow men and women to interact in the civilian sphere, halakha can (and has) adapted to similar situations in the military.²⁹

This finding is important when viewed in the context of conscription-based militaries. Since the 1990s, several Baltic and Nordic states have reinstated conscription. Germany and France have both begun to consider reinstating conscription as well. These events indicate that conscription is still an important issue and, in turn, this highlights the importance of accommodation of various minorities in the military. Just as a vegan soldier must be accommodated in a conscription-based military, so must a religious soldier. In this context, the Israeli case can help understand how to manage religious soldiers and their concerns in a conscription-based military.

Western militaries tend to shy away from addressing religious concerns in an open way. Religion is seen as something that shouldn't be discussed, because if it is, it could lead to discrimination (Rosman-Stollman 2014). This strategy could actually be detrimental when trying to support religious soldiers. Looking at religious concerns in context can allow for better understanding and accommodation.

When considering the Israeli case, European countries with Muslim minorities can utilize strategies used in the IDF in order to approach possible military-religious issues. When viewed as socio-cultural, rather than religious, concerns, it is far easier to understand how religious soldiers perceive given situations and, consequently, motivate them to cooperate with the military system. In turn, understanding religious considerations as socio-cultural ones can help the military system understand and accommodate religious soldiers. When religious concerns are framed as cultural ones—connected to core values, to education and upbringing—they are far less threatening for the military system. This does not mean that religious concerns are imagined or in any way “not real”.

²⁸ For just a small number of examples discussing these issues (see: Levy 2015; Kampinsky 2020; Umriel-Feldman 2020; Hassner 2014; Ettinger 2019).

²⁹ For a detailed discussion of how this can be done and has been done (see: Liebman 1983).

Rather, that they can be addressed in the same way western militaries are trained to address cultural differences or beliefs such as vegetarianism.

In AVFs (all-volunteer forces), using this point of view can also diffuse tension. While in many cases, religious soldiers can be viewed as a threat (Hassner 2016, 2014), seeing religion as a concern similar to other social concerns neutralizes it and allows the military see it as less of a threat.

In turn, this allows for addressing the issue of women in combat in a more composed manner. While functional concerns can and should still be part of the considerations that influence decisions regarding women in combat, socio-cultural and religious concerns should remain in their rightful place in the discussion—no more, and no less.

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