



# Faith, Duty and the Haredi Draft Crisis in Israel

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## Faith, Duty and the Haredi Draft Crisis in Israel

*By Lin Jing*

### SYNOPSIS

*Mass protests by ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel against military conscription have exposed deep tensions between religious life and civic duty. What began as a small exemption for yeshiva students in 1948 has grown into one of Israel's most contentious political and social issues.*

### COMMENTARY

#### From Protest to Privilege: The Roots of the Haredi Exemption

On 30 October 2025, around 200,000 ultra-Orthodox Jews blocked roads in Jerusalem to protest against the government's plan to enforce military conscription. A 15-year-old boy died after [falling](#) during the demonstration, one of the largest in recent years. The protesters, known as Haredim, belong to the ultra-Orthodox branch of Judaism, which sees itself as the true guardian of Jewish law and tradition. They observe Halakha (Jewish Law) strictly and seek to create a pure community free from secular influence. Many oppose Zionism on theological grounds, believing that a Jewish state should not exist before divine redemption.

Their exemption from military service dates back to an arrangement made in 1948 between Israel's first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion and Haredi leaders. Under the principle of *Torato Umanuto* ("Torah is his profession"), full-time yeshiva students were allowed to defer service until they aged out of eligibility. At that time, only about 400 men benefited, less than 0.1 per cent of the population. Today, Israel's Haredi community [numbers](#) about 1.28 million, roughly 13.5 per cent of the total, and grows at approximately 4 per cent annually. Based on current trends, they may reach around one-fifth of the population by the mid-2030s. According to media [reports](#), around 66,000 Haredi men deferred service in 2023, the highest figure recorded to date.

For many Haredim, Torah study is not a personal choice but a national duty that sustains Israel's spiritual security. Their separation from modern life, visible in distinct dress, large families and limited secular education, contrasts sharply with religious Zionists, who combine faith with military and civic participation.

### **Faith, the State, and the Question of Equal Duty**

The Haredim's resistance to military service reflects a long-running tension between religion and the state in Israel. Military service in Israel is compulsory for most Jewish citizens, with men serving about three years and women about two. The system is seen not only as a defence requirement but also as a cornerstone of civic duty and national identity.

The continued exemption of Haredim has therefore come to represent inequality in the eyes of many Israelis. As the country faces conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon and the West Bank, frustration has grown among secular and traditional Israelis. Families who have lost sons in battle see the exemptions as unfair.

Recent opinion polls indicate overwhelming public support for ending the long-standing exemption granted to Haredi men. A 2024 [survey](#) by the Israel Democracy Institute found that about 70 per cent of Israeli Jews favour drafting ultra-Orthodox men into the army, reflecting widespread frustration over what many perceive as unequal burden-sharing. [Another poll](#) reported that 85 per cent of non-Haredi Jewish Israelis support sanctioning draft evaders, including revoking state benefits for those who refuse to serve.

For the Haredim, however, the military represents an environment that threatens their way of life. They fear exposure to secular values, mixed-gender units and non-kosher food. They also distrust the state's motives, believing that conscription is part of a wider effort to force them into modern society. Their leaders argue that Torah study provides spiritual defence equivalent to military service.

In early November 2025, discussion of the so-called "[Bismuth Law](#)", a proposed compromise framework to regulate Haredi exemptions, was once again postponed. Haredi parties accused Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of deliberate delay, claiming he was "dragging and mixing" political manoeuvres instead of acting decisively.

### **Power, Politics, and the Risk of a Religious Army**

The dispute has serious political consequences. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu relies on ultra-Orthodox parties to maintain his governing coalition. Any move to draft yeshiva students risks breaking that alliance. Yet continuing exemptions anger other voters and widen the gap between religious and secular citizens. The tension reached a new high when the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties [quit](#) the government in July 2025 over former Knesset Speaker Yuli Edelstein's version of an enlistment bill, which would have imposed strict sanctions on draft evaders. Their withdrawal underlined the fragility of Netanyahu's coalition and the political volatility surrounding any attempt to legislate Haredi conscription.

The political weight of the ultra-Orthodox has also grown. In the February 2024 Jerusalem municipal [election](#), Haredi parties won 16 of 31 seats, confirming their strong influence in the capital. This local success reflects a broader national trend: the Haredim are gaining bargaining power in both local councils and the Knesset, often using coalition leverage to resist reforms on military service or budget allocations.

This expanding influence has implications far beyond politics. As Haredi parties consolidate their role in government, their values increasingly shape public debate on education, welfare, and the role of religion in state institutions, including the military. In a climate of growing social polarisation, forcing the Haredim into service could deepen existing divisions and risk importing ideological conflicts into the army's ranks.

Some analysts [warn](#) that the large-scale enlistment of Haredi men could transform the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) from a military built on secular Zionist values into one shaped by religious zeal and messianic fervour. Such a shift, they argue, could undermine the army's secular ethos, weaken social cohesion, and endanger the status of women and minorities within the ranks. Ultra-Orthodox leaders and their allies in the military have already voiced opposition to mixed-gender service.

The concern is that new Haredi recruits are unlikely to be the quiet yeshiva students devoted to Jewish study, but rather young men from the far-right or messianic wings of Israeli society. This could strengthen ideological and nationalist currents within the army and increase the risk of religiously motivated violence. The case of the [Netzah Yehuda Battalion](#), described by several Israeli and international media outlets as a "breeding ground for extremist ideology", is often cited as a warning example. The battalion has faced repeated allegations of violence against Palestinian civilians in the West Bank.

Beyond the political standoff, Israel's private sector is beginning to explore pragmatic solutions. In May 2025, major companies, including Fattal Hotels, HOT Telecom, and Altshuler Shaham, joined a [campaign](#) led by One Technologies, pledging to offer jobs to any Haredi man who completes his military service. This initiative seeks to depoliticise the issue through practical social integration based on employment and dignity.

At a deeper economic level, the plan also addresses one of Israel's structural vulnerabilities: the chronically low labour participation rate among Haredi men, particularly in high-tech and service sectors. By offering a pathway from military service to employment, such programmes are as much about economic self-preservation as about social cohesion, helping Israel broaden its human capital base while easing tensions between secular and ultra-Orthodox communities.

## **Conclusion**

Value differences are unavoidable in any plural society, but in Israel they have become unusually sharp. The tension between secular and ultra-Orthodox

communities has become one of Israel's most significant internal divides, with implications for social cohesion and political stability.

The dispute over Haredi military service reflects a deeper struggle over the state's identity, the boundaries between religious tradition and national obligation, and who carries the burden of defence. Attempts to impose a universal draft face strong resistance from a community that views military service as a threat to its way of life, while continued exemptions fuel resentment among the wider public. There is no solution that can fully satisfy all sides.

Beyond manpower concerns, the debate touches on resources, autonomy, and economic sustainability. State support for yeshivot, stipends for full-time study and allowances for large families have placed a growing burden on public finances. As more working-age Haredi men remain outside the labour force, the draft controversy thus symbolises broader concerns about welfare, equality, and competing visions of the state. Until these underlying issues are addressed, the conscription question will remain a recurring fault line in Israeli politics.

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