

Being Israeli: The IDF as a Mechanism for the Assimilation of Ethiopian Immigrants

Hana Rosenfeld

Adviser: Dr. Claire Adida

Senior Undergraduate Thesis Submitted to the Department of Political Science at
the University of California, San Diego

March 28th, 2016

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My sincere thanks to all of the soldiers I spoke with for your service, your thoughts, and your words. I am also grateful for the guidance and support of Professor Megumi Naoi and Professor Christina Schneider in the honors seminar. Special thanks to Professor Eli Berman for taking the time out of one very busy Pi Day to answer some questions. Most of all, thank you to my ever-patient adviser, Professor Claire Adida.

Introduction

For millennia, the area that is now the state of Israel has been home to an enormously diverse array of religions, ethnic groups, and nationalities. While the extremely diverse makeup of the country and its neighbors has at times contributed to a volatile environment of tension, conflict, and war, the success at which Israel has been able to integrate its many immigrant groups within, at least, its own borders is startling. Nowhere can this be seen more plainly than in the Israel Defense Forces, more commonly known as the IDF, with its unique conscription program and unorthodox organization. First of all, every citizen (both men and women) is mandatorily conscripted, though there are several complicated exemption policies. Israelis who are exempted from military service include those with medical and mental health histories that make them unfit to be soldiers, Israeli citizens living permanently abroad, *haredi* ultra-Orthodox (highly religious) Jewish men and women, women who are married or have children, Arabs, and Muslims. Despite these exemptions, however, several minority Israeli communities like the Druze (Arab non-Muslims), Circassians (non-Arab Muslims), and Bedouin (Arab Muslims) have formally asked the Knesset (Israel's parliamentary body) to conscript their communities just as any other in Israel. These minority groups who, from the outside observer, should have a vested interest in foiling the success of the IDF, especially to avoid fighting and killing their Arab or Muslim brothers, instead have earned themselves reputations as formidable soldiers who often serve in highly specialized units.

However, despite the successes of those minority groups, Ethiopian immigrants and Israelis of Ethiopian descent, who are Jewish, have so far not enjoyed rates of success in the IDF

that are comparable to those of the general population, or even other recent immigrant groups. Ethiopian soldiers are significantly more likely than the general population to be discharged dishonorably from service, to commit suicide with an IDF issued weapon, to be incarcerated in military prisons, and to desert their unit. They, on average, also score receive lower KABA (preliminary IDF placement exam) scores which significantly lowers their chances of succeeding in the IDF since it is the “threshold criterion for recruitment to elite units in the IDF and may influence the soldier's selection for officer training or assignment to certain occupations in the army”¹. These troubling statistics beg the question: why does the IDF struggle to help Ethiopian immigrants assimilate into Israeli society when it has a very good track record with other immigrant groups and minority populations? Is the recently adopted five-step *Chomesh* plan for Ethiopian integration in the IDF effective and does it have the potential to be adapted for government institutions in other countries to boost assimilation of their immigrant populations?

Conventional literature says that a number of factors can significantly impact the success of an immigrant group in integrating into their new country, with emphasis placed on origin-dependent determinants like socioeconomic status, language compatibility, similarities in political culture, and education capital². Moving from Ethiopia, for example, where the majority of people are comparatively poor, are from rural agrarian villages, do not speak Hebrew or English, live in a *de facto* one party state, and are not generally highly educated, to Israel, a democratic, highly literate, developed country, would disadvantage immigrants automatically according to this theory. In spite of that, several other immigrant groups to Israel have had similarly bleak backgrounds and yet assimilated successfully, especially when religion is take

¹ Integration of Israelis of Ethiopian Origin in the IDF, Knesset Research and Information Center

² Friedberg, R. You can't take it with you? Immigrant assimilation and the portability of human capital, 1996.

into account; Jewish Ethiopians do worse in most measures of assimilation than the Israeli Arab and Muslim populations, as well as Christians. A 2012 study using Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) data demonstrated that, when work experience and education are held constant, Ethiopians earn 30-40% less than Arabs when they first enter the workforce, effectively showing that Ethiopian Israelis had replaced Arabs as the most disadvantaged group in Israel³. Clearly, the primary reason Ethiopians are failing to integrate is not language, cultural compatibility, or education, since they share those disadvantages with other minority or immigrant groups who are doing much better. Racism is likely at least a minor factor, but until a heavily black or African immigrant group with a more theoretically advantaged background also emigrates to Israel, there is no way of knowing if that can entirely explain the integration gap.

To tackle the question of effectiveness of IDF and Israeli government policy changes, I decided to interview IDF soldiers about their experiences and analyze Knesset research data measuring Ethiopian Israeli military performance. This was done with respect to the government's 2008 decision to implement a "five-step plan" (*Chomesh*) to further the integration of Israeli soldiers of Ethiopian descent into the IDF, since it was the first comprehensive differential programming package in the IDF's history, providing for the Amir course, pre-military training (*Mechinot*), resources for first-generation IDF soldiers' families, a high school mentoring program (*Zinuk B'aliyah*), and a course to train non-Ethiopian officers how to reach out to new soldiers⁴. I will ask IDF soldiers who have recently or are currently serving if they have been impacted by the five-step *Chomesh* plan either because they are Ethiopian or because they are officers for units with Ethiopian soldiers. I will also examine several measures

³ Siniver and Epstein. Can an ethnic group climb up from the bottom of a ladder? 2012

⁴ Haaretz - One in four Ethiopian Israelis winds up deserting military service, 2011.

of success in the IDF, like low rates of desertion, suicide, and incarceration coupled with high rates of enrollment in elite *sayeret* units or officer's courses before and after the five-step plan was phased in in 2010 (after two years of research and planning following the 2008 approval date)⁵.

I was able to interview 29 IDF soldiers who had all served in the IDF during or since the implementation of the five-step *Chomesh* program about their experience under the new policies and whether or not they felt it was effective in accelerating the assimilation of Ethiopian Israelis. I also interviewed two men (my father, Joel Rosenfeld, and Professor Berman of UCSD) who had served in the 1980s both for general context and to understand the IDF environment prior to the introduction of differential programming, but their responses will not be included in the group analysis since they did not themselves serve during the policy changes. I found respondents for the interviews through chain referrals, also called snowball sampling, with starting points being my family in Israel and my friend who works as the Israel fellow for the UC San Diego chapter of Hillel, Edi Mesoznikov. I asked every person that I interviewed for referrals and contact information of other potential respondents, followed up with them, then asked them the same thing at the completion of the interview. Interviews with soldiers in Israel took place over Skype, and were more difficult to organize due to the time zone difference, while interviews with respondents in the United States were done either in person or over the phone.

The 21 Ethiopian Israeli respondents overwhelmingly supported the five-step *Chomesh* plan, though many were quick to point out that there was domestic pushback against it in the Ethiopian community. Several (7 out of 21) were also in favor of phasing out the program within

⁵ Haaretz - One in four Ethiopian Israelis winds up deserting military service, 2011.

the decade, though all but one thought that 2017, the current projected end date of *Chomesh*, was too early. All of the Ethiopians interviewed said that they thought they were better off than their parent's generation, 81% (17 out of 21) believed that black Israelis are better off than black Americans, and 86% (18/21) believed that the Israeli government is working hard to combat inequality. These responses indicate a high level of optimism for the situation of Israelis of Ethiopian descent, especially when considering the personal benefits experienced by every soldier I interviewed due to the differential programs.

The number of non-Ethiopian recent soldiers I interviewed was smaller (8 out of 29) but there were several common threads in the experiences of the soldiers I was able to speak with. Five of the eight were officers in their unit, which mean that, even though they were not of Ethiopian descent themselves, they still participated in one of the prongs of the *Chomesh* plan. The five officers received training in basic Amharic, the language of northern Ethiopia where most Beta Israel are from, as well as lessons in Ethiopian culture and constructive ways to approach soldiers about sensitive issues. Two officers reported learning about warning signs of depression, which the IDF allegedly taught were different among Ethiopians than non-Ethiopian Israelis. They were also generally optimistic, with all of the respondents agreeing with the statement that the Israeli government is working hard to combat inequality.

The analysis of government data on Ethiopian integration in the IDF prior to and following the implementation of the five-step *Chomesh* program was difficult because much of the raw Knesset and IDF commissioned research and data was classified. However, I was able to find some data from a combination of Knesset press releases, Comptroller reports, and newspaper coverage that were made available to the public to sketch a rough idea of the

effectiveness of *Chomesh*. I found that Ethiopian Israeli soldiers began to close the achievement gap in almost every measure of military success except for suicide, in which Ethiopians continue to be at higher and higher risk than the general population. However, I will also explore alternate explanations of why suicide rates have not decreased, taking into account the small incidence rate (just 15 Israeli soldiers committed suicide in 2015 compared with 177 active duty soldiers and 6,500 veterans in the US in 2012⁶) as well as psychological phenomena like suicide “clustering”. Also known as suicide contagion, it refers to the increased likelihood of multiple suicides occurring within a short time frame and within a given geographic area⁷. Since even a single suicide by an Israeli of Ethiopian descent would account for 6.7% of the suicides despite the fact that Ethiopians make up just under 2% of the general population, a “cluster” of two or three suicides could very quickly inflate the number to be disproportionate by nearly ten times.

The IDF and the Knesset’s Research and Information Center have undoubtedly conducted internal studies and research to gauge the success of costly differential programs like the five-step *Chomesh* plan, but since those are not available to the public, this thesis will provide a basic overview of the effectiveness of such government policies not only within the context of the IDF, but also the potential of similar programs in other countries. While there is extensive research into the role of a military in shaping a national conscience or of affirmative action style programs that try to compensate for class disadvantages, not very much research has been done on the effect of low-cost integration programs that then use, in this case, the IDF, but potentially, university or even high school, to magnify that very small initial cost into a highly beneficial integrative force. This is especially important for countries that have suddenly

⁶ *Department of Veterans Affairs: 2012 Suicide Data Report*

⁷ Center for Suicide Prevention: *Suicide Contagion and Suicide Clusters*, 2013.

experienced a high influx of immigrants they are not equipped to absorb, like in Western Europe for the next few decades, since this model uses existing, well-oiled state institutions to magnify some very small, low-cost policy changes.

Argument

Historical Context

Jewish Ethiopians had been emigrating to Israel well before she was officially a state, but the largest migrational wave came in the 1980s and 1990s when the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) first airlifted over 8,000 Jewish Ethiopians from refugee camps in Sudan in the covert effort known as Operation Moses. The famines and civil war in Ethiopia had displaced thousands of people, forcing them to trek hundreds of miles to refugee camps over the Sudanese border. The 1991 Operation Solomon saw 35 disguised planes evacuating over 14,500 Ethiopians from refugee camps in Addis Ababa over the course 36 hours, as well as the births of five babies on those flights. The covert military operation was carried out on the Jewish sabbath, since the planes were idle at the time and Jews believe that breaking the Sabbath to save lives is permissible⁸. The operations were widely popular and thought to be the last influx of Ethiopians, since the Beta Israel community, or Jewish Ethiopians, had nearly all succeeded in making *aliyah*. However, an ethnic group called the Falash Mura (or Falashmura) by the Israeli and Ethiopian governments has been fighting for their right to move to Israel under the Law of Return, which allows any Jew living abroad to claim Israeli citizenship and make *aliyah*⁹. The topic is contentious because the Falash Mura converted to Christianity almost 200 years ago to

⁸ New York Times - Ethiopians and Israelis exult as airlift is completed. 26 May 1991.

⁹ Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Law of Return, 5 July 1950.

avoid persecution despite a two thousand year history prior to that of being part of the Jewish Beta Israel community. Israel agreed in October of 2015 to allow all the remaining Falash Mura to come to Israel provided they reconvert back to Judaism, but sparked major protests in March of 2016 after renegeing on that Cabinet decision due to lack of funds. This failure of Prime Minister Netanyahu to follow through with his original promise to allow them in was seen by many in the Ethiopian Israeli community to stem from racism¹⁰. Tensions between the Ethiopian Israeli community and the rest of Israel have clearly not ended, but the five-step *Chomesh* plan to integrate Ethiopians into the IDF more effectively was seen as a significant step in the right direction. If the government decides to follow through with the projected phase out year of 2017, there may be protests once again.

Argument + Literature Review

This thesis demonstrates that, while the Israeli government has in the past struggled to assimilate Ethiopian Israelis at similar rates as other immigrant groups, the recent reforms and new programs in the IDF are highly effective, making IDF a potentially central mechanism for immigrant integration in the future. Not only would this encourage the Israeli government and the IDF to continue to fund the differential programs that it is currently going to phase out in 2017, but other countries trying to assimilate large groups of immigrants of dissimilar backgrounds to native populations could model their integration programs on Israeli successes. The Israeli model is a low cost way to use the power of existing institutions and using them as magnifying tools of smaller, earlier reforms and policy changes.

¹⁰ Haaretz: 1,500 protest in Jerusalem against suspension of Falashmura airlifts from Ethiopia, 20 March 2016.

The five-step integration program, called *Chomesh*, includes the Amir course, guidance for first generation soldiers and their families, extensive training for officers, create a high school mentoring program, and increase access to pre-military activities and organizations for disadvantaged teens. None of these reforms are large, institutional changes that affect the entire Israeli population; rather, they are targeted treatments at the early stages of Ethiopian Israelis' journey as citizens and can therefore change the course of their lives more efficiently than welfare or subsidy programs later in life.

A key part of the IDF's effective approach to the problem of lagging Ethiopian integration is their willingness to recognize that the Ethiopian population was actually highly motivated and capable, but societal and other factors were standing in the way. Previous administrations had put forth the argument that the disproportionately high rates of Ethiopian soldiers who drop out of the IDF, are incarcerated, desert, and fail to get into elite units occurs because they do not see themselves as "Israeli" and are not motivated to serve their country. However, both men and women of Ethiopian descent have some of the highest voluntary enrollment rates of any ethnic group, and significantly higher rates than the general population. This shows that they are willing and eager to serve, not that they are half-hearted and trying to avoid conscription at any cost. The soldiers instead drop out when they are faced with the stress-filled, unfamiliar environment with no support system for dealing with it constructively. for desertion or the lesser, but similar, charge of abandonment of their unit. This is proven by the fact that, of the Ethiopian soldiers who are incarcerated, 80% are imprisoned because of desertion or taking "absence without leave", a lesser but related charge. Ethiopian soldiers who

were sentenced because of drug use, violence, theft, or the unlawful use of a weapon make up just 3% of all Ethiopian soldiers in military prison¹¹.

This thesis argues that the IDF has, in the past, been highly successful at assimilating new immigrants because it encouraged integration as a virtue in and of itself. What differs in the Ethiopian case is that the same institutions and procedures that helped other immigrant groups began to work against the Beta Israel. However, several new IDF measures, most notably the Amir course and the changes in protocol to lower the numbers of deserters (and therefore incarcerated soldiers), have had a significant effect not only on the raw numbers, but also on the way Ethiopian Israeli soldiers perceive themselves in the wider context of the IDF.

Even a cursory glance at the history of state formation and war shows that militaries have had a powerful hand in shaping the futures not only of neighboring states but also of colonized populations. Not as much attention is paid, however, to the impact that the formation and maintenance of a military has on the domestic population and its government until recently. Perhaps the most well known exploration of the role of the military in shaping contemporary national identity comes from Charles Tilly, who writes about this phenomenon generally in European states over nearly a thousand years¹² as well as more specifically in the context of the French military¹³. He notes that “militarization = civilianization” since conscription and volunteer armies drew on the state’s citizenry in ways that previous mercenary forces had not, creating a newly built-in need for veteran’s benefits, political interest groups for soldiers, and the incorporation of military structures into government. This incorporation of the citizenry into the

¹¹ Knesset Research and Information Center: Integration of Israelis of Ethiopian Origin in the IDF

¹² Charles Tilly – Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 990-1992, 1994

¹³ Charles Tilly – Citizenship, Identity, and Social History, 1996

military and the subsequent incorporation of the military into government helped to marry the national identity with the military identity in an unprecedented way. In early France, rural towns throughout the country spoke different dialects, practiced different religions, and were generally highly varied from province to province. The mingling that resulted from the mass conscription of men, however, helped to create a national French identity as differences were set aside and similarities in values and background highlighted.

The indigenous people of Australia, called Aboriginal Australians, have been party to increased efforts from European Australians at reconciliation for historical injustices in recent decades, but are still disturbingly marginalized in contemporary society. A pervasive education and healthcare gap from early childhood continues to disadvantage Aboriginal Australians later in life, as obvious in measures of household income, where 45.2% of the entire indigenous population fall into the lowest income quintile compared to just 19.6% of non-indigenous Australians¹⁴. Despite this continuing inequality, however, Aboriginal Australians have seen a change in government policy toward them since the mid 1970s, beginning with the national enfranchisement of the indigenous population, and continuing through to 2008, when Prime Minister Rudd issued a formal apology for the “Stolen Generations” (Aboriginal children forcibly taken from their families during the first half of the twentieth century)¹⁵. This change in government policy came on the heels of Aboriginal inclusion in the Australian army during WWI, which prompted the extension of the right to vote, then citizenship, to Aboriginal men for the first time¹⁶. This was largely due to the emergence of indigenous servicemen as Australia’s

¹⁴ Australian Bureau of Statistics – Income by Indigenous Status in 2006

¹⁵ Bretherton and Mellor - Reconciliation between Aboriginal and other Australians: the "stolen generations", 2006

¹⁶ Noah Riseman - Aboriginal military service and assimilation, 2014

“model minority” to the point that, despite the continued inequality suffered by Aboriginal people well into 2016, nearly all of the major victories in citizenship and national identity came on the heels of military service.

Conventional wisdom holds that Ethiopian immigrants to Israel struggle to assimilate largely due to the living conditions in their origin country, which is considered a *de facto* one party state, has suffered cycles of famine and civil war for the past three decades, and is not fully developed, especially in rural villages¹⁷. In fact, Steinberger concludes that the apparent inability of Ethiopians to integrate is a result of irreconcilable and fundamental cultural differences between the two groups¹⁸. This theory that immigrants retain “capital” that helps immigrants from an origin country very similar to their destination integrate while immigrants from significantly different language, religious, educational, and economic backgrounds struggle to do so is a common justification for inaction on the topic of assimilation programs. Since Israel is overwhelmingly made up of immigrants from all different political, economic, and language backgrounds, none of whom have experienced the same degree of difficulty in assimilation as Ethiopians, combined with the fact that even minority Muslim groups enjoy parity with other Israelis shows that this cannot be the sole reason for an assimilation gap.

Research Design

This thesis uses in-depth interviews with former and current IDF soldiers as well as data released by the Israeli government to track the effectiveness of government assimilation efforts and examine the

¹⁷ Economist Intelligence Unit – 2010 Democracy Index

¹⁸ Ami Steinberger - Becoming Ethiopian Israelis: An appraisal of the adjustment of the Ethiopian Jewish community to Israeli society, 2006

ways the IDF serves as a unique assimilation mechanism, especially with regard to Ethiopian Israelis. The first empirical chapter will be a qualitative analysis of the personal experiences of Ethiopian Israeli soldiers, as well as their non-African commanding officers and fellow soldiers, as understood through interviews and correspondence. The second empirical chapter will be a quantitative analysis of the trends in Ethiopian success in the military as reported by the IDF's reports to the Knesset and the Central Bureau of Statistics to determine if new differential programs aimed at boosting assimilation were effective.

The geographical scope of this thesis is limited to Israel, but the historical background of the Ethiopian immigrants, especially when compared with other immigrant groups to Israel, is important since it is generally understood to contribute to assimilation success in the host country. The few respondents being interviewed in the United States (3 out of 29) were only asked about their experiences in Israel and the IDF, so their place at the time of the interview is outside the scope of this thesis. The temporal scope for the interviews ranges from respondents who relayed their experiences in the IDF during the 1980s Lebanon War to the present day (March 2016), since many of the respondents are still serving in the IDF at the time of this writing. For the purpose of analysis more generally, the interviews will be divided up into "before" and "after" 2010, which was the year of implementation of Israel's comprehensive five step *Chomesh* program to assimilate Ethiopian Israelis through the IDF. This is also the benchmark year used to gauge the effectiveness of the IDF's differential programs, like the Amir course, in the quantitative portion by comparing the rates of IDF success before and after that year as reported by Israeli government data. Again, the experiences of other immigrant groups, who came to Israel before the major Ethiopian wave in 1980-90, will be a factor in understanding the context in which the IDF decided to implement special programs targeting Israelis of Ethiopian descent, but will not be the subject of the thesis itself.

The unit of analysis is the individual, particularly in the interview portion, though some of the data from Israel's Central Bureau of Statistics may be in the form of percentages rather than individuals to

better highlight the disparity between Ethiopian soldiers and their non-Ethiopian counterparts because of the very small share of the population they represent, just under 2%. The interviews were all conducted in the five month period between November 2015 and March 2016 and touch on experiences of the IDF soldiers from 2007, which was the earliest entrance date for male soldiers to still be serving at the implementation of *Chomesh*. range from highlighting important experiences and impressions from nearly three decades ago to recounting occurrences from just weeks prior, but the data from the CBS is generally always annual reporting commissioned by the Knesset to monitor the IDF.

Originally, I wanted a large sample size of Ethiopian Israelis, especially with a wide variety in age and length of time living in Israel, so I contacted several of the largest absorption centers to see if it would be possible to send a questionnaire there for many people to fill out. However, I quickly found that the absorption centers handled the affairs of only new immigrants, usually only for the first year after arriving in Israel, so second generation Israelis of Ethiopian descent would rarely have had any contact at all with such centers. In addition, almost none of the people living in the absorption centers had served in the IDF. Since there were no other centralized institutions which exclusively handled the affairs of Ethiopian Israelis in the IDF, I needed to find them myself, but had limited resources to do so.

I asked my family currently living in Israel, as well as the Israel Fellow for UCSD Hillel, to put me in contact with their friends who were Ethiopian and had served in the IDF. The contacts I received at that time will be referred to as Round One, whom I then reached out to them via email with some preliminary information as well as my availability for Skype interviews. The people who responded to either that initial email or one follow-up email were interviewed about their experiences in the IDF. It was difficult given the time zone difference to schedule interviews, but those who were able participated in interviews that often went over an hour in length. After the interviews, I would send a follow up email thanking them for participating and asking for the contact information of any other Ethiopian Israelis who might be able to participate as well; they became Round Two. This chain of referrals continued until

Round Four, where I stopped due to time constraints. For every contact I received, I sent one email to reach out to them and one thank you email if the interview was successful; at both of these points I also sent one follow-up email four days after the original one. If they did not respond to the follow-up email, I did not contact them again and they would be a dead end in the chain.

Due to this system of snowball sampling, also called referral sampling, the respondent pool is not representative of the Ethiopian population in Israel or the makeup of the IDF. Instead, I will use the interviews to determine whether or not the IDF has implemented significant changes in military protocol, in addition to measuring how optimistic Ethiopian soldiers are about their future in the IDF and Israeli society as a whole. I began with several basic questions that were asked of all the respondents, but as certain similar themes came up in multiple interviews, I began to incorporate them as well. For example, my first three interviews with Ethiopian soldiers all led, organically, to the respondent noting several similarities between the debate surrounding differential programming in the IDF and affirmative action in American universities. I decided to add in a question about whether there were groups within the Ethiopian community who feel that differential programming cheapens their achievements, since that is an issue raised by under-represented minorities in the United States, for the remaining 26 interviews. Similarly, several of the earlier interviews included people saying that, while they were disappointed with some of Israel's policies aiming to assimilate Ethiopians, they still thought that it was easier to be black in Israel than in the United States, so I added that as another measure of optimism. Since I did not directly ask the first four respondents the exact same list of questions as I did the other 25, the results may be different had I done so. In total, I interviewed 21 Israelis of Ethiopian descent and 8 non-Ethiopian Israelis, all of whom had or are currently serving in the IDF. Out of the above 29, three were living in the United States at the time of the interview and the other 26 were living in Israel. I will also reference two interviews with non-Israeli, non-Ethiopian former IDF soldiers, for context of the environment prior to the five-step integration program but will not include them in analysis of the current situation and how the

IDF is helping Ethiopians assimilate. These interviews were with Professor Eli Berman, who served in an elite *sayeret* unit, and my father, Joel Rosenfeld, who served in the Education Corps in Lebanon, and their experiences in the IDF in the early 1980s. While there had been some Ethiopian immigration to Israel prior to that time, the majority of Ethiopians first came to Israel in the mid 1980s and after, so there were even fewer Ethiopian Israeli soldiers than there are currently. Efforts to boost the assimilation process for Ethiopian immigrants were not as comprehensive or developed and there were no programs in the IDF tailored specifically to the needs of soldiers of Ethiopian descent at the time although there were certainly Ethiopian soldiers then.

Results: Interview Analysis

One of my first interviews was with Edi Mesoznikov, the Israel Fellow for Hillel at UC San Diego, and a former drill sergeant in the IDF. Having gone through the special officer training provided for under the five step *Chomesh* plan, Edi was able to outline many of the differential programs including the Amir course and the static “oleh” (new immigrant) status of Ethiopians, even when they are born in Israel. Edi began by telling me that, as an immigrant to Israel himself (he and his parents are Russian), he understood more about the trials of Ethiopian soldiers than other Israelis. This background helped him land a position as the officer of a unit of immigrant soldiers, many of whom were Ethiopian. He noted that the Israeli government has made it policy to grant “oleh” status to Israelis of Ethiopian descent, even when they are not actually new immigrants, as a way to allow continued access to benefits including mortgage subsidies, help with university tuition, and daycare tuition subsidies, that are normally reserved for new immigrants to the country¹⁹. The Amir course, one of the five points of the *Chomesh*

¹⁹ Nefesh B’Nefesh: Government Benefits for Olim Chadashim

plan, is designed to give Ethiopian teenagers who received poor KABA scores another chance to enter an elite unit, get into an officer's course, or be able to choose a position in a combat unit. Everyone who is not exempt from service receives a KABA score that is a combination of an IQ test, a Hebrew proficiency test, a personal interview, and a physical (given by a physician) on a scale of 41 to 56. People who score below 41 are considered not to be fit for service in the IDF, 41-47 is a low score, 48-51 is average, 52-54 allows participation in *Yom Sayerot* (the day to try out for the elite commando units), and 54-56 is the highest bracket that opens doors into military intelligence and other elite units. As has been noted by scientists using IQ tests in the United States, performance depends not only on intelligence, but is also significantly impacted by socioeconomic factors which negatively impacts Ethiopians teens whose parents are generally less well off than their non-Ethiopian counterparts. In an attempt to break this cycle, the IDF decided to establish the Amir course, which is seven weeks of intensive training in subjects from Israeli history and heritage to lessons in critical thinking skills and adaptation. Following the course, Ethiopian teens are permitted to retake the placement tests (not an option for other immigrant or minority groups) and receive placement into officer's courses, *sayeret* units, the Air Force, or into combat units according to their new, and hopefully improved, KABA score.

One Ethiopian former soldier, Simcha Masala, recounted her experience with the Amir course as exceedingly positive, noting that she was originally slated to become a clerk due to her low KABA score, but was able to become a commander, then later a sergeant, in the Education Corps after completing the Amir course. This in turn led her to have an "amazing" and very successful time in the IDF, which allowed her to apply to university and receive a full scholarship at the end of her service, which would likely not have been possible if she had ended

up a clerk. This is a perfect example of the way the Israeli government and IDF are able to keep costs relatively low; since they are not restructuring the entire placement system or overhauling the KABA test, a few changes in improving the accuracy of the test by providing a month and a half of training can literally change the entire course of a soldier's life. While not every nation has a mandatory conscription program quite like Israel, other similar institutions, particularly schools and universities, may benefit from this low impact model.

Both Simcha and Edi, along with Grigory S²⁰, Lev Baer, and Maayan A, all of whom are officers, also weighed in on the issues behind the abnormally high rate of incarcerated Ethiopian soldiers in military prison. Edi said that, though he had been trained to approach all of his Ethiopian soldiers, he nearly always was the one initiating contact about issues like homesickness and desertion. In years prior to *Chomesh*, officers would not know to talk with Ethiopian soldiers, who are stereotyped as shy and more reserved, until they had already abandoned their unit and were on the disciplinary track. Soldiers who are the first in their family to be in the IDF are often not prepared for the high stress environment, and if their parents depend on them to translate documents into Hebrew or provide for them, Ethiopian soldiers have been known to simply move back home as though nothing had changed in their life. While the IDF originally declared a soldier a "deserter" after 45 days of being away from their unit, it was recently lowered to just 22 days, after which the military police had grounds to arrest and imprison you. To cut down on desertion rates, the IDF decided to create a 24-hour call center that provides counseling and advice to new Ethiopian soldiers and their parents in both Hebrew and Amharic with the aim of resolving problems in a way that does not tempt soldiers to

²⁰ Soldiers who are currently serving in the IDF will not have last names specified to protect their identity. Respondents who have their last names included have completed their service in the IDF.

abandon their units. Edi also told me that requests for financial assistance in exchange for lost wages is also made easier to Ethiopian soldiers, who just need the recommendation of their commanding officer and one form as opposed to the many bank statements other soldiers are required to provide.

On the issue of national identity, I expected more respondents to express improved feelings for the state of Israel or their role as a citizen than what was actually reported, but it is still an important aspect of successful assimilation, particularly with new immigrants. An officer in the Air Force, Elijor K. was initially reluctant to enter the officer's course because he had wanted to go to university right after the IDF for a degree in computer science. Instead, his family encouraged him to take the position despite the extra time commitment that would follow the completion of his mandatory service, and he increasingly began to feel like an integral part of the IDF. He said that, prior to service, he was "childish" and did not feel like he was a significant part of Israeli society, but being in the IDF helped ground him and helped him feel that he was "doing something for his country". When asked about the debate surrounding differential programming, Elijor said that, while there are many genuine cases of racism, he feels that most non-Ethiopian Israelis actually do not support programs like the Amir course but do not proclaim it too loudly for fear of coming off as racist. He scored well enough on his first KABA that he earned a very good placement without taking part in the Amir program, and does not believe that such programs are necessary for anyone in the Ethiopian community. In fact, Elijor was the only Ethiopian soldier I spoke with who was in favor of phasing out the five-step *Chomesh* plan in 2017. When I brought up the infamous video of an Israeli police officer beating an Ethiopian IDF soldier that sparked massive protests in the spring of 2015, however, his response was

vehement and swift, calling the incident “a disgrace” that did not accurately represent the experiences of most Ethiopians with Israeli police.

Another measure of successful integration is intermarriage, which had previously not been common between Ethiopian Israelis and non-Ethiopian Israelis. Of the 29 total soldiers I interviewed, all of them said that IDF service made them more likely to consider an interracial relationship, with 17 out of 21 Ethiopian soldiers reporting that they already had had such a relationship and just 2 of the 8 non-Ethiopian soldiers saying the same thing. Of the 17 Ethiopian soldiers who had been in an interracial relationship, 16 had their first interracial relationship after they began IDF service, and both of the two non-Ethiopian soldiers had a similar experience. Clearly, the IDF encourages soldiers who previously had not had relationships outside of their own ethnic group to do so, especially for the Ethiopian soldiers. When I followed up the relationship question by asking if their family would approve, all 21 Ethiopian soldiers (even the four who had never had such a relationship) agreed that at least one member of their extended family would not approve, while none of the eight non-Ethiopian soldiers agreed with that statement. While many of the other questions may be subject to respondent bias, I argue that the question of past interracial relationships is a very accurate gauge of integration because the cost of lying about a non-hypothetical is higher than a simple opinion survey.

Results: Government Data Analysis

With the five-step Ethiopian integration program of 2008 in place, the Knesset’s Research and Information Center began to prepare annual reports on the effectiveness of the programs. While many of the documents are classified and may occasionally be made available

only to soldiers, we are able to glean some information from Knesset press releases and collaborations with other research groups. For example, the statistics for suicides committed by soldiers with IDF issued weapons has been a heavily guarded secret to the general public, though this information is made available to active duty soldiers with clearance. When one such soldier leaked the information to an outside news blog in 2012, the blog was investigated by the police and the IDF before sparking demands from the Israeli public to release the numbers²¹. As a result, I did not ask any of the soldiers if they knew the exact numbers of soldier dying of suicide, but for their general perceptions about how common it was and if they had ever felt that suicide was a particular problem for Ethiopian Israeli soldiers.

Following the incident with the anonymous blogger leaking classified files about the IDF's suicide rates, the IDF has published some limited data on the subject. According to an official report by the IDF Medical Corps, an average of 39 soldiers committed suicide annually between the years 1991 and 1993. Between 2000 and 2002, the average was 33 annually, and 2009 -2011 saw 23 suicides per year on average. Seven soldiers died in 2013, but the number then jumped to 15 in both 2014 and 2015. In 2014, three out of 15 were Ethiopian and 4 out of 15 were in 2015. While data is not available on the percentage of Ethiopians committing suicide for any of the other years, rates of 20% in 2014 and 26.6% in 2015 means that the suicide rate for Ethiopians in the IDF is ten times higher than their share of the general population, which stood at just under 2% at the end of 2015. Despite these dismal numbers, however, Other factors may inflate these numbers in ways that have very little to do with successful integration. For example, the suicide clustering phenomenon may help to explain a higher number of soldiers of Ethiopian

²¹ Times of Israel: Every two weeks a soldier commits suicide, IDF numbers show. 27 December 2012.

descent committing suicide, since it there are fewer Ethiopians in the IDF generally and the suicide contagion effect could “spread”, or impact the population, more quickly.

Perhaps the most effective arm of the five-step program is the effort to decrease the numbers of incarcerated Ethiopian soldiers by preventing desertion in the first place. The IDF has established a 24-hour hotline available in both Amharic and Hebrew to guide Ethiopian families who are sending a teenager to the IDF for the very first time; previously, there were virtually no resources to explain the process to potential recruits since every other family was full of people who had served in one capacity or another and were familiar with the process after several generations. Additionally, officers are trained to approach their Ethiopian soldiers and make sure that they are not considering leaving to support their family at home. Even if this situation should arise, commanding officers have an easier time in securing financial assistance for their soldiers to send home or can request that the soldier be transferred to a position closer to home. These few steps will help cut down desertion, which will significantly cut down the number of incarcerated Ethiopians since 80% of jailed Ethiopian soldiers are there for either desertion (55%) or absence without leave (25%) compared with just 3% who are there for a combination of violent crimes, drugs, and theft.

Conclusion

The policies and programs instituted by the Israeli government and the Israeli Defense Forces aimed at accelerating the integration of soldiers of Ethiopian descent into the military are, on the whole, very successful. Interviews with 29 soldiers recently in the IDF shows that they have increased access to previously closed areas of the IDF, including elite commando units, the

Air Force, officer's courses, and intelligence units because of differential programming that works to minimize the inherent disadvantages in the system. Respondents generally were overwhelmingly optimistic about the future of Ethiopian soldiers in the IDF and were confident that the government would continue to prioritize equal opportunity. Not only were the reforms effective in setting up soldiers for success after service through university acceptances, officer training (which is a marketable trait in the workforce), and cutting down on desertions that lead to incarceration or a dishonorable discharge (which turn many companies off from hiring them), but the quality of life for the soldiers also improved. Many reported that feelings of impotence and insignificance were banished, about half (11 out of 21) felt that they were able to change the views of non-Ethiopians towards them by breaking down stereotypes, and a total of 19 had an interracial relationship for the first time during their IDF service.

Future research should continue to track the success of soldiers of Ethiopian descent in the IDF past the 2017 end of many of the institutions set up under the five-step integration program, including the Amir course. If the success rates stagnate or even dip down slightly, it will be clear that not only was the differential programming effective, but that similar institutional changes in other countries may help to assimilate immigrants quickly. Research on this subject should also in future gain access to more Knesset, Central Bureau of Statistics, and IDF data to create a more comprehensive look at the trends seen in the various measures of IDF success before, during, and after the introduction of the five-step *Chomesh* plan.

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