

ULTRA-ORTHODOX IN ISRAEL APPEAR HEADED TO THE ARMY

Haredi lawmakers warn move could unleash a culture war or worse — the wrath of God

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TOMER, West Bank

On an abandoned army base here in the Jordan Valley, a couple dozen ultra-Orthodox teenagers are entering a new military academy designed to prepare them for the rigors of the Israeli army.

Where once these young men in black hats, white tassels and side curls were destined for a life of religious study, poring over Torah and Talmud at a yeshiva, they will now spend the coming months with an expanded curriculum: running an obstacle course and humping packs across the frying pan of the Judean desert.

“Ever fire a gun?” the visiting deputy defense minister, Danny Danon, asked a whip-thin 17-year-old from one of the most cloistered, religious neighborhoods in Jerusalem, where the role models are learned rabbis, not Israeli special forces.

“No, sir,” he replied. “But I am looking forward to it.”

The specter of ultra-Orthodox Jewish boys donning green Israel Defense Forces chinos and toting TAR-21 assault rifles is exactly what mainstream Israelis are demanding — and what leaders of “the Torah world” dread.

The Israeli parliament is ready to make good on a campaign promise by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition government to compel the Haredi, as the ultra-Orthodox are known, to “share the burden.” Under the new law, they must enlist in the army or perform some other kind of national service, or else they face criminal charges and jail time as draft dodgers.

In an Israeli society divided between secular, high-tech Tel Aviv and pious, ancient Jerusalem, the voting public’s insistence that the sons of the ultra-Orthodox go to boot camp, like every other 18-year-old in Israel, represents a remarkable rewriting of the social contract.

“This marks the end of the era in which we discriminated between secular Jewish blood and Haredi Jewish blood, while our enemies don’t make that distinction,” said Yaakov Peri, a government minister and former head of the security agency Shin Bet.

The law of compulsory service for the Haredim passed the first of three rounds in the Knesset late last month by a solid two-thirds majority. If the bill wins final approval after the summer recess, as predicted, the new law could bring 5,000 or more ultra-Orthodox recruits into the army each year. As part of a compromise, the government will begin a compulsory draft for the ultra-Orthodox after a four-year transition period. About 1,800 “Torah geniuses” will be allowed to continue their studies. Haredi women will also be exempt.

Haredi politicians and rabbis warn that this could unleash mass protest, a culture war or worse — the wrath of God.

In parliament, the bill’s initial passage evoked intense emotions, as Haredi parliamentarians handcuffed themselves to the podium, tore their clothes in acts of mourning and blew a ram’s horn in the corridors.

“They look at this legislation as evil, as a threat to their way of life,” said Sam Sokol, a reporter with the Jerusalem Post who served in the sole all-male, super-kosher combat brigade for the ultra-Orthodox in the Israeli army, which he compared to “a yeshiva with guns.”

Haredim believe, he said, that as the Jews have survived persecution by Pharaohs, Babylonians, Romans, Nazis and Communists, so, too, they will endure this. “If the political establishment says they have to go — then the army will have to take them by force,” Sokol said.

Ultra-Orthodox youth, enrolled in religious study, have been exempt from military service since the 1950s, when one of the founders of Israel, former prime minister David Ben-Gurion, struck a deal with Haredi rabbis that allowed yeshiva students to study rather than fight.

But that was at a time when Jews were struggling to rebuild the world of Torah study following the Holocaust, and when the number of Haredi students seeking exemptions was relatively small.

Yair Lapid, the Israeli finance minister and leader of a party that campaigned on a platform that called for the ultra-Orthodox to serve, said that when exemptions and subsidies for Torah learners were established, they went to 400 students. Today there are 800,000 ultra-Orthodox in Israel.

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