

Article

# Introduction to the *Armed Forces & Society* Forum on Military Reserves in the “New Wars”

Armed Forces &amp; Society

1-9

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DOI: 10.1177/0095327X21996220

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## Abstract

This *Armed Forces & Society* forum is dedicated to exploring recent trends in the characteristics of military reserves and of the changing character of reserve forces within the armed forces within the military, the civilian sphere, and in between them. To bring new and critical perspectives to the study of reserve forces and civil–military relations, this introduction and the five articles that follow draw on two organizing conceptual models: The first portrays reservists as transmigrants and focuses on the plural membership of reservists in the military and in civilian society and the “travel” between them. The second model focuses on the multiple formal and informal compacts (contracts, agreements, or pacts) between reservists and the military.

## Keywords

military reserves, reservists, military compacts, military sociology, transmigrants, civil–military relations

Changes in the environments of the militaries of industrial democracies have led to reserve forces becoming key components of their force structure and operational plans (Bury, 2019; Griffith, 2018; Keene, 2015; Weitz, 2007). Reserve forces,

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appearing in many forms—such as primary or supplementary reserves, national guards, home guards, territorial armies, or militia and auxiliary formations—are increasingly involved in an array of security and civilian missions that include international interventions, border security, and missions centered on disaster relief or national emergencies such as the COVID-19 crisis (Bury, 2016; Cromptoets, 2013; Kirke, 2008; Lin-Greenberg, 2018; Nevitt, 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Although their responsibilities span combat, combat support, and logistical support roles, reserve forces and reservists have received relatively little sustained scholarly attention compared with the consideration given to regulars and conscripts. This situation holds despite their importance and the unique social and psychological features marking them (Diehle et al., 2019; Griffith et al., 2020). Indeed, reservists seem to differ from professional regulars and draftees in terms of motivations (Griffith, 2009; Laanapere et al., 2018), social cohesion (Bury, 2019; Griffith, 2009), familial dynamics (Anderson & Goldenberg, 2019; Basham & Catignani, 2018), employment relations (Fairweather, 2018; Figinski, 2017), political commitment and awareness, and long-term considerations regarding military service (Jenkins et al., 2019).

Moreover, studies of reserves that did take place were carried out during the heyday of the Cold War when the emphasis was on mass formations fighting in conflicts assumed to be akin to conventional wars. With the end of the Cold War and the advent of the so-called “New Wars,” the need for reservists, as has become clear, has not disappeared, but the way they are deployed has taken older and newer forms. For example, during the past three decades, the involvement of militaries in contemporary conflicts has brought changes in doctrine and the deployment patterns of reserve forces and in their demographic composition (see Peele, 2014). In addition, the global financial crisis of the late 2000s, which shaped both military budgets and military families, also reshaped the economic dimension of reserve service and the kinds of formal and informal “contracts” or understandings governing relations between reservists, the military, employers, and families (Jenkins et al., 2019). These developments invite renewed scholarly attention that captures the particular social and organizational characteristics of military reserve forces and the special experiences of serving in the reserves.

This special issue aims to fill this gap. It gathers contributions that theoretically, critically, and empirically reflect on changes in the character of reserve forces within the military, in the civilian sphere, and in between the two spheres. The articles are an outcome of papers presented at the conference “‘New Wars’: Between Transmigration and Military Compacts” that was held at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom in 2018. In this conference, we revisited the metaphor of reserve soldiers as transmigrants first proposed by Lomsky-Feder et al. (2008) in an article published in *Armed Forces & Society* more than a decade ago. Participants reflected on the validity of this conceptualization and its utilization in explaining the recent developments in military reserve forces around the globe.

The metaphor of reserve soldiers as transmigrants seems to capture the unique and dynamic traits of military reserves. Similar to those migrants who regularly

travel between (at least) two permanent homes in different countries while personally and socially invested in both of them, reservists seem to combine plural membership both in the military and in civilian society and to “travel” between the two worlds. This dynamic, and to some degree their liminal position within the armed forces, is significant in shaping reservists’ experiences and expectations. At the same time, it influences their relations with the standing army. Lomsky-Feder et al. (2008) elaborate on some of these implications:

First, many reservists bring into the military the resources, skills, and abilities of their civilian occupations and specializations and *may* be better suited for special technological and technical tasks or missions that involve constabulary and stabilization/peacekeeping operations since they are older and perhaps less aggressive than conscripts and regulars. Second, reserves involve a link between the civilian population and the military since they can often break down the civil–military gap and incorporate the military into parts of wider society. Third, the constant mobilization and demobilization of reservists may—like the shifting of transmigrants between different homes—bring about much more critical thinking about “what is going on” in the armed forces and outside it. Hence, reservists share a dual perspective on the military organization, of soldiers and of civilians, and are more inclined to criticize it since they are less dependent on the military hierarchy. Fourth, the very character of the military—its specialization in the management, handling, and perpetration of organized violence—is something that is different from other organizations, and thus, its deployment involves unique problems of legitimation. Accordingly, there is usually more need for public approval for the deployment of reserves than there is for the assignment of regulars, making decisions about their deployment more problematic for decision makers.

These insights have led Gazit et al. (2020) to the development of additional analytical framework of military reserves that complements the one of transmigration. This framework focuses on the multiple, formal and informal, arrangements and agreements that regulate the relationships between reservists and the military. These “multiple compacts” are based on the “military covenant” that determines the relations between the military and society and shapes the expectations of a variety of groups and individuals. At the foundation of this idea is the contention that the covenant is based on an exchange relationship between the military and (an undifferentiated) society in which resources are negotiated about and traded between parties. The model of exchange is bolstered by a political perspective giving pride of place to how the constant (implicit) bargaining and (sometimes explicit) contestations between the parties are related to the resources each party can employ and the coalitions it can create. At the level of the military itself, the key question related to reservists is what kind of social role they are expected to fulfill. Thus, beyond the military missions they are to undertake, reservists often are used to legitimate action, as links to local communities or as forums for increasing the diversity of the forces.

The military covenant, in turn, is derived from and related to the wider social covenant and is the “vehicle” through which changes in the macro-sociological

environment are translated into expectations of the military and in our cases the reserves. Thus the advent of neoliberal ideas or the increased juridification of public life influences or transforms the expectations between reservists (and their families) and the military and state regarding such things as the risks they must take (e.g., their exposure to armed violence) or the material and symbolic rewards they receive for service (see Catignani & Basham, 2020).

This conceptualization aids us, as the essays in this special issue show, in delineating the kinds of ongoing exchanges between different kinds and groups of reservists and parts of the military that are at the base of recruitment and retention, expectations about family welfare, material and symbolic rewards for service, or indeed the kinds of stresses reserve service may incur if contracts are breached. Furthermore, the multiple levels and the diversity of contracts direct our attention to the diversity of reservists in terms of social background, family circumstances, deployment patterns, or military occupation as well as to their power (sociologically, their agency) in negotiating their particular deployments. Finally, this kind of conceptualization underscores how contracts differ from each other. For example, are they explicit or implicit? What is the length of their validity (due date), and how often must they be renewed? What sanctions may be invoked if they are breached? And, what discretion do commanders have in negotiating local agreements? The thematic center of the articles in this collection is the interplay of these two frameworks: reservists as transmigrants and the multiple formal and informal compacts (contracts, agreements, or pacts) between reservists and the military.

The opening article by Gazit et al. (2020) reexamines and further develops the analytical metaphor of “Reserve Soldiers as Transmigrants” by adding the conceptualization of “multiple contracts.” The authors review the literature that has used this metaphor to make sense of various facets of military reserves since the publication of their original article in 2008. They then expand the notion of transmigration by linking it to the explicit and implicit “contracts” or agreements struck between the military and individuals and groups within and outside of it. They show that the operation of reserve forces is not just an institutional administrative matter but an ongoing negotiation with soldiers that involves issues including the management of identity, commitment, and the meaning attached to military service. Finally, they examine the institutional and political meaning of the reserves at the macro-sociological level. The juxtaposition and interplay of the two models, transmigration and multiple contracts, is used to introduce structural elements into the movement of soldiers between the military and civilian society. Correspondingly, it adds a dynamic dimension to the contents of the implicit contracts that organize reservists’ relations with the state and military.

The second contribution by Griffith and Ben-Ari (2020) examines reserve military service from a perspective of social construction. In their article, the authors explore how reservists interpret their unique experiences, give meaning to military service, and construct their identity. They point to three interrelated sets of issues: the content of reservists’ identities, the contexts within which they emerge, and the

processes by which identities develop and are maintained. Based on an extensive literature review of previous studies of military reserves and the thematic analysis of their findings, they identify four major categories of such social constructions: First, reserve service as complementary to civilian life, reserve military service providing wanted satisfaction not otherwise achieved, material gain, or ideological commitment; second, reserve service as based on an equitable arrangement or equitable understandings, understood as fair compensation for self-sacrifice; third, reserve military service often serves as a basis for self-definition; and fourth, reserve military service can often result in discordant identities between the civilian and military worlds. These social constructions illustrate the fluid nature of reservists' experiences and demonstrate the need for a holistic examination of the phenomenon that pays attention to the deferential and super-dynamic character of reserve military service which takes place in various operational settings and social contexts.

Connelly's (2020) article points to the different status and prestige of diverse components of the military reserves. More specifically, Connelly investigates causes and consequences of the marginalization of part-time British Army reservists. He asks how regular army personnel's perceptions of part-time reservists are influenced by regular army norms of time, commitment, and conformity to a profession with strong workplace boundaries and pressures for internal conformity and high stratification. The analysis suggests that part-time reservists represent a puzzling social category that can be challenging for the full-time soldier. Despite recent shared operational experiences of regular soldiers and reserve soldiers, there are tensions and disparities between these two components; the former holds ambivalent attitudes with regard to the latter's perceived commitment, professionalism, vague military identity, and imperfect conformity to military norms. Connelly concludes that while there can be much respect for individual British Army reservists, they represent a challenge to the dominant professional beliefs and identity of the British regular army. These findings bear significant ramifications for militaries that seek to implement the Whole Force approach, such as in developing more integrated professional discourse around identity, competence, commitment, and time that would encompass regulars and reservists alike.

The fourth article by Laanepere and Kasearu (2020) concentrates on the issue of military service readiness of reserve soldiers in the Estonian Defence Forces. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's theory, it examines how different types of capital related to the military and civilian fields are associated with the military readiness of reservists and, more specifically, their readiness to participate in military exercises. Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of "fields," "habitus," and "capital" are used to demonstrate the continuous movement of reservists between military and civilian spheres, the reciprocal relations between the spheres, and the flow of capital on military service readiness. The authors find that cultural capital-related military skills and knowledge, social capital-related military cohesion, and symbolic capital-related positive colorful peak experiences would increase the service readiness of reservists. Yet, the most durable factor that was relevant in the military and civilian fields was from the

conscription experience and military training—derived military skills and knowledge that supported the personal development of the reserve soldier. For reserve soldiers, the dominant social group is located in the civilian field, and cohesion or loyalty to them is a factor scholars cannot overlook without causing complications to reservists' readiness.

The closing article for this special issue by Rein-Sapir and Ben-Ari (2020) explores the legislative process leading to the enactment of Israel's Reserve Law that was led by several reservists' organizations that tried to improve the standing and resources allocated to the reserve forces. The article analyzes the impact of these organizations and the coalitions they created with politicians serving in the national parliament. It demonstrates how the actions of reservists' organizations turned a bilateral tie between the military and its (reserve) soldiers into a trilateral one comprising the military, reserve soldiers, and state institutions. The analysis illuminates how the unique position and movement of reservists between the military and the civilian worlds do not only influence the social status of reservists, but also the position of the military vis-à-vis the state's social and political arenas. Rein-Sapir and Ben-Ari make a threefold argument. First, the ongoing activity of reservists in the civil society-state arena outside the military undermines the military's autonomy in managing its relations with reservists. Hence, the negotiations of reservists to improve their conditions of service are not only an internal military matter but politically charged actions that impact the institutional autonomy of the Israel Defense Forces at large. Second, while the unique dual position of reservists in both the military and civilian worlds can aid military effectiveness by integrating the skills and perspectives of civilians into the forces, it also intensifies criticisms that sometimes press the military to accede to external interventions. And third, although legislation may seem to formalize and finalize the social contract between reserve soldiers, the military, and society, it is actually a stepping stone for further negotiations as new problems and challenges emerge due to changes in society and in the geopolitical environment. In other words, although rooted in the particular case of Israeli reserve soldiers, this article demonstrates how contracts and compacts regarding reserve soldiers are the result of changing dynamics and the flexibility necessitated by different tasks and missions and, at the same time, are closely influenced by sociopolitical powers outside the military.

As the importance of military reserves in present-day militaries around the world increases and as reservists are more involved in a growing array of military missions, there is a growing scholarly recognition that the reserves are unique components of the armed forces that deserve special analytical attention to their distinctive traits. As the collection of articles in this special issue demonstrates, the significance of reservists goes beyond important issues such as military readiness, motivation, cohesion, familial dynamics, and employment prospects since an analysis of reservists sheds light on far broader aspects of civil–military relations. It is our hope that the insights of this collection serve as a springboard for further exploration of the field.

## Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the editor Professor Patricia Shields and the anonymous reviewers whose feedback and suggestions greatly improved the final version of this introduction and the articles that comprise this special issue. They would also like to thank the participants who discussed earlier versions of the articles associated with this special issue while attending the *Military Reserves in the “New Wars”: Transmigration and Military Compacts* workshop, which was hosted by the Strategy and Security Institute, University of Exeter, on August 20–21, 2018. The workshop was made possible thanks to funding received from the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/L013029/1), the UK Ministry of Defence and British Army. The opinions expressed in this publication are solely those of the individual authors and do not reflect the views of the funders.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Note

1. See for example <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/military-reservists-possible-prairie-deployment-1.5832023>.

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