



جمعية الشباب العرب

Baladna-Association for
Arab Youth



SECTARIAN RECRUITMENT

Israel's Policies for Conscripting
the Youth of Arab Palestinian Citizens



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INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, the majority of its citizens have been obliged to perform military service of varying lengths upon turning 18, with female recruits currently conscripted for 2 years and males for 3 years, with male conscripts also liable for 30 days of reserve duty a year until their early forties.

Exceptions to this general conscription were made for Orthodox Jewish communities, and the indigenous Arab Palestinian population. Among the latter of these two however, a deal was struck in 1956 between the Israeli State and certain community leaders of the Druze religious sect, whereby male Druze youths would be made available for conscription, and ever since this time Druze citizens of Israel have been bound by this deal, although conscientious objection in the community has always existed and has in fact increased in recent years. In addition to the conscription of Druze youth, small numbers of non-Druze Palestinian youth volunteer for military service, drawn in by the substantial financial benefits given to those who have completed military service. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent among certain

Bedouin communities, but also exists to a lesser degree among non-Bedouin Muslim and Christian youth.

In addition to military service, there also exists a civic national service. This was first initiated by the Israeli State in the early 1950s and was primarily aimed at religious Jewish women who felt unable to undergo military service due to religious requirements. The following decades saw some changes to the exact structure of this civic service, but it remained at its core an alternative form of service to the Israeli state for Jews unable to perform military service, whether through reasons of religion, conscience, or nationality.

However the past 15 years has seen increasing calls from the Israeli establishment to widen and develop this civic service as an alternative to military service amongst the 2 main sectors of citizens who have been thus far exempt: Orthodox Jews and Arab Palestinians. The main argument claimed by its proponents is the notion of “sharing the burden”, in other words all citizens should be forced to contribute to the State regardless of their status within it. However there also exists on the part of the establishment a fear that its Palestinian citizens are becoming increasingly disconnected from the State, and the claim is that an obligatory civic service could co-opt young Arabs into State institutions upon entering adulthood. These arguments, as well as the sectarian recruitment strategies used by Israel, will be explored later on.

MILITARY SERVICE

Israel's army has its roots in the Zionist militias which fought and terrorised both the Palestinians and the British colonial presence in the run-up to the creation of Israel in 1948. Like the State they fought to create, these militias and subsequently the Israeli army were expressly Jewish and Zionist, both in terms of the identity of its soldiers and also in terms of its symbols, rituals, and expressed aims and goals. Palestinian citizens of Israel were therefore historically exempted from the military service for the plain fact that the Israeli army has, ever since its formation until the current day, been responsible for occupying and confiscating Palestinian land, killing residents, imposing and maintaining forced exile, demolishing buildings and infrastructure, as well as a whole host of other crimes. Even those Palestinians who managed to remain on their lands and became Israeli citizens were governed by martial law until 1966. In short, the Israeli army was never meant to be an inclusive institution, but a tool for control against the Palestinian Arabs by the region's new Jewish Zionist arrivals. Under these conditions, both the Israeli state and its Arab Palestinian citizens were agreed on their exemption from military conscription.

Despite this, there is a long history of involvement of Palestinians in the Israeli army. To achieve this, Israel has sought out and exacerbated divisions within Palestinian society. Most well-known is the example of the Druze minority, whose males are included in Israel's obligatory military conscription following a 1956 deal between the State and Druze community leaders. Youth from Palestine's marginalised Bedouin communities have also long been encouraged to volunteer for military service, with the generous benefits associated with military service enough to entice many young recruits. Recently, the Israeli state has also turned its focus onto its Palestinian Christian citizens, and a concerted drive is currently underway to increase recruitment from this sector. In this section we will examine further the situation for Druze and Christian youths inside Israel, with the former constituting the majority of Arabs recruited into the army, while Christians are currently on the frontline of the Army's drive to increase recruitment of Israel's Arab Palestinian citizens.

The Unique Situation of the Druze

During the 1948 war some Palestinian Druze voluntarily cooperated with the Zionist Haganah forces, partly as a result of sectarian tensions with their non-Druze Arab neighbours, and also as an attempt to increase their influence and political standing. As the war progressed, Zionist leaders decided to form the Minorities Unit in the IDF and launched a campaign to recruit Druze volunteers to serve the unit. The first formal decision to subject male Druze youth to compulsory military service was made in 1956 with the complicity of a minority of Druze sheikhs who were promised that such a move would help to gain influence and support from Israel's leadership, with the expectation being that this would lead to a lessening of their marginalisation and the securing of better economic and political conditions.

Major Issues

The IDF began to speed up the integration of Druze into command positions and the number of officers in many branches of the army increased significantly, although top positions, for example in intelligence, remain off-limits in practice. Due to the contrast in opportunities between the Israeli army and those available in their home towns and villages, which along with most Arab Palestinian areas are economically below average, many Druze men decide to pursue careers in the army and security industries. This is also often seen as more attractive than pursuing studies after their army service, which is expensive and without guarantees of success, and as a result the academic level of Druze society remains low in comparison with other sectors.

On a social level, many Druze have left subsistence farming and sold their lands in order to improve their quality of living. Others were forced to give up their lands to the Israeli state which then built settlements for Jews on it, in total over 65% of the Druze community's land has been confiscated by the Israeli State since its establishment. At other times the lands have been sold at high cost by the State back to young Druze men who served the army.

Another major problem is the obfuscation of identity. In 1957, the Israeli state took the momentous and unprecedented step of no longer designating its Druze Palestinian citizens as “Arab” but as a new “Druze” nationality, a move made to try and further separate Druze communities from their fellow Palestinians. Moreover, throughout the years the state has taken major efforts to carve out a new identity for the Druze that is separate from their Arab Palestinian identity. This process was accelerated during the 1970s in response to riots in Druze communities unhappy with the lack of progress which the introduction of conscription was supposed to bring. As a result of these outbreaks of communal discontent Israel separated Druze municipal councils from those of other Palestinian Arabs, set up a special school system with a unique, specially tailored curriculum, and intensified efforts to promote a distinctive Druze culture and heritage in order to undermine the unity of the Arab Palestinian identity.

Resistance

While significant parts of the Druze community have now accepted their new designation as “non-Arab” Israelis, many others object to the compulsory military service and believe these arrangements are being imposed on them without their approval. In 1958, just two years after the agreement allowing Druze conscription was signed, dissenting members of the Druze community formed the Free Young Druze Movement, many of whose founders were among the first Druze to be jailed for refusing to serve, along with the renowned poet Samih al-Qasim. Forced to operate in secrecy due to Israel imposing martial law over all its Arab citizens, after this was finally lifted a new organisation, the Druze Initiative Committee, was formed in 1972, and it continues today to be one of the leading groups fighting compulsory service. Since then thousands have refused to serve as a matter of principle, regularly citing their identity as Palestinian Druze with a shared history and culture with the Palestinians who the Israeli army suppresses. The penalties for refusal however are harsh, with the Israeli establishment seemingly sensitive to the risk of losing this source of frontline, Arabic-speaking soldiers. Prison sentences given to Druze refusers are regularly double or more those given to their Jewish counterparts, while exemptions for reasons of conscience or pacifism, occasionally granted to young Jewish Israelis, are unheard of among Druze men.

“Once your uniform is off, you’re a dirty Arab again” is a regular complaint from disgruntled former conscripts, as they find that the discrimination faced by other Palestinian citizens in Israel remains in place even after serving Israel’s army, with promises of full equality, good jobs, entitlement to state-owned land and economic privileges such as cheap loans, government allowances and tax breaks often harder to gain than expected. The promise of integration remains a mirage, with the doctor, writer and local historian Dr. Kanaaneh summarising “In the end, the military, like all other [Israeli] state institutions, is a tool the dominant majority wields to preserve Jewish privilege.”

Meanwhile a new campaign was launched in 2013 which aims to build on growing feelings of discontent with the status quo by young Druze. Named Urfod – Sha’abak Byehmek (Refuse – Your People Will Protect You) , and including members from all sectors of Palestinian society, the movement aims to provide support to young Druze breaking with tradition and refusing to be enlisted, raising money for scholarships, setting up a helpline for young Druze looking for advice, and providing a solidarity and support network. High profile cases in recent years have lent impetus to the young movement’s efforts, and media attention has been drawn to the stories, including one week in December 2013 when 4 young Druze who publicly refused to serve were all imprisoned along with others who had preferred to remain anonymous.



Christians – T h e N e w T a r g e t

The past few years have witnessed a number of moves at the official level to separate Christians from their fellow Palestinians, and to entice them into army service. Last year, the Knesset passed legislation legally separating Christians from Muslims. In October 2014, “Aramaic-Christian” identity was officially recognized by Israel as a separate, non-Arab ethnic group. One member of the Knesset who was active in the bill’s passing, Yara Levin of the right-wing Likud party, stated “There is a big difference between Christians and Muslims, and they deserve recognition and separate representation...They’re our natural allies, a counterweight to the Muslims who want to destroy the country from within.” These obvious efforts to drive Palestinians apart through concentrating on religious background are directly related to the recruitment effort.

Since last year the number of Palestinian Christians joining the Israeli military service has risen due to different campaigns supported by the Israeli government and some Christian clergymen. Father Gabriel Nadaf, an orthodox priest from Nazareth, promotes enlistment to the IDF and claims that Christians must serve in the army if they want to integrate into Israeli society and win greater access to jobs. Along with a small group of Arab Christian army volunteers, he is the leader of an organisation called Forum for Christian Recruitment, from where he preaches about his belief in the shared fate of the Christian minority and the Jewish state, and has gained an enthusiastic audience among government officials including Prime Minister Netanyahu himself. It would appear these official links remains sensitive though, and last year a Palestinian citizen of Israel was arrested after posting photos onto Facebook of Nadaf and his entourage arriving to meet Israeli Finance Minister Lapid to discuss recruitment of Christians, while others have been called for questioning for publicly criticising him. Furthermore Basel Ghattas, a Palestinian Christian member of the Knesset, has accused police of threatening to revoke the licences of any venue holding meetings protesting attempts to recruit Palestinian Christian youth.

The practical results of Israel’s new policy towards recruitment of Christians was seen last summer, when the Israeli army sent out about 800 letters to young Palestinian school leavers inviting them to perform military service. And while it remained a voluntary invitation, the very act of sending them out, and of singling out Christian youth, crossed a red line for many in the Palestinian community, with fears that what is voluntary today may not be tomorrow.

Additionally, the situation is made worse by international misconception surrounding the issue of Palestinian enlistment due to the media's frequent portrayal of it as a positive initiative for Christian 'assimilation' into Israel that would subsequently grant them more rights.

Resistance

Israel's sectarian conscription attempts are facing vigorous resistance by political blocs and Christian religious authorities. The archbishop of Sebastia of the Greek Orthodox, Atallah Hanna, states "We as Christians are an integral part of the components of the Palestinian people", with former Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem Riah Abu el-Assal affirming "The reality is that most Christians do not want to serve and will not respond to the call-up".

Moreover, the Coalition Against Military Service, led by Baladna - Association for Arab Youth, and consisting of Palestinian youth and other civic organizations, urges an escalation in efforts to refuse military service such as that imposed on the Druze. Baladna director Nadim Nashif said that the law was "linked to a much larger and systematic process of 'divide and conquer' as well as to attempts to destroy Palestinian identity among Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel". Baladna also broke the news story in 2012 of the aggressively sectarian literature being distributed by Israeli recruiters to Palestinian Christian scout groups with the purpose of inciting fear among young scouts of their Muslim neighbours, in an attempt to enlist them to the military service. The incident created a strong reaction in the Palestinian community and media, and actually helped to raise awareness of Israel's sectarian strategy and galvanise support in resisting attempts to recruit Palestinian youth.

History

In 1953 the Knesset passed a law declaring a compulsory two-year, alternative, non-military national service dedicated specifically towards religious Jewish women, whose religious commitments precluded their involvement in a secular, mixed-sex military service. It was initially poorly enforced, but during the 1960s and 1970s it slowly gained in prominence, and in 1977 the women undertaking it were granted the same benefits at those completing military service. This development marked the first time that a direct link was made by the State between completing a form of national service to the state and the gaining of rights. In 1997 an upsurge in demand for the civic national service to be expanded manifested itself in Israeli discourse, with the two principal targets being Orthodox Jews and Palestinian citizens of Israel. Over the next 10 years a series of commissions examined the issue, and in 2007 the Israeli government adopted the findings of the Ivry Commission report. Among other things, the report recommended expanding the civic service to all citizens who did not perform military service, albeit on a voluntary level, as well as underlining the “priority and seniority” of military service above other forms of service.

What is the civic service? Organisation and links to the Defence Sector

Following restructuring, the civic service is now overseen by the National Service Administration, a government body under the control of the Prime Minister’s office. Most recruits are assigned to hospitals, nursing homes, schools, and other public institutions throughout the country, however positions also exist in various security branches.

This connection to the security establishment of Israel is not limited to the placement of certain recruits, for while the civic service presents itself as separate from the military service, a closer look reveals several connections with the defence establishment. The Ivry Commission, whose recommendations inform current government policy, was jointly created

by the Minister for Defence. Meanwhile the body created to implement the new expanded civic service has been headed by a succession of former military and internal security figures, including Ami Ayalon (former head of secret police Shin Bet and the Israeli navy) and Reuven Gal (who boasts a string of high-ranking posts in the field of domestic security, as well as positions in the army and navy). In addition to this background, even the service itself can result in posts in or supporting the military, with an additional provision that in times of emergency recruits will be posted in military positions as necessary. Upon completion of the civic service, participants receive the same status and social benefits as those completing the military service, further blurring the lines between the two.

Voluntary service to the state?

Officially, government policy has not strayed too far from the Ivry report's findings. However, there is an inherent contradiction in its recommendation that the civic service should both be expanded to Palestinian citizens, but that it should also remain voluntary, and it is this contradiction which shapes current developments of Israel's attempts to recruit greater numbers of Palestinians, including an attempt in 2011 to finally make it mandatory. Ultimately, the contradiction rests on the fact that most Palestinian youth inside Israel remain sharply sceptical of being forced to perform services to a state which marginalises and discriminates against their community. A 2009 survey conducted by Baladna and the Jaffa Center for Research found that 54% of youth surveyed were strongly against the civic service, with only 17% strongly in favour.

To address this, over the past several years government agencies have embarked on a growing propaganda campaign to persuade young Palestinian citizens to sign up for the civic service. This is conducted both through advertisements in Israel's major newspapers, television and radio channels, and also through social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter, platforms where youth are more likely to access information alone and without input from their family and community.

There is also a widespread worry that the civic service's current status as voluntary is merely a precursor to an obligatory national service, initially introduced as voluntary merely to soften and divide rejection of the Palestinian community. Certainly the aggressive recruitment tactics of the

establishment and their stated recruitment goals suggest that the term “voluntary” is misleading, as Palestinian minors face pressure to sign up. Adding to these suspicions are the failed attempt in 2011 to make the civic service mandatory, and the fact that many of those behind it have openly stated their desire to make it so.

A decision in late 2010 by the Education Ministry to favour prospective Arab teachers who had performed civic service also sent alarm bells ringing. It is common in the private sector for employers to enquire about candidates’ military service, and hence implicitly discriminating against Arab candidates. However while all teachers in Israel’s Arab school system are rigorously vetted on a political level, up until now performing national service was never a requirement. Introducing this requirement widens and formalises discrimination against Palestinian citizens in the area of work and employment, and sends the message to the private sector that discriminatory hiring practices are perfectly acceptable and even sanctioned by the state.

This incident also brings up one of the key objections to the civic service, the gradual introduction of a link between duties and rights, whereby one’s rights in Israeli society are conditioned and made dependent on performing national service to the State. While rights are generally considered to be granted automatically with citizenship, this state of affairs will see young Palestinian citizens forced to win their basic rights by serving a state that has historically disenfranchised and displaced them, and which continues to routinely discriminate against them and their communities.

One of the key media slogans put forward by the proponents of a more wide-reaching civic service was the notion of “sharing the burden” of the state, or the idea that everyone should contribute to it for the mutual benefit of everyone. This notion gains little support from most Palestinian communities, who suffer from the vastly unequal allocation of funds between Jewish and Arab areas, and whose localities remain the most underdeveloped in the country. As Knesset member Aymen Odeh put it, “The government should be talking to us regarding our rights and general relations and not dealing with us through the back door. The Arab community works and pays taxes and yet is far from getting equal rights as it still deals with a high unemployment rate and many other problems. One thing to be stated is that Israel has deprived most of its Arab citizens of our land. Israel is the one who should be working to compensate us. Israel is the one responsible and in debt, not the Arab citizens.”

Attack on Palestinian identity

The idea that the recent impetus to enlist Palestinian youth into various forms of national service is “a way to contribute to Arab society and as a channel of social mobility (a tool to overcome discrimination and exclusion)” seems unlikely, given Israel’s record of violating the rights of its Arab Palestinian citizens. Rather, it seems clear that the motivation behind the politicians’ eagerness to push this policy forward is to co-opt young Palestinians into state institutions, thus creating a shared interest between Palestinian youth and the State of Israel, and a degree of identification with the State. Proponents of this position point to dubious, ideologically-motivated studies which claim a correlation in Palestinian youth between support for civic service and support for Israel as a Jewish state. Other studies claim that a mandatory civic service could form the basis for the integration of Israel’s Arab citizens into Israeli society.

Integration however does not mean equality in areas such as employing, housing and education. A look at the situation of the Druze shows us that all of these things are denied, despite promises of the “integration” of Druze into Israeli society. Rather, “integration” here means the loss of an independent Arab Palestinian identity, and its replacement with an Israeli, or specifically “Israeli Arab” identity, which would accept and acquiesce to being 2nd class citizens in a Jewish state.

As for the argument that the civic service would help Palestinian society inside Israel, those best placed to determine what Palestinian society most needs, such as local community leaders and politicians, have been completely ignored and sidelined by the government, with Palestinians’ “best interests” instead decided by Jewish Israeli politicians and members of the security apparatus. This only confirms suspicions that the real goal of the civic service is to undermine autonomous Palestinian identity and organisation, and to co-opt young Palestinians into serving the State’s security strategies at the expense of the Palestinian people.



Resistance

Operating with the co-operation of the High Follow-Up Committee, the leading representative body for Palestinians in Israel, resistance to the civic service has been spearheaded by the Baladna-led Coalition Against the Civic Service. Founded in 2006, the Coalition gathers together a number of Palestinian civil society groups and actors inside Israel. The Coalition's activities range from organising conferences and community meetings to raise awareness and formulate unified and clear responses from the Palestinian community, to addressing youth directly in schools and youth centres. Conferences and community meetings have gathered together community leaders, leading religious figures from all sects and Palestinian Knesset members from various parties. These events have enabled the movement to reach conclusive agreements about the best methods and strategies to take while confronting Israel's recruitment drive, with a legitimacy bestowed by the participation of leading representative figures from across the religious and political spectrum of Palestinian society.

A media campaign has also been running for several years delivering thought-provoking original content directly to Palestinian youth in Israel through social media, countering pro-recruitment propaganda which they receive from official channels.

All signs indicate that the Israeli administration will continue to press ahead with attempts to increase Palestinian enlistment in its national services branches. Whether this takes the form of increased pressure on youth to volunteer for service, or whether further moves will be made to make it compulsory, Palestinian society in Israel has formed a cohesive movement rejecting all types of national service to the State, and will be ready to resist future attempts to erase Palestinian identity and impose national service on Palestinian youth to the State which marginalises and discriminates against them and their communities.



أخي العزيز،

وصلتني أخبار مقلقة من البلاد المقدسة بأن هناك من يحاول إقناعك بالتجنّد لجيش الاحتلال الإسرائيلي، الذي احتل بلادنا ودمّر مدننا وقراننا وهجر أهلها، ويحاصر الآن شعبنا ويخنقه بالجدران، ويمارس ضده يومياً القمع العنيف. لكن القلق زال من قلبي بعدما عرفت أنك طردت سماسرة التجنيد من بيتنا وامتلاً قلبي غبطة بعدما حدّثتني أننا عن إجابتك لهم: "لا تقموا الله والدين في تجارتكم العفنة، الله محبة وضانا في البدء أن لا نقتل. أنا عربي ولن أخدم جيشكم. لا توهموني بمساواة فأنا أتعلّم من تجارب السابقين. سلاحكم لن يحميني، السلاح يسيل الدماء، وأنا لا أحبّ الدّم والألم، ستحميني هويتي العربيّة المتجذّرة بالأرض كالزيتون".

لقد بلغت سنّ الرشد فعلاً أخي العزيز، وقد أصبحت إنساناً مستقلاً حراً، كم أنا فخور بك.

أخوك المُحبّ
من بلاد الغربة



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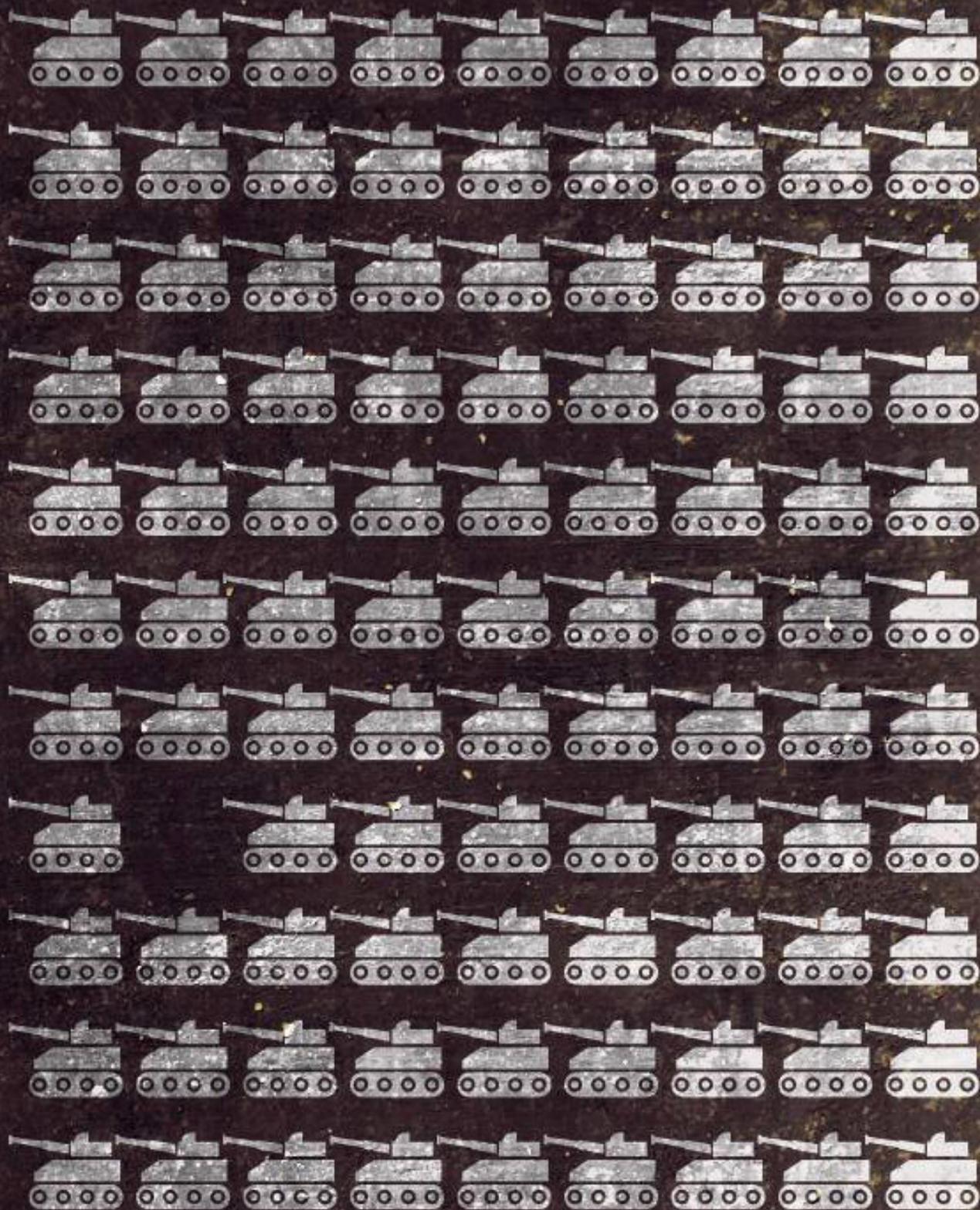
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