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OPEN SERVICE BY TRANSGENDER MEMBERS OF ISRAEL DEFENSE FORCES

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Palm Center Research Memo on Open Service by Transgender Members of Israel Defense Forces

Open Policy Enjoys Broad Support; Widely Considered a Success

Overview

The Israel Defense Forces has allowed gay and lesbian Israelis to serve since 1993. A Palm Center Study released in 2000 found that military performance was not impaired as a result of the open policy, which was a further liberalization of a 1983 policy that allowed openly gay service only in certain positions and subject to security restrictions. The IDF never had a written policy on service by transgender personnel, but until recently, individuals were frequently discharged—voluntarily or involuntarily—under the guise of mental health issues when it became known they identified as transgender. In recent years, as more military members were found to be openly transgender, and as transgender identity ceased to be regarded as a mental illness, officials have sought guidance from civilian gender and sexuality experts and groups on how best to accommodate and support transgender service members. Current policy makes all positions open to transgender personnel as long as health, aptitude and security considerations are met; transgender identity is no longer an automatic reason for ending or avoiding service.

Background on Transgender Identity and Health

Transgender is a broad term used to describe individuals who do not identify with the physical gender they were assigned at birth. Identifying as transgender may or may not mean one has transitioned to a different gender, and some who identify this way never do, or intend to, change genders. Research shows that, for some transgender people, changing genders through hormone therapy and/or surgery is medically necessary to obtain optimal health and that depriving individuals of such necessary health care poses serious risks to their wellbeing. Palm Center research has shown that there is “no compelling medical rationale for banning transgender military service,” “there is no medical reason to presume transgender individuals are unfit for duty,” and that eliminating the current U.S. ban on transgender service “would advance a number of military interests, including enabling commanders to better care for their service members.” Currently, 18 foreign militaries, including the IDF, allow transgender personnel to serve openly.

Recent Developments in the IDF

Consultations with press reports and interviews with those knowledgeable about transgender service in the IDF suggest there are at least a dozen and probably more military members who are openly transgender, and the number is growing. Although

transgender individuals have long been allowed to serve, they were not always treated and housed according to their preferred gender. The recent changes, which seek to allow transgender military members to be treated as their preferred gender and to obtain necessary support, were set in motion in 2013 when conversations among officials resulted in allowing a transgender woman who was born male to enlist as a female. Recognizing that supporting its troops was the best path to a strong fighting force, the IDF Medical Corps' Mental Health Division consulted with the Israeli Center for Human Sexuality & Gender Identity in an effort to better understand issues facing the transgender community and to raise awareness within the IDF about how to address their needs. In 2014 a new policy was agreed to that would automatically refer transgender personnel to a support system rather than require them to seek a commander's help to obtain proper uniforms, health care, facilities, etc. Current policy generally calls for treating members according to what their government-issued identification card—which can sometimes reflect a gender transition—says, but the new policy will make it easier for members to obtain needed support and to serve while living as their target gender. Under the new policy, IDF psychologists will work closely with civilian specialists to ensure full support for transgender military members. Tolerance training for senior officers has also been implemented.

How the IDF Handles Sensitive Questions around Transgender Service

- Showers: Attention is generally focused on ensuring the comfort of the transgender individual; most showers are private and many military members serve close enough to home to return there at night, but each situation is accommodated on a case by case basis.
- Housing: Except in combat units, most military members serve close enough to home to return there at night; most transgender individuals have not transitioned genders when they serve in the IDF, and they are housed according to the gender reflected on their government identification card, but special accommodations have been made, including switching to a unit that can offer private rooms or baths.
- Uniforms: Under new policy of referring transgender individuals to a support system comprised of both military and civilian specialists, transgender personnel can obtain uniforms for their desired gender.
- Cost of transitioning: Few if any IDF members transition during their service because of the young age at which they enter the military. Until recently many health insurance policies regarded transitioning genders as an elective process and did not cover it; however, as the medical community has come to view such procedures as medically necessary, military-provided insurance has begun to cover the cost of hormone treatment and can authorize an individual for gender-confirming surgery.
- Fitness: All service members must meet the fitness and aptitude standards required of a given position; if transgender service members are serving as their target gender, they must meet fitness standards applicable to that gender.
- Health needs: The health care needs of transgender individuals are no more difficult or burdensome than a wide range of health care needs of other military members, and no special accommodations or concerns are warranted.

Comments on Transgender Service in the IDF

Brig. Gen. Rachel Tevet-Weisel, advisor for LGBT and women's issues, IDF:

“Some [transgender individuals] come with documents and say they are starting the transitioning process. In those cases, **we think, how we can help them, whether it's with uniforms or a special permit to have long hair.** If there is a soldier who enlists as a man, but along his service wants to be addressed using female terms, then we do that.”

Col. Eyal Fruchter (on leave), former head of Mental Health Department, IDF:

“We had to deal with some problems when the first [openly transgender] people came. We didn't know how to give them the right hormones because they'd never been bought by the medical corps before. But we solved it immediately, and then **no problems occurred.** The commanders were very flexible.”

Dr. Ilana Berger, director, Israeli Center for Human Sexuality and Gender Identity:

“In the past, it wasn't always easy, and protocols weren't always followed; [transgender] people could have a hard time. But the Army realized **it can better use all its people if it individualizes according to the strengths of each person.** This way they don't just discharge them, but figure out how to get the most benefit from each.”

IDF officer Shachar (pseudonym), Israeli Army's first out transgender officer:

“Serving in the army and being recognized for who I really am by my fellow soldiers made me feel like a real man for the first time in my life. It made me feel like myself. **When you feel accepted and happy as who you are, you want to do your best as a soldier, as a person.**”

Lt. Col. Limor Shabtai, Advisor, Deputy Chief of Staff for women's issues, and head of Equal Opportunities Branch, IDF:

“It is important to have growing awareness of the issue in the IDF and we make sure to guide each and every soldier that addresses us in any state of the process. It will be right to form a standard procedure for every applicant and to **find a suitable solution individually for each one according to his or her own needs** and special status.”

Lt. Col. Dr. Rinat Yedidia, clinical head, Mental Health Department, IDF:

“Sometimes there should be no special approach. [Transgender people] mainly need special care because of difficulties they experience during their service. They are not common cases and thus each case should be discussed individually; there is no defined protocol. **If someone needs a mental health treatment, we provide it immediately and in the best manner possible.**”

Dr. Aaron Belkin, director of the Palm Center:

“Israel's experience with open transgender service as a proven fighting force and a close ally of the U.S. should be instructive to American leaders assessing the current, outdated policy. The IDF has created a supportive and drama-free climate by striking a sensible balance between accommodations where needed and uniformity where possible. **The Israeli situation shows that equal treatment and success go hand in hand.**”