



Lone Soldiers and Immigrant Lone Soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces

Abstract

This study, which was written at the request of Knesset Member Yaron Levi, discusses lone soldiers serving in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), with particular attention to immigrant lone soldiers. The study presents the criteria for recognizing soldiers as lone soldiers, the assistance and benefits provided by the State to lone soldiers during and after their military service, data on lone soldiers and immigrant lone soldiers, and data on the recipients of assistance and benefits. The document briefly reviews issues regarding lone soldiers that arise following the conclusion of their military service, particularly as regards the performance of reserve duty.

Definitions and Recognition of Lone Soldiers and Immigrant Lone Soldiers: IDF General Staff Order: Lone Soldiers relates to two groups of lone soldiers recognized by the IDF: standard lone soldiers, whose parents are deceased or reside abroad, and lone soldiers who are recognized as such due to exceptional circumstances because of which they cannot live with their parents or are not supported by them. According to the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, an immigrant lone soldier is someone who has been recognized by the IDF as a lone soldier and who is classified by the ministry as an immigrant (or returning minor, immigrant citizen, child of immigrants, or returning resident). The process of gaining recognition as a lone soldier takes place during recruitment or during the course of active service. Some lone soldiers enlist in the IDF as part of special programs, and the recognition process is conducted collectively by the program for all the participants. **Lone soldier status applies exclusively during mandatory IDF service.** The duration of immigrant lone soldier status granted by the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration and of the benefits associated with this status depends on the amount of time that passed between the time an individual received immigrant status and his or her enlistment (as well as of the individual's immigration status and country of origin).

Assistance for Lone Soldiers: The IDF provides monthly financial assistance to lone soldiers in addition to the monthly subsistence allowance received by every soldier: about NIS 600 per month for a lone soldier;

about NIS 830 for a lone soldier on activity level A (combat support); and about NIS 1,070 for a lone soldier on activity level A+ (combat). The IDF also offers lone soldiers options for free housing: soldiers' homes¹, "warm home" (*bait cham*) apartments², and kibbutz housing. Lone soldiers who rent an apartment independently can receive a rent subsidy (about NIS 1,400 per month) and also a refund for apartment maintenance (about NIS 350 per month). Lone soldiers are also entitled to special vacations to visit their parents overseas or in Israel, funding for a flight to visit parents overseas, recreation days and time off to run errands, and support from the IDF Lone Soldier Center.

Assistance for Immigrant Lone Soldiers: Immigrant lone soldiers receive additional assistance through Government ministries and dedicated organizations. The Knafayim (Wings) program assists immigrant lone soldiers at various stages of their service: during their preparation for entering the army, exercising their rights during service, and upon their discharge. The Ministry of Aliyah and Integration provides a monthly grant of NIS 540 to immigrant lone soldiers (including returning residents) who apply for assistance. The Ministry of Housing offers standard immigrant lone soldiers (excluding returning residents) rent assistance (unconnected to whether they actually rent an apartment) in the amount of NIS 750 for those who immigrated after March 2024 (and about NIS 400 for those who immigrated before then). Beginning in 2023, the assistance is supposed to be transferred automatically. The IDF offers immigrant soldiers (some of whom are lone soldiers) and Mahal volunteers³ a pre-enlistment preparation program and a Hebrew language improvement course.

Data on Lone Soldiers and Immigrant Lone Soldiers: In August 2024, there were 6,731 lone soldiers serving in the IDF. However, the data received from the IDF was categorized differently from the definitions of lone soldiers in IDF General Staff Order: Lone Soldiers, and we were unable to obtain clarifications from the IDF regarding the discrepancies between the categories. Therefore, among other issues, **we cannot definitively state based on the IDF data how many immigrant lone soldiers are on active duty**. From the available data, we can determine that 3,930 (58%) of all the lone soldiers, are part of the various groups categorized as standard in the IDF General Staff Order, and 2,801 (42%) are soldiers lacking family support. **Of the lone soldiers in the groups categorized as standard, 2,815 are termed "standard" in the IDF's response and are probably immigrants, 706 are termed children of "emigrants," and 223 are Mahal volunteers. According to data from the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, approximately 3,000 immigrant lone soldiers serve in the IDF;** however, there may be additional lone soldiers who are immigrants but who were not included in the data because they did not apply for recognition or were deemed ineligible for grants.

¹ A soldiers' home is a type of hostel or dormitory operated by an NGO and partially funded by the IDF, with dozens to hundreds of rooms for soldiers who serve far from home, who have no other place to sleep, or who are lone soldiers.

² A "warm home" is similar to a soldiers' home except that it is an apartment rather than a larger setting.

³ Jews or children of Israeli citizens who come from abroad to volunteer for 18 months of IDF service without becoming citizens.

The IDF provided data on the countries of birth for 3,035 soldiers serving in the IDF as of August 2024, who are apparently immigrant lone soldiers (it is unclear whether these data include all the immigrant lone soldiers as defined by the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration) and Mahal volunteers. The largest number of soldiers were born in Israel (805, 27%), followed by the United States (531, 17%), Russia (508, 17%), Ukraine (273, 9%), and France (151, 5%); the remainder were born in other countries.

The number of lone soldiers who enlisted in 2023 (2,865) was 25% lower than in 2022 (3,834). The number of lone soldiers who completed their service was similar in 2022 and 2023 (3,224 and 3,377, respectively).

Data on Lone Soldiers Receiving Assistance: Information on the number of lone soldiers receiving assistance was obtained from various sources, sometimes with significant discrepancies between them.

According to the IDF, in August 2024, 75% of the 6,731 lone soldiers received either reimbursement for both rental and maintenance expenses (61%) or reimbursement for maintenance expenses only (14%).

Only a quarter of the soldiers resided in the housing arrangements offered by the IDF on kibbutzim (including Gar'in Tzabar⁴) (11%), in "warm home" apartments (8%), and in soldiers' homes (6%). The Association for Israel's Soldiers reported that as of September 2024, an average of 650–700 soldiers resided in soldiers' homes and approximately 1,166 in "warm home" apartments. These figures, which include soldiers eligible for accommodation due to personal circumstances (whose numbers are apparently large), are higher than those in the IDF data. The Kibbutz Movement reported that as of July 2024, approximately 500 lone soldiers lived on kibbutzim. Gar'in Tzabar reported that as of July 2024, there were 737 immigrant lone soldiers in the program: 289 in kibbutzim, 252 in independently rented apartments, and 196 in Kfar Tzabar in Ra'anana. The figures from the Kibbutz Movement and Gar'in Tzabar are close to those received from the IDF.

According to the IDF, in 2023 approximately 8,000 lone soldiers received rent and maintenance assistance, about 1,300 received maintenance assistance only, approximately 3,300 resided in soldiers' homes, and about 375 lived in "warm home" apartments (some soldiers may have moved between housing arrangements during the year and thus received more than one type of assistance in the same year). In contrast, according to the Association for the Israel's Soldiers, during this year an average of 650–700 lone soldiers per night stayed in soldiers' homes, and approximately 900 soldiers per night stayed in "warm home" apartments—a figure significantly higher than that reported by the IDF regarding those residing in "warm home" apartments. The IDF further reported that in 2023, there were 1,436 cases of funded flights abroad, 882 cases of special leave abroad, and 1,143 cases of special leave in Israel.

According to the Ministry of Aliyah and Integration, an average of approximately 3,000 immigrant lone soldiers receive a grant each month, and the ministry's annual budget for monthly financial grants to

⁴ Gar'in Tzabar is a program that assists Jewish youths or the children of Israeli citizens living abroad in immigrating to Israel and performing full army service. Participants are hosted in groups on kibbutzim.

immigrant lone soldiers is NIS 22 million. **The Ministry of Housing reported that in July 2024, 2,384 immigrant lone soldiers received rental assistance from the ministry**, double the average number of monthly grant recipients in 2022—1,183 soldiers (in 2023, the number stood at an average of 2,079 soldiers per month). According to the Ministry of Housing, the increase is due to the fact that as of 2023 the IDF sends information on soldiers directly to the ministry, eliminating the need for soldiers to apply for assistance.

Assistance for Discharged Soldiers: All discharged soldiers are eligible for various benefits, including discharge conferences, discharge allowance, personal deposits, housing benefits, academic scholarships, income tax credits, and more. In addition, discharged lone soldiers are entitled to workshops in preparation for civilian life (workshops for immigrants are provided in cooperation with the Wings program and workshops for those without family support are provided in cooperation with the Gruss Foundation), extension of eligibility for immigrant benefits pursuant to the Absorption of Discharged Soldiers Law, housing in soldiers' homes or rental assistance, academic scholarships, employment assistance, and support from the IDF's Lone Soldier Unit.

The Wings program provides immigrant lone soldiers with discharge preparation workshops (in cooperation with the IDF); personal, occupational, financial, and emotional support; and support from its community of alumni. The Ministry of Aliyah and Integration extends the eligibility of immigrant lone soldiers for new immigrant benefits (the extension is equal to the duration of the military service) and provides full funding for tuition at institutions of higher education and employment assistance. The ministry did not report how many soldiers have received this assistance in recent years. The Ministry of Housing provides discharged immigrant lone soldiers with extended eligibility for rent assistance (equal to the number of months spent in service) at the same level granted in their final month of service. In 2023, an average of 2,290 discharged immigrant lone soldiers per month received rent assistance; this represents a decrease of more than 40% compared to 2022, which was due to technical issues with the ministry's receipt of information on discharged soldiers from the IDF.

Lone Soldiers in Reserve Duty: As mentioned above, lone soldier status and the rights associated with it cease upon completion of mandatory service, and reserve soldiers who were lone soldiers during their mandatory service are no longer recognized as such or given the support granted to lone soldiers. In discussions held by the Knesset Committee for Immigration, Absorption and Diaspora Affairs, it emerged that some lone soldiers who performed reserve duty during Swords of Iron sustained physical or emotional injuries, which are especially challenging to cope with in the absence of family support, and it was claimed that these soldiers did not receive adequate support from the IDF. In the committee discussions, **IDF representatives presented estimates regarding the number of soldiers who had performed reserve duty since October 2023, who were recognized as lone soldiers during their mandatory service, and who had been discharged during the previous ten years—approximately 11,000 soldiers according to**

initial estimates and approximately 8,000 soldiers according to updated estimates. The discrepancy between the estimates may be due to the length of reserve service during the war.

Immigrant Lone Soldiers or Volunteers Remaining in Israel

The Ministry of Aliyah and Integration and Gar'in Tzabar reported in August 2024 that statistical sampling showed that 86% of immigrant lone soldiers discharged between 2018 and January 2023 remained in Israel at the time of sampling (exact date not specified). In addition, more than 20% of the families of lone soldiers immigrated to Israel during or after their service. The World Zionist Organization reported that approximately 100 discharged Mahal volunteers return to the United States annually, as compared to approximately 130 volunteers from the United States who enlist annually.