

Israel a model on gays in the military

Michele Chabin Religion News Service | Oct. 22, 2010

JERUSALEM -- Israel, like the United States, is a largely secular society with deep religious roots. And Israel, like the United States, is home to vocal religious conservatives who frown on homosexuality.

But Israel, unlike the United States, has allowed gays and lesbians to serve openly in the military for 17 years. In fact, they are required to.

So, if Israel has found a way to allow gays in the military, can it provide lessons to the U.S. as it struggles with whether -- and how -- to dismantle Don't Ask/Don't Tell?

Perhaps. But like everything in Israel, it's a bit more complicated. And the comparison between the U.S. and Israel is inexact.

By most accounts, Israel's integration of gays in the military has succeeded, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has reportedly begun to share its experiences with the U.S. military.

While the Obama Administration continues to wrangle in court over a federal judge's ruling that declared Don't Ask/Don't Tell unconstitutional, the Pentagon has directed military recruiters to start accepting applications from all qualified potential recruits, regardless of sexual orientation.

If the courts or Congress overturn Don't Ask/Don't Tell, the U.S. will become the 26th nation to fully integrate gay and straight members of the military, according to the Palm Center, a think tank at the University of California Santa Barbara.

Aaron Belkin, the center's director, said full integration has been successful even in countries engaged in frequent combat, citing Israel, American's closet ally in the Middle East, as an example.

"The lesson the U.S. military can learn from the Israeli military is there are no negative consequences" to inclusion, "even when the military is a battle-tested force like the IDF," Belkin said.

Drafting openly gay soldiers into the IDF and other military forces "has been highly successful and has no negative impact on morale, retention, readiness or overall combat effectiveness," according to a Palm Center report, "Gays in Foreign Militaries 2010."

Israel has reportedly offered advice to a commission on repealing Don't Ask/Don't Tell. Pentagon spokeswoman Cynthia Smith declined to go into detail, but hinted that at least some talks had already occurred.

"I don't have any information on that," Smith said. "It's part of a comprehensive working group (report) that will be presented to the Secretary of Defense Dec. 1."

An IDF spokesman would only say that "the IDF routinely cooperates with the armies of other countries on a number of different levels."

Israel's transition to full integration took time and planning. As a nation with mandatory military service for both men and women, and a strong religious ethos that dictates almost every facet of everyday life, the Israeli government treaded carefully.

The IDF began placing openly gay soldiers in units as early as 1983. It took another 10 years for full acceptance, following a 1992 parliamentary law on equality. Internal monitoring of gays continued until 1998.

Only then did homosexuality in the IDF "became totally a non-issue," said Frances Raday, a professor of international law at the College of Management Academic Studies in the city of Rishon Lezion.

Even with the heavy influence Israel's ultra-conservative religious political parties wield in parliament, the country has "an extremely liberal stand on homosexuality," said Raday.

Rabbi David Rosen, the Jerusalem-based international director of interreligious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, noted that the same ultra-Orthodox leaders who regularly decry gay pride parades never tried to stop openly gay soldiers from IDF service.

One reason, Rosen theorized, is that they did not want to open a national debate over who can serve in the IDF, because ultra-Orthodox seminary students are exempt from military service -- a policy that a majority of Israelis want to cancel.

Religious Zionists -- Modern Orthodox Jews who serve in the IDF -- have been more preoccupied with preventing interaction between male and female soldiers than the status of gays and lesbians, Rosen said.

"This was a centrally dominant issue in the whole national discourse of religion, state, security and sexuality the early decades of statehood," Rosen said, "and even today it hasn't been totally resolved."

One outcome of the debate was the establishment of National Service, a voluntary alternative to military duty open to religious young women and some men, including Arab citizens. Before Israel changed its law, many gays and lesbians performed National Service.

Yonatan Gher, director of the Jerusalem Open House, a prominent Israeli gay rights group, said the IDF "seeks out" training from gay groups in order to better serve and integrate the soldiers.

"We speak with them regularly, especially with commanders and educators," Gher said, adding that the IDF has been "sharing its information" with the Pentagon.

Amit Lev, who disclosed his homosexuality during a stint in the IDF, believes that within the proper environment, being gay in the military "can be a non-issue."

"Unlike Israel, in the U.S. no one has to serve in the army," Lev said. "Those who volunteer, whether they're gay or straight, are already motivated and will be good soldiers."

[Whitney Jones contributed to this report from Washington.]

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