

Majority of Israelis want to outsource military's dirty laundry

• By NATHAN COHEN

New data released last week show the majority of Israelis believe the military should export some non-combat services to private companies in ways similar to the US system.

A poll by the Dahaf polling firm showed that 60 percent of Israelis are supportive of military privatization for services like laundry, food, car repairs and maintenance, however, 87% are against outsourcing security-related services.

The Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies, which commissioned the study, said it would like to see more outsourcing than the current levels, for everything from laundry services to non-combat reservist duty. JIMS operates on the belief that private enterprises are far more efficient than the same services managed by the government.

Corinne Sauer, an Economist and co-founder of JIMS, believes such handovers would allow the Israeli economy to grow.

"[The military] outsourced some health funds in the past, and the soldiers were happy...and it cost the IDF a lot less money," she said.

A few bases do receive catered food, and the IDF does lease some cars instead of buying them, but Sauer said a lot more could be done.

Dr. Yacov Shenin, CEO of Economic Models, said at the Herzliya Conference last year that the IDF could save 25% of its budget, or NIS 8 billion, through privatization, according to the conference's Web site.

Benjamin Friedman, a

research fellow at the Washington-based Cato Institute, said the US is at the forefront of military outsourcing.

"The question is really what we don't outsource," he said. "Everything but combat is contracted in some instances."

US military contracts with private companies include food and maintenance, as well as intelligence analysis and security.

Friedman's organization is known as a proponent of privatization and free-market policies, but he admits that too much outsourcing has had negative effects as well as positive ones.

"For many tasks the government performs, there is often insufficient competition to create a real market for the government's buck... which gives them little reason to compete on price," said Friedman. "They become experts at winning government contracts as opposed to the function contracted for."

JIMS's other co-founder Robert Sauer said "the IDF claimed we tried [outsourcing] and it failed," but he still supports the idea, claiming that many of the economic problems Israel faces, including poverty, are due to heavy government control of the economy.

The study surveyed 1,006 Israelis on a wide range of topics relating to the army and the economy in February and March 2008. JIMS is currently analyzing the results, which also include surveys on draft dodging, welfare, religion, and corruption.

The Ministry of Defense was unable to respond by press time.