

First Muslim woman joins Israeli Air Force

MEL FRYKBERG

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Newly graduated Israeli Air Force pilots throw their caps in the air after getting their wings in a ceremony at the Hatzerim Air Force base near the Israeli city of Beer Sheva in June 2007. Four female pilots were among the graduates. (Chameleons Eye via Newscom)

JERUSALEM -- An error led to the first-ever female Muslim Israeli-Arab soldier recently joining one of the Israeli Air Force elite units. But after the mistake was discovered the unit's commander was so impressed with the woman's ability and achievements that he allowed her to stay, breaking all the rules.

The IAF's elite Airborne Combat Search and Rescue Unit 669 is normally involved in sensitive and highly classified Israeli Defense Forces operations and is considered one of the Israeli military's premier units.

Its main function is to rescue and extricate wounded soldiers from combat zones, under heavy enemy fire in most cases. The unit also often helps rescue civilians injured during various catastrophic incidents.

Due to the sensitivity of the unit Muslims and Arabs are prevented from joining. Israel fears a conflict of loyalties should Israeli-Arabs serve in Palestinian areas or fight Muslim states.

Most Israeli-Arabs, apart from the Druze, a schism of Shiite Islam who defected during the 11th century, are not required to undergo the compulsory military service that Jewish youngsters are.

Israeli Jewish males are required to complete three years of military service and Jewish females two years of compulsory service unless they are especially religious, and in the cases of women pregnant or married.

There are, however, a limited number of Arab Christians – including Circassians – and the Bedouin whose tracking skills are much sought after by the Israeli Defense Forces, who are able to join, but only after undergoing strict security clearances, and the units which they can join are limited.

Unit 669 requires an even higher security clearance. Consequently no Muslim has ever served in this unit, in either an administrative or combat capacity.

So when the Muslim background of the young woman, who is a medic and from an Arab village in the north of Israel and whom the IDF has refused to name, was accidentally discovered there was consternation all around.

She had just completed her medic training course with top honors, and was immediately placed with Unit 669. Subsequent investigation later revealed that an error had been made, but due to her exceptional skills her commander insisted that she remain with the unit.

Another Israeli-Arab's dream of being a fighter pilot in the Israeli Air Force, however, remains a pipe dream. "Soldier C" as he is officially known, and also from a village in the north of Israel, finished high school with top honors and received a certified pilot license before enlisting with the Israeli Defense Forces.

"My dream and ultimate ambition is to become a fighter pilot. I know I have the potential and ability to fulfill my dream and serve as a combat pilot with the IAF," he wrote. "If deemed physically and mentally fit, I ask that I be able to serve in all of the elite units of the IDF, which are open to all other enlisted personnel."

The aspiring pilot's plea was unheeded by the Israeli Defense Forces, however, in spite of a letter of recommendation given to him by his flight instructor, a former major and combat pilot in the IAF, so he was forced to serve with another unit of the IDF where he currently remains.

It appears unlikely that the Israeli military's ruling against Muslim and Arab Israelis will change anytime soon, especially in light of the deteriorating political situation. However at a time when Israel is getting a lot of negative press, the "error" over the Muslim recruit has been put to good use promoting the country's image.