

Ultra-Orthodox protest bill to draft them into military

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [April 2, 2014](#) issue

Much of Jerusalem was paralyzed March 2 by a demonstration by hundreds of thousands of ultra-Orthodox Jews against a bill that would require many of them to serve in the military. The main road between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv was closed, and offices and schools closed early.

The rally—part protest, part prayer vigil—was organized by the religious and political leadership of the *haredi* (ultra-Orthodox) community in Israel, which strongly opposes mandatory conscription on the grounds that it would tear yeshiva students from their full-time religious studies.

They and counterparts throughout the world are particularly incensed that the bill would criminalize yeshiva students who evade service.

Prior to the demonstration, Rabbi Aaron Teitelbaum, the New York-based head of the ultraconservative Satmar Hassidim worldwide, told his followers, “We aren’t afraid of beating and whipping, we’re not afraid to sit in jail, we are ready to sacrifice ourselves. We went through the [Spanish] Inquisition and Auschwitz, and the strength of [Israel] will not lie,” according to *Yeshiva World News*.

The haredi draft exemption has become an ever-hotter flash point between ultra-Orthodox and modern Orthodox Jews. All nonharedi Jewish men and women are required to serve three and two years, respectively. Some non-Jews, mostly Druze and Bedouin, also serve, while others perform civilian service.

Israel’s high court struck down the law exempting haredi yeshiva students from being drafted back in 2012, but the government has repeatedly postponed conscription due to demands from the country’s ultra-Orthodox political parties, who represent many of the country’s 800,000 haredim—roughly 10 percent of Israeli’s population.

Many Israelis think it is unfair that haredi men do not serve in the military. In addition, many haredi men opt for religious studies over paid employment, and the community refuses to teach basic subjects such as math and English in school, which makes those haredim who do want to join the workforce unqualified for most jobs.

Nissim Leon, an expert on haredim at Bar-Ilan University, said the community opposes conscription due to ideology, not laziness. “They believe they are protecting the soul of the Jewish people and the nation, and that that is their contribution,” Leon said. “Additionally, they’re afraid that if their children go to the army, they will be exposed to the outside world and not remain haredi.”

Shahar Ilan, vice president of Hiddush, an organization that promotes religious freedom and equality, said the exemption places a burden on those who do serve.

“People risk their lives, so the fact that one sector of the Jewish public doesn’t serve is problematic and tearing the country apart.”

Ilan said the problem is also demographic. “Right now about 15 percent of Jewish 18-year-olds are haredi, but eight years from now, their proportion of the population will be 26 percent due to their high birth rate.” —*USA Today*