

## National Service in Tunisia

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Photo by Reuters

*Making Tunisia's draft national service law effective will require amendments to the age and length of service and exemptions for people with criminal records.*

Unlike armed forces in much of Europe and North America, where recruits volunteer to become professional soldiers, Tunisia has kept a system of conscription in place. The reasoning is that military service is a sacred duty for every citizen and a means to instill national values, morality, and respect for discipline and the law in the country's youth. This view has been enshrined in multiple laws since the founding of the Tunisian Armed Forces (TAF) at independence in 1956, most recently in [Law No. 1 of 2004](#).

While this legislation has its theoretical merits, in practice the TAF has not been able to apply it fairly to all citizens for two decades. The yearly intake of recruits far outstrips military need. This has [discouraged young people](#) from carrying out their service and had a negative impact on the operation of army units. In recent years, only around [500 young people per year](#) have willingly signed up at recruitment centers—just 1.67 percent of the 30,000 conscripts theoretically joining every year.

## **Solution: A Revised Law**

Looking to solve this problem, Tunisia's Ministry of Defence in 2018 presented a [new draft law](#) to parliament that would amend the hard-to-implement 2004 legislation. The new bill includes some positive measures:

- Maintaining mandatory military service
- Linking completion of military service to priority recruitment for public sector jobs
- Promoting gender equality by gradually increasing the proportion of female recruits

These measures and incentives could overcome some of the issues that have pushed many young people to avoid military service. But they will not solve the fundamental problem, which lies not in the inadequacy of the 2004 law itself but in the lack of political will and mechanisms for enforcing it.

According to Tunisia's National Institute of Statistics, by 2014 some [160,000 young people](#) reached conscription age every year. Taking into account those exempted (temporarily or permanently) from military service for legal reasons such as poor health, ongoing education, or family responsibilities, some 100,000 citizens remained available for national service every year. The state can hardly be expected to have either the political will or the administrative, financial, and logistical means to absorb such a large number of young people into national service.

## **Suggested Measures**

This is the crux of the issue, and it requires a practical solution. Any law, no matter how good on paper, needs to be judged on whether it can be implemented. The best way to make it possible to implement the 2018 draft law would be to adopt measures allowing for a reduction in the number of citizens legally required to carry out military service. This would bring the numbers of recruits more in line with what the TAF is able to absorb effectively.

The following measures could help in this regard:

1. Reduce the length of service from 12 months to nine, allowing the army to absorb larger annual numbers of young men and women, but for shorter periods.
2. Set the age of conscription at 20–25 years instead of the current bracket of 20–35, while keeping the current legal exemptions. This would reduce the number of recruits joining up every year while helping to integrate those who do sign up. Furthermore, the 20–25 age cohort mostly includes young men and women who have not gone into higher education and who may also be unemployed. Hiring them and giving them military training, as well as some

technical skills, not only prepares them better for professional life but also converts them into an important human capital reserve for the armed forces.

3. Exclude from service convicts who have been imprisoned for more than six months and have not received positive responses to requests to have their names cleared. This measure would remove the risks the army takes on by recruiting people of this profile.

The question remains: how to deal with people over the age of 25 who have benefitted from temporary exemptions from service for one of the reasons cited in the existing law. These are mostly people with university degrees who have entered professional life. In reality they are not fully relieved from service, but can, if needed, be called up at any time until they reach the age of 35.

### **Advantages of the Proposed Modifications**

Despite their somewhat selective nature, these proposals have a number of positive, practical elements that would help implement the law fairly and limit the shirking of national duty. On this basis, the Ministry of Defense and related parliamentary committees should make the appropriate amendments to make the new legislation more effective. No law is effective unless it can be implemented. What is more, the Tunisian people want laws that enshrine equality for all citizens without exception.

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