

Opinion – Rishi Sunak’s National Service Pledge and the Case Against Conscription

Written by Andreas Yiannaros

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ANDREAS YIANNAROS, MAY 28 2024

On May 25, 2024, the UK Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, pledged to reinstate mandatory national service, a practice that has been suspended in the UK since 1963. The government was quick to explain that the scheme does not amount to conscription, however, I argue that terming this scheme as “national service” rather than “conscription” does not alter its fundamental nature; the defining characteristic of conscription is its compulsory nature, meaning individuals are legally obligated to participate. Regardless of the terminology used to describe this practice, if the service is mandatory and enforced by law, with legal consequences for those who refuse to complete it, it constitutes conscription. Thus, the essence of the requirement—its obligatory enforcement and the penalties for non-compliance—remains unchanged despite the name used to describe it. It is also argued that contrary to claims that national service can help promote a sense of “social unity” and “heterogeneity” among young people, “conscription” or “national service” will not be a quick fix to systemic staffing issues within the UK’s Armed Forces and cannot be seen as a panacea to the decreasing numbers of military personnel, a 32% decrease since 2000 according to the Forces Network.

The UK suspended conscription in 1963, shifting towards a professional volunteer army. The relationship between professional service personnel differs significantly from that of conscripts. Professional soldiers enter into a contract of employment with the armed forces, agreeing to specific duties and responsibilities. This professional framework ensures a higher level of commitment and expertise as service members voluntarily choose this career path. This volunteerism is central to maintaining a motivated and efficient military force, as it attracts individuals who are genuinely committed to their country’s defence.

Conversely, conscripts drafted into service for a defined period of time retain most of their civilian rights and cannot be considered as true volunteers. Their incorporation into a professional army can also affect the morale and performance of professional military personnel. From a moral point of view, the imposition of mandatory service infringes on personal freedoms and can lead to resistance and resentment among those conscripted, unless conscripts have a genuine belief in the efficiency and efficacy of the conscription system.

A January 2024 YouGov poll highlights that more than a third of under-40s in the UK would refuse conscription in the event of a world war, further questioning the feasibility of reinstating conscription. This statistic reflects a significant lack of public support for mandatory service and suggests potential challenges in enforcement. It also remains unclear how the government would fund and enforce a national service programme that respects individual autonomy while being cost-effective. Implementing such a program would require substantial resources and infrastructure, potentially diverting funds from other critical areas of defence and public service.

In countries with conscripted or hybrid (professional and conscripted) armed forces, those eligible for conscription who refuse to take military duties on religious, philosophical, ideological, ethical, moral, conscientious, humanistic, or humanitarian grounds are permitted to complete alternative civilian service. Countries such as Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Switzerland permit applications for exemption on grounds of conscience to be submitted by new conscripts, as well as those already in service, even if their beliefs change during their service. While this approach is deemed more ethically considerate, it still imposes mandatory service on individuals, which may not align with

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modern democratic values that emphasise personal freedom and autonomy.

The push towards conscription is not only outdated but also, impractical. Finland typically recruits approximately 25,000 conscripts per year for mandatory service and is arguably well-supported in Finnish public opinion although its long-term sustainability in a changing geo-political landscape has been questionable (Kosonen et al, 2022). Regardless, comparing the UK Armed Forces with those of countries that maintain conscription is a futile exercise. The UK has been a member of NATO since 1949, while maintaining several foreign military bases such as in Gibraltar and Cyprus, used to launch missions to Iraq and Afghanistan, and more recently in 2024, in cooperation with the US when it targeted Houthi sites in the Red Sea. The size of the UK armed forces compared to other nations in Europe can also be seen in manpower figure comparisons; it is notable that the UK maintains 153,200 active personnel, compared to 19,250 active personnel that are recruited by Finland’s Armed Forces (forces.net).

It is argued that instead of conscription, the UK government should consider other options to address military personnel shortages, such as promoting the creation of volunteer forces. Germany offers a voluntary military service programme, promoted on the government’s website as “an opportunity, not an obligation”, that allows individuals to serve for up to twenty-three months. This model provides flexibility and attracts volunteers who are genuinely interested in military service, ensuring a more motivated and professional force. Pay is considerably more attractive with salaries starting from 1500 euros per month, increasing to 1900 euros per month throughout the scheme. Since 2021, Germany has also been offering the “Freiwilliger Wehrdienst im Heimatschutz” programme (voluntary military service in Homeland Security) for an active service period of seven months (three months of general basic training and four months of special training for homeland security), which can be extended to a total of twelve months. Through these initiatives, Germany offers the opportunity to join the armed forces without committing as a soldier for several years, which can act as a deterrent for some individuals. Voluntary military service can also bridge the gap between the start of a course of study and training, making it an attractive option for recent graduates or career changers.

For those who wish to volunteer but not undertake any duties of a military nature, Germany offers access to the Federal Voluntary Service (BFD), the successor of former “civilian service” while military service in Germany was mandatory, as Germany abolished conscription relatively recently in 2011. The Federal Voluntary Service provides young people with opportunities to engage in various social and environmental projects, allowing them to contribute to society without bearing arms. This alternative not only respects individual autonomy but also fosters a sense of civic responsibility and social contribution.

A professional military force remains more effective, ethical, and aligned with modern democratic values than a conscripted army does. Conscription, by its very nature, imposes service on individuals, which can lead to ethical dilemmas and practical challenges. Additionally, the administrative and logistical burden of managing a conscripted force can be significant, potentially outweighing the benefits.

The UK government should focus on modernising its recruitment strategies and offering flexible service options rather than reviving coercive and anachronistic practices. Modern recruitment strategies could include better career development opportunities, educational incentives, and improved living conditions for service members. Furthermore, leveraging technology and modern communication systems that can help promote voluntary schemes can help reach a broader audience and attract individuals who might not have considered a military career (or civilian service) otherwise. Reinstating conscription is neither a practical nor an ethical solution to addressing military personnel shortages. Instead, efforts to enhance the UK’s Armed Forces should turn to developing a professional and volunteer-driven military force that is motivated, skilled, and aligned with contemporary democratic values. This will help create a more effective and sustainable military force without resorting to coercive measures. The path forward lies in respecting individual autonomy and fostering a genuine commitment to national service through voluntary participation.

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Dr Andreas Yiannaros is an Associate Professor in Law (The University of Law) and the author of “Legal Research, Planning and Skills: A valuable guide for your legal studies” (published in 2024). He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, the Society of Legal Scholars and various professional bodies in the UK and in Europe. He has authored numerous publications and academic journals in the areas of human rights law, freedom of movement and human rights accountability for multinational corporations. His PhD thesis explored the development of legal standards and practice in the Council of Europe for individuals who refuse to carry out military service or duties on grounds of conscience. You can find most of his publications on conscientious objection to military service on Academia.