

Breaking the Silence - Israeli Soldiers Speak

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They're called "Refuseniks" but not for refusing to serve. They've done it proudly and courageously, and here's how "Courage to Refuse" members state their position:

"We, reserve officers and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF)...have always served in the front lines....were first to carry out any mission, light or heavy, (and we did it) to protect the State of Israel and strengthen it.

We....served....long weeks every year, in spite of dear cost to our personal lives, have been on reserve duty all over the Occupied Territories, and were issued commands and directives that had nothing to do with the security of our country (but were only given to perpetuate) our control over the Palestinian people. We('ve)....seen the bloody toll this Occupation exacts from both sides.

....the commands issued to us in the Territories (have) destroy(ed) all the values (we learned) growing up in this country.

....the (way) the Occupation (undermines the) IDF's human character and (exposes) the corruption of the entire Israeli society.

We....know that the Territories are not Israel, and that all settlements are bound to be evacuated in the end.

We hereby declare that we shall not continue to fight this War of the Settlements.

We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.

We hereby declare that we shall continue serving the Israel Defense Forces in any mission that serves Israel's defense.

The missions of occupation and oppression do not serve this purpose - and we shall take no part in them."

These are courageous men and some women, hundreds of them. Their "Courage to Refuse - Combatant's Letter" web site lists 550 by name. There are hundreds more as well. Their numbers are growing, and their resistance is firm. There are five separate refusenik groups. They're listed below. Courage to Refuse is one of them.

Yesh Gvul (There is A Limit)

Yesh Gvul combats the "misuse of the IDF for unworthy ends" that includes the occupation of Palestine. It was established during Israel's 1982 Lebanon invasion that they denounced as a "naked (act of) aggression in which they wanted no part." It supports imprisoned

members and their families, holds vigils where they're held, informs the public of their status, and embraces a peace agenda. They state that "as responsible citizens (they) declare that (they) will take no part in the continued oppression of the Palestinian people (nor will they) participate in policing actions or in guarding the settlements."

They further say that as "an Israeli peace group" they oppose the occupation and support soldiers who refuse to be part of it. They call the Israeli army's role "brutal" and "subjugating." It places servicemen "in a grave and moral and political dilemma (because it requires them) to enforce policies they deem illegal, immoral and ultimately harmful to Israeli interests." Many of their members are combat officers, they've served with distinction, and they rank from sergeant to major. They hold different political views, support peace but no one specific program, and they back a "two-state" solution they believe is "key to (peacefully resolving) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The Shministim

The Shministim is made up of high school seniors approaching age 18 after which Jewish and Druze men and women face mandatory military service, except for exemptions on religious, health and other accepted grounds. The organization no longer maintains a web site.

Courage to Refuse (The Combatants Letter)

The organization was founded in 2002 by a group of 50 combat officers and soldiers after its members realized that their missions had nothing to do with defending Israel. They're to colonize Palestine and oppress its people. They further believe that many commands issued them harm Israel's strategic interests and they refuse to obey them.

They've served their country and support it, but they determined that "fighting in Gaza and....West Bank (was counterproductive): by obeying orders they would not be protecting the lives of their dear ones." They believe "the Occupation poses a threat to the security of Israel." They stated their beliefs openly in "The Combatant's Letter." Hundreds of IDF members signed it and joined "Courage to Refuse." New members join weekly, and Yaffee Center for Strategic Studies surveys show that over 25% of Israelis sympathize with their struggle.

They continue to perform reserve duty, but won't serve in the Occupied Territories. Over 280 of them have been court-martialed and jailed for up to 35 days. Yet they've "won a warm place for the movement in the hearts of many Israelis" who support their self-sacrifice and willingness to be imprisoned for their beliefs.

Hundreds of Israeli professors signed petitions for them. Sami Michael is acting chairman of the Israeli Association for Human Rights. He said that refusing the occupation is not just a moral act, it's the purest form of patriotism in Israel today. Their reasons for not serving are stated above.

The Pilots Group

The Pilots Group maintains a web site in Hebrew only, so it can't be monitored by non-Hebrew readers. In September 2003, 27 of their members (including reserve Brigadier General Yiftah Spector) published their statement for the first time. It declared they would no longer fly missions against West Bank and Gaza civilians, that doing so is illegal and

immoral, and they denounced targeted assassinations.

On Israeli television, one pilot said: "We veteran pilots and active pilots alike....are opposed to carrying out illegal and immoral attacks, of the type carried out by Israel in the Territories. We....love the State of Israel (but) refuse to take part in air force attacks in civilian populations centers. We refuse to continue harming innocent civilians."

They knew they could be punished for their stance and for their "illegitimate" and "forbidden" statement, according to Israel's chief of army staff, Moshe Ya'alon. Israeli Air Force (IAF) chief Dan Halutz downplayed their action, said announcing it on national television was "inappropriate," and called it "the mother of all dangers to our people."

Because of it, they were expelled from the IAF, denounced as traitors, and went public again two months later to explain further. One captain's comment was typical: "In the beginning, we were pilots who believed our country would do all it could to achieve peace. We believed in the purity of our arms and that we did all we could to protect unnecessary loss of life. Somewhere in the last few years it became harder and harder to believe that is the case."

A single incident changed them. It was the bombing of Hamas military leader Salah Shehade's home that killed him and 14 members of his family, nine of whom were children. One pilot called it "murder," another "state terrorism," still another "vengeance," and all agreed they could no longer perform these missions.

Lt. Colonel Avner Raanan was one of them. He's one of Israel's most respected and decorated pilots. He signed the letter and stated: "If you look at the past three years, you see that, if we had a suicide bombing, the Israeli air force made a big operation in which civilians were killed, and that looks to innocent eyes like revenge. You hear it in the streets of Israel; people want revenge. But we should not behave like that. We are not a mafia."

Referring to an attack on Gaza's Nuseirat refugee camp, another pilot added: "Is it legitimate to take F-15s and helicopters designed to destroy enemy tanks, and use them against cars and houses in one of the most heavily populated places in the world....we have become blinded by the blood on our own faces. We cannot see that on the other side....is a whole nation of innocent people."

The pilots' action and statements shook Israeli society. Their superiors condemned them, but over 500 supportive letters disagreed, including one from a holocaust survivor and others from fellow pilots. In addition, former left wing cabinet ministers also praised their courage.

Sayeret Matkal

This is an elite IDF commando unit that maintains no web site. In December 2003, 13 of its reservists and officers (including one major) wrote the Prime Minister declaring their refusal to serve henceforth in the Territories. Their statement read: "We say to you today, we will no longer give our hands to the oppressive reign in the territories and the denial of human rights to millions of Palestinians, and we will no longer serve as a defensive shield for the settlement enterprise."

Members of this commando group carried out the 1976 Entebbe, Uganda airport raid that rescued 100 hostages on an Air France hijacked plane. They rarely serve in the Territories,

but their announcement was significant because of the group's standing in Israeli society. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak once commanded them and led a raid against a 1972 hijacked Sabena plane at Tel Aviv airport. He asked the signers to reconsider, called their letter a grave mistake, and said "it's not too late to correct it...." Other officials also condemned them, but Meretz Knesset Member (MK) Roman Bronfman believed they acted bravely, and Labor MK Ophir Pines said it requires that serious discussion be held.

In May 2004, Haaretz journalist Gideon Levy was supportive. He urged more soldiers to speak out, discuss their actions in the Territories, and ask why they serve there "to protect groups of delusional settlers (and) what their systematic abuse of the Palestinians has to do with security....how many innocent people (have) they killed and (keep on) killing."

He noted that Israelis don't know what goes on in the Territories, so it's up to soldiers to "lift this screen....The Palestinians aren't believed, the Israeli press (keeps) its distance from the Territories and the international press is perceived as hostile. Only the soldiers can break the vicious circle....No one (can) deny their accounts....it's time (for them) to stand up and speak out....how they killed and jailed and humiliated for no good reason."

Excerpts From Soldiers Breaking the Silence

Breaking the Silence (Shovrim Shtika) dedicates itself to two purposes:

- exposing IDF oppression in occupied Palestine; and
- providing discharged Israeli soldiers and reservists a platform to explain what they were ordered to do on the ground.

In their own words, hundreds of their testimonies tell shocking stories – the ordeal they faced, its moral price, and the corrupting erosion it had on their values. They focus on orders gotten, rules of engagement and operational procedures that include frequent illegal commands:

- firing at civilians posing no risk;
- revenge operations for collective punishment; and
- intentionally attacking Palestinian rescue forces, including ambulances.

Their accounts are disturbing. They portray institutionalized moral corruption, universal contempt for Arabs, and how it affects everyone from new recruits to commanders. Rules of engagement are unrestrained, government oversight is non-existent, so reporting abuse is urgent. They want it stopped and demand an independent body to do it.

It goes on everywhere in occupied Palestine with Hebron a prominent example because it's the only Palestinian city with an Israeli settlement in its center. Sixty-four soldiers from the Nachal brigade spoke out, they were there during the Second Intifada, and their testimonies recount horrors on the ground they were ordered to commit.

They call their experiences "shocking" with photos for confirming evidence. Their collective statement says: "In coping daily with the madness of Hebron, we couldn't remain the same people beneath our uniforms. We saw our buddies and ourselves slowly changing...."

We were exposed to the ugly face of terror....an innocent family killed while at the Sabbath table. Countless engagements, bereaved families, innocent civilians injured, chase and arrests.

The settlers....rioted, occupied houses, and confronted the police and army....The constant curfew made Hebron into a ghost town....The school in Jebel Ju'ar has been an army post....We asked ourselves why an army platoon prevents children from going to school. We found no answers.

We decided to speak out....to tell....Hebron isn't in outer space....But it's light years away from Tel Aviv....Come, see, hear and understand what's happening there."

Here are more paraphrased comments:

We man checkpoints, stop people from going somewhere, humiliate them, but "I'm doing my duty (and) inflicting pain on people, harming them unnecessarily." It affects your mind, your sleep the longer you serve there. Jews do as they please. There are no laws. Anything goes, breaking into shops, occupying Palestinian homes. Your judgment gets impaired when everyday your enemy is an Arab. You don't look at them as people. But they're not dogs, not animals, not inferior, yet they simply don't count, and since they're your enemy you can kill them.

At checkpoints, our job was don't let them pass. It was absurd, there were old ladies who had to get through to go home. Why was it forbidden to pass? It was collective punishment. "You're not allowed to pass because you're not allowed to pass." Then there are the curfews. "I'm certain that 80% of the time there was a curfew." We closed all the stores and sent everyone home.

I'm ashamed of myself because I realized I enjoy the feeling of power. I'm the Law. It's a mighty feeling. It's because you have a weapon, because you're a soldier, it's addictive. You can do whatever you want, unsupervised, enter people's homes, conduct random searches. Tell them what you want and they'll do it because they're afraid. Palestinians feel you don't let them walk in the streets, work, live or breathe.

I have a machine gun, it's loaded, the safety catch is off. I can shoot you any time, for any reason, split your head open with the gun butt and my commander will pat me on the back and say good job. It's crazy, I'm just a kid, but Hebron hardens you. I say to myself I'm doing something I don't believe in, and I'm putting myself in a position where someone wants to kill me because of it. You see things that couldn't possibly happen in your own home and shouldn't happen. But here everything is different.

Any time of day or night, whenever we feel like it, we pick a house, any house, and we go in. We move all the men into one room, the women in another, and place them under guard. We can do whatever we want. There's no justification for it. It shouldn't be happening.

Then there are the settlers. They run wild. There's no law. They do what they please. So they burn another shop, trash another home, occupy another one, no big deal, happens all the time. We just watch and do nothing.

If someone is sick and needs to go to the hospital, I ask my commander if I can let her pass. No way if there's a curfew. She's not going anywhere no matter how sick. All these stories

are my daily routine for over six months. When it ended, I questioned whether I protected myself or my country. I began watching out for myself because I didn't believe in the ideology.

Serving in Hebron made me feel there's something different about being a Jew. I can't explain it. I'm supposed to guard the settlers who don't have the kind of morality I was raised to believe. I reached a point where I didn't know who the enemy was anymore, Jews or Arabs. Maybe I need to protect the Arabs, not the Jews who attack them. I feel emotionally injured. If someone's caught breaking curfew, we can let them have it aggressively. Hold them, make them wait eight hours with no water, sit and wait. "Why? Because he walked outside. Because he dared go buy something. Because he dared send his kid to school." We can even shoot them.

Selected Israeli Organizations Supporting Refuseniks

Several important ones are covered below:

New Profile

New Profile is a pluralistic feminist organization that includes men and women. It's goal is to transform Israel from a militaristic to a civil society. It opposes occupation and supports all conscientious objectors – from pacifists opposed to war to refuseniks who won't serve in occupied Palestine. Its charter states that "Israel is capable of a determined peace politics. It need not be a militarized society." It understands that "the words 'national security' have often masked calculated decisions to choose military action for the achievement of political goals."

It no longer is "willing to take part in such choices. We are no longer willing to go on being mobilized, raising our children for mobilization....while those in charge of the country go on deploying the army easily, rather than building other solutions."

It's "hard to express this type opinion in Israel today....An attitude that dares question the fundamental principle of willing enlistment is almost incomprehensible in a soldiers' state." We reject perpetuating war. We prioritize and protect life.

"We oppose the use of the army, police, (and) security forces in the ongoing oppression and discrimination of the Palestinian citizens of Israel (and in the Occupied Territories)," in demolishing their homes, "denying them building and development rights, (and) using violence" against them. Thousands of young Israelis are opting out and refuse to serve. They reject military service in Israel today. The IDF states that only one-third of reserve forces in fact serve actively.

Israeli law doesn't recognize conscientious objection. "We regard Israeli conscription law as discriminatory and non-democratic, and call for" recognizing every person's right to act according to his or her conscience. They should have the right to fulfill their social commitment by alternative civic or community means, including through non-governmental, voluntary organizations.

The Refuser Solidarity Network (RSN)

It was founded in 2002 to support Israel's growing "Refuser Movement." RSN supports Courage to Refuse, Combatants for Peace, Yesh G'vul, the Shministim, New Profile and

other Israeli organizations advocating peaceful conflict resolution in Occupied Palestine.

Its original 2002 “Call to Action” declaration said: “The time has come” to act against growing violence. Increasing numbers of Israeli soldiers reject serving in Occupied Palestine. They’ve seen what goes on, it has nothing to do with security, and its sole purpose is “perpetuating our control over the Palestinian people.” They now declare they no longer will help “dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.”

The time has come “to listen to our consciences,” summon our courage, and publicly support them. Israel can never have peace and security unless it withdraws from Occupied Palestine. This is a “crucial moment, a potential turning point.” Their campaign was initiated from Chicago, but it resonates across the country as a “portal” in support of the Refuser Movement in Israel.

Combatants for Peace

Former Palestinian and Israeli cycle of violence participants are the founders – IDF soldiers and Palestinian resistance fighters. They believe their actions were futile, decided another way is crucial, and now work together for peace. Henceforth, they “refuse to take part (in further) bloodletting.” They will only act non-violently through dialogue and reconciliation and work together cooperatively to understand each other’s aspirations.

Their goal – end the occupation, halt the settlement project, and establish a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem alongside the State of Israel. They want to raise consciousness, educate both sides, and create political pressure to establish a constructive dialogue for resolution.

They hold meetings, conduct educational lectures and public forums, undertake joint projects, have bi-national media teams to get out their message, and participate in non-violent demonstrations against the occupation. It’s motto reads: “Only by joining forces, will we be able to end the cycle of violence.”

Israeli Laws Affecting Conscientious Objection and Refuseniks

Conscription existed since Israel became a state in 1948. Today, its legal basis comes under the country’s 1986 National Defence Service Law. It requires all Israeli citizens and permanent residents (men and women) to serve. However, the Ministry of Defence has discretion under Article 36 to exempt all non-Jews, except the Druze. Israeli Arabs may volunteer, but they’re not encouraged, and very few do it. Reserve service is also required up to age 51 for men and 24 for women.

Exemptions are possible for reasons of:

- educational requirements,
- religion (orthodox Jews are exempted),
- health,
- family considerations,
- married or pregnant women or those with children,

- persons convicted of crimes,
- the undereducated (until they complete at least eight years of school), and
- other considerations at the Ministry of Defence's discretion.

Israeli law rejects conscientious objection rights for men and only partly accepts them for women on the basis of religion. Those who cite it and refuse to serve are in trouble. They're subjected to unfair procedures and hearings that may, and most often do, recommend prosecution and imprisonment.

Israel signed the United Nations Charter and must, under its provisions, comply with the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Its Article 18 guarantees everyone "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion." So does the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under Article 18 where it repeats that "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion..." By denying refuseniks this right, Israel violates international law and a fundamental human right afforded everyone under it.

No official figures exist, but refusenik numbers have grown since the Second Intifada began in September 2000. Most opt out in the Territories, and estimates of their numbers range from 1100 well-documented cases to as many as double that number. Here's what they face.

Article 35 (a) (2) of the National Defence Service Law states that:

- failure to fulfill a duty under the law is punishable by up to two years imprisonment;
- evading military service is subject to five years in prison;
- refusing to perform reserve duties calls for up to a 56 day sentence that's renewable if the objector refuses repeatedly;
- helping someone avoid military service is punishable by a fine and up to two years in prison;
- disobeying call-up orders means facing up to five years imprisonment, although most often sentences rarely exceed 12 months.

Refuseniks are generally sentenced on one of the following charges:

- refusing to obey an order;
- absence without leave;
- desertion; or
- refusing to be mobilized.

Where exemption applications are denied, individuals are ordered to perform military or reserve duty. Continued refusal can mean discipline or court-martial, and repeat offenders face re-imprisonment in violation of Article 14, paragraph 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. It states: "No one shall be liable to be tried or punished again for an offence for which he (or she) has already been finally convicted or acquitted in

accordance with the law and penal procedure of each country.”

Summary Comments

Peace activists, people of conscience and most notably Israeli refuseniks are in the front lines of a valiant struggle:

- to free Palestinians from 41 illegal occupation years,
- end decades of abuse,
- achieve a just and lasting peace, and
- protect everyone’s fundamental human rights and freedoms that are guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for “all members of the human family....”

Israel must no longer be exempted from international law, from being allowed to flaunt it brazenly, from ignoring over five dozen UN Resolutions going back decades. Peace activists and refuseniks condemn the Jewish state for its actions, deplore it for committing them, and demand, call on and insist Israeli governments end them. Its lawlessness must end, and collective resistance can achieve it. It’s no longer an option. It’s an obligation to assure that everyone has equal dignity and the right to life, liberty, security and freedom under universal international law.

May 14 is the 60th anniversary of Israel’s founding. Commemorations there and in the West will celebrate it. People of conscience won’t participate. Refuseniks may not either. Use this time to demand an illegal occupation end and that Israel no longer be allowed a pass on the international law it disdains.

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