

# Israeli army reservists refuse to serve in occupied territories

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More than 70 Israeli army reservists, including at least two dozen officers, have publicly stated they will no longer serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip because of the brutality of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories.

“We will no longer fight beyond the Green Line [the border between Israel and the West Bank established after the 1967 Six-Day War] for the purpose of occupying, deporting, destroying, blockading, killing, starving and humiliating an entire people,” the group declared in a statement published Monday in *Yedioth Ahronoth*, Israel’s bestselling daily newspaper.

The petition was initiated by a pair of reserve captains—David Sonnschein, 28, a software engineer, and Yaniv Itzkovich, 26, a university teaching assistant—who have both served in the occupied areas over the last 16 months, a period during which nearly 800 Palestinians have been killed by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF).

Describing themselves as men “raised in the lap of Zionism,” the petition signers wrote that while they would continue to defend Israel, “they would no longer fight in the war for the welfare of the [Jewish] settlements.” The soldiers wrote they had “rendered service throughout the occupied territories and received orders and instructions that had nothing to do with the security of the state, and whose sole purpose is the perpetuation of domination of the Palestinian people.” This “mission of occupation and repression does not serve this purpose [the defense of Israel],” they said, “and we shall have no part of it.”

The soldiers said they had “witnessed with [their] own eyes the bloody toll that the occupation takes on both sides of the divide” and understood “that the price of occupation is the loss of humanity in the IDF and the corruption of the whole Israeli society.”

Most Israeli men are required to serve as reservists until they are 45 years old and typically spend a few weeks each year in active duty. The organizers said they hoped to collect 500 signatures from among the growing number of reservists who were uneasy over the demolition of homes, the killing of stone-throwing boys and the blockading of villages. Many

see the war chiefly as one to defend Israeli settlers in the territories, many of whom are religious fanatics who express disdain towards soldiers and nonreligious Jews, as well as fascist hatred towards Arabs.

The petition—which quickly became known as the “Officers’ Letter”—evoked furious condemnation from representatives of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and the army general staff, and immediate reprisals against those who organized it. Despite the efforts to crack down on dissent in the army, another 50 reservists contacted the officers to add their names to the petition shortly after its publication in *Yedioth* and other newspapers.

“We knew we’d get a lot of reactions, and some of them are not just critical, they’re violent,” Sonnschein said. “These are hard people with very extreme beliefs.” However, “We all have limits,” he told *Yedioth*. “You can always be the best officer, always be first ... and suddenly you are asked to do things that should not be asked of you—to shoot people, to stop ambulances, to destroy homes in which you don’t know if there are people living,” Sonnschein said.

In a statement, the Israeli army general staff said: “To serve in the Israeli Defense Forces is obligatory under the law and there is no place for reserve soldiers to choose what jobs they want and what jobs they don’t want. The writers of the petition don’t represent the soldiers and officers of the reserve who understand their mission and are working days and nights toward the security of the state of Israel and peace for its citizens.”

Sharon’s spokesman Raanan Gissin dismissed the petition and refusals to serve in the army as a “marginal phenomenon.” The petition, he claimed, “undermines the basic tenet of Israeli democracy. You can’t have a government in which people can decide ... they’ll bomb this target but not that target. You abide by the rule of the majority, and the majority has decided this is the government and this is its policy.”

According to *Yesh Gvul* (There is a Limit), an Israeli protest group founded in response to the 1982 Israeli

invasion of Lebanon, since the current uprising by Palestinians began in September 2000, more than 500 Israelis have refused to serve in the occupied territories, including pacifists and veterans, recruits and reservists. Of that number, about 40, including 12 reserve officers, have been sentenced to military prison terms for their refusal, the group said.

Reserve Major Rami Kaplan, the most senior of those who have signed the petition so far, was removed from his position as a deputy commander of a reservist tank battalion. His commander, Res. Col. Amit Regev, told the *Ha'aretz* newspaper that the decision to move Kaplan was made months ago after he had a "difficult time with exposing work" in Gaza. "Exposing work" is the IDF's euphemism for demolishing houses and farmlands along the side of roads. In an interview with *Ha'aretz* last April, Kaplan said he was worried by "the unbearable ease" with which the army decides to destroy such properties. "I don't want to be part of what are blatantly immoral actions," he said.

Captains Sonnschein and Itzkovitz were also officially ousted Wednesday from their roles as platoon commanders in paratrooper units. Yamit Mashiah, another signatory, said that members of the group believe the IDF has decided to deal as harshly as possible with them. IDF officials are also disseminating a counter-letter, signed by combat reservists, denouncing the "amalgam of lies, distortions and unbridled defamation of the army" in the dissenting group's letter.

In recent months there have been growing numbers of public statements by Israeli soldiers about the unprovoked violence the IDF metes out to Palestinians on a daily basis. These exposures—like the release of the "Officers' Letter"—have been chiefly ignored by the US media as the Bush administration increasingly embraces Sharon's war against the Palestinian people. Instead American news outlets have largely repeated the Israeli government's claims that the killing of Palestinians is a defensive measure on the part of the IDF to unprovoked "terrorist" attacks.

One reservist, Shuki Sadeh, recounted for the *Yedioth* newspaper the murder of a Palestinian boy by an IDF sniper firing from an outpost 150 meters away from his victim. "What angered me at the time," Sadeh said, "was that our soldiers said, 'Well, that's another Arab who's disappeared.'" He added that soldiers regularly violated the supposed rule of firing 50 meters to the right or left of Palestinian children.

Ariel Shatil, another reservist who signed the petition and a veteran of duty in the Gaza Strip, noted, "People say that the Palestinians shoot first and we just respond. This is untrue. One officer there told soldiers doing guard duty in the lookout posts: 'If things are too quiet or if you don't feel certain about the situation, just let off a few rounds.'"

"Shots were fired every night," Shatil said, "we would start shooting and they would fire back."

Two reserve soldiers from an engineering unit that served from near the city of Nablus in the West Bank described the widespread procedure by which IDF soldiers removed suspicious objects from roads. Instead of waiting for demolition experts to arrive, the soldiers would go to the nearest vehicle driven by Palestinians and tell the driver or one of the passengers to pick up and remove the object, while the soldiers and settlers watched the removal from a safe distance.

Reserve Lt. Itai Swirski told a *Ha'aretz* reporter that this practice is the norm. "Fortunately the first time I encountered this phenomenon, I prevented it. It was truly a suspicious object, with wires sticking out of it and all that, and I simply did not let the soldiers send a Palestinian to check it out." But in other cases, Swirski admitted he was part of the procedure: the demolition expert is late, time is pressing, there is a disturbing possibility that the soldiers might be fired on from one of the surrounding hills, and there is also the fear that settlers will complain to the command level that their routine is being upset. The result, he said, is that even people of conscience give in and take measures that by any definition constitute a crime.

Asked if the Palestinian has the right to refuse, Lt. Swirski replied: "I assume that they don't think they have that right. When you are a civilian and four M-16s are pointed at you, even if no one intends to fire them, you don't count on having room for maneuver." Responding to the reporter's question of whether IDF personnel would ever ask an Israeli settler or soldier to remove a suspicious object, Swirski said, "The very fact that something like that is totally inconceivable shows how deep is the distinction that we make between people. There is a first class and second class, and their lives are worth a lot less."



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