

The political impasse facing Israel's refuseniks

Laura Villon, Chris Marsden
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The ongoing assault on the Palestinian population is causing extreme disquiet within Israel. Not since the 1982 massacre of women and children at the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla overseen by then Defence Minister Ariel Sharon has there been such political unrest within Israel.

The most dramatic manifestation of opposition to the brutal subjugation of the Palestinians is the growing number of conscientious objectors within the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). These "refuseniks" are Israeli soldiers who refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories, openly defying "assignments of a repressive or aggressive nature". Yesh-Gvul (There is a Limit!), is a support group for resisting soldiers. It is a movement that has emerged outside of the official "left" groups, Meretz and the Labour Party.

Military service is not only legally required, but also widely considered a moral duty in Israel. Israeli youth must serve in the military for several years at the age of 18. Thereafter, Israeli men are reservists in the army who can be called up for active service at intervals. Soldiers refusing to serve in the military not only face jail sentences, but also rejection by official society, their friends and relatives.

Despite these pressures, many soldiers have found that they cannot in good conscience participate in Israel's ongoing war against the Palestinians.

The policy of destroying Palestinian villages and building armed and walled settlement outposts in the Occupied Territories was begun following the 1967 War. Since the 1993 Oslo Peace Accords, which called for an end to the settlement policy, consecutive governments have actually increased the number of settlements and linked them with roads that Arabs are not permitted free movement on. The resulting honeycombing of the Occupied Territories has so effected Palestinian lands that they are no longer continuous. The remaining diminished area available to the Palestinian is physically insufficient for making a viable Palestinian state. The settlements not only take the best land, but also divert most of the water needed by the surrounding impoverished Palestinian fields.

To pay for the settlements, social programmes have been severely cut within Israel itself. In addition, since the settlements are a target of attack by enraged Palestinians, Israeli reservists are called up more frequently to guard the surrounding perimeters.

The refusenik movement has grown by leaps and bounds since the beginning of the Al-Aqsa Intifada in September 2000. Presently, over 1,000 soldiers are refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. With each call up of reservists in the current military campaign the number grows.

Hundreds of reservists have signed "The Courage to Refuse—A Combatant's Letter", first posted by two officers at Tel Aviv University in February 2002.

Guy Grossman, a lieutenant in the Israeli Defence Force reserves and a founder of Courage to Refuse, joined an IDF paratroop unit and was commissioned an officer in 1992. He told an audience at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, how he and three of his soldiers were ordered to sneak into a refugee camp at night. The camp was asleep.

As they entered the grounds of a Palestinian home, its owner awoke and confronted him and his soldiers with a rock. In self-defence, they shot the man. The camp awoke and before the evening was done four other Palestinians in the camp were dead. The Israeli newspapers the next morning said that the Palestinians had rioted. "I asked myself, why am I here?" Grossman said. "Everything that we did that night was legal: sneaking into the camp was legal, shooting the guy was legal, shooting the others was legal."

A number of the signatories have written extensive statements explaining their decision. They describe the horrific nature of the occupation as seen by those who have carried out its crimes, and can no longer do so.

"The Situation in the Occupied Territories is Unethical, Unbearable, and Unjustified," writes Gil Nemesh, an engineering staff sergeant. "I've seen my friends humiliating people, treating them as I would not treat an animal. My friends forcing an elderly man to disgrace himself, hurting children, abusing people for fun, and later bragging about it, laughing about this terrible brutality. I am not sure I still want to call them my friends...."

"Those terrible things happening in the territories have little to do with the security of Israel and stopping terror. It is all about the settlements. Choking and starving and humiliating millions of people, to provide safety to the settlements."

Paratrooper Captain Dan Tamir became an unwitting participant in the preparation of a war crime. Only a few weeks after a planning session over a crowded suburb of Jerusalem, "did he realise he was actually planning Ghettos for the Palestinian population.... Just a few days ago a senior officer was quoted in *Haaretz* as saying that the IDF must learn the lessons of the German Wehrmacht as it was fighting in the Warsaw Jewish Ghetto in the Second World War...Technically he is right, but the moral price was—and still is—high."

Ofer Beit-Halachmi, a major in the Medicine Corps, writes: "I cannot even begin to describe the detentions, the torturing, and the physical and psychological suffering that we had caused to human beings who are just like us, and which we are still causing. Nor am I speaking of my close friends, who were injured physically or mentally as a result of the deeds that they participated in and because of the things that they witnessed. Nor about others who have left Israel or have in a variety of ways stopped doing their military service/reserve duty."

The movement has proved especially troubling for Sharon's government because the resisters include many combat officers, who have proved themselves under fire. "There is no doubt that our profile is different from Yesh-Gvul's," Amit Mashiah told *Haaretz*. "We belong to the centre. Our protest is not coming from the margins."

But what presently makes the refuseniks' protest so politically embarrassing to the government—loyalty to the state of Israel and the ideology of Zionism—will prove to be its Achilles heel in the long run.

The position of the refuseniks is one of loyalty to Israel, while arguing

that the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza runs contrary to the national interest. The *Courage to Refuse* letter ends, “We hereby declare that we shall continue serving in the Israel Defence Forces in any mission that serves Israel’s defence. The missions of occupation and oppression do not serve this purpose—and we shall take no part in them.”

Grossman warns that the Israeli people had reached a historic impasse: either they maintain a democratic state with the pre-1967 borders, or they form a non-democratic state in all of biblical Judea. The reservists argue that some *modus vivendi* must be found with the Palestinians if Israel is to survive. They still see this as the creation of two states—one Jewish and the other Arab and probably Muslim. Within this framework, coexistence between Jew and Muslim is generally excluded.

The two states perspective is shared by much of the Israeli peace movement. Yesh-Gvul, formed during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, advocates Israeli and Palestinian states sharing Jerusalem as their common capital, and with the pre-1967 demarcation, or “Green Line” as Israel’s borders. Gush Shalom, the Peace Bloc, formed by Uri Avneri in 1992 during the first Intifada, calls for “the creation of the state of Palestine in all the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the release of all Palestinian prisoners, the dismantling of all settlements and the recognition of Jerusalem as the joint capital of both states.”

Even if well intentioned, however, the stance of the reservists has a reactionary logic that cannot be overcome. The two states policy is clearly animated by a mixture of disgust at the brutal treatment of the Palestinians, with a progressive and democratic opposition to the growing political influence of the fascist settlers on the Israeli body politic. But it is coupled with a backward looking nostalgia for Israel prior to the 1967 War. A desire to return to the state’s supposed democratic origins and, perhaps most importantly, a fear that Israel will not survive if it carries on its present course.

A recent poll by *Haaretz* newspaper found that 54 percent of Israel’s Jewish population now “perceives the settlements as weakening Israel’s national interest.” There are a number of reasons for this belief. Firstly, there is the ever-present danger that the hostility of the Arab masses will be enflamed to such an extent that war will result. Secondly, there is the belief that Israel’s existence as a Jewish state is demographically unsustainable.

A study by Bar-Ilan University’s Rappaport Centre for Assimilation, Research, and Strengthening Jewish Vitality states that 28 percent of Israelis, more than one in four, are not Jewish. Of those, 18 percent are Israeli Arabs. Another two percent are illegal Arab immigrants and the remaining eight percent include a growing number of non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union and foreign workers. More Jews are emigrating from Israel than are immigrating to Israel. According to the study, there are 83,868 mixed Jewish and non-Jewish couples in Israel and unofficially the number could be as high as 114,254. Another 33,500 families are not Jewish at all.

The head of the centre, Zvi Zohar, has declared his concern is how to keep Jews from assimilating and how to preserve the Jewish identity of Israel.

The report prompted a debate in the Knesset, during which Major General Uzi Dayan, chairman of the national Security Council, warned that in less than 20 years Israel, the West Bank and Gaza combined would have a population of 15 million, of which only 45 percent would be Jews—reversing the current ratio based on a population of nine million.

It is this concern that provides an impulse amongst what passes for the left within the Zionist establishment. Recently Ami Ayalon, the former head of the security service Shin Bet, insisted, “We must leave Judea and Samaria, [the West Bank] and Gaza right away. If we don’t get out of the territories, we will not have a democratic society, or alternatively, there will be no home for the Jewish people.”

The proposals championed by the reservists are shared as a long-term

goal by influential sections of the Israeli establishment, even amongst those playing a leading role in Sharon’s war-cabinet.

Present Labour Defence Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer has called for a negotiated pullout from most of the West Bank and Gaza to create “Two states for two people, living side by side in peaceful coexistence, Israel and Palestine.”

His leadership rival, Haim Ramon, has urged Israelis to take “our destiny in our own hands” and separate unilaterally from the Palestinians.

Former prime minister and Labour Party leader, Ehud Barak, has urged a policy of unilateral separation as a means of preserving the Zionist state.

When such figures take up key aspects of your policy, then it is necessary to question its democratic credentials. The attempt to reconcile a belief in democracy with patriotism and loyalty to the general ideological framework of Zionism cannot be sustained.

A Chinese wall cannot be built between the Israeli state founded in 1948 and the state as it has developed since the 1967 War.

The Zionist founders of Israel hailed it as a democratic, even egalitarian, home for those who had suffered the tragedy of the Holocaust. But Israel was established through the military dispossession of the Palestinian Arabs and founded on the assertion of the ethnic and religious interests of Jews over those of Arab Muslims and Christians. Israel developed as a state based on the denial of democratic rights, a garrison state entirely dependent on US imperialism and surrounded by hostile Arab neighbours.

The 1967 War and the establishment of Jewish settlements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza was an expansionist measure, which transformed Israel into a regional colonial power and fostered the creation of an extreme right-wing Zionist settler population that has provided the social bedrock of militarism and the growth of religious zealotry.

Whenever the ruling elite has felt threatened, it has been able to utilise the settlers and the ultra-orthodox parties as a bulwark against the emergence of a social movement from below. While millions are squandered on the army and providing social privileges for the settlers, the subject Palestinians suffer ever-greater brutality and the Israeli working class declining living standards.

The creation of two states would not offer a democratic alternative for either the Palestinians or the Israelis. However brightly its left and liberal apologists paint it, the proposal is based on the claim that coexistence between Jews and Arabs is impossible. As imposed by Israel, separation would not create a viable Palestinian state but a series of militarised cantons without genuine economic or political independence.

The character of the two states proposal is exemplified by the support for the building of a fence separating the political border between Israel and whatever part of the West Bank and Gaza Israel would allow to become a Palestinian entity (several proposals do not accept the 1967 Green Line, but call for the annexation of around 15 percent of West Bank lands where 75 percent of Zionist settlers live).

Grossman and other reservists have advocated building a wall between the 1967 Israeli borders and the occupied territories. Now the proposal has been partially adopted by Sharon, who has approved a \$100 million, 65-mile line of defence along the West Bank frontier, modelled on that already in existence around Gaza.

Life on the Israeli side of the fortified border would not be a democratic and peaceful idyll. Israel would remain a state under siege, ruled by the military/political elite and plagued by the ultra-orthodox far-right, who will demand the imposition of their backward views on secular Jews while insisting that Arab Israelis be deported to the Palestinian areas of the West Bank.

Democracy is incompatible with the existence of a state based on religious exclusivity and the denial of the democratic rights of the Palestinians. The refuseniks and those workers and youth within Israel’s broader peace movement can only go forward by breaking with Zionism and adopting a new and genuinely independent axis of struggle—one based

on the unification of Jews and Arabs on a democratic, secular and socialist basis.



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