Israel: Air Force pilots reject participation in targeted assassinations

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In September, a group of 27 Israeli Air Force pilots issued a letter declaring their refusal to take part in military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Their letter was sent to Air Force Chief General Dan Halutz and was aimed at Israel's policy of assassinating activists of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade.

Extra-judicial killings are considered war crimes under the Geneva Conventions.

The pilots refused to carry out duties including track and kill operations or transporting ground troops to the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The letter stated, "We refuse to continue harming innocent civilians.... Perpetuation of the occupation is fatally harming the security of the state of Israel and its moral strength."

The letter is the first act of open dissent by Air Force pilots, who are viewed as an elite within the armed forces. Nine of the 27 were on active service.

Over 120 Palestinians have been killed in extra-judicial assassinations launched by the Air Force, of which 84 were civilian bystanders. For many signatories the final straw was provided by the largest targeted assassination operation in July 2002, when an F-16 pilot dropped a one-tonne bomb on the home of Hamas leader Salah Shehade in a crowded Gaza neighbourhood. The bomb killed Shehade, along with 14 other civilians, mostly children.

One of the pilots, identified as Captain Alon, told *Yedioth Ahronoth*, "Something deep broke inside me. I don't sleep well at night. How many more have to be killed until we realise that we are committing crimes?"

The government responded ferociously to the pilot's challenge, accusing them of treachery. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon condemned the pilots during a radio address to the nation, as did both the Army and Air Force commanders, Moshe Yaalon and Dan Halutz.

Sharon said the Israel Defence Forces "is not an organisation where you can do as you please." Those signatories in active service were immediately grounded and have since been removed from the Air Force. Halutz warned that they could also face prison sentences. "This method has proven itself," he told *Haaretz*.

Only three pilots withdrew their names from the original list in response to this intimidation, including a civilian airline El Al pilot who was threatened with dismissal and a reserve pilot who lost his civilian job. But others have signed up and there are now more than 30 signatories.

Though a small protest, this has not diminished the concerns of the government and the armed forces over its significance. The list includes figures such as Yiftah Spector, a brigadier general who took part in the 1982 attack on Iraq's nuclear reactor, and Lieutenant-Colonel Avner Raanan, who was awarded one of Israel's highest military decorations in 1994.

A military commentator told *Yediot Aharonot* that the letter was "dangerous" because it set a "precedent":

"The pilots' rebellion is an earthquake with a potential for disaster, whose magnitude is difficult to assess at present.... If this storm does not go way quickly, it could drag with it other parts of the army and not only the air force."

To date there are approximately 1,200 soldiers and reservists who are refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories, of whom around 300 have served prison terms. The pilots' action has been supported by a petition signed by 200 Israeli professors and university students and they have received over 500 letters of support.

Speaking to the *Guardian*'s Chris McGreal, the pilots gave their first open statements explaining their actions

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after having been removed from the Air Force.

They again referred to the dropping of the one-tonne bomb on the home of a Hamas military leader Salah Shehade. According to McGreal's report, "One captain described the bombing as deliberate killing, murder even. Another called it state terrorism, though some colleagues swiftly stomped on that interpretation."

Captain Alon R. said, "With Shehade I began to re-evaluate my beliefs. We killed 14 innocent people, nine of them children. After my commander gave an interview in which he said he sleeps well at night and his men can do the same. Well, I can't. We refused to see it as an innocent mistake." He asked, "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?"

Captain Assaf L. said, "You don't have to be a genius to know that the destruction from a one-tonne bomb is massive, so someone up there made a decision to drop it knowing it would destroy buildings.... Someone took the decision to kill innocent people. This is us being terrorists. This is vengeance."

Lt.-Col. Avner Raanan said, "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."

Captain Jonathon S. said, "Our fight to keep the settlements and suppress the Palestinian people is killing us. It is killing our right to live safely in the country of Israel. A very small group of radical Israelis is leading the sane majority to catastrophe."

Col. Raanan identified some leading figures in this radical right-wing cabal when he opposed accusation that the pilots have denigrated their uniforms by wading into political issues.

"The Air Force commander spoke in favour of the [Zionist] settlements while sitting in uniform next to Sharon at a Likud party convention. That is political. This country has a defence minister who, as army chief of staff, was the most political ever. It is hypocritical to say lower ranking officers cannot express an opinion. What they mean is, we can be political so long as we agree with the government. Well that's not democracy."

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