

Israel: Elite commandos refuse to serve in Occupied Territories

Julie Hyland

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The refusal of thirteen reservists in Israel's elite commando unit, Sayeret Matkal, to serve on missions in the Occupied Territories is the latest expression of the growing opposition within the armed forces to the Sharon government's repression of the Palestinian people.

The Sayeret Matkal is Israel's most celebrated commando unit. Comparable to the US military's Delta Force, it has been involved in some of Israel's most high profile security missions, and senior military and political figures have served within its ranks—including former prime ministers Ehud Barak and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Thirteen of the unit's reservists wrote a letter to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on December 21, stating they were no longer prepared to defend illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Their letter stipulated that their refusal to participate in the operations, which have involved brutal raids on Palestinian homes supposedly targeting senior militants, was motivated by "grave concern for the future of Israel as a democratic Zionist and Jewish state, and with concern for her moral image".

"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," reads the letter, "and we will no longer serve as a defensive shield for the settlement enterprise."

The letter branded Israel as an aggressive occupying force in the Palestinian territories that is riding roughshod over the democratic rights and lives of the people: "We shall no longer lend our hand to the quelling of human rights of millions of Palestinians.

"We shall no longer serve as a defense shield for the settlements campaign.

"We shall no longer deface our human image as an

army of occupation.

"We shall no longer deny our commitment as fighters in the Israel DEFENSE forces."

The letter stressed that the reservists were not refusing to protect the security of the Israeli people, but indicted the Israeli government for undermining that security through its provocative and murderous actions in the Occupied Territories.

"We fear for the destiny of the children of this land, exposed to an evil that is unnecessary, and to which we have lent our hands. We have long transgressed the border of soldiers, just in their ways, and have become warriors suppressing another nation. We shall cross this border no more!"

The reservists letter ignited a furious response from across the military and political establishment, not only for its unreserved condemnation of Israel's actions, but because at least one of the signatories is a Major. Of the thirteen, nine are on active duty.

Deputy Defense Minister Ze'ev Boim said, "These soldiers should be stripped of their uniform and face judgement for their disobedience and rebellion."

The signatories, who were "infected with this 'leprosy' of refusal must be stripped of their military aura and tried for disobedience and even, I would say, incitement to mutiny," Boim went on.

National Religious Party whip Shaul Yahalom said the group should be "put in jail", while Labour Party MP Danny Yatom, a former head of the Mossad overseas intelligence agency and deputy commander of Sayeret Matkal, branded the protest as "illegal". Regardless of whether Sharon's policy was "exacerbating friction" with the Palestinians, this could not justify soldiers' refusal to serve, he said.

Ehud Barak demanded that the 13 "immediately" retract their protest and issued a naked apology for

Sharon's crimes, stating, "In a democracy there's no place for refusal because it is the elected government that issues the orders to the army. As much as we are divided over the hesitant and confused policy of Sharon's government which is endangering Israel, it is essential that this battle be waged in the public sphere, and for the army to defend all of us."

Sharon declined to comment, but an army spokesman decried the reservists—stating that the fact the thirteen had addressed their letter to Sharon rather than military commanders proved they had a political axe to grind.

"It is very serious that reserve soldiers are using their military past and the name of the unit in which they served as a vehicle to publish their political views," he said. Netanyahu also denounced the reservists for "using military service as a political axe", whilst Deputy Education Minister Zvi Hendel (National Union) said there is "no limit to the moral corruption of the extreme left [which] does not hesitate to use the military to spread its ideas."

One of the signatories, identified only as "Zohar" rejected the accusation that the thirteen had a secret political agenda, telling Channel One Television: "This is not a political letter ... we spoke of the phenomena of occupation which corrupts."

"I was sent to suppress another nation. I was sent to be an occupying army. I don't know what the political solution to this war is. But what I have to say is that I cannot bury my head in the sand—like so many in the army do. The IDF [Israeli Defense Forces] is out of control. The country is out of control.

"I was sent to serve as a defensive shield to the settlements, and this I refuse to continue doing. I shed my humanity in many little deeds and actions in the past, which I will not tell you about, and I will not do it any longer."

It was true that insubordination led to the disintegration of society, he went on, "but Israeli society is disintegrating anyway. I can only hope that the brakes we are applying will somehow slow down the disintegration."

Reports indicate that the reservists are coming under intense pressure to withdraw their statement, or face ejection from the army.

Moshe Ya'alon, Chief of Staff in the Israeli Defense Forces, told Army Radio on December 22 that each of the signatories could expect to be thrown out of the

army. They would be interviewed individually by their commander, Ya'alon said. "The severity [of their actions] will be explained to him and he will be given the chance to back down. If he doesn't, he will be thrown out of army reserve duty."

The problem for the Israeli government is that the thirteen join an ever growing number of military personnel who are refusing to participate in illegal actions against the Palestinians. Hundreds of reserve soldiers have been imprisoned for refusing to serve in the Occupied Territories. Earlier this year two officers, David Sonnschein and Yaniv Itzkovitz posted a letter at Tel Aviv University offering support for those refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Within weeks, they had been joined by more than 200 reservists stating their refusal to serve.

In September, 27 pilots issued a letter to Air Force Chief General Dan Halutz stating their refusal to participate in political assassinations, so-called "targeted killings", in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, branding them "immoral and illegal".

The statements by the pilots and now the commando's are particularly significant because of their elite status, causing some MPs to caution against too heavy handed an approach.

Labour MP Ophir Pines said the letter showed that a serious discussion had to be held on Sharon's policies in the Occupied Territories, whilst Meretz MP Roman Bronfman called the statement a brave step intended to save Israel from the consequences of the occupation.



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