

# Israeli police target young people for refusing military service

**Jean Shaoul****21 May 2009**

Last month, in scenes reminiscent of a coordinated sweep on dangerous organised criminals, Israeli police mounted a country-wide raid of people active in Target 21, a draft resistance group, and searched their homes citing “incitement to draft evasion”. They seized computers and documents, and detained seven people for interrogation. The police branded the refuseniks, as those who refuse to serve in Israel Defence Forces (IDF) are called, as “draft shirkers”.

Timing the raid on the day before Israel’s Memorial Day for those killed in military action, the police sought to exploit the emotions of families who had lost loved ones in Israel’s wars and military assaults on the Palestinians and its Arab neighbours to brand the young anti-military activists as beyond the Pale.

The seven, who included a 70-year-old artist, a retired nurse and a 20-year-old activist, are suspected of operating Web sites that they claim actively promote “incitement to draft dodging”, an offence punishable under Israeli law by up to five years in jail. They were released after questioning on the condition that they do not associate with blacklisted activist groups.

The police followed this up with early morning raids on the homes of 10 activists from New Profile, a feminist group that has for more than a decade opposed the militarisation of Israeli society, seizing computers and interrogating the activists. When New Profile supporters turned up to protest outside a police station in Tel Aviv, the police beat their way through the crowd and made a further eight arrests.

New Profile and Target 21 (21 refers to the IDF’s code for those deemed unfit to serve) are two of the draft resistance groups that are now proliferating in Israel. They post tips on their Web sites about how to evade military service via medical or other exemptions. They insist on their loyalty to Israel and commitment to Zionism, limiting themselves to a call to the pre-1967 borders and co-existence of two states, Israel and Palestine.

Israel requires young men to serve in the IDF for three years and then at least a month a year until the age of 40. It is the only state in the world to require compulsory military service for young women as well, although they are not required to serve in combat units. It provides no alternative to active service, nor does it recognise conscientious objection for pacifist reasons.

But despite conscription, many Israelis do not serve. Palestinian Israelis are not drafted although a few Bedu and Druze do serve

voluntarily. Religious Jews are exempt if they can show that they are attending religious seminaries, while orthodox women are exempt. Recently, the military has begun to hire private investigators to check up on whether those pleading exemption on religious grounds are indeed orthodox Jews. According to a personnel officer, Lt. Colonel Gil Ben Shaul, they are trying to find out “what kind of [religious] life they are leading...whether they are out at a disco on Friday night or driving on the Sabbath”.

It is a reflection of the soaring inequality that pervades Israeli society today that an increasing number of poor and marginalised Israelis are deemed “unfit” or “unqualified” for mental or physical reasons. There are also a number of young people who refuse to serve for pacifist reasons or—and this is more prevalent—refuse to serve in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

While the “partial” or “selective” refuseniks are largely made up of reservists, there are increasing numbers of high school graduates who have refused outright out of pacifism or because their opposition to the army’s ongoing oppression of the Palestinians.

The Israeli High Court ruled in 2002 that refusal to serve was legal if the objector was an “unqualified” pacifist but that “selective refusal,” which accepted some duties but not others, was not. It argued that to allow selective refusal would “weaken the ties that bind us as a nation” and ruled that refusing to serve in the West Bank and Gaza constituted “selective refusal,” not conscientious objection.

It is now estimated that 50 percent of young men and 56 percent of young women avoid military service for one reason or another, and this number is increasing. According to a recent military report, the number of women failing to enlist has increased from about one third 20 years ago to 44 percent last year.

In 2003, well over 1,200 Israelis of military age declared that they would refuse to take part in the IDF’s illegal actions against the Palestinians. Of these, more than half had already rejected orders to serve in the occupied territories and a further 600 had said that they would refuse when they were called up to do so. At least 300 reservists were known to have been imprisoned.

The IDF has generally sought to downplay the scale of dissent and avoided court-martialing refuseniks, preferring instead to try them by summary procedure where the unit commander acts as judge and jury, and sentences are limited to 35 days at the most. While a court martial would result in a more draconian punishment, more in line with the IDF’s ethos, it would give the

defendant greater rights, including the services of a lawyer and the right to call witnesses. That in turn could lead to a defence based upon right to disobey orders, such as the invasion of Lebanon, the suppression of Palestinian resistance and the blockade of Gaza, that are illegal under both Israeli and international law, a situation that Israeli leaders have been desperate to avoid.

However, in 2003 the IDF was confronted with hundreds of twelfth grade high school students, or *shministim*, who had signed a letter saying that they would refuse to enlist in an army of occupation, and then lived up to their promise. When repeated jail sentences failed to quash the dissent, the IDF broke with tradition and court-martialed six of the group's leaders. It also began to move against women refuseniks, imposing jail sentences on young women.

With a population of just 6 million, one fiftieth of the population of the US, one tenth of the population of Britain and one twentieth of Japan, the number of refuseniks is significant in numerical terms. It would be the equivalent of 50,000 US soldiers refusing to serve in Afghanistan or 10,000 British troops refusing to serve in Northern Ireland.

For a state as dependent as Israel is upon on its military forces, such a rate of attrition is nothing short of disastrous, particularly as the army has traditionally been seen as the very incarnation of nationhood. In the 1950s and 1960s, military service was regarded as an honour and a duty. Soldiers were treated with enormous respect. Officers could walk into the best civilian jobs, and those who went into politics were assured rapid promotion in local and national government. Until very recently, outright or even selective refusal was seen as an act of moral and political defiance against the state, a sacrilege, leading to a refusenik being ostracised by his or her family and friends.

It was only after the 1967 war that led to the capture of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights and Sinai, and the transformation of Israel's armed forces, formally constituted as the Israel Defence Force, into an army of occupation and the defender of illegal settlements that refusal to serve became more than an isolated phenomenon. The invasion of Lebanon 1982 led to the growth of the peace movement, a major part of which was the refusal to serve in Lebanon. The refusal movement has grown with every armed offensive by Israel.

Last year, hundreds of *shministim* signed a conscientious objector pledge, adding to the growing opposition to the compulsory draft. When a number of them were jailed, an international campaign was mounted to secure their release.

This growing opposition to conscription is significant, because such is the militarisation of Israeli society that the IDF wages a major recruitment drive aimed at teenagers, including mass advertising, youth training camps, and media, institutional and educational interventions. These are clearly no longer as effective as they used to be in grooming youth for conscription.

It was unclear how many soldiers refused to serve in Gaza during Israel's onslaught earlier this year. According to Chris McGreal writing in the *Irish Times*, this was because the IDF was sending people home, quietly. Courage to Resist's Web site said that of the seven who had been summoned to fight and refused, one had been imprisoned for 14 days and the rest were awaiting a

military trial.

Nowadays, young men and women talk openly of their dislike of frisking, humiliating and turning away Palestinians at the more than 600 road blocks in the West Bank that have wrecked the Palestinian economy and made the normal activities of everyday life all but impossible. Others have called the IDF "the settlers' army". Finding loopholes in the rules governing enlistment has become common among Israeli youth.

It is for this reason that last September Attorney General Menachem Mazuz called for draft resister groups such as New Profile, which also campaigns against Israel's brutal and humiliating treatment of the Palestinians and exposes the actions of the IDF, to be investigated. It followed the declaration of a "war on draft evasion" by Defence Minister Ehud Barak and IDF Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi last summer.

This crackdown on young people comes within weeks of the most right-wing government in Israel's history, pledged to an expansionist policy, coming to power. It appears, according to *Ha'aretz*, that a complaint against New Profile was made by the Israeli Forum for the Promotion of Equal Share in the Burden, which advocates universal and mandatory conscription. It signifies a turn to repress any opposition to the government's expansionist and militarist policies.

Almost all the political parties in Israel have condemned the refusal to serve on political grounds, calling such action dangerous and undemocratic. The so-called parties of peace, Labour and most of Meretz, have opposed their actions, as have the right-wing and ultra-nationalist parties. Some of the far right parties have even accused the refuseniks of aiding and abetting Israel's enemies and of treason during war time.

However, the raids appear to have backfired, with the dissent groups receiving increased interest, with more hits on their Web sites, and support. The, as yet, small but growing dissent testifies to the real state of public opinion in Israel, the ever widening gap between official politics in Israel today and the broad mass of the population, who want an end to the long running conflict, and the objective unity between Arab and Israeli youth and working people.



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