

Israeli security service reservists refuse to conspire against Palestinians

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Forty-three reserve soldiers and officers in Israel's prestigious military intelligence gathering unit, Unit 8200, have refused to take any further part in the gathering of information on Palestinian society in the West Bank.

Their stand is the latest expression of the growing opposition within the armed forces to the ongoing repression of the Palestinian people.

Refusal to enlist was once considered unthinkable among Jewish Israeli youth other than among the ultra-orthodox, but now, as one young refusenik, Shaked Harari, explained, they "are not embarrassed that we are refusing. We believe that this declaration can make an ideological change, and it will not happen if we don't stand behind it and we are not honest with it."

Unit 8200 is under the control of the Israel Defence Force's (IDF) Military Intelligence Directorate, whose role is similar to that of the National Security Agency in the United States. It collects signal intelligence (SIGINT), including eavesdropping on telephone calls, text messages, and emails. As the largest part of the IDF, the views expressed must therefore reflect a much wider layer than the number who actually signed the letter.

The unit has acquired an iconic status, in part because as a result of its technical expertise a number of 8200's alumni have gone on to found or manage some of Israel's high-tech start-up companies. Its operations are secret and subject to censorship, while the identities of its leading personnel are never revealed.

It is therefore all the more significant that it is the ethical and political character of the Unit's work and above all its methods that have come to public attention. While a number of pilots, soldiers and officers from combat units faced with the daily task of humiliating and arresting Palestinians—and worse—have

refused service, this is the first time that anyone in electronic surveillance has spoken up and refused to enlist.

Jewish Israeli men are required to carry out three years of military service from the age of 18 and then at least a month a year of reserve duty until the age of 40. They typically spend a few weeks each year in active duty. While women are also obliged to do military service, they are not required to serve in combat units, while their service and reservist duties are shorter.

The 43 signatories, collected over a year, to an open letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, chiefs of the IDF and its SIGINT branch stressed that they believed that the information they collected was often used to exert control over innocent Palestinian civilians and to set West Bank residents against each other. At the same time it was an invasion of the privacy of the Palestinian, said the signatories.

The reservists wrote, "The Palestinian population, which is under military rule, is completely exposed to the espionage and surveillance efforts of Israeli intelligence. The intelligence [that was] gathered, hurts innocent people, and was used in order to politically persecute [Palestinians], and as a means to create division in Palestinian society by mobilizing collaborators and directing Palestinian society against itself."

The letter stated, "Intelligence allows ongoing control over millions of people, thorough and intrusive monitoring and invasion into most aspects of life. All of this does not allow for normal living, fuels more violence and puts off any end to the conflict."

The reservists' letter brings to mind the widely screened Palestinian film Omar, reviewed here by the WSWWS, which graphically portrayed the intense pressures the Israeli authorities exert on Palestinians

who have illicit love affairs or homosexual relationships, or who need medical treatment for their loved ones, to inform on their friends and neighbours. This is the way that a vast network of collaborators and informers is created. It leads to a situation where no one trusts anyone and today's friend may be beaten, tortured or blackmailed into collaborating with the Israeli authorities tomorrow.

The letter added that there was "no oversight on methods of intelligence or tracking, and the use of intelligence information against the Palestinians, regardless of whether they are connected to violence or not".

It concluded, "We are unable, morally, to serve in such a system which harms the rights of millions of people."

The signatories added, however, that they would gather information about enemy states, explaining, "We understand the need to defend ourselves, and intelligence is by definition something dirty, and compared to other countries it really is self-defence."

One of the reservists told Siha Mekomit magazine, "But with the Palestinians, the main objective is to maintain the military rule in the West Bank. We say this not because we read some newspapers or blogs, but because that is what we had to do in the line of duty."

The letter was published with testimonies from the reservists which can be read here.

In them, the reservists described the Unit's training methods and pointed out that they were collecting information that was not related to security or intelligence. They were targeting people who were completely innocent, including collecting information about those targeted for assassination. Some of it was transferred to politicians, not the security apparatus, to satisfy their own political agendas.

One statement said, "All Palestinians are exposed to non-stop monitoring without any legal protection, "and that even "junior soldiers can decide when someone is a target for the collection of information" with "no procedure in place to determine whether the violation of the individual's rights is necessarily justifiable. The notion of rights for Palestinians does not exist at all."

The IDF chiefs ritually intoned their standard line that they held to ethical standards "without rival." This is laughable coming from an army that has illegally occupied and annexed Palestinian and Syrian land,

including East Jerusalem, captured during the 1967 war, detains without trial, practices collective punishment—including the demolition of family homes and the blockade of Gaza, practices torture, carries out targeted assassinations, uses internationally proscribed weaponry, and conducts genocidal wars against defenceless civilians.

All of these crimes would render Israel liable to prosecution for war crimes and crimes against humanity, but for the political and diplomatic cover provided by Washington on the international arena.

Israel's military and political leadership, including the Labour Party, turned on the refuseniks, with Netanyahu accusing them of "baseless slander". Minister of Defence Moshe Ya'alon denounced them as "criminal" and threatened them with prosecution, although it is not clear what charges they could face. At the very least, they face a dishonourable discharge from the IDF.

The commander of 8200 has written to the Unit, warning them not to raise complaints with the media, saying that any ethical concerns could be dealt with within the Unit. Two hundred other members of 8200 Unit have signed a counter-letter defending its work.

This letter of the 43 is part of a small but growing number of young conscripts and reservists that have refused to serve and have gone to prison for their refusal, including during the most recent brutal assault on Gaza. Earlier this year, dozens of draft-age youth wrote to Netanyahu, declaring themselves conscientious objectors to military service and excoriating the IDF. They wrote of their opposition to the "continued occupation of the West Bank" and the military's "penetration into civilian life, which deepens the country's chauvinism, militarism, violence, inequality and racism."



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