

Reservists issue open letter refusing to fight in Gaza, exposing Israel's war crimes

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The death toll in Israel's war of annihilation in Gaza speaks to a policy of shoot to kill, a policy whose existence the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) denies. But several Israeli soldiers have given statements to the daily *Haaretz* confirming such a policy. Their testimonies corroborate those of Palestinian eyewitnesses and doctors.

These soldiers are part of a small but growing number who have served in the war that have signed the first letter of refusal to serve published by reservists since October 7. The 41 reservists wrote, "The six months during which we participated in the war effort proved to us that military activity alone won't bring the hostages home."

Referring to the invasion of Rafah: "This invasion, aside from endangering our lives and the lives of innocents in Rafah, won't bring back the hostages alive... It's either Rafah or the hostages, and we choose the hostages. Therefore, after the decision to enter Rafah rather than to bring about a hostage deal, we, male and female reservists, are declaring that our conscience doesn't allow us to lend a hand to forfeiting the lives of the hostages and torpedoing another deal."

Some of the soldiers spoke to *Haaretz* following their recent release from active duty in Gaza, describing their reasons for refusing to continue fighting. These included being authorized to open fire on Palestinians virtually at will, including on unarmed civilians that did not appear to be posing any imminent threat, and being required to torch residential buildings and kill civilians during bombing raids.

Tal Vardi, a Tank Corps commander, was first sent to fight Israel's war against Hezbollah in the north, replacing the battalions of conscripts sent to the south, where he was engaged mainly in teaching younger reservists tank operations. He had no hesitation in accepting reservist duty in the north. The turning point came when the fascist government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chose to mount a ground operation in Rafah in preference to signing a deal to release the hostages and end the war.

Vardi said, "The moment the operation began in Rafah I felt it was beyond what I could feel right about ethically,

stand behind and justify. We're just chasing after heads in order to demonstrate some kind of achievement, without any strategy and direction."

Yuval Green, a 26-year-old student and reserve paratrooper opposed to Israel's occupation in the West Bank, explained that he had been undecided about continuing doing reserve duty and had been on the point of refusing to sign up for the October 7 war. He was sent to the Khan Yunis area where he was required to torch a residential building without any confirmation that it was the home of a Hamas combatant.

On another occasion, the company commander ordered his squad to torch one of the houses where they had been staying because they were leaving military equipment there that would reveal army combat methods. Green recalled, "I said if we're doing that, I'm going. And they really did burn down the house and I left. I went up during the next leave and didn't return."

He told *+972 Magazine*, "There were no restrictions on ammunition. People were shooting just to relieve the boredom," citing an incident when a whole battalion opened fire.

Michael Ofer Ziv, a 29-year-old reservist, had interrupted his vacation in Turkey to report for duty when the war started. As a brigade control officer, his task was to track in real time films of drones and Israel Air Force bombings in Gaza. He said, "It's far from you and the feeling is that it isn't real."

It was a week or two before he realized that "every time you see it, it's a building that's falling. If people were in it, then they're dead. And even if there aren't any people inside, everything that's there—televisions, memories, pictures, clothing—is gone. It's high-rise buildings. In the war room, they know what the level of evacuation is.

"They keep saying, for example, 50 percent were evacuated from the area. I remember a day when I heard '50 percent were evacuated from northern.' That same day, I saw a building in the area fall and I thought to myself: '50 percent were evacuated from the area, but 50 percent are still

there.’ At the same time there are also bombings in southern Gaza, and we know nobody was evacuated from there. On the contrary, everyone fled to there.”

Ofar Ziv said that when his brigade entered Gaza, permission to fire was given with relative ease. “There are areas where it’s forbidden to fire without approval of the command, for all kinds of reasons. For example, it’s forbidden to bomb buildings that are near humanitarian areas. In the end, sometimes we fire of course. You get exceptional permission.”

He added, “When a commander asked me at some point if we’d get permission to fire somewhere, I told him: ‘We’ll get permission, the only question is when.’ In other words, the vibe is ‘You can fire wherever you want. You have to get permission, but there will be permission. It’s only bureaucratic.’ I can count on one hand the times when we were told: ‘You can’t fire there.’”

He explained, “At first, it’s very hard to say what’s justified and what isn’t. From a distance it’s easy to say: ‘That’s how it is in war; people get killed.’ But in war there aren’t 30,000 people killed, most of them buried beneath the ruins when they’re bombed from the air. The feeling is of indiscriminate firing.”

Gaza’s health authorities place the confirmed death toll at 39,000 plus thousands lost in the rubble. A recent study by the *Lancet* put the estimated death toll at 186,000.

A fourth reservist, a 26-year-old in Military Intelligence who asked not to be named, described his experiences. Responsible for finding assassination targets, he began to realise he was taking part in actions that violated his conscience. He said, “They justify it with a hundred reasons.”

He explained, “You feel you’re doing something without any military rationale, with a risk of causing very serious harm to people who are undoubtedly innocent, only because you have to demonstrate an achievement.” “In the end, refusal is a political act,” he said. “What’s being done there is a crime, one reason being its uselessness, and it’s personally harming my future as a citizen of this country.”

Giving testimony before a Knesset committee last month, Guy Zaken, a soldier who operated D-9 bulldozers in Gaza, testified that he and his crew “ran over hundreds of terrorists, dead and alive.” A soldier he served with subsequently committed suicide, one of at least 10 known to have committed suicide since the start of the war. Around 1,600 are reportedly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Tal Mitnick, Israel’s first conscientious objector to its war of annihilation on Gaza, has finally been released from military jail after serving six successive sentences totalling more than six months, the longest period ever served by an

Israeli conscientious objector, and exempted from serving in the Israeli army. The 18-year-old was the first person since the October 7 war against the Palestinians broke out to refuse the compulsory draft for young people on conscientious grounds.

He said, “I’m relieved to be exempted after such a long time. Luckily, I had an opportunity to play a part in the struggle against the war and the occupation.” He added, “There are growing voices in our society that realize that only peace can guarantee security, and that the only way to get out of the cycle and bring about a different future for both peoples is a cease-fire and a hostage deal.”

Mitnick is one of three young people who have refused to serve in the IDF as conscientious objectors.

In June, the 19-year-old Sofia Orr was released after spending 85 days in Neve Tzedek military jail after refusing to enlist. She told the IDF, “I refuse to enlist in order to show that change is needed, and that change is possible, for the security and safety of all of us in Israel-Palestine, and in the name of empathy that is not restricted by national identity.” She explained, “I refuse to enlist because I want to create a reality in which all children between the Jordan River and the [Mediterranean] sea can dream without cages.”

Despite being sentenced to several stretches in military jail, she still refused the draft. “I realized that the army doesn’t stand for the basic values I grew up with, of resolving conflicts with dialogue, of empathy, and of solidarity and equality—not in how it treats its own soldiers and not in how it conducts itself externally in the occupation and war. It’s a system that is inherently very aggressive and violent, and I cannot take part in any such system.”

A third young Israeli, Ben Arad, is still in jail, after being sentenced in April for refusing the draft.



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