

Israeli Soldiers Refuse To Commit War Crimes

by Dean Andromidas

By Feb. 5, in a growing resistance, almost 200 reserve soldiers and officers from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) were circulating a powerful letter declaring their refusal to serve in the Israeli occupied territories. The soldiers charge that they “were issued commands and directives that had nothing to do with the security of our country, and that had the sole purpose of perpetuating our control over the Palestinian people. . . . We, who sensed how the commands issued to us in the territories, destroy all the values we had absorbed while growing up in this country. . . .”

The resisters charge that the “price of the occupation is the loss of IDF’s human character and the corruption of the entire Israeli society.” Recognizing that the Israeli settlements are illegal and will have to be withdrawn, their open letter declares “that we shall not continue to fight this war of the settlements. We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.”

The reaction of IDF Chief of Staff Gen. Shaul Mofaz has been harsh; he told Israeli Army Radio Feb. 1 that the signers had political motives: “If this is the case, then this is not dissent, but a serious rebellion that the country’s leaders must address.” A few days later, Mofaz went even further and told a Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, “If some of the officers have ideological motives and are trying to advance those by means of the IDF, it’s much worse than refusing to serve. It’s mutiny.” He has ordered all signers of the letters to be interrogated by their commanders, and ordered the officers to be relieved of their commands. Three officers have been relieved so far, and others have been suspended. It is expected that several may go to jail.

Although Mofaz did not speak of court-martialing the soldiers, Ra’anan Gissen, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s official spokesman, did. (see *EIR*, Feb. 8, 2002).

‘The Oslo Generation’

The charge among the Israeli right wing that the signers are ideologically motivated “leftists” or “peaceniks” is absurd, given that the majority of the signers are members not only of combat units, but of elite units such as the paratroopers. Many had served in southern Lebanon during the years Israel maintained its so-called “security zone” there. The letter was released only days after it was revealed in the Israeli

mass-circulation daily *Ha’aretz* on Jan. 27, that Israeli officers have been studying the Nazi destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto to learn “useful lessons” on how to conduct war in Palestinian cities (see *EIR*, Feb. 8).

A spokesman for the soldiers, Amit Mashiach, denied that the group has any political motivation, or even contact with politicians. “If the Chief of Staff has information suggesting otherwise, then he should reveal it. If not, then this is a campaign by the army to silence and smear us.”

Public support for the soldiers has been gaining momentum. Following the publication of their letter with the initial 50 signatories, as a paid advertisement in Israel’s leading dailies, the list of signatories has increased four-fold. At least one-third of the signatories are officers from the rank of lieutenant to major. Averaging between the ages of 25 and 35, these men can be seen as the “Oslo Generation,” who saw for themselves the possibility of peace with the Palestinians as demonstrated by the 1993 Oslo Accords. They also saw the Israeli unilateral withdrawal from southern Lebanon which, contrary to the hysterical warnings of the right wing, has left Israel’s northern border in its quietest state since the founding of the Israeli state in 1948. They also experienced the assassination of Israel Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995, at the hands of a right-wing extremist, who received support from the extremist elements in the settlements. These are the same settlements, to protect which the soldiers have been ordered to commit war crimes.

The website of the letter’s initiators (www.seruv.org) has received over 2000 e-mails, 70% of which offer support for their effort. Many of these e-mails are from officers and soldiers, some of whom then decided to add their signatures.

In Lebanon, the major English-language newspaper, the *Daily Star*, expressed support for the initiative, in an editorial calling for the Arab world to “break bread” and engage in a dialogue with the “other Israel . . . one which Arabs need desperately to engage in dialogue and on which the Jewish state’s supporters among world Jewry need to focus.” This “other Israel,” the *Daily Star* writes, “is made up of a few dozen reserve officers who have publicly declared that they will no longer serve in the occupied territories.”

This display of moral principle coming out of the IDF, which is still a citizen-army of conscripts, is not unprecedented. In was in 1978 that the famous “Officers Letter,” which was signed by scores of officers, was sent to then-Prime Minister Menachem Begin, urging him not to miss the opportunity of signing a peace treaty with Egypt. Many of the signatories to that letter of 24 years ago, in 1982 formed the core of the leadership of Peace Now, the leading Israeli peace organization.

The Checkpoint War Crimes

At the core of this growing movement is the refusal to continue to commit what are clearly war crimes. While the international media have focussed much of their attention



“Courage To Refuse”: the open letter of refusal to serve in the Occupied Territories, circulated by 200 Israeli reservists as of early February. The reservists say they receive orders in the Occupied Territories which morally must be refused, as the IDF shifts toward occupation tactics characteristic of fascist regimes.

on “targetted assassinations” and the brutal demolition of 56 homes in the Gaza strip, which has left 600 people homeless, even graver are the war crimes that are committed, every hour of every day, at the endless numbers of checkpoints used to enforce the closures that have turned the entire West Bank into a checkerboard of mini-Warsaw Ghettos.

These checkpoints are not to be confused with toll booths on New York’s George Washington Bridge! They are fortified positions, complete with tanks and armored personnel carriers. They constitute the core of the policy of “collective punishment,” the war crime now being committed. These checkpoints keep Palestinians waiting on long lines for hours, turning what was a 20-minute trip from one village to another, into a two- or three-hour ordeal, in which a Palestinian could very well lose his life. People cannot get to work, let alone to hospitals, or simply to visit friends and relatives.

The Orwellian logic of these checkpoints is the claim that every Palestinian is a potential terrorist—even the unborn. Last December, two pregnant women who were being rushed to hospitals were refused passage through the checkpoints. In one case the soldier told the distraught husband, “I have the right to kill you, but not to allow you to pass.” Both babies died before they could get to a hospital.

After putting their signatures to the letter, many of the soldiers gave press interviews, revealing the brutal reality of

enforcing the occupation.

One signatory, Ariel Sharil, told the Israeli daily *Yediouth Ahronoth* of the lie that the Israeli soldiers only shoot in self-defense: “People say that the Palestinians shoot first and we just respond. This is untrue. One officer there told soldiers, doing guard duty in the lookout posts: ‘If things are too quiet, or if you don’t feel certain about the situation, just let off a few rounds.’ Shots were fired every night; we would start shooting and they would fire back.” Other soldiers reported how Palestinian children or youths, who, if armed, were armed with stones, were shot by snipers from as far as 2.5 kilometers away.

Reserve Lt. Itai Swirski revealed how suspicious objects—e.g., potential bombs—are routinely dealt with: “Instead of waiting for demolition experts to arrive, the soldiers would go to the nearest vehicle driven by Palestinians and tell the driver or one of the passengers to pick up the object. It goes without saying that the soldiers and settlers watch from afar.”

And Lt. Ishai Sagi was quoted in the press saying, “I don’t think that what the Israeli Defense Forces do in the territories contributes in any way to defending Israel itself. . . .

“Everything that we do in there—all the horrors, all the tearing down of houses and trees, all the road-blocks, everything—is just for one purpose: the settlers, who I believe are illegally there. So I believe that the orders I got were illegal and I won’t do them again.”

The argument being posed against the soldiers, is that they have no right to refuse to serve in the territories; and that if they say war crimes are being conducted, or they are being given illegal orders, they should report it to the army’s judge advocate general or the state prosecutor. The senior military correspondent of *Ha’aretz*, Amir Oren, revealed the hypocrisy of such an argument, by way of revealing what goes on at the highest level of the IDF. Oren described a briefing last May, to all career and reserve officer field commanders in the West Bank, by Chief of Staff Mofaz. Oren’s account is based on a report, now revealed, on that meeting, by former Shin Bet (domestic intelligence) chief and former Navy commander Ami Aylon, who “spoke of a certain commander who demanded that troops bring him ‘seven dead bodies.’ ” The “certain commander” was Mofaz.

Within a few days of the briefing, Oren writes, “one commander attached to one of the reserve battalions who was present at Mofaz’ briefing, Lt Col. Yahuda Albek, lost no time in getting himself needlessly caught in a deadly incident involving Palestinian police officers. In his defense, Albek used the chief of staff’s guidelines.”

Oren continued, “Neither Ayalon nor the commander of the Central Command, Major Yitzhak Eitan, . . . dared to approach the judge advocate general or the state prosecution



The resistance movement of the IDF reservists—here, reservists with a commander in the Occupied Territories—has drawn worldwide notice and clearly given a shock to IDF chief Gen. Shaul Mofaz.

with a demand to investigate Mofaz.” Oren concludes that “the only way to change the course of the ship is to work for replacing the captain, not by calling on the sailors to mutiny.”

‘False Consensus’ Beginning To Crack

The soldiers’ letter comes at a time when serious cracks are beginning to emerge in the rotten consensus within Israel’s political and military-intelligence establishment that has kept Sharon in power. That consensus has found Labor Party leader and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, “the architect of the New Middle East,” in the same government as Benny Elon, the leader of the Moledet party, whose platform includes deporting the entire Palestinian population to Jordan.

In recent weeks, the peace camp, after being in serious disarray for over a year, is beginning to mobilize itself. A new political party is taking shape behind the scenes. It could potentially include the pro-peace Meretz party, which now leads the opposition; the Russian Democratic Choice, a liberal party; and the peace camp within the Labor Party, led by Yossi Beilen and Avraham Burg, who are said to be considering leaving the Labor Party. Even the Israeli Arab parties are considering joining such a formation, which could become a social democratic party oriented to peace and social issues, especially the collapsing economy.

Roman Bronfman, the leader of the Democratic Choice party and a strong supporter of the idea, told *Ha’aretz* of Jan. 29 that the new party was necessary in order to stop Israel from being taken over by “ordinary fascism.” This term was coined by Russian-Jewish director Mikhail Romm, to describe the rise of fascism in Germany in the 1930s. “I say that the false consensus that exists today in Israel, and the daily atrocities in the territories,” said Bronfman, “will bring this

type of fascism among us. I feel everything must be done to stop the deterioration, and if I have to sacrifice my political career for this end, then I shall.”

Reflecting how this “false consensus” is starting to break apart in Israel’s all-powerful military-intelligence establishment, Ami Ayalon—the former head of the Shin Bet—has been speaking out on the dangers of Israel’s current policies. In an interview on Israeli TV on Jan. 31, Ayalon said he “has a lot of empathy for the reserve officers” who signed the letter. He went so far as to say that soldiers should disobey illegal orders: “As far as I’m concerned, too few soldiers are refusing such orders. For example, [an order] to shoot an unarmed youth is a blatantly illegal order. I am very worried by the number of Palestinian children shot in the past year.”

Ayalon, who is also a retired admiral and commander in the Israeli Navy, has become one of the most outspoken members of the military-security establishment.

In an interview with the French daily *Le Monde* published on Dec. 22, 2001, he went further than any former security official of his rank. “Since Sept. 11,” he said, “our leaders have been euphoric. With no more international pressures on Israel, they think the way is open. This obscures the consequences of our holding on to the Palestinian territories. This is not only a moral matter. Our founders saw a state that provided a homeland for Jews and was a democracy. From both points of view, time is playing against us. Demographically, it works in favor of the Palestinians. And politically, in favor of Hamas and the settlers. But in the fight against Hamas, we must evacuate the settlers, whose proximity to the Palestinians reinforces hatred.”

Further Upheaval Coming?

“Reoccupying the Palestinian Authority lands, and killing Arafat, what would that change?” Ayalon asked. “Those who want victory want an unending war.” He added, “what needs to be done, urgently, is to withdraw from the territories. And a true withdrawal, which gives the Palestinians territorial continuity in the West Bank linked to Gaza, open to Egypt and Jordan. If they proclaim their own state, Israel should be the first to recognize it and to propose state-to-state negotiations, without conditions, on the basis of the Clinton proposals to resolve all pending problems.”

A senior Israeli member of the peace camp told *EIR* that the soldiers’ initiative is the most important shock given to Sharon and his generals since the beginning of the Intifada. Although it still was not strong enough to decisively shift the situation, the source said it could be joined very soon with another shock, which he warned would be the very real possibility of mass social upheaval, in response to the collapse of the Israeli economy.

“This is real politics, based on ethics and morality, which one does not see too often these days,” and that can be very powerful, he concluded.