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CAN REFUSAL STOP THE OCCUPATION?

By Martin Smedjeback ()*

Free photos available, see below

The refusal movement in Israel has grown rapidly over the last few years. It has become more accepted in Israeli society to refuse military service in the occupied territories and become what is known as a "refusenik". According to a very optimistic Arik Diamant, director of *Courage to Refuse*, the movement can lead to what many believe to be the unthinkable. "We are getting very good vibes," says Diamant. "We will be ending the occupation within five years." A member of the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI) gives an account of this new phenomenon.

Since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, the army has played a very large role in Israeli society. Many of Israel's most powerful politicians had long careers in the army. The army employs tens of thousand of people, and most citizens in Israel have done two or three years of military service, not including the many years spent on reserve duty.

"In the 1980s, refusers were called traitors, and everybody scorned us," says Eyal Hareuveni, himself a refusenik and active in the refusal organization *Yesh Gvul*. "Today you see scientists, pilots and commandos who refuse military service. Now it is even considered noble not to serve in the occupied territories." Recent polls reveal that 25 percent of the adult Jewish population in Israel thinks that it is a soldier's right to refuse to serve in the occupied territories. Among teenagers, the number is 43 percent. "It is sinking in," says Diamant, a former paratrooper. "We are getting very good feedback."

> A shock to the army

Throughout Israel's history, there have been those who have refused to serve in the army, but they have been very few and scattered. When the Lebanon war began in 1982, more people questioned Israeli army policies. Because of the controversy it generated on the home front, that war was likened to the American experience in Vietnam. The death toll for Israeli soldiers was high, leading to fierce debate in the media and among Israeli citizens. As the war continued, some reservists organized themselves and collectively stated that they would refuse to serve in Lebanon for political reasons.

"The army was in shock," remembers Hareuveni. "This was the first time anyone refused for political reasons." It responded by sending the refuseniks to jail, but that tactic did not stop the movement. Approximately 3,000 soldiers signed a petition announcing their refusal to serve in Lebanon. In 1985, the army stopped sending reservists to Lebanon for fear of feeding the movement and starting an uprising within the army, and the first refusal movement was born. It was called *Yesh Gvul*, which is Hebrew for "There is a limit."

> The Intifadas bring new waves of refuseniks

The first Intifada, which began in 1987, created another wave of refuseniks, and the current, second, Intifada has seen the establishment of many new refusal organizations. In 2001, a first movement for conscripts - those inducted into the army for the first time on graduation from high

school - started. The 18-year-old founders called their movement "Shministim", which means high school. Together, they wrote a letter to prime minister Ariel Sharon declaring that they "refuse to take part in acts of oppression against the Palestinian people, acts that should properly be called terrorist actions". The letter has been signed by more than 300 potential conscripts to date. Many of them have served time in prison for their refusal to be inducted. Five were recently sentenced to serve one year in prison, the longest term in Israeli history for such an action.

In 2002, a "combatants' letter" was signed by 50 combat officers and soldiers. In it, the signatories promise that, "We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve, and humiliate an entire people." In the same letter, they declare that they still believe in the Zionist dream, and are willing to continue serving in the army "in any mission that serves Israel's defence." The letter was the beginning of the *Courage to Refuse* movement, which today numbers 623 soldiers who have refused to serve in the occupied territories.

Perhaps the most surprising development in the refusenik movement was a 2003 letter by some Israel Air Force (IAF) pilots stating that they would "refuse to take part in Air Force attacks on civilian population centres," and that "the ongoing occupation is corrupting all of Israeli society." IAF pilots are considered among Israel's greatest heroes.

> Are we seeing the end of the occupation?

Diamant seems very confident that the nonviolent method of political non-cooperation, in this case not cooperating with the occupation, is the most effective method to end it. "Demonstrating is completely useless... because you can't really demonstrate in the occupied territories," Diamant says. "I tried tens of times. Once, I went to demonstrate in a settlement which expanded with a new neighborhood, and we were not allowed in there. The minute you cross the 'Green Line', there is no democracy whatsoever. The only effective means of combat is to refuse to take part in the army, and it is working."

Diamant thinks that it will take five years to stop the occupation. Others in the refusal and peace movements are not so optimistic. Hareuveni sees positive changes in the Israeli mentality, but points out that the peace movement is still rather small. "We in the radical peace movement are a few thousand people," Hareuveni says. "It is a tiny minority."

To date, a total of 1,362 soldiers have officially refused in one way or another - a fairly small number compared with the millions of Israelis who have served in the Israel Defense Force. Of course, rather than facing the stigma of refusing, many others quietly get out of serving, either in the occupied territories or altogether, by finding a way to be declared unfit. The army usually goes along with this so as not to see the refusenik numbers swell and have to admit that there is a movement.

Diamant notices a distinct change in the mentality of the common soldier. "Many of my comrades in the army say that they don't know if they have the guts to refuse and to go to prison for it, but they will not go back to the occupied territories," he says. "People are serving out of fear, and it is starting to crumble." [1,070 words]

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For more information on the refusenik movement see:

<http://www.refusersolidarity.net>

and the book: "*Refusenik! Israel's Soldiers of Conscience*" compiled and edited by Peretz Kidron.

Free high resolution photos to accompany this story are available at:
<http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/palestine/refusniks.html>

*The **Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI)** was launched in August 2002. Ecumenical accompaniers monitor and report violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, support acts of non-violent resistance alongside local Christian and Muslim Palestinians and Israeli peace activists, offer protection through non-violent presence, engage in public policy advocacy and stand in solidarity with the churches and all those struggling against the occupation. The programme is coordinated by the World Council of Churches (WCC). Website: <http://www.eappi.org>*

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The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches, now 342, in more than 120 countries in all continents from virtually all Christian traditions. The Roman Catholic Church is not a member church but works cooperatively with the WCC. The highest governing body is the assembly, which meets approximately every seven years. The WCC was formally inaugurated in 1948 in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Its staff is headed by general secretary Samuel Kobia from the Methodist church in Kenya.