

IDF Refuse-nicks — Frequently Asked Questions

V1.1

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Why should soldiers, recruits and reservists, refuse to serve in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces)?

There are two equally important reasons to refuse to serve in the Israeli army:

1. The IDF is the main reason that Israel continues to illegally occupy the West Bank and Gaza, and refuses to reach a just and permanent solution with the Palestinians.
2. The IDF is the key institution that undermines democracy in Israel, and perpetuates inequality and corruption in Israeli society.

Those are quite serious charges you are making, Can you back them up?

The opinions voiced here are based on the experiences I had over the 10 years I served in active reserve duty in the IDF on the West Bank and Jordan Valley. I am writing a separate piece describing those experiences and what led me to the conclusions described here. Besides my own experiences, over the years I have spoken to many fellow reservists, officers and common soldiers. I have carefully read as much as I can in the Israeli press about the army and its practices. I can't claim to any special expertise or academic background on the subject. This FAQ is the opinion of one ex-soldier. I only can ask that you consider what I say with an open mind. Talk to others, and see if their experiences corroborate mine or not. Think for yourself.

Why is the IDF interested in perpetuating the occupation?

Because as long as there is a conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis, the army remains the "keeper of the keys" in Israeli society. Everything is deferred to defense needs. Just look at the budget process. Every year the Treasury requests cuts in the army budget. Every year the defense budget increases.

Wait a second. Haven't you noticed there is a war on? That money is needed to defend out security, isn't it?

Is it really? Over the past two years, the army has been fighting an unrestrained war in the territories, killing alleged "terrorists" at will, destroying homes, restricting the movement of Palestinians. Yet, the more invasions of Palestinian cities occur, the more assassinations there are, the more checkpoints the army puts up, the more Israelis seemed to be less secure. In fact, we have never been as insecure as we are now. So apparently spending all that money isn't very effective.

But the people assassinated are terrorists! Many of them were on their way to kill Jews. Should the army just let them go?

The army's behavior reminds me of a fire-fighter who sets a fire and then rushes in to save the burning victims. He demands to be called a hero, but in fact he is the one that endangered the victims in the

first place. The current *Intifada*, began like the first, as a civil uprising by Palestinians. The army responded with brutal force, ruthlessly killing hundreds of Palestinians in the first few months. This brutality caused the Palestinian side to escalate with sporadic shooting incidents against soldiers and occasionally settlers traveling on roads. The army once again upped the ante with bombings from helicopters and F-16s, and the assassinations policy. Roadblocks were placed in every corner of the territories and the Palestinian's day to day life became intolerable. At this point the suicide bombings began. Then the army began reoccupying Palestinian cities, each time staying longer and longer. The escalation continues, each time with IDF raising the stakes, each time the cost in life on both sides going up.

Sure the roadblocks, closures and curfews cause great suffering to the Palestinians. Everyone feels bad when a baby dies in a car on the way to the hospital stuck at a roadblock. But how else are we to prevent suicide bombers from entering Israel?

These measures sure aren't helping. You can be sure the terrorists aren't sitting around in their cars waiting to be inspected by the soldiers. There are plenty of easier ways for them to get into Israel proper without being detected. The army sets up roadblocks, closures and curfews to embitter the Palestinians lives, in the hopes of breaking their spirit. Also to show the Israeli public that they are doing "something" to fight terrorism.

So what do you propose, that we do nothing?

No, I propose we go back to the negotiating table.

But how can we negotiate under fire? That is just rewarding violence, isn't it?

That's just an empty slogan. It is precisely when you are fighting that you must go to the negotiating table. The Palestinians have been willing to negotiate all along, it is the Israeli government that is refusing. Besides, even Prime Minister Sharon, who repeats the above slogan at every possible opportunity, has been negotiating all along through his proxies Omri Sharon and Shimon Peres. Despite his constant repetition of that other meaningless slogan, "Arafat is irrelevant," Sharon continues to obsess about him.

But what is there to negotiate about? The Palestinians rejected the most generous offer ever made to them by Barak at Camp David? What's there to talk about?

This whole Palestinian rejection myth is just another baseless slogan used to avoid serious negotiations with the Palestinians. Barak returned from Camp David and said he made the best offer possible and Arafat just wasn't a partner. But a few months later, under the dual pressure of Clinton and the election, he was back at the negotiating table with new ideas. Precious months were wasted. Since that time, all the Palestinians leaders, including Yassir Arafat himself, have clearly stated that a two-state solution, with a shared Jerusalem and a solution to the refugee problem which does not threaten Israel "demographically," is the basis for a negotiated solution. This formulation is acceptable to the vast majority of both Israelis and Palestinians. So why is our government afraid to return to the negotiating table?

You tell me. Why is our government afraid to return to the negotiating table?

Because the IDF opposes a negotiated solution. See my point above.

You sound like one of those conspiracy theory nuts saying there is some military-industrial junta that rules Israel. Israel is a democracy!

I wouldn't say it is a conspiracy. There wasn't a group of fat cats who met in some dark room somewhere and decided to take over the country. Nor is it a junta. It wasn't a bunch of army generals that overthrew the government. They didn't have to. The Israeli people and our representative governments have willingly relinquished control to the army in the name of national security. The result is that the Israeli economy and its political and social system is totally dominated by elites tied in to the command structure of the army.

But that is the result of our security situation! The IDF is the pillar of Israel because we need to defend ourselves against our enemies!

Or maybe it's the other way around. The army perpetuates the conflict in order to remain the pillar of Israeli society. Let's take the war in Lebanon as an example. The army fought tooth and nail to prevent every staged withdrawal. Each time, before a pull back, they threatened that withdrawal will be an act of weakness that encourages the enemy to follow. Katyushas would be raining down on Netanya. And in fact, as long as we continued to occupy part of Lebanon the tension never ceased, soldiers never stopped coming home in body bags. The army was almost frenetic when the final withdrawal was announced by Prime Minister Barak. Doom and destruction were predicted. Despite the warnings, the Lebanese border is one of the most tranquil parts of the country today. The residents of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv have to escape to the Galil to find a little peace and tranquility. Of course, the army hasn't given up. While it is quite obvious that the withdrawal from Lebanon is a huge success, something that should have been done 18 years earlier, the army is now claiming that the Palestinians have learned from the Hezbollah, and are applying the same tactics to get us to withdraw from the territories. This is clearly not true. The Palestinians don't need the Hezbollah to teach them how to resist occupation.

But doesn't this very example contradict your argument? If the IDF controls Israeli society how did we ever get out of Lebanon?

No it doesn't contradict it at all. I said specifically that the army's control is the result of a *voluntary* abdication on the part of Israeli citizens. Israeli's are so influenced by various myths, that opposition to the army's policies is always apologetic and tentative. Anyone who speaks out against the army is called a traitor and a threat to our security.

Aren't you exaggerating a bit?

When Shimon Peres was negotiating with Arafat last year, the army attacked a Palestinian bunker very nearby. When Peres mildly complained about this, the Army brass openly said that Peres was violating government decisions by meeting with Arafat and that Peres was endangering national security by doing so. Answer this question: in what kind of governments do army generals tell politicians what to do and essentially quiet a Minister's criticism by "hinting" he is a traitor? Can you spell Banana Republic?

Well I might concede your point that the military strongly believes in military solutions to the conflict. But that's what armies are supposed to do, isn't it?

Yes they are, to a point. But in all Western democratic states the army brass are under the strict control of the government. The President of the United States is the commander-in-chief of the army and he dictates its policies. In Israel, it is the army that dictates the government's policies. Not by overt rule, but by invoking "national security." Moreover, most of our Prime Ministers in recent years, and many other Ministers and Knesset members, served in high-ranking positions in the army. "One

hand washes the other” as the saying goes. In Israel, the army is such a sacred cow, that not even Meretz or Peace Now dares attack it frontally.

Well if the IDF is so all-powerful then why did we ever get out of Lebanon?

I clearly state that the army’s control is due to the Israeli public’s voluntarily relinquishing power to the army. Fortunately we still are a democracy and there hasn’t been a junta. I also don’t believe there will be one. I don’t believe the army commanders are inherently evil people. When it was clear to the politicians that the Israeli public was no longer willing to bear the burden of the Lebanese military adventure, they made the army withdraw against its will. This is precisely why refusal to serve in the territories is so important.

But why refuse to serve? Isn’t it enough to refuse to execute illegal orders?

If you believe that the illegal orders, activities which are war crimes, are isolated incidents, that refusal to obey them, is the proper course of action, as former *Shin Bet* chief, General Ami Ayalon advised. However, if you believe, as I do, that the army is the main reason we are in the territories, then the only way we will get out is if there is a mass refusal movement.

How can you be so sure?

All you have to do is look at the panicked reaction of Chief of Staff Mofaz to the “officer’s letter” written by 50 reserve officers who recently announced that, given the war crimes committed in the territories, they will no longer serve in positions beyond the so-called Green Line (Israel’s pre-1967 borders). His relentless campaign to denigrate the motives of these men, shows how powerful an act refusal to serve is. For 16 months the country seemed to totally acquiesce to unending violence and bloodshed, including horrible war crimes. The left seemed weak and totally out of touch with the sentiments of the broad Israeli public. It was this letter and the act behind it that has finally catalyzed the country to begin a serious discussion about the occupation of the territories. The more soldiers who refuse to serve, the quicker will the government be forced to reign the army in, confront reality and sit down at the negotiating table.

But even many people on the left, even Peace Now, are against refusal to serve. They argue that the IDF is the core of consensus in Israeli society and refusal to serve undermines the IDF and society as a whole.

This leads to the the second reason I gave above for refusal to serve. The problem with the army is not just its militaristic behavior which leads it to advocate a military solution to our conflict with the Palestinians and oppose a political one. The problem is far deeper. The army plays an unhealthy role in Israeli society. It is precisely this wall-to-wall consensus which must be criticized. The various myths about the army must be examined and critically discussed if Israel is ever to be open, tolerant, civil democratic society. The act of refusal should be seen not just as a protest against the inhumane treatment of Palestinians. It is also a protest against the strangle-hold the army holds over Israeli society and the subsequent brutality it perpetrates against Israeli citizens.

You keep on talking about these myths. What are they?

Myth 1: The IDF is the pillar of Israeli democracy, the only institution which everyone in Israel trusts.

This is a half truth. Indeed, the army is the only institution which nearly everyone in Israel trusts. But not for any good reason. Because this trust is blind, the Ministers rarely oppose or even question army decisions. The Knesset does not exercise real oversight over the army and its budget as it would

in a healthy society. The press doesn't do deep investigative reporting about the army, its practices, its policies nor its spending. In fact, the press in Israel serves more as the mouth piece of the army. You have to read the foreign press, and a few brave correspondents in Ha'aretz to get anywhere near the truth about what the IDF really does. And the army is only questioned by these journalists, vis-a-vis its actions in the territories. The huge budget of the Army is never an object of discussion, nor is the economic influence of the army and ex-army officers ever a subject of public discussion. This blind trust undermines the civil institutions of Israel and the democratic decision making process.

Myth 2: The IDF is the an egalitarian institution, the people's army.

By the army's own numbers, over 40% of draft age Israelis are not recruited into the army. The actual numbers are probably far higher, and even the army concedes these numbers are on the rise. Of those drafted, the actual burden of fighting only falls on a small number. Whether you actually end up in a fighting unit or not is also not based on impartial criterion. If you're well connected you can easily avoid being in a fighting unit. In fact, even if you're not, if you make sufficient trouble you can get yourself kicked out of the army. This is true both in regular units and the reserves. So the real risk of army service (i.e. the possibility of getting killed) falls on those who are too well-mannered or too good-hearted to make a fuss.

In one of the most bizarre aspects of the Israeli army, the burden of fighting service mostly falls on under-trained reservists and the regular army, also under-trained for the tasks they fulfill. The so-called professional career soldiers are nearly all people who serve in desk jobs which involve little real risks and lots of financial rewards. Reservists serve under hazardous conditions, and not solely because of the security aspect of what they do. Reservists are provided old and dangerous equipment, serve in sub-standard quarters, are given sub-standard food rations in un-hygienic facilities. They are treated with contempt by the career cadre, exploited for the personal advancement of these same, often used as slave labor to perform tasks unrelated to their official duties. Moreover, they are expected to sacrifice days of work and supplement the armies sub-standard equipment with tools they bring from home and even their own cars.

Meanwhile, the career army members, which also are responsible for allocating the army's vast budgets, work in far better conditions, have well-paying jobs, are exempted from reserve duty, are in no physical danger and retire in their early 40s with huge pensions. Most of these retirees use their connections to guarantee themselves well-paying senior positions in both the private and public sector.

The inevitable conclusion is that the career army, for the most part, is a bloated bureaucracy, an unnecessary burden on the Israeli economy and Israeli society. Of course there are exceptions — hard working men and women who serve society, some at great personal risk, with great dedication. But the majority of career military people do very little and get paid very well.

Whenever someone in the Knesset dares mentions the possibility of cutting the Defense budget in even a minor way, the wives of career officers take to the streets, crying on television how their husbands sacrifice themselves for their country, spending days away from home in their jobs. The implication is that these men are away on dangerous missions fighting the enemy in land, sea and air. In fact, there are brave soldiers who are doing precisely this and they deserve whatever praise they get, and more. But very few of them are in the career army. They are draftees and reservists. Only very few career officers are away from home for an extended period. And those that are are, for the most part, serve at army bases sitting at desks jobs of questionable value for the country's security.

Myth 3: Since everyone serves in the IDF, no one in a responsible position there, would do anything that endangers their own children's lives. Hence, there is very little corruption in the IDF bureaucracy.

Since we have already shown the premise is false, the conclusion is obviously false as well. The corruption begins with the fact that most of those who serve in the career army face little, if any, personal risk. So many of them care little for the draftees and reservists who do. Almost every reservist who serves in the army has experienced the following or something similar: you are away from home and job for 30 days, living in a dump barely fit for human habitation, in a uniform that is more rags than clothing, riding in jeeps that are Vietnam war surplus and an incredible danger to be in. One day, a delegation of five young career officers, in crisp new uniforms and a fancy jeep come driving up to do a *kashrut* inspection. This isn't going to take long since they don't want to spend too much time on your overheated base, because they want to rush back to their air conditioned offices. Never mind that the kitchen is a health hazard and its a miracle that more soldiers don't go home with hepatitis. Well not a miracle — the reservist medics bring with them sterilization materials at their own expense for their own safety and those of their unit buddies.

Because of myth 1, reservists and draftees accept their conditions as the way things are. They always assume that the problem is local to them, not endemic to the army and the way it is structured. Besides, when draftees and reservists return to civilian life they want to forget the horrors they endure during their army service. If they think about it all, its to fondly recall their buddies who help them endure the misery. So nothing changes.

But the corruption only begins here. Reservists know that one reason their food is so bad is not only because the allocations for the good stuff goes to the career army. Vast amounts of food is stolen by contractors who transport materials out to the reservists bases of operation. The same is true for equipment. Even when supposedly new equipment is delivered to the reserve units, it is often shoddy, sub-standard, and obviously used. There is little, if any public scrutiny of how money is spent in the army or by army contractors. After all, its a national security issue. We mustn't let the enemy know details of where the money goes. This opens the door wide open to abuse.

The corruption continues when retired career army officers are appointed to senior positions in both the private and public sector. In the best case this means the mediocrity of the army bureaucratic culture is perpetuated in government agencies and non-profit organizations. In the worst case, these ex-army people are being allocated contracts by their friends still on the inside. The internal corruption of the army thereby seeps out and begins to pervade Israeli society as a whole.

Myth 4: The best and the brightest of Israeli society serve in the IDF.

Again this is a half truth. Yes, many of the best and brightest serve in the regular army because of the draft system. The soldiers who fight in elite units or who work in elite intelligence units accomplish extraordinary feats. Many of them are induced to extend their service. But invariably, almost all the best people leave because of the stultifying bureaucracy, the politics of advancement, the mediocre standards.

Myth 5: The Israeli army is the most moral army in the world.

If all the the articles about what really goes on in the territories, written by *Ha'Aretz* journalists like Gideon Levy and Amira Hess, don't convince you, then the officers letter should be enough to refute this myth.

These are extremely serious charges you are making. Aren't you exaggerating?

As I stated earlier, these are conclusions I reached based on my experiences and analysis. If anything I would say I am under stating the seriousness of the situation. But even if only 10% of what I am saying

is true, these issues deserve a serious public discussion at all levels of Israeli society. This discussion is not taking place, with very serious consequences for Israel.

Why doesn't anybody else see what you are saying?

Many people do. In fact a relatively new movement on the Israeli scene — *New Profile* — has arisen precisely to raise these issues on the political agenda. But anyone who raises these issues is marginalized by the army and the political establishment. First they are accused of being naive and not understanding the complex security issues facing Israel that the army has to deal with. Next they are told that they don't have the combat record to express informed opinions (this argument is most often used against women or politicians who didn't serve in combat units). If they have combat experience, they are accused of being "politically motivated" or worse — seditious — trying to undermine the democratic process. Finally they are told if they don't like it they should leave the country, since the army is the essence of Zionism.

Precisely because so many people in Israel haven't served in the army, or served many years ago when the army was smaller and less bureaucratic, the general public doesn't pay much attention to these issues. The idea that we are at war and during a war you can't criticize the army is enough to close the subject for most people.

Are you really saying that the IDF wants to continue Israel's state of war precisely to stifle criticism and stay in its power position?

The army is not a person who makes a conscious decision to act in a certain way. It is a collection of many different people with different opinions and motives. Individually, members of the career army all the way to the top, might be all over the Israeli political map in terms of their ideology. However, the collective interest of this group is exactly to continue the status quo. So effectively the army acts to maintain Israel in a state of war. This is not a conspiracy, but a natural consequence of too much un-supervised power and resources given to a bureaucratic institution. Moreover, the closer you are to the top of the pyramid, the more you have to lose if things change. For this reason, the generals who are the chiefs of staff and our prime ministers are the most resistant to change.

Are you saying that Prime Minister Sharon and former Chief of Staff Mofaz prefer war at any cost rather than reaching a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians?

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. There was a picture shown in the news media around the world, of Sharon and Mofaz, a few minutes before the press conference regarding the seized arms from the Karine A. The two of them are looking at the huge stockpile of arms with an ear to ear grin on their faces. Their unrestrained glee was not induced by the joy of having averted a disaster. Both of them have to know that even if these arms were captured, more are on the way. And in any case, the site of these arms and the thought of the damage and death these instruments of war cause, should be sobering to any man with a modicum of compassion. But as is clear by their words and behavior, they were overjoyed because now they could go back to the Americans and justify Israel's brutal policies in the territories. Apparently, their personal and political agendas are far more important than the well being of Israel and its citizens, not to speak of the well being of the Palestinians.

So what does all this have to do with refusing to serve in the IDF?

First, those who want to refuse to serve often hesitate because they are afraid of undermining the legitimacy of the army and the Israeli consensus. If they understand these issues, then it should be clear that the army is not the pillar of Israeli society, but rather the greatest threat to Israeli

democracy. Refusal is not just a “bleeding heart leftist” thing to do — it is the duty of all those who care about the future of Israel. Second, if refusal is based solely on the issue of “war crimes,” then the debate over refusal will deteriorate into a discussion of whether or not soldiers are in danger, whether specific actions by the army are self defense or aggression. This kind of debate avoids the core issues of why the occupation continues despite the majority of Israelis being opposed to it. Only by putting these issues on the table, can the Israeli public begin to understand the central role the army plays in the occupation and in many of the problems of Israeli society. Only when these issues are forcefully raised and debated, is there any hope of Israel becoming a strong and healthy democracy, living in peace with our neighbors. And the best way to bring these issues to public debate, is precisely by refusing to serve!

One last question: Even if we reach a peace agreement with the Palestinians, Israel will still face military threats from Syria, Iraq and Islamic militants for a long time to come. So isn't undermining the army an act of suicide?

I am not advocating a pacifist position. Countries, like individuals, have the right to defend themselves if they are attacked. But as long as the current unnatural situation continues, it is impossible to separate out the real security issues that Israel faces from the ones the army fabricates. This FAQ is not about attacking the IDF for the sake of attack. The ultimate goal is to begin a healthy debate. Not to end on a negative note, here are some positive actions that might be taken, as minimal safeguards any sane and healthy democracy should ask from itself:

- the army's budget must face outside oversight and scrutiny,
- the army brass should be forbidden to be involved in political discussions, which includes shutting the door between the army and subsequent political involvement,
- the army's bureaucracy needs to be shrunk and overhauled,
- the army must be professionalized with the reserves and draft significantly cut back,
- national service must be universal, with army service being only one option,
- Israeli's must begin to see the army as a necessary evil, not a “value.”

None of these actions imply abolishing the army or endangering the security of Israel. On the contrary, by returning the army to its rightful place in society, not only will Israel be a more safe and secure place, it will also be a more equitable, tolerant and democratic country.

Addendum: Where can I find out more?

Vist my weblog regularly at <http://www.IsraelBlog.org/>

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