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Meron Rapoport
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By [Meron Rapoport](#)

The Israeli army is facing its biggest refusal crisis in decades

Over 100,000 Israelis have reportedly stopped showing up for reserve duty. While their reasons differ, the scale demonstrates the war's waning legitimacy.



Israeli soldiers seen on the border with Lebanon, northern Israel, December 3, 2024. (Ayal Margolin/Flash90)

No one can state precise numbers. No political party or leader calls for it explicitly. But anyone who has spent time at anti-government protests or on Hebrew-language social media in recent weeks knows it to be true: it is becoming increasingly legitimate to refuse to report for military service in Israel — and not only [among the radical left](#).

In the lead-up to the war, talk of refusal — or more precisely, “ceasing to volunteer” for the reserves — had become a [significant feature of the mass protests](#) against the Israeli government’s judicial overhaul. At the height of those protests, in July 2023, over 1,000 pilots and Air Force personnel [declared](#) that they would stop showing up for duty unless the legislation was halted, leading to warnings from senior military officials and the head of the Shin Bet that the judicial overhaul endangered national security.

The Israeli right continues to argue to this day that those refusal threats not only encouraged Hamas to attack Israel but also weakened the army. But in truth, all the threats disappeared into the ether on October 7, with the protesters overwhelmingly and enthusiastically volunteering to enlist.

For 18 months, the vast majority of Israel’s Jewish population has rallied around the flag in support of the onslaught on Gaza. But particularly after the government decided to collapse the ceasefire last month, cracks have started to appear.

In recent weeks, the media has reported a significant decline in soldiers showing up to reserve duty. Although the exact numbers are a closely guarded secret, the army informed Defense Minister Israel Katz in mid-March that the attendance rate stood at 80 percent, compared to around 120 percent immediately after October 7. [According to Kan](#), Israel’s national broadcaster, that number was a fudge: the true rate is closer to 60 percent. Other reports speak of attendance rates of 50 percent or lower, with some reserve units resorting to [trying to recruit soldiers](#) via social media.



A crowd of friends, family, and activists holds a solidarity protest in support of Ella Keidar Greenberg outside the Tel Hashomer recruitment center, before she declares her refusal to enlist in the Israeli army, March 19, 2025. (Oren Ziv)

“Refusal comes in waves, and this is the biggest wave since the First Lebanon War in 1982,” Ishai Menuchin, one of the leaders of the refuser movement Yesh Gvul (“There is a Limit”) which was founded during that war, told +972.

Like conscription into the regular forces at age 18, it is compulsory for Israelis to serve in the reserves when summoned until the age of 40 (though this can vary depending on rank and unit). During wartime, the army is heavily dependent on these forces.

At the start of the war, the army [stated](#) that it had recruited around 295,000 reservists on top of the roughly 100,000 soldiers in regular service. If reports about 50-60 percent attendance in the reserves are accurate, that means over 100,000 people have stopped showing up for reserve duty. “That’s a huge number,” Menuchin noted. “It means the government will have a problem continuing the war.”

“October 7 initially created a feeling of ‘Together we will win,’ but that has now eroded,” said Tom Mehager, an activist who refused to serve during the Second Intifada and now runs a [social media page](#) that posts videos of past refuseniks explaining their decision. “To attack Gaza, three planes are enough — but refusal still draws red lines. It forces the system to understand the limits of its power.”

‘Day after day, I see refusal declarations’

The majority of those defying enlistment orders appear to be what’s known as “gray refusers” — people who have no real ideological objection to the war but rather have grown demoralized, weary, or fed up that it is dragging on for so long. Alongside them are a small but growing minority of reservists who refuse on ethical grounds.

According to Menuchin, Yesh Gvul has been in contact with over 150 ideological refusers since October 2023, while New Profile, another organization supporting refuseniks, has dealt with several hundred such cases. But whereas teenagers who refuse the compulsory draft for ideological reasons are subject to prison sentences of several months, Menuchin is aware of only one reservist who was punished for their recent refusal — receiving a sentence of two weeks of probation.

“They’re afraid to put refusers in prison, because if they do, it could bury the model of the ‘people’s army,’” he explained. “The government understands this, and therefore it doesn’t push too hard; it suffices with the army dismissing a few reservists, as if that will solve the problem.”



Israeli soldiers seen near the border with Syria, December 8, 2024. (Michael Giladi/Flash90)

As a result, Menuchin finds it difficult to estimate the true scale of this phenomenon. “During the Lebanon War, our assessment was that for every refuser who went to prison, there were another eight to 10 ideological refusers,” he says. “So if 150 or 160 people have declared that they won’t go to the army for ideological reasons, it’s reasonable to estimate that there are at least 1,500 ideological refusers. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg [given the far larger number of non-ideological refusers].”

However, according to Yuval Green — who refused to continue serving in Gaza after disobeying an order to set fire to a Palestinian home, and who now leads an anti-war movement called “Soldiers for the Hostages” with 220 reservists signed on to its refusal statement — this binary categorization doesn’t tell the whole story.

“There are more and more people who may not necessarily care about Palestinians but no longer feel at peace with the goals of the war,” he explained. “I call this ‘gray-ideological refusal.’ I have no way of knowing how many there are, but I’m sure it’s a lot.

“In the past, people I knew were really angry with me [for calling for refusal],” Green continued. “Now I feel much more understanding. We’ve become more relevant. The media is covering us; we were invited to Channel 13 and Channel 11. Day after day, I see refusal declarations.”

Recent examples abound. Last week, Haaretz published an op-ed by the mother of a soldier who stated: “Our children will not fight in a messianic war of choice.” Another op-ed in the same newspaper by an anonymous soldier declared: “The current war in Gaza is meant to buy political stability with blood. I will not take part in it.”

Others are less explicit, but the effect is similar. In a recent interview, former Supreme Court Justice Ayala Procaccia stopped short of endorsing refusal but called for “civil disobedience.” On April 10, nearly 1,000 Air Force reservists published an open letter demanding a hostage deal that would end the war; they were soon joined by hundreds of reservists in the Navy and the elite intelligence squad Unit 8200. Prime Minister Netanyahu responded: “Refusal is refusal — even when it is said implicitly and in laundered language.”



Activists from Free Jerusalem protest against the war in Gaza, Jerusalem, April 9, 2025.
(Chaim Goldberg/Flash90)

‘The legitimacy of the regime is in danger’

[Yael Berda](#), a sociologist at the Hebrew University and a left-wing activist, explained that the declining willingness to show up for reserve duty stems first and foremost from economic concerns. She referred to a [recent survey](#) by the Israeli Employment Service which found that 48 percent of reservists reported a significant loss of income since October 7, and 41 percent said they were fired or forced to leave their jobs due to extended periods in the reserves.

Menuchin also attributes significant weight to economic factors, but offers an additional explanation: “Israelis don’t want to feel like suckers, and they’re now reaching a point where they feel they’re being exploited. They see others getting exemptions, and they wager that if something happens to them, no one will support them or their families. There’s a feeling of abandonment: they see the families of the hostages crowdfunding just to survive. The bottom line is that the state isn’t really there, and that’s becoming clear to more and more Israelis.

“There’s a lot of despair,” Menuchin continued. “People don’t know where this is heading. You see the rush for foreign passports — even before October 7 — and the search for ‘better’ places to emigrate to. There’s a growing retreat into concern for one’s own interest group. And above all, the hostages are not being brought back.”

When it comes to ideological refusal, Berda identifies several categories. “One type of refusal stems from ‘What I saw in Gaza,’ but that’s a minority,” she explained. “Another type is loss of faith in the leadership, especially when the government didn’t do everything it could to bring the hostages back. There’s an intolerable gap between what the government said it was doing and what it actually did. And this gap causes people to lose trust.”

An additional category, Berda continued, is “disgust with the discourse of sacrifice” promoted by the religious far-right, led by the likes of Itamar Ben Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. “It’s a kind of backlash against the settlers’ narrative that says it’s good to sacrifice your life for something bigger,” Berda explained. “People are reacting to the notion that the collective is more important than the individual by saying: ‘The state’s goals are important, but I have my own life.’”



'Lavender': The AI machine directing Israel's bombing spree in Gaza



Israel's designs for Jenin refugee camp are about more than just destruction



In southern Syria, a violent new Israeli occupation emerges

While noting that refusal threats were a major part of the anti-government protests of 2023, Berda asserted that “now, after the collapse of the ceasefire, it can be said that the entire protest movement [opposes the continuation of the war](#) on the basis that it is Netanyahu’s war. This is definitely new; there’s never been such a rupture, where the legitimacy of the regime is in danger.

“In 1973, they said Golda [Meir] was incompetent, that she made mistakes, but no one doubted her loyalty,” Berda continued. “During the First Lebanon War, there were doubts about the loyalty of [Ariel] Sharon and [Menachem] Begin, but that was on the margins. Now, especially in light of the [“Qatargate” affair](#), people are convinced that Netanyahu is willing to destroy the state for his personal gain.”

Nevertheless, the wave of refusal and non-attendance has not yet brought the army to its knees. “People are saying: ‘There’s the government, and there’s the state,’” Berda explained. “These people still go to serve because they cling to the state and its security institutions — because if they don’t believe in them, they’ll have nothing left.

“The public understands that the moment trust in the army breaks, the story’s over — and that’s frightening,” she went on. “They’re afraid of being involved in bringing down the army because that would make them complicit. Bibi is forcing Israelis into [what they see as] a terrible choice. No matter what you do, you’ll be complicit in a crime: either the crime of genocide or the crime of dismantling the state.”

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