

2017 Seniors' Letter - Dozens of Israeli teens: 'We refuse to enlist out of a commitment to peace'

Tuesday 2 January 2018, by [MATAR Haggai](#) (Date first published: 29 December 2017).

Sixty-three Israeli teenagers have published an open letter to Prime Minister Netanyahu on Thursday, declaring their refusal to join the Israeli army due to their opposition to the occupation.

"The army carries out a racist government policy that enforces one legal system for Israelis and another for Palestinian in the same territory," they write. "Therefore, we have decided not to take any part in the occupation and oppression of the Palestinian people... for as long as people live under an occupation that denies their human rights and national rights - we cannot have peace."

The group calls itself the "2017 Seniors' Letter," continuing a long tradition of similar letters sent by high school seniors announcing their refusal to join the army, dating back to 1970 (the writer of this text was a signatory of the 2001 letter). Members of the group have stated they are willing to be imprisoned for their conscientious objection; one of them, Matan Helman, is already serving a prison sentence. The teens have also stated they will be traveling the country, speaking to others their age, challenging them to rethink their positions on military service and inviting them to join the movement.

The Israeli army does not recognize the right to conscientiously object to the draft based on rejection of the occupation. It does, however, allow for objection based solely on pacifism and the rejection of all forms of violence. These young refusers, therefore, are likely to be denied exemptions, and sent to repeated prison sentences of two to four weeks each, as has been the case with other conscientious objectors in recent years.

In their letter, the young refusers list the occupation, the siege on Gaza, settlements, and violence toward Palestinians as the main reasons for the decision. However, they also mention the ongoing effects of militarism on the Israeli society, enshrining violent solutions instead of peace as a central value, and the effect the occupation has on strengthening Israeli capitalism and dependence on American military aid.

"Testimonies of former soldiers and heads of the security establishment teach us that the reality of occupation does not allow one to make a difference from within," they write. "The power to change reality does not lay with the single soldier but with the system as a whole. Similarly, the blame for this reality does not lie with the soldier, but with the army and government. This is the system we wish to change."

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