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'This Isn't a Country I'll Sacrifice My Life For': Why 130 Israeli Soldiers Are Refusing to Serve

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Physically and mentally exhausted from the war, appalled by what they see as a far-right spirit sweeping the army, and feeling anger at the abandonment of the hostages, 130 reservists and conscripts say they will no longer report for duty if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fails to strike a deal with Hamas.

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Credit: Images: IDF spokesperson/Shutterstock.com Artwork: Ayala Berger

Max Kresch spent more than two months serving as a reservist on the Lebanese border after the war began on October 7, but just announced that he will no longer report for duty.

He moved to Israel in 2014 at age 18, as part of a program for his religious-Zionist community in Massachusetts: spending a year in Israel and getting to know the country through various educational programs. After a year at a Jerusalem yeshiva, during which time he volunteered at the Magen David Adom rescue service, he decided to make aliyah and serve in the army. His entire family followed him to Israel.

He was accepted into the Egoz reconnaissance unit and took a course training to be a medic. However, during his service, he was transferred to the battalions clinic due to, as he puts it, his unwillingness to kill. After his discharge, Kresch joined the reserves as a combat medic and has not missed a day of reserve duty.

Now, though, he has decided that enough is enough. The reason he doesn't intend to report for duty isn't the exhaustion that is characteristic of so many reservists. Instead, he is one of 130 reservists who have just signed an open letter to Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), stating that they will not continue serving if he does not seek a deal for [the release of the 101 hostages](#) still being held in Gaza.

Max Kresch. Saw himself as a "voice of reason" in his IDF unit. Credit: Naama Grynbaum

Kresch is one of 64 soldiers who signed the letter using their full name; the rest used initials and gave the name of the battalion or brigade in which they serve. Most of the signatories are reservists,

while 14 are regular members of the army.

One of the conscripts is 19-year-old Shai (not his real name), who serves in the Border Defense Corps in the south and is mulling whether to refuse “as an act of protest, not desertion,” he says. “Our priority is to ensure the security of the state. I feel that many times, soldiers are exploited for public relations and ultimately this adds nothing. I came to serve.”

Forty-seven of the signatories serve in combat units. Some, like Kresch, have already refused to serve. Others have refused to report for reserve duty that involves certain missions, while others are still considering whether to refuse.

According to Yuval Green - a medic in the Paratroopers Brigade who signed an earlier “letter of refusal” published before this spring’s Rafah ground operation, and who initiated the current letter - more than 100 signatories have served since the war began a year ago: 21 of them in Gaza and others on the Lebanese border. Thirty of the signatories signed both the previous letter and this one.

Although the soldiers did not set a specific date from which they will refuse to serve if no hostage deal is reached, the letter - which has three times the number of signatories as its predecessor - highlights the unrest among those who have devoted the past year to the war.

Their discontent is emotional, moral and ideological, a combination of fatigue and mental wounds suffered by some of the soldiers, anger at the government - whom the signatories consider to have torpedoed a hostage deal - and the continuation of what they see as an aimless war.

Yuval Green. Initiator of the latest letter, which he says more than 100 soldiers have signed. Credit: Moti Milrod

Some of the signatories raised another issue: Their revulsion at the corruption and far-right spirit they say has subsumed large parts of the Israel Defense Forces.

‘We knew we were on the front line’

Kresch admits to struggling with some of the missions he performed in recent years while serving as a combat soldier in the West Bank. But he felt his presence on the team was important to provide a “voice of reason,” he says. The government’s efforts to weaken the judiciary added to his misgivings and he considered no longer serving, but didn’t get the chance to act on his intentions.

On October 8, 2023, when the IDF was expecting members of [Hezbollah’s Radwan Force to invade northern Israel](#), he went to the Lebanese border. “We knew we were on the front line and strongly believed that there would be a massacre here,” he recounts. “On that day, I was ready for the possibility that, in a few hours, I would no longer be among the living or that my comrades around me would die.”

Israeli soldiers looking out at the Gaza Strip last year. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

Things calmed down after about 10 days. Although there was still shelling and anti-tank missile fire, Kresch says, “there was no longer the feeling from [October 7](#); there was no existential threat.”

The unit stayed on the border for over two months, mostly engaged in exercises, and the soldiers had plenty of free time to discuss the situation. Kresch says he was exposed to the radicalization among his friends in the unit and was ostracized for his own views.

On his Facebook page on October 12, he wrote: "Now is the time to embrace our Arab and Palestinian friends." He also spoke out against those calling for the destruction of Gaza. "The extremists say that Gaza must be flattened, and this hurts the most because people are giving up on peace. I have not given up and I will never give up on peace."

My wife told me, 'If you die there, I'll write "Idiot" on your headstone.' But if I'm there, I know that my presence protects, let's say, the people of Israel.

Yariv

The post sparked anger within his unit. "People were really furious with me," he relates. "Someone shared it with the entire company and said, 'Did you see what Max posted? Isn't this wrong?' It was very uncomfortable and I was removed from my team. I was given to understand that they didn't want me, that they couldn't get along with me. Someone in the team told me he wasn't sure he could rely on me, that I would not do what was necessary at the critical moment. I'm someone who hadn't missed a day of reserve duty until then, when a third of my team was not on reserve duty until the war."

Kresch says his commander stressed to him that he wasn't removed from the team because of his opinions, but for social reasons. However, he is convinced this was just an excuse.

He returned from reserve duty, in his words, "emotionally shattered." His partner left him, he postponed his biology studies at the Hebrew University by a semester and moved back in with his parents. What helped him recover somewhat was group therapy sessions for reservists. There, he says, he realized that the past year has taken a heavy toll on people from across the political spectrum, and that the endless war is "tearing society apart."

For him, the failure to forge another hostage deal was the last straw - "though signing it will no longer heal the fracture."

As for his decision to stop serving, he says: "I can't do it anymore. The judicial coup is continuing and the war serves as a smoke screen. The country that will rise after the war won't be the same country I enlisted for. This is not a country I'm willing to sacrifice my life for. Too many things here have gone in a direction I don't believe in, and I can no longer justify it."

Conditional service

Yotam Vilk, 28, grew up in Jerusalem in a religious-Zionist home that he calls “soft right.” Today part of the religious left, he lives in Tel Aviv, is interning to be a human rights lawyer and is an advocate for Palestinian rights in the occupied territories. He serves as a deputy company commander in the Armored Corps and recently completed his second round of reserve duty since October 7. In total, he fought for 230 days over the past year, mostly in Gaza.

He says that after refusing to serve in the territories, he was discharged from the army on grounds of conscience about a year before the war broke out. But on October 7, he volunteered to fight.

“I arrived and took a tank from a young tank commander to carry out missions in the Gaza border area. It was clear to everyone that it was better for an experienced officer to do it.” Later, he commanded two tanks and was subsequently promoted to deputy company commander in a company stationed on the Netzarim corridor in the Strip.

Yotam Vilk. “It’s impossible to enter Gaza and not feel the human suffering.” Credit: Tomer Appelbaum

“The first moment when I actually realized the war was going in a problematic direction was the last day of the first hostage deal, when Israel refused to accept seven living hostages. It claimed that if we lowered our demands, Hamas would bring us to our knees or some such nonsense. It was clear to me that, to some extent, Israel had given up on the people kidnapped from its territory,” he says.

“Beyond that, it’s impossible to enter Gaza and not feel the human suffering. It’s been totally destroyed, unfit for human habitation. That was true in December, and it’s even truer today. Gaza’s coastal boulevard bears a somewhat disturbing similarity to Tel Aviv, and it is simply devastated.”

I can’t do it anymore. The judicial coup is continuing and the war serves as a smoke screen. The country that will rise after the war won’t be the same country I enlisted for.

Max Kresch

Like Kresch, Vilk’s relationship with his partner ended when he returned from his first round of duty, partly due to his mental state. “I feel that Israel has betrayed me personally,” he says. “It has taken so much from me, and all kinds of powers are using me to promote a pointless war.”

Even so, he doesn't know if he will refuse to serve when he is next called up.

"I feel that abandoning Gaza means giving up on the hostages there," he says, before adding a qualifier: "Even if we don't abandon it, we'll give up on them because the State of Israel doesn't want them. Reaching an agreement is not just an obligation; it's the only possible solution. It will happen eventually, just not with the hostages."

The bottom line, Vilk says, is that his time as a reservist is now conditional. "If Israel makes a conscious decision not to reach a deal because of personal political interests and messianic ambitions, my service will be in doubt," he explains.

Smoke rising after an Israeli strike in Gaza last December. Credit: Rami Shllush

For 29-year-old Assaf (not his real name), who served in the 16th Infantry Brigade, the point of no return has already passed. He fought in Gaza for two months at the start of the war, and in February-March was called up for the West Bank, where he previously served during his regular service. At the end of that second round, which he says left him emotionally scarred, he decided never to return to reserve duty.

"After Gaza and a great deal of sacrifice, not just from us but also by our families and work colleagues, we're back in a situation that has lasted for as long as I can remember. [Being told]: You need to do this, right now; it stinks, it's illogical, it's wrong, but it has to be done.

"I returned to that same emergency routine that has been going on for 50 years," he says, "and I'm no longer willing to jump the instant the IDF decides it's necessary, to don the uniform, stand at a post and say, 'Yessir, of course, amen.'"

Several of Assaf's comrades in the brigade have been killed in Gaza recently, in the round of fighting he refused to participate in. That is another reason contributing to the sense of futility he feels over the ever-lengthening war, which he says his comrades also felt when they served and fought in the previous round and, like him, lost comrades there.

'The army has become messianic'

Yariv (not his real name), in his 40s and married with children, served as a regular soldier in a commando unit during the second intifada and never thought he'd refuse to report for reserve duty. "Part of my identity is being a soldier. I'm a soldier, a father, a Zionist, a leftist," he says. "I always did reserve duty." When the judicial coup was in full flow last year, Yariv suspended his volunteering. But on October 7, he says, he felt "a strong need to be a soldier again, beyond volunteering in agriculture," and put on the old uniform.

Like other interviewees, he was stationed on the Netzarim corridor. "It was quite calm for us. A few mortars, some patrols were shot at, but I don't think I made a significant contribution," he says. "But I saw how the army has become messianic. The number of people with patches saying 'Messiah' or 'Greater Israel' to the Tigris and Euphrates - it's absurd, and no one says anything. When I began making a fuss about it, I was told that they'd remove me from the company WhatsApp group and I should stop talking politics. I said: 'This is politics; you're engaging in politics. Do it or don't do it, and I'll wear a "Peace Now" and "Two States for Two Peoples" patch.' I annoyed a lot of people over that."

After his time in Gaza, Yariv was recently called up for service in the West Bank, but refused.

However, he says that if he is called up for a ground campaign in Lebanon, he thinks he will serve. He would also return to Gaza, if necessary, despite all the difficulty and mixed feelings.

The Eli Azza settlement near Netiv Ha'asara, northern Negev, in August. Credit: David Bachar

"My wife told me, 'If you die, I'll write "Idiot" on your headstone,'" he recounts. "If I'm there, I know that my presence protects, let's say, the people of Israel. But at the same time, it endangers the hostages and encourages the occupation of Gaza and the establishment of settlements there. That's really happening. You see how the outposts can gradually become settlements; you can practically smell it. There's outpost after outpost after outpost, 500 meters [1,640 feet] from each other. They're creating a wide corridor. The sense of security is important, sure, but the distance from that to settlements is very small."

The IDF spokesperson's unit said in response to this story: "The presence of reservists is important for carrying out the missions the IDF is tasked to perform. Since the outbreak of the war, reservists have reported for duty and continue to do so in order to protect the security of the State of Israel. As part of the combat troop exchanges in Gaza, a feasibility study was performed in which several reserve brigades would be mobilized. The agreed-upon reservist brigades were summoned through the normal channels through their commanders.

"Regarding the letter, the IDF views any call to refuse reserve duty with the utmost seriousness. Each case will be examined and handled individually by the commanders according to the orders."

It added that "the patches mentioned are not approved by the IDF according to the rules of appearance and dress, and the procedures on the matter will be clarified."

The IDF declined to comment on the matter of Max Kresch's removal from his team due to his views.

Liza Rozovsky

P.S.

• Haaretz. Oct 9, 2024:

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2024-10-09/ty-article-magazine/.premium/this-isnt-a-country-ill-sacrifice-my-life-for-the-israeli-soldiers-refusing-to-serve/00000192-7157-d478-adf7-755f7bb00000>

• *Liza Rozovsky's articles in Haaretz:*

<https://www.haaretz.com/ty-WRITER/0000017f-da2b-d249-ab7f-fbeb7edf0000>