

Roundtable Meeting

Courage to Refuse

with

Major (Reserve) Rami Kaplan

Lieutenant (Reserve) Avi Mayorek

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Meeting Summary

Terror is on the minds of all Israelis. 'When I walk the streets it is something that is always on my mind and it doesn't leave', says Lieutenant Avi Mayorek. Palestinian terror is a big problem, making it difficult for Israelis to sympathize with their plight. However, it is the occupation that is causing the Palestinian suicide attacks. When males and females turn 18 in Israel they must join the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and serve for 3 years for men or 21 months for women before becoming a reservist, serving one month a year. While in the IDF soldiers participate in rigorous drills and attend educational lessons. Within these lessons, soldiers are taught the significance of refusing orders and the type of punishments issued if this occurs. Also, soldiers are taught about certain core values, such as freedom and social responsibility.

To illustrate his views, Lt. Mayorek used the following examples:

In Jenin, his unit served at a checkpoint, randomly searching vehicles. Passengers were required to get out of the vehicle and show identification. The wait would usually be extremely long, with people returning from work and school. In addition, the commander would give orders to search houses. His unit would wake up entire houses and rummage through everything, but usually find nothing. Discovering something like a Palestinian flag was a 'big victory' for his unit.

Hebron, a city of 200,000 Palestinians and 100 Jewish settlers is located just south of Jerusalem. In order to guard these two neighborhoods, each with fifty Jewish settlers, you must have at least one battalion company. Despite the small group of settlers, the city has little freedom. For instance, during Jewish Holidays, the entire city, excluding settlers, is under strict curfew.

Many soldiers in the Israeli Army hate serving in occupied territories but do it anyway so as not to let down fellow soldiers and commanders. The last time Lt. Mayorek was called to serve in the Army was December of 2000, in Tapuach Junction, in the Center of the West Bank. Two events during this time served as breaking points for him. The first such event occurred when commands were issued proclaiming that no Palestinians could drive the following day due to

escalating violence on the roads. The roads were only open to settlers and the army. The second event was when a jeep was stopped at a checkpoint. Two Israeli soldiers approached the car and a 19-year-old soldier slapped the 25-year-old driver of the vehicle. The Palestinian driver had overtaken the Israeli soldier on the road, which is not permitted. The Palestinians are humiliated and oppressed on their own land.

Lt. Mayorek finished his discussion by saying, 'I find my actions very patriotic. I am not acting against Israel, but I feel I am doing this for the sake of Israel. I believe this is the best way I can help my country to become a normal, better place.'

Major Rami Kaplan served six years in the IDF and six years in the reserves. One of the settlements he served was Netzarim, in the Gaza Strip. In the settlement there are approximately fifty families and many more soldiers. This experience reminds Major Kaplan of Lebanon, where he served for five years. Before the intifada, Israel felt responsible for the Palestinians' welfare and way of life, even though under occupation. There is now no longer this sense of responsibility. Now more than fifty percent of Palestinians are surviving on humanitarian aid. Today, more than twenty-five percent of Palestinian children are suffering from malnutrition; the death rate of newborns is five times greater than before the intifada and two times as many women are delivering babies at home.

Two soldiers serving in the Gaza Strip decided to draft a letter refusing to serve in the IDF and against the occupation. After getting fifty signatures, including Major Kaplan's, this letter was published. Major Kaplan believes that for two months after the letter was published, there was a strong shift in public opinion against the occupation. Sharon's popularity went from seventy to thirty percent, but this trend did not last because of the impact of suicide bombings. There are currently five hundred soldiers refusing to serve.

In February and March of 2002, Israeli polls showed that a fourth to a third of Jewish citizens supported the right to refuse to serve in the occupied territories. The only reason for the IDF's presence in the occupied territories is to guard the settlements and it is not there to prevent terror or defend Israel. The occupation is destroying Israel. The economic situation is deteriorating due to the occupation. If you want to be a Zionist in Israel, you will want Israel to be prosperous and peaceful and must therefore oppose occupation.

Main Discussion Points

It is impossible to fight terrorism while occupation is occurring. To prevent Palestinian terror, Israel must stop the occupation. Even if ten suicide bombers are captured, one will always manage to get through. Most of the orders given

by the IDF are not given to harm the population. Humiliation and oppression is not the purpose of the occupation but the result.

Currently there is a fence being built to separate Israel and Palestinian territory. The problem with the fence is where will it be built and which settlements will be included. There are better options if Israel wants to make peace with the Palestinians

There is an increasing problem with the reserve army. Only about one out of three soldiers actually shows up for duty. More and more reservists are evading service.

Refuseniks have not experienced problems at work or in finding employment. Support from family members varies. Typically, out of ten family members there will be one who disapproves, eight who will understand but not agree and one who will fully agree.

Courage to Refuse is not a political movement. It is a group of soldiers who refuse to serve in the occupied territories. Very few political parties would be willing to support this movement. At this time it is impossible to align with a Palestinian peace movement because there is no contact between the two sides.

The main purpose of the High Court Appeal is to define the occupation as illegal under international law and Israel's constitution. Another point is to establish a law stating that refusing to serve in occupied territories is legal and permissible. The main argument is that Israel is a democratic state and should recognise the rights and decisions of its citizens.

Most of the soldiers in Courage to Refuse come from the political left, although Courage to Refuse does not have any political alignment. It is made up of soldiers who care and come from a high socio-economic background.

Before the Courage to Refuse letter was published the IDF did not reveal that soldiers were refusing to serve in the occupied territories. After the letter was published and the issue was publicised, soldiers were sent to military jail. This year 150 soldiers were sent to military prison, many more than in past years. The IDF uses disciplinary punishment for each soldier. This involves the commander, rather than a court martial, deciding each soldier's sentence individually. Most reservists spend approximately one month in military jail.

Palestinian women in Nablus have recently been throwing flowers on Israeli tanks. This new kind of resistance technique is much better than current Palestinian resistance tactics and could be very effective in changing the opinions of Israeli soldiers.

Courage to Refuse is a recognised organization with an established leadership and committees. It holds demonstrations and runs promotional tours abroad. It is supported by several major foreign contributors, mostly Jewish, and also by Israeli NGOs.