

Synopsis:

Refuzniks

Refusing Israeli military service

Photographic documentary by

Martin BARZILAI

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The idea for this project came up during long discussions with a friend. We wanted to speak about the occupation of the Palestinian territories and to give a voice to those on the Israeli side who are opposed to it. We thought of the young people imprisoned for having refused to do their military service, or of the reservists who refuse to fight... We went to meet them in July 2008. The clichés and preconceived ideas evaporated one after the next: while Tel-Aviv may be a rich and very westernised city, it also has its poor neighbourhoods inhabited by immigrants and Sefardic Jews. We travelled around town from one meeting to another, from an interview to a photo shoot. The Israelis “who refuse” are often very busy... Between militant activities, work and family life, they still manage to find some time for us. When we ask for a formal interview, or a portrait, the answer is always positive. Those who refuse military service have a fundamental and urgent need to publicise their ideas to the world. I am especially impressed by the young, the adolescents who have decided that they will go to prison for their ideas. There are other cases of refusal such as that of the young Margarida, a girl originally from Brazil who didn't want to continue with the army because it put her too far from her family, and because she almost lost her life in service.

Meanwhile, on July 29, 2008, in the village of Ni'ilin, in the West Bank, Ahmed Mousa, aged ten, was shot in the head by an Israeli soldier. The day of his funeral, July 30, the seventeen-year-old Youssef Amireh would also fall, assassinated by the occupier's army. Shocked, we continue to interview and take photos.

I went back the following year, alone this time, and I met up again with the teenagers who have now grown up. Fresh from their spell in prison, they are happy that I came back. “The Europeans come, do interviews, take our photo, but rarely come back”. Still shocked by the massacre in Gaza in December 2008, most of them want to leave: “I can't stand living in this country”. The others stay because “the fight must go on”.

Those who are opposed to the occupation of the Palestinian territories are in the minority. The others seem to live a carefree life. I hardly dare think about how those who are born there feel, and who today, despite a military education, rise up against the expansionist policy of their country.

Who are the Refuzniks?

The Israeli refuzniks are those who do not want to serve in the army, everyone for different reasons. During their schooling, army representatives explain the importance of the army in class. Israel is the world's biggest per caput spender on arms: 1 429 \$ US (source, "Le temps", Geneva). Tsahal is made up of around 186 500 soldiers, and can count on a further 445 000 reservists.

The Israelis are enrolled at 18 years old, men for three years, and women for two, with the exception of the 18% of Arab Israelis in the population and of most Haredim Jews who concentrate on religious studies. People suffering from physical or mental problems can however be exempted. In total, less than 60% of the population actually do the full duration of their military service (source: "newprofile.org").

A conscript has two possibilities if he does not want to do military service : he can assert that he is a pacifist, and go before a commission to prove it, with witnesses to attest that he has never tolerated violence. The commission judges if the arguments are valid. If the pacifist is not convincing enough, he can find himself in prison. Assuming that the arguments are accepted, the objector is duly exempted. Women can do civil service, but this does not exist for Jewish men. As it happens, women are treated with « favours », being exempted from military service if they are married, pregnant or religious – without necessarily having to prove that they are studying religion. There are occasional checks however, as many young women claim to be religious.

The most radical solution is to refuse to do military service specifically to protest against the occupation of the Palestinian territories. These young refuznik are called "Shministim". They come together before their conscription to draft a collective letter to the Press and to the army, in which they denounce the Israeli state's policy in Palestine. The letter is then signed by their supporters, sent and published. These teenagers find themselves in military prisons for periods ranging from two months to two years. There are also other Israelis who refuse to serve in the Palestinian Territories, and yet others who refuse to serve as reservists after having completed their basic military service.

The refuzniks in this article are Shministim, pacifists, survivors of suicide, discharged... What they have in common is without doubt their rejection of the army in a country where the pressure from state propaganda is extreme that you really need to have strength of character to go against it. These portraits and interviews were carried out in July 2008 and 2009. In the case of the Shministim who had been imprisoned between these two periods and who I was lucky enough to meet twice, I have shown a date (2008 and 2009) with what they said before and after their stay behind bars.