David versus the State: Refusal to Serve in the Israeli Defense Forces during the Lebanon War and the First Intifada: 1982-1993

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Today, Israel’s military is one of the largest and most advanced in the world. However, it stands out because it relies on mandatory conscription of both men and women in order to staff an armed force of 170,000 active duty soldiers and 450,000 reservists from a total population of only 7.5 million.¹ This military force is used to defend the country from attacks by neighboring states as well as patrol and monitor the occupied Palestinian Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza strip. Mandatory IDF service dates back to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing War of Independence. Throughout its early history, most Israelis deemed military service as an honorable and necessary duty since Israel was involved in several wars within the first 25 years of its existence and instances of conscientious objectors were basically unheard of. However, starting with the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and continuing through the First Intifada (1987-1993) there was a shift in some Israeli opinions towards universal military conscription. While the large majority of Israelis always saw service in the Israeli Defense Force as an admirable and essential duty, some Israelis refused to serve due to moral disagreement with military policies that were highlighted by the Lebanon invasion.

The Israeli Defense Forces was officially established on May 31, 1948 immediately following the creation of the modern State of Israel. It incorporated the pre-state Jewish paramilitary organizations of the Haganah, the Irgun, and the Lehi into one cohesive force.² The policy of universal conscription of both men and women was immediately put into practice with the creation of the IDF. The official policy, incorporated into the Chok Sherut Bitachoni (National Service Law) in 1949, outlines a military system split into three parts. The first group consists of the core group of career officers who are responsible for military planning,

organization, and administration. The second group consists of the conscripts made up of men who must serve for three years and women who must serve for two years. The third group is made up of reservists. Reservists have finished their period of conscription and are required to attend yearly training sessions to be prepared for service in case of emergencies until they turn fifty one (for men) or thirty four (for women).  

There are a few traditional views of the IDF which have been propagated since the inception of the state, but came under fire by critics during both the invasion of Lebanon and the First Intifada. One traditional view is that Israel is the underdog in a David versus Goliath struggle against its Arab neighbors. One of the most important biblical sights in Israel is Tel Azeka and the Valley of Elah where, according to the bible, the battle between David and Goliath occurred. Tourists and Israeli school children come to feel inspired by the story of the Jewish David defeating the much stronger Philistine. However, in 1982 and again in 1987 Israel showed that it could no longer be considered an underdog. The IDF was one of the best armed forces in the world and showed the ability to easily crush resistance in Lebanon and the Occupied Territories. Another important traditional view of the IDF is that its soldiers respect the purity of arms. This is the idea that the IDF “will only use force of arms for the purpose of subduing the enemy to the necessary extent and will limit his use of force so as to prevent unnecessary harm to human life and limb, dignity and property.” Most Israelis used to believe that the IDF was a morally superior army and only used force when completely necessary. However, after Israel’s actions against civilians in Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank became

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known to the public, the IDF’s commitment to the purity of arms came into doubt for many Israelis.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 was the major turning point which caused some critics to oppose universal conscription or refuse to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). A number of IDF soldiers and civilians saw this invasion, also known as “Operation Peace for Galilee”, as a milchemt brera (war of choice).\(^6\) Tension between the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon and Israel had been mounting throughout 1981, especially after Prime Minister Menachem Begin appointed known war hawk Ariel Sharon as his defense minister. Sharon immediately began drafting plans for a potential invasion of Lebanon.\(^7\) The catalyst for this invasion came on June 3, 1982 when Israeli Ambassador Shlomo Argov was shot in London by agents from the Fatah Revolutionary Council. Even though The Revolutionary Council, also known as the Abu Nidal Organization, was a splinter group which was no longer affiliated with the PLO, Israel responded with air strikes against PLO positions in Beirut. After the PLO retaliated with rocket attacks on Northern Israel which killed one Israeli, Begin and Sharon believed they had justification for a full scale invasion Lebanon which was launched on June 6\(^{th}\), 1982. However, not all Israelis agreed.\(^8\) Within a month, only 66% of Israelis believed that the invasion was justified, and by December support was only at 34%.\(^9\) With the invasion of Lebanon, Israel set a new precedent for the Israeli Defense Forces. For the first time, it sent its military on the offensive and initiated a war without a clear threat to national security. This is immensely significant because the IDF was created as a conscription army solely for the defense

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\(^6\) Van Creveld, 298.


\(^8\) Davis, 3.
of the state. Using the military as a tool for reasons other than national defense was a controversial decision and many Israelis responded by questioning or protesting their leaders.

The Lebanon War was unique in Israeli history in that it did not present any concrete danger to the average Israeli civilian. The war had little physical effect on any civilians in Israel and the country was in no danger of being invaded. This had a significant effect on the morale of soldiers who sometimes doubted the necessity of the war to the defense of the State. This became especially clear when soldiers returned home on leave from battle and saw that their friends and families were living their lives without any interruption from the war. As it became apparent that the PLO in Lebanon was not an essential threat to Israeli security, some soldiers began to question the legitimacy of the invasion and a few even questioned the legitimacy of a conscription army.

The Lebanon War was also a turning point in that it changed the way Israelis perceived the IDF’s treatment of Arabs. In Lebanon, the Western press, especially American sources, presented Israel as the aggressor for the first time and actively concentrated their reporting on Arab civilian deaths. Some journalists compare the effect that this coverage had on Israeli citizens to the same effect that coverage of Vietnam War atrocities had on Americans. Some Israelis even questioned the IDF’s commitment to the purity of arms. The purity of arms is one of the core guidelines of the IDF and states that the soldier “will only use force of arms for the purpose of subduing the enemy to the necessary extent and will limit his use of force so as to prevent unnecessary harm to human life and limb, dignity and property.” Most Israelis used to believe that the IDF was a morally superior army and only used force when completely

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necessary. However, after Israel’s actions against civilians in Lebanon became known to the public, some Israelis expressed doubt in the IDF’s commitment to the purity of arms. Dov Yermiya, a Lieutenant Colonel in the IDF during the Lebanon invasion, embodied this development in his memoir in 1983—“The Jewish, Israeli soldier, whose hypocritical commanders and politicians call him the most humane soldier in the world, the IDF which claims to preserve the ‘purity of arms’ (a sick and deceitful term) is changing its image.”

Since the IDF were fighting PLO guerrillas instead of an organized, state-sponsored army, they assumed that every civilian could be an enemy combatant. According to Yermiya, many Israeli commanders and officers in Lebanon had a deep hatred of Arabs and clearly showed indifference to the fate of civilians. They saw all Arabs, especially Palestinians, as terrorists (and children as future terrorists) and treated them accordingly. Yermiya describes the poor treatment of Lebanese and Palestinian civilians who were rounded up, tied up for hours in the summer heat, beaten, and humiliated while the IDF claimed to be searching for terrorists. He believed that Israel had turned into the very evil that Jews were protecting themselves from through the creation of the State of Israel. He made this point clear when he wrote, “the IDF found itself assuming the classic image of a wanton regime, which allows blood to be taken from a besieged, defenseless population, an exact reproduction of the mass pogroms that were perpetrated against us when we were in exile, when hordes rampaged and slaughtered, and the ruler appeared only after the job was done.” Lebanon was not only a turning point in terms of military strategy. It also signaled a change in the way Israelis viewed justifications for war and the morality of their military.

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14 Yermiya, 81.
15 Yermiya, 119.
One of the best examples of the disregard for Arab life which the IDF showed during the Lebanon invasion is the Sabra and Shatila Massacres. On September 16th, 1982, Lebanese militias, including roughly 150 Christian Phalangists, moved into the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps under orders from Israeli commanders to search out an estimated 2,500 PLO terrorists who were rumored to be hiding in the camps. Instead, they massacred between 700 and 3500 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians (the number varies depending on the source) while the IDF patrolled the entrances to the camp. Unarmed men, women, and children were shot to death in their homes and their bodies were piled in the streets. Ian Glover-James, a reporter with the *Daily Telegraph*, described evidence of close-range killings which clearly pointed to a massacre and not a battle: bodies lined up in front of a wall with bullet holes at chest level, entire families killed in their homes and buried in rubble, and victims cut down while attempting to run away. When Israeli citizens heard the news of the massacre and realized the possibility of Israeli involvement they were furious and 400,000 protested in anger in Tel Aviv.

While the IDF did not actively participate in the massacre, many argue that they deserve at least some of the blame for allowing the notoriously savage and blood-thirsty Phalangists into a Palestinian camp without supervision. The International Commission, led by 1974 Nobel Peace Prize recipient Sean Mcbride, published a scathing report in 1984 which concluded that Israel was unmistakably responsible for allowing the massacre to happen and for failing to apprehend those responsible. It states:

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18 al-Ḥuout, 203.
19 Van Creveld, 298
“Israel, as a State, is clearly responsible for these grave violations of international law, and the political and military leaders involved in the undertaking are individually liable for their roles in aiding and abetting the perpetration of the massacres, as well as for their failure to apprehend or even accuse or lay complaint against, those principally responsible for directing the massacre and those who committed these atrocities.\(^20\)

Even Israelis were heavily critical of the IDF’s involvement with the Phalangists at Sabra and Shatila. Israeli writer Amos Oz made a chilling comparison saying, “If you invite the Yorkshire Ripper to spend a couple of nights in an orphanage for small girls, you can’t later on, just look over the piles of bodies and say you made an agreement with the Ripper—that he’d just wash the girls’ hair”\(^21\). The Kahan Commission, the official Israeli investigation into the massacre, also concluded that while no senior IDF officer had known of the massacre or colluded with the Phalangists, the Israelis should have foreseen it and were responsible for the lives of all civilians in Beirut, including Palestinians in the camps. Additionally, Ariel Sharon was forced to resign as a result of the Commission’s report.\(^22\) The events at Sabra and Shatila clearly demonstrate the IDF’s indifference towards Palestinian and Arab lives during the Invasion of Lebanon. Dov Yermaya perfectly summed up the treatment of Arabs by the IDF in Lebanon. He quotes a fellow officer, who after seeing hundreds of miserable refugees walking through the streets of Beirut said “This was a picture that reminded me of the death march of the Jews in Auschwitz. \textit{Oi vavoi}, what have we come to?”\(^23\)

The most lasting social change that was born out of the Lebanon invasion was the acceptance of anti-war protest movements in Israel. It was the first time when citizens began to protest the war \textit{en masse} and some soldiers even refused to serve or carry out certain orders.

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\(^21\) al-Hout, 314.
\(^22\) Van Creveld, 301.
\(^23\) Yermiya, 28.
Gideon Spiro, a veteran paratrooper from the 1956 Sinai Campaign and supporter of refusers explained the origins of the movement perfectly. He said, “You see, when we go into the Army, we swear to defend the country; we do not swear to defend aggression…I consider this war unlawful, illegal, and against all the international agreements Israel has signed…For the first time in Israel, we have a movement of conscientious objectors, which we never had before”.24 One of the most significant and best known of these dissenters was Colonel Eli Geva. Geva was a brigade commander stationed in Lebanon who was publicly discharged after he refused to command his troops to open fire in a civilian area of Beirut because he knew it would result in high civilian casualties. This was significant because he was such a high ranking officer and one of the first to publicly announce his disproval of Israel’s actions in Lebanon. His dissent became a model for others and created a sense of legitimacy in the refusal movement. It showed that not all would blindly follow IDF orders and others who wished to refuse would have support.25

Other Israeli soldiers formed protest groups to voice their opposition to the war and advocate their refusal to serve. One prominent example is Yesh Givul (There is a Limit), a group composed of Israeli soldiers which was formed in 1982. They promised to always fight for the defense of Israel, but refused to invade another country or attack civilians.26 Another important protest group was the Peace Now movement. Peace Now actually began in 1978 when reserve officers sent a letter to Prime Minister Menachem Begin urging him to pursue peace with Egypt; however the movement rose to prominence during the Lebanon war. The group protested the

25 Van Creveld 298-99.
war, urged the government to withdraw from Lebanon, and stood in solidarity with the refusers. Other protest movements also launched in Israel in direct response to the war in Lebanon included The Committee against the War in Lebanon, Soldiers against Silence, and No to the Ribbon. A supporter of the Committee against the War in Lebanon, Professor Shmuel Ettinger of the Institute of Jewish Studies of the Hebrew University summed up the argument that many Israeli’s had against the invasion:

This is the first war in the history of the State of Israel that was not forced on us. The government deliberately chose this war declaring that we must destroy the military infrastructure of the PLO. This is a vacuous declaration, for there are hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and other countries, and before time passes the PLO will recruit thousands more members. Our military presence in Lebanon, serving to influence a “new order” there, places us in an extremely dangerous position, for Lebanon is liable to become our Vietnam. Sharon has already demanded that we “complete the job” of liquidating the PLO in Beiruit. For the sake of the security of our country we must immediately cease all military actions in Lebanon and offer the Palestinians and magnanimous political settlement.

This type of public support was important in soldiers’ decision to refuse because it validated their moral dilemma to refuse military orders. On June 26, 1982, 20,000 Israelis rallied in support of The Committee against the War in Lebanon and in February of 1983, 1,466 Yesh Gvul supporters signed a petition denouncing the war in Lebanon. Most significantly, by the end of the conflict, one hundred and sixty eight soldiers went to jail for refusing to fight in Lebanon. In the case of Lebanon, many citizens believed that Israel invaded a country without a clear threat to its security thus violating the core purposes and values of the IDF, which are solely to

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28 Linn, 122-123.
31 Chacham, 3.
defend Israel from invasion. After Israel’s invasion of Lebanon, nearly unconditional support from soldiers and the public would no longer be the norm and contemporary dissenters would follow the example of those who protested in 1982. This is why many historians call “Operation Peace for Galilee” Israel’s Vietnam.32

The First Intifada (1987 to 1993) was another defining moment in causing opposition to the Israeli Defense Forces. It began in Gaza in 1987 when an Israeli tank collided with a car full of Palestinian laborers, killing four men. Two days earlier, an Israeli citizen had been killed in Gaza and the tank accident seemed like deliberate retribution for some Palestinians. Immediately, Gaza erupted in protests and then violence which soon spread to the West Bank. Palestinians were fed up with the oppression of the Israeli occupiers and the accident was the spark that ignited their anger.33 While the outbreak of violence was spontaneous, much of the anger had been building up for years due to Israeli policies in Occupied Territories, which had been under direct Israeli control since 1967. The main issues were increased Jewish settlements in Gaza and the West Bank, administrative detention of Palestinian suspects without trial, and generally poor living conditions for Arabs in the territories.34 The central goal of the struggle, to free the Palestinian people from Israeli control, is clear as the word intifada is Arabic for “shaking off.”35

The intifada was significant to Israeli soldiers, especially reservists called into active duty, because suddenly they were thrust into a long conflict which they were not trained for. Orders were often contradictory and difficult to carry out. Politicians and generals ambiguously

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32 Linn, 78.
34 Charles Smith, Palestine and the Arab-Israel Conflict, 7th ed, (Bedford/St.Martin’s: 2010), 401-402.
35 Gelvin, 213.
ordered IDF soldiers to break up demonstrations and subdue unruly protestors with “appropriate force”, but punished offenders if anything went wrong. For example, in the first two months of the Intifada, known by Palestinians as “the black two months”, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin ordered soldiers to break the legs and arms of Palestinian protesters who threw rocks at Israeli soldiers. He considered Arab protest to be terrorism and believed that the Palestinians would submit only to overwhelming force. Following this directive, in January of 1988, an IDF Colonel named Yehuda Meir, ordered his men to assemble twelve rioters in Gaza and to break their bones. When the story eventually leaked to the press a year later it caused worldwide outrage and the IDF prosecuted Meir who was then demoted and discharged. In another case, Israeli soldiers were caught on film using large rocks to deliberately break the bones of detained Palestinian protesters and the footage made its way to the world press.

Policies like these continued to be ordered, but every time soldiers used excessive force, demonstrators responded with more anger. A large problem with the nature of the conflict itself was that Israel could not avoid looking like the aggressors. Palestinians armed with slingshots were waging battle against a modern, professional army. Additionally, instances of non-violent protest by Palestinians were also common and IDF soldiers had little training for those situations. Palestinians protesters organized street demonstrations, defied the commands of soldiers on patrol, painted anti-Israeli graffiti, and blockaded streets. When combat trained soldiers encountered non-violent protesters and attempted to assert their authority, the situations sometimes turned violent. B’Tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the

36 Smith, 407.
37 Van Creveld, 345-346.
38 John Pilger, Palestine is Still the Issue, directed by Tony Stark (2002; Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2004.), DVD.
39 Gelvin, 216.
Occupied Territories estimates that over one thousand Palestinians were killed in the conflict while less than three hundred Israelis perished. Historian James Gelvin summarized this idea perfectly when he wrote, “Images of unarmed youths confronting Israeli tanks and soldiers with nothing more than stones and slingshots could not fail to strike a chord with an international audience and transform the Israeli David into an Israeli Goliath”. Accordingly, many soldiers saw themselves as the powerful aggressor fighting against a weaker enemy. Because of these policies, some soldiers felt that their presence in the Occupied Territories was a morally inexcusable violation of the purity of arms and they should reserve the right to refuse to serve there.

As instances of violence exploded all over the Occupied Territories, Israel responded by increasing the arrests of Palestinian suspects. A controversial issue before the Intifada, the increased imprisonment of Palestinians during the conflict triggered a huge moral debate. Before the Intifada, the IDF was only marginally involved in imprisoning people, which was generally under the control of the Israeli Prison Service (IPS). The IDF only operated three small detention centers to hold Palestinian suspects while they awaited trial: Far’a near Nablus, Tulkarm in the West Bank, and Beach Camp in Gaza. However, by 1989, two years into the Intifada, there were so many Palestinian detainees that the IDF was forced to open five more camps and held about 9,000 inmates. Additionally, the International Middle East Media Center reports that by the end of the Intifada, Israel had conducted a total of 210,000 arrests. With such a huge number of detainees, prison conditions were not ideal and overcrowding was common. Prisoners were

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42 Ibid.
housed in unheated tents containing 20 to 30 mattresses with no space for personal belongings.\textsuperscript{45} Palestinian detainees also reported that there were obstacles to the access of lawyers to meet with their clients and general “pervasive disrespect for Palestinian lawyers among the authorities”\textsuperscript{46}. Reports of these prison conditions did not help to justify the occupation and created a moral dilemma when reports reached the public. For some the question became: How can the IDF maintain its identity as a morally superior fighting force while it denies its prisoners basic human rights?

The biggest moral issue for many Israelis centered on the use of torture during interrogation of Palestinian prisoners by the Israeli General Security Service, more commonly known as Shin Bet. In March of 1991, B’tselem, The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, released the findings of an independent study based on interviews conducted on 41 Palestinian detainees between 1988 and 1990. They reported that:

“Virtually all our sample were subject to: verbal abuse, humiliation and threats of injury; sleep and food deprivation; hooding for prolonged periods; enforced standing for long periods, sometimes in a enclosed space, hands bound behind the back and legs tied ("al- Shabah"); being bound in other painful ways (such as the "banana" position); prolonged periods of painful confinement in small, specially constructed cells (the "closet" or "refrigerator") and severe and prolonged beating on all parts of the body, (resulting sometimes in injuries requiring medical treatment). Other methods less frequently reported included enforced physical exercise and the use of violence by collaborators planted in detention cells. Overall, Gaza detainees were subject to consistently worse treatment than the West Bank group.”\textsuperscript{47}

Not only were these techniques common, they were actually condoned by the Israeli Government in the infamous “Landau Report on the General Security Service”, published in 1987. The report was written by the Landau Commission led by former Supreme Court of Israeli

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\textsuperscript{45} Middle East Watch, \textit{Prison conditions in Israel and the Occupied Territories}, 68-70.
\textsuperscript{46} Middle East Watch, \textit{Prison conditions in Israel and the Occupied Territories}, 91-93.
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President, Justice Moshe Landau, in response to the Nafsu affair. In 1987, Izzat Nafsu, an Israeli officer sentenced to 18 years in prison for treason and espionage, alleged that his confession had been extracted through torture by Shin Bet. After reviewing Shin Bet’s interrogation policies, the Landau Commission decided that permissible pressure was necessary to protect Israeli citizens. The report states:

The effective interrogation of terrorist suspects is impossible without the use of means of pressure, in order to overcome an obdurate that will not to disclose information and to overcome the fear of the person under interrogation that harm will befall him from his own organization if he does reveal information. Additionally, the report suggests that interrogators use “moderate physical pressure” in order to obtain information, but does not clearly define the boundaries of moderate because these details were contained in a classified section of the document. The Landau Report was used to justify the torture of detainees until 1999 when the Supreme Court of Israel ruled in The Public Committee against Torture in Israel vs. The Government of Israel et al that the recommendations of the Landau Commission did not meet the requirements of Israeli law. The use of prison camps and State sponsored torture during the First Intifada clearly contradicts the purity of arms and the idea that the Israel is under the threat of strong enemies. They represent a piece of the moral dilemma which caused some soldiers to refuse to serve in the Occupied Territories or declare themselves conscientious objectors.

Similar to Lebanon, there were individual soldiers and groups which flat out refused to serve in the Occupied Territories during the First Intifada. Once again Yesh Givul became a major faction. The movement gained momentum again during the Intifada in response to the

48 Cohen and Golan, 18-20.
49 Ibid
50 Ibid
expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the violent suppression of demonstrations by the IDF. They once again pledged to always defend their country, but refused to comply when ordered to engage civilians and occupy land outside of the 1967 borders.\footnote{Chacham, 4.} This was a drastic stance considering IDF units were being deployed all over the West Bank and Gaza in order to crush the Intifada and Israelis were bracing for war. However, they made their objective clear when they distributed the following pamphlet among soldiers serving in the Occupied Territories in 1988:

Dear Soldier, we are members of Yesh Gvul who serve as soldiers in the active reserves of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Many of us are combat veterans and serve in combat units. Our political outlooks vary, but we are united by a deep anxiety about the future of the State of Israel. Since 1967 the IDF has been changing, more and more, from an army of defense to an army of occupation. In contrast to the myth that this has miraculously saved the country, it has, in fact, proved that there is no enlightened occupation. Every occupation first affects the conquered, but participation in acts of oppression necessarily destroys the humanity of the conqueror. Therefore we have prepared the following declaration: The Palestinian people are in rebellion against the Israeli occupation of the territories. More than twenty years of occupation and oppression have not curbed the Palestinian struggle for national liberation. The rebellion in the territories, and its brutal suppression by the Army, clearly prove the terrible cost of continuing the state of occupation in the absence of a national solution. We, soldiers in the active reserves of the IDF, make known that we can no longer bear the burden of participation in, and responsibility for, this ethical and political deterioration. We proclaim this because we shall refuse to take part in the suppression of the uprising and rebelliousness in the occupied territories.\footnote{“There Is a Limit”, Harper’s Magazine (March, 1988), found in Israel Left Archive, accessed February 25, 2013, http://israeli-left-archive.org/greenstone/collect/yeshgvul/index/assoc/HASH019e.dir/doc.pdf.}

It is clear from this document that some Israelis understood that the purity of arms and the underdog mentality of the IDF were myths and they would take a moral stand against their own military. In January of 1988, 160 reservists announced that they would refuse “to take part in suppressing the uprising and insurrection in the occupied territories”.\footnote{Andy Court, “160 reservists say they won’t serve in occupied territories”, Jerusalem Post (January 1, 1988), found in Israeli Left Archive, accessed February 25, 2013, http://israeli-left-archive.org/greenstone/collect/ yeshgvul/index/assoc/HASH0124.dir/yg%20880101.jpg.} By the fifth year of the
conflict, 170 soldiers had been arrested for refusing to serve. Another group which protested during the First Intifada was called Zav Kria (Call Up Order). This group was founded in 1988 in direct response to the IDF’s policies in the Occupied Territories during the Intifada. Its membership consisted of a small group of reservists which wanted to draw attention to the moral contradictions surrounding the policy of acting against civilians.55

One major difference between the First Intifada and the Lebanon War was that refusers during the First Intifada did not have a high ranking officer, like Colonel Eli Geva during the Lebanon invasion, to validate their grievances in the public eye. However, they did look to his example for inspiration. A study published in 1996 by Israeli psychologist Ruth Linn, called Conscience at War: the Israeli Soldier as a Moral Critic in which she studied data collected from forty-eight refusing reservists and thirty-two objecting reservists confirms this. According to her research, Intifada refusers developed their criticism based on the precedence of comrades’ actions and words during the invasion of Lebanon.56 Yesh Gvul member Roni Bergman highlighted this point in a letter to Ha’aretz in 1989 stating his intention to refuse to serve. He was a veteran of the Lebanon War where he became disillusioned with the IDF. He wrote:

“My refusal is an act of protest against stupidity. If I knew that our use of force in the West Bank and Gaza is part of a political process—I would feel differently. But without a political process, I am not willing. There is a historic process, there’s a river that flows, clubs and guns won’t help. If they build a dam—the river will burst out in another place. If there will be many people who refuse, there will be no one left to do the killing. What I am trying to do by my act is to cause everyone who makes the decisions to go towards a political process, and not use us as a club”57

55 Linn, 126.
56 Linn, 101.
Following this precedence, in 1990 two different reserve units sent letters to the Prime Minister requesting that the IDF withdraw from Gaza and explaining their frustration and opposition to Israel’s policies during the Intifada. Refusers during the First Intifada continued the protest movement began by their comrades during the Lebanon invasion. They looked to their example for inspiration and guidance but also brought the movement to a new height.

Israel is known for having one of the most organized, closely knit armies in the world. It uses a policy of near universal conscription to bring together a large fighting force committed towards defending its borders with die hard loyalty. Up until 1982, there had been little protest towards any IDF policies. However, after the controversial invasion of Lebanon and then the expanded military presence the territories during First Intifada four years later, some Israelis began to question the morality of Israeli military policies. While it was still by far a minority opinion, opposition to universal conscription became known to the public and gained some acceptance. Those soldiers who protested and refused to serve for moral reasons between 1982 and 1993 still have an effect on Israel today. There is still an active contingent of protest groups and support networks for conscientious objectors, especially those protesting the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. Young people every year are joining the movement as can be seen through the phenomena of Shminitisim, groups of 12th graders who pledge to refuse to serve for moral reasons.

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58 Linn, 122.
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