

Young Israeli ‘Refusers’ Face Jail for Resisting Oppression of Palestinians

Ellie Armon Azouley is an 18-year-old Israeli, a “refusenik,” who is facing a jail term for her decision to refuse to serve in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in the occupied territories. Azouley has worked for human rights inside Israel—with both Jews and Palestinians—since her early teens. She has personally observed the discrimination and human rights violations against Palestinians, and as a matter of conscience is refusing to be an occupation soldier, where she would be participating in the occupation’s humiliation of, and violence against, Palestinians.

Every Israeli boy or girl, at age 18, after finishing high school, is drafted into the military. Exemptions are granted for many reasons, including religious beliefs. But, those who refuse to serve in the occupation for moral reasons, for human rights reasons, face prison. Azouley is one of those. Some months ago, the IDF rejected her formal petition that she be exempted from military service as a “refuser.” The authorities say her reasons are political, not moral. Her case is now on appeal.

Michael Kirsh of the LaRouche Youth Movement and Michele Steinberg of EIR interviewed her on April 30.

Kirsh: Could you tell some of your own personal story, of how you chose to be a refusenik, and what it means to be a refusenik?

Azouley: The first time I thought of not going into the Army, I didn’t think about refusal, but I was thinking about just not going into the Army, when I was about 13. And it’s because I was studying in history about Israeli Independence Day. And I remember, I got back home and I told my mother what I was studying, and she told me a whole different story. And that enlightened me, that there is no one story, and that things are not simple. So, I started to research and speak with other people. And then, I started political activities on my own, and started to work with Palestinian youth inside Israel. And I knew I couldn’t do both: go into the Army and be in close relations, with a hope to change, with the Palestinians.

The refusal decision was, I think, a year after, when I was 14.

I think the meaning of the refusal is very powerful, because it’s something that breaks the rules, or the dynamics of the system that I’m protesting against. We need to say things, not just go into the Army in a regular way and without saying

anything. I think there should be a statement, and a negotiation with the Army. And you have to do it. If you want to do it, it’s only by refusing; otherwise they won’t hear your voice. There’s no other way to be heard.

Kirsh: I think it’s very important, especially for people inside the United States who may be reading this interview, to get a sense of the situation on the ground in Israel right now. Because a lot of people have a bit of a swayed view from reading the United States’ media, which has been covering mainly the Sharon line. If you could use your story to get people inside the United States to act upon it, what would you say to the U.S. Congress?

Azouley: To put more pressure on Sharon, and to look at the human rights problems in Israel. There are statistics that are published every month, through organizations in Israel. And just to come and to see how things are working in fact, and not in statements that Sharon publishes. Because the situation is a lot more complicated: The Israeli government is committing war crimes. Not only violating the Geneva Accords; there are many more, like Geneva, that Israel has signed on to. And they are doing illegal things that hurt the bodies and rights of lots of people, inside the state, or even inside the Israeli territories.

So, the simple thing to tell them, is just to enforce all of these laws, and to make it clear that these are illegal things; and it’s not human to do all of these things; that this occupation causes lots of loss, for both sides—for all people.

Steinberg: You mentioned starting to work with Palestinian youth inside Israel. Could you tell us a little bit about where you are from? Is there a situation of segregation as we have had, and still have, in the United States, between blacks and whites, or Asians, and so forth?

Azouley: I come from Tel Aviv, which is a big city, without much Palestinian population—mostly the Palestinians are in Jaffa, which is nearby; it’s basically the same city. And I worked there.

And there is segregation everywhere, in jobs, in buses—there’s lots of racism in Israel. I think Israel is the most racist country—against Russians, against foreign employees from the Philippines and India and everywhere, and also towards the Palestinian citizens inside Israel. And there have also been



An IDF checkpoint on the West Bank, outside the Palestinian city of Jericho. Israel's youth are being made to do the dirty work of occupation—but some are now refusing induction into the military, which is required of every citizen.

lynchings. Every time there are bombings inside Israel by the Hamas, you can see lots of Israeli-Palestinian citizens getting hurt or lynched.

I can tell you one example. A Palestinian football team inside Israel won something like a championship. Now, the Israeli national anthem doesn't even mention the Palestinian citizens, it only mentions the Jewish spirit or something like that; and they were supposed to sing it. There was lots of pressure on them.

Kirsh: In one of the documents that *EIR* has published, Lyndon LaRouche's statement on how to arrange a peace for Southwest Asia, there is much discussion on the question of peace in Iraq. The United States is bogged down in an occupation which is going nowhere; and this peace could only be arranged, if the situation in Israel were dealt with by the United States.

Do you think that's true? That peace in Southwest Asia is only going to be possible, if we solve the crisis in Israel?

Azouley: I don't think *you* can solve the crisis in Israel, but I think you can put pressure for the right direction to be taken. And I think it's something today's Israeli government and the Palestinian [leadership] can deal with. And maybe change the government in Israel.

Kirsh: How do you think the crisis in Israel radiates throughout the rest of Southwest Asia?

Azouley: I think it shows that there can be occupation for that long a time; people around the world can see that for more than 50 years, the Israelis occupied the Palestinians. Maybe

the United States thinks the same [about occupying Iraq].

Kirsh: Could you say more concerning the cause of the refuseniks? Why are they doing what they're doing?

Azouley: The youth refuseniks, the *Shministim*, say that they believe in democracy, and humanism, and pluralism. And from this point of view, from these values, they feel that they have to take a stand. This is the way to be good citizens inside Israel, and the way to fulfill all these beliefs and values that they were raised with, that you study in school; to give to every person the basic rights of freedom, liberty, the right to live. And they think that it is their conscientious obligation to work for, to protect these rights, these basic rights. And they can do it, they say, only by refusing the occupation and the

oppression of the Palestinians. This is what they write in their statement and in their refusal petition.

Steinberg: You called yourselves the "*Shministim*." What does that mean?

Azouley: "*Shministim*" means the 12th grade, the last grade before you graduate from school and get inducted into the Army.

Steinberg: There has been a letter, I understand, that has been sent to the government and to the Minister of Defense and so forth. [See box.]

Azouley: Yes, a few weeks ago. And when it was sent, 250 people signed it. And I think there are now 300 more.

Steinberg: Are you one of the signers, also?

Azouley: Yes. This, and the first letter, also.

Steinberg: It says, "We believe there is a different way." What do you think that "different way" is?

Azouley: I think it's starting from the refusal. They give the option for other youth to follow this option. This is the more specific way that they're suggesting. But the other way, is to get back to the borders of 1967; to give the right of return to the Palestinians; and to give them the authority and independence they should get. And also to rebuild everything that has been destroyed by the Israeli armed forces. And there are many more things that need to be done.

Kirsh: Our generation has not adopted the old assumptions

which have led to the crisis, here in the United States, as well as in Israel. What do you think, for our generation, that it means to be a leader?

Azouley: I don't know what it means to be a leader, but I think that it is important for the youth to take leadership, because the youth are the ones who are enrolled into the Army. This is why the Army takes them so young, and they're doing all these dirty jobs that the government and the big guys tell them to do. If they can take someone's life, then they can also take leadership in the same way, and hope for good. Because I think the youth have more openness to other things, than the old people who built the Israeli country from nothing, and have a different mindset. So, I think the youth are more important for leadership, because their involvement is very close to the occupation: not necessarily out of choice, but because of their commitment to their country.

And to be a leader I think is just to get beyond, above all, the prejudices that exist, especially among the youth now, against Palestinians; and just to look for equal and human rights, basically. This is the most important, the first thing that needs to be done.

And maybe to study more. Because people don't study anymore about the other side of the story, about the differences, about the people they are afraid of or hate. And this is also the problem with the government: There are no educated men in the government, anymore.

Kirsh: What kind of things can we do to get beyond and above this crisis, more than just putting down our weapons and pulling back to the '67 borders and rebuilding what we've destroyed?

Azouley: I think it's first to listen, because the Palestinian story has been hidden for a long time. They call it *al-Naqba* ["the Catastrophe"], what we call "Independence Day." I think this story needs to be heard. These are the activities I'm doing in Israel now. There is an organization called Zochaot, which is "Remember" in English. It's a feminist organization, but there are men and women in it, and Palestinians and Israeli Jews. Their main goal is to get the Jewish population to know the Palestinian *Naqba*, the story of the occupation. They think that this is the first step.

And they also say there should be a historical compromise, otherwise there will never be peace. You need to know and to be aware. It's a big story; it's a very hard story, and we don't know it. We study—even the Palestinians inside Israel—learn that the Palestinians just ran in '48, and escaped, or they attacked Israel, the Jewish people. I think this is the first step: to get to know more about their history or their point of view.

I saw it working. We went to some destroyed villages, and there was a refugee who came to speak, and there were lots of people who came to hear. And we publish small books that we give to people, and we're trying to get into schools, to speak about *al-Naqba* (nobody has let us, yet).

But we have informal lectures. I think that this is the most important.

Steinberg: The books that are published by the group called, "Remember," are they in Hebrew, or Hebrew and English?

Azouley: They are Hebrew and Arabic. But on the Zochaot website, there is some material from these books that is published in English.

Steinberg: What amazes me, Ellie, in listening to you, is that, here Israel is the closest ally of the United States—probably not just in Southwest Asia, but in the whole world. More Americans probably have read about Israel, and many have visited there and so forth; and yet, many of the things that you're telling us, about the activities for peace, are unknown.

Azouley: In addition to the Shministim, there is the organization called Yesh Gvul, which includes all kinds of refusers—from the Army, fighters, pilots, everything, and also some Shministim. And there is Ometz Le'sarev, the Courage to Refuse, which presents themselves as patriots and Zionists, and say this is the way to be a good patriot and to be a Zionist. But, the other two groups, I don't think they make this kind of statement.

The Shministim say that they *are* the citizens of Israel, and from this point of view of being citizens, they want to fulfill their citizenship in the best way, and they think the best way is to refuse. So, there is a patriotic point of view.

But, for me, I don't do it from reasons of patriotism or Zionism; I'm doing it for humanistic reasons. And, the people in Israel don't see us [the refusers] as either patriotic or Zionist—they see us as a betrayal.

Steinberg: Have you brought your message to the United Nations, the United States, or other bodies?

Azouley: We haven't published anything yet in the United States, but there are a few organizations in the United States that have been trying to publish more information about this. There is the Solidarity with Refusal organization.

I think it's important; I think we should do something about it. I plan to do something when I come back to Israel, after my stay in United States. I thought it was very important, because I saw that there is solidarity, but there are also people who don't know about it, or are even against it—they should hear about it.

I think this is the next step of the Shministim. We've been discussing this, but, nothing has been done before, because there were too many other things—too many people in jail, and too much work to do to support them. This definitely, I think, should be the next step.

Steinberg: There is this whole question of what's going to happen to you, and of people going to jail, and the legal defense. Could you tell us how that is working, and what's going to happen?

Israeli Youth: 'We Believe There Is Another Way'

The following letter from Shministim, the high schoolers' refusal organization (www.shministim.org), was delivered in March 2005 to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Minister of Defense Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Moshe Ya'alon, and Minister of Education Limor Livnat. Despite the fact that it has been signed by more than 300 youth who plan to refuse to serve in the armed forces when they finish high school and turn 18 years old, they have received no response from the government.

We the undersigned, Israeli girls and boys, believing in the values of democracy, humanism, and pluralism, hereby declare that we shall refuse to take part in the occupation and repression policy adopted by the Government of Israel. Our backgrounds are diverse, but we are all agreed that these values are the bases of a just society. Every human being has the right to life, equality, dignity, and freedom. We are bound by our consciences and as citizens of Israel to act in defence of these rights, by refusing to participate in the occupation and repression policy.

The occupation leads to inhumanity and to a massive infringement of the right to life. It tramples on the basic rights of millions of people and inflicts daily carnage and suffering. It leads to the confiscation of lands, to mass destruction of homes and public buildings, to arrests and killings without trial, to victimization and murder of innocents, to hunger, to a denial of medical assistance, to collective punishment, and to the building and expansion of settlements and the negation of any chance of normal living both in the occupied territories and in Israel itself. This flagrant violation of human rights is opposed to our view

of the world, as well as being in contravention of international conventions signed and ratified by Israel.

The occupation contributes nothing to the security of the state and its citizens, but, on the contrary, it only aggravates it. It deepens the despair and fans the hatred among the Palestinians, feeds terrorism, and widens the river of blood between the two sides. True security will only be accomplished by ending the occupation, dismantling the wall of Apartheid around the Palestinians, and striving for a just peace agreement between the state of Israel and the leadership of the Palestinian people as well as the Arab world. The present policy is not a result of a military necessity, but the outcome of a nationalistic-Messianic fantasy.

The occupation has corrupted Israel, turning it into a militaristic, racist, chauvinistic, and violent society. Israel is wasting its resources on the perpetuation of the occupation and repression in the territories, while hundreds of thousands of Israelis live in shameful poverty. In recent years, Israeli citizens have experienced a deterioration of all public services. Education, medicine, welfare, pensions, everything to do with the well-being of the citizenry has been neglected and sacrificed for the continued existence of settlements which the majority of the population wishes to be evacuated. We cannot stand idly facing this situation, which amounts to a "targetted liquidation" of the principle of equality.

We wish to live in a society which pursues justice, upholding equal rights to every single citizen. The occupation and repression policy is an obstacle to the realization of this vision; therefore, we shall refuse to take part in it. We wish to contribute to society in an alternative way, which does not involve harming other human beings.

We call on all young people facing mobilization and on all members of the Israeli army to weigh again whether to risk their lives in the service of this repressive and destructive policy.

We believe that there is another way.

Azouley: I refused when I was 16 and a half. I sent a letter to the Army, which was basically similar to the Shministim letter, but more personal. And then, I had a hearing before an Army committee. It was eight months ago, maybe more. I was investigated by three men from the Army, and it was very short—there were two witnesses, my mother and her partner. And then, after a few months, I got a letter saying that they rejected my demand to be released for conscience reasons. And I appealed to have another hearing, and I said that they didn't give me the chance to express myself enough, because they asked questions that are not really connected, and they were trying to fail me. I'm still waiting for this second com-

mittee hearing.

I got a letter a few weeks ago, which said that they had rejected my request for an appeal, so I sent another letter. And now I'm waiting for either an answer or a second hearing.

The date I'm supposed to enroll in the Army is very close—at the end of July or the beginning of August. If they don't give me an answer, I'm supposed to go to [the IDF induction center at] Bakum, where you start your service. And then, I'm supposed to come there, and to tell them that I'm not going to the Army, and they will arrest me and hold me for a few days until I have a trial, or something. That's how it goes.

Steinberg: Are you the first one of the Shministim that will be facing that?

Azouley: No, there have been more people in past years. But for this round, there are four people, at this minute, in jail from the Shministim. One of them is a pacifist, and the others are against the occupation.

Steinberg: Well, that certainly is a very courageous step to take.

What more could we in the United States do, to publicize the case of the Shministim who are already in prison? Is there somebody we can get in touch with? Also on the legal defense? I think we could open Congress's eyes to this also.

Azouley: There is an organization called Profil Hadash, "New Profile," because when you are starting to enroll, the Army gives you a medical profile, so they said this is a "new profile," the refusal profile. It's an interesting name. They give legal defense. They give you more advice about how to go through this, and they support you, and they do lots of demonstrations for you. And they have lawyers who work with them. It's usually the people who are facing jail, who use the service of these lawyers that are part of the Profil Hadash. They have information about all the people who are now in jail, and all the people who are going to be in jail. And they are the main organization that helps the Shministim when they are facing jail, or their refusal. . . .

Kirsh: Because you and the Shministim, the youth leaders, are the ones who are acting on principle, over most of the Israeli population, have you thought about becoming the future leaders of the government of Israel, and what you would do?

Azouley: Actually, I've thought about it, but I don't think it will happen. I think I will always take leadership from informal places, from the sides, from the people. But through organizations, and lectures, and all kinds of activities, that can be done.

As to the politics, all I can tell you, is that our government, even the left-wingers, are people who served in the Army, and it's a militaristic society in Israel, and so is the government. So, we always choose the left-wingers, but the options are not working out for the best. Even the left-wingers are not supportive of the refusers.

The government is committing a big crime, because they are forcing kids my age to participate in a horrible act, and horrible policies, and a horrible system. That's all I can tell you about the government.

Steinberg: So, your letter, for example: There's nobody in the Knesset who will put it in the record—not your personal letter, but that of the Shministim movement?

Azouley: They denied our letter. Nobody gave any comments about it. We sent a letter, and a week later, one of the people from the Army, in the higher ranks, and also someone

For Further Reading

Vital information on the crisis in Israel and Palestine, and what can be done, can be found in the following issues of EIR:

Dean Andromidas, "Israeli Pilots Refuse Occupation Orders," *EIR*, Oct. 3, 2003

Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., "Southwest Asia: The LaRouche Doctrine," *EIR*, April 30, 2004

Interview with Maxim Ghilan, "Israel's General Staff: 'A Bunch of Dr. Strangeloves,'" *EIR*, June 4, 2004; and "To Be Ethical and Still Succeed," June 28, 2004

M. Woodward, "Some Refuse To Serve As Military Occupiers" (a review of *Refusenik! Israel's Soldiers of Conscience*, Peretz Kidron, ed.), *EIR*, Sept. 10, 2004.

Dialogue with Maxim Ghilan, "Arafat's Legacy and the Quest for Peace," *EIR*, Nov. 26, 2004

from the government, were asked about "the problem of refusal"—and they said, "No, we have only one refusal." They didn't even say a thing about the letter, which 250 people had signed.

Steinberg: So, they just lied!

Azouley: They just didn't pay attention to it.

Steinberg: I think probably they gave it a lot of attention, but they just decided to lie about it, and now will come the moment of truth.

Azouley: You know, it was in all the papers, but they didn't say anything about it! But they will, because we'll keep pushing. And the number of people who refuse every year will grow. People are starting to say, "Why are these people in jail, because they are great kids, and they have all been volunteering all their lives, and they're doing lots of good work?" And people can't believe that these people are sitting almost two years in jail, because of their values. So, if the numbers grow, people will start wondering if the right people are sitting in jail. This is our hope, to grow.

Steinberg: Well, remember, Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement in the United States, also went through this period. Have you and your friends and your colleagues been studying the civil rights movement in the United States?

Azouley: Yes, we studied it in high school. The people in the movement definitely read about it, and all of the civil rights activists in the world. not maybe all of them, but they

are trying to expand their knowledge and get more books for this organization.

Kirsh: You'll be happy to know that Amelia Boynton Robinson, the grandmother of the civil rights movement, is vice chairwoman of the Schiller Institute. We do have a book on that, which would give you a lot of good insight into how to approach the situation in Israel as well. She was the woman whom Martin Luther King asked to stand in his place, in the famous march in Selma, Alabama. She led the march. On Tuesday, she was in the streets, in Washington, D.C.—now, at the age of over 90.

Azouley: I was in Washington, D.C.!

Kirsh: On Tuesday? She described it as an “historic moment.” She started fighting for the right to vote back in the—was it 1950s?

Steinberg: No, even before, in the 1930s, when they had the very, very racist Jim Crow laws. You had to have property, you had to memorize the dictionary to pass a test.

Kirsh: She fought for 35 years to get the right to vote, to get equal rights. And after that, she started fighting with Lyndon LaRouche for global economic justice. That was the cause of Martin Luther King, which is why he was killed. But you can see now, she has three or four phases of her life of fighting for humanity, and getting a greater and greater understanding. And she's still playing a role in putting the spirit inside the United States of the highest conception of economic justice, with Lyndon LaRouche. So, you're at the beginning.

Steinberg: Just one more question: How long will the group of five stay in prison?

Azouley: They were arrested for nine months, and they sat in prison, which is different, for one year. So, basically, they sat one year and nine months. And they did part of the time, at a few different times; and part of it as a longer term.

There are 1,654 people who signed the refusal statement, which includes pilots, higher units in the Army, Shministim, reservists—altogether there are 1,654 people. They are signers; it doesn't mean that they are all refusers, but this is very important. It's very effective, and this number is growing up every day—I hope. And 436 people signed on Yesh Gvul's refusal statement—“Yesh Gvul” means “There Is a Limit”—but all of these people are from the Army. And by now, there are more than 300 people who have signed on the Shministim letter that was published in October 2004. And there is another petition that was published in January 2002, at the initiation of 50 military people at higher levels in the Army, who refused to continue with the occupation and the repression. And on this petition that they published, there are now 634 people who have signed.

The first refusals go back a long time, to the 1967 war,

and more recently to the first occupation refusals. Some of them spent time in jail. But there has always been some kind of refusal in the Army, even if it was as pacifists, or not just about going to the territories.

Kirsh: You mentioned that there's a distinction between the people who were serving in the military and then they decided to refuse the next term, and that there are four of them—

Azouley: No. The four who are now sitting in jail, these are from the Shministim. They just finished high school. But, I think there are a few people from the reservists in jail. I have one friend, a reservist, who sat, until a few days ago, for one month in jail.

But, the four that I mentioned are the Shministim, the high-school students.

Steinberg: And these are 18-year-olds?

Azouley: One of them is 19, but yes, they are 18.

Steinberg: And these are young people who are being thrown into prison; they're prisoners of conscience. Unbelievable.

Azouley: Yes.

Kirsh: So, you will be then the fifth.

Azouley: I don't know. Maybe. There are people who are supposed to enroll before the time I'm supposed to in August. So, maybe there will be more refusals. I haven't heard about them, although we usually know each other.

Steinberg: Thank you so much. I'm going to see Amelia Robinson this weekend, so, you may be hearing from her.

Azouley: Okay, that's great. And thank you, because it's important for this to be published; not many people know about it.

Steinberg: Well, this is, I hope, the beginning. The story has to get out, and I think that there are people that we know in the U.S. Congress, who are going to take what you said *so seriously*, that this could be the beginning of a real, new level of international recognition.

Azouley: This would be like a dream.

Kirsh: I'd like to say: It was three years and a few months ago, that I in fact joined this movement, Lyndon LaRouche's movement, because I was sitting in school and I was listening on the radio about tanks driving over ambulances in Palestine. And I thought, how could I actually go along with the United States government that was going along with this—just like the Nazi occupation to the Jews. I just wanted to let you know this: that it was in fact the fight in Israel and Palestine, which I personally reacted to, which allowed me to join Lyndon LaRouche's fight.

Azouley: That's what made me an activist, the same thing.