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## Three Israeli army refusers: ‘We will not participate in genocide’

Tuesday 20 August 2024, by [GREENBERG Itamar](#), [MOAV Yuval](#), [MUELLER Oryan](#), [ZIV Oren](#) (Date first published: 7 August 2024).

**Conscientious objectors Yuval Moav, Itamar Greenberg, and Oryan Mueller explain why they are willing to go to jail in order to stand against the war.**



This week, three 18-year-old conscientious objectors reported to the Israeli army’s Tel Hashomer recruitment center, near Tel Aviv, and declared their refusal to enlist in mandatory military service in protest of the occupation and the current war on Gaza. Yuval Moav, Oryan Mueller, and Itamar Greenberg were each tried and sentenced to an initial 30 days in military prison, which is likely to be extended. The only other refuseniks to have publicly opposed the draft for political reasons since October 7 — [Tal Mitnick](#), [Ben Arad](#), and [Sophia Orr](#) — were recently released after serving prison sentences totaling 185 days, 95 days, and 85 days respectively.

The three latest refuseniks — who are being accompanied through the refusal process by the conscientious objector network [Mesarvot](#) — each released statements prior to appearing in military court. Greenberg, who grew up in the ultra-Orthodox city of Bnei Brak, said he originally saw enlisting as a way to become more integrated into Israeli society, before coming to realize that “the door into Israeli society goes through the oppression and killing of another people.” He added: “A just society cannot be built on gun barrels.”

Moav addressed his statement to Palestinians. “In my simple act, I want to stand in solidarity with you,” he said. “I also acknowledge that I do not represent the majority opinion in my society. But in my action, I hope to raise the voice of those of us waiting for the day we can build a joint future [and] a society based on peace and equality, not occupation and apartheid.”

Mueller spoke of how revenge is the engine driving the cycle of bloodshed. “The war in Gaza is the most extreme way the State of Israel takes advantage of the urge for revenge to advance oppression and death in Israel-Palestine,” he said. “The struggle against the war is not enough. We must fight the structural mechanisms enabling it.”

Several dozen people came to support the refuseniks at a [demonstration](#) outside the recruitment center on Monday morning, as Moav received his sentence. Nearby, hundreds of ultra-Orthodox Jews also held a fierce protest at the site, on the first day of their mandated conscription following

last month's [landmark High Court ruling](#), which overturned a decades-old military exemption.



*Mounted police suppress a protest by ultra-Orthodox Jews against mandatory conscription, at the Israeli army's Tel Hashomer recruitment center, near Tel Aviv, August 5, 2024. (Oren Ziv)*

The Haredim initially thought the left-wing protesters were secularists who had come to demonstrate against them, but the two groups of protesters soon found common ground in their shared opposition to the military. “The holy Torah forbids us from [engaging in] war, occupation, and the military,” one ultra-Orthodox protester said, to applause from those supporting the refuseniks. “We must not provoke the [non-Jewish] nations, we must compromise on what is possible, because the most important thing is life, not death.”

Before entering prison, the three teenagers spoke to *+972 Magazine* and *Local Call* about the reasons for their refusal, the reactions of those around them, and the prospects of convincing more Israelis of their position. The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

### **How did you arrive at the decision to refuse?**

Mueller: I was born in Tel Aviv, and all my political education began at home. I come from a family that is critical of the occupation and other political problems, but it was still a Zionist home and my whole family served in the army. There was an expectation that I would serve too. But then I learned and understood more, and when the war broke out [and I read] the testimonies that came out of Gaza, I realized that I had to refuse.

I think the brutality undermined [for me] the idea that you can distinguish between the occupation on one hand and the State of Israel on the other, and that these are separate things. The level of destruction and death in Gaza and the lack of attention it receives in Israel — or the way in which it is actively concealed — broke that dissonance.

**Greenberg:** After growing up in an ultra-Orthodox home, I went through processes of political and religious questioning. I left religion, and because I've been a very political person since I was young, this directed me toward justice, and I got to where I am today. I think the decision to refuse is a direct result of that.

In an ultra-Orthodox family, supposedly it's not a big deal not to serve, but I grew up with a father who served in reserve duty for 25 years, and even now he's been in the reserves for 10 months. It greatly affects the atmosphere at home. It's not easy. I don't talk about it with them because I know how painful it is. This is what bothers me the most about the whole process. The real cost of refusal is not prison but what happens outside. I care about the price [my family] pay, because they don't deserve it. I try not to hurt them too much.



*Yuval Moav waves to friends and supporters before entering the Israeli army's Tel Hashomer recruitment center, near Tel Aviv, August 5, 2024. (Oren Ziv)*

**Moav:** I'm from Kfar Netter, a moshav near Netanya. Like Oryan, I grew up in a left-wing Zionist family, but in a less political home. They played a part in who I am, but my refusal didn't come from there. The truth is that I was lucky to be exposed to international content that allowed me to change my mind about the place that I live.

I realized that I really didn't know what was going on here. As soon as I became interested and asked questions, I saw that I was alone: I realized that I couldn't enlist because it's an occupying army, and though I knew that there were others who refused, I felt completely alone in my experience and in the reason from which my decision stemmed. Then I heard about refuseniks, about Mesarvot, about people who come out and speak their truth and pay a price, and I realized that I belonged there, that I was not alone.

If you ask me why I refuse today, the answer is, ultimately, because I refuse to participate in genocide. I've been met with violence [for my decision], but I keep going. The war has only strengthened my position.

### **Did experiencing the occupation first-hand influence your decision?**

**Greenberg:** I am active [in solidarity activities] in the West Bank, mainly in the village of Mukhmas [a Palestinian community that faces regular army-backed settler violence]. Being present in the West Bank changes perceptions, makes you familiar with the occupation and oppression, and turns you from a listener into a physical partner in the experience. While I don't experience it myself, I have friends who face daily oppression, people who want to kick them out of their homes. When you see it with your eyes, it doesn't go away. I'm walking around here, but my head is there.

**Mueller:** I didn't get to experience it, but unlike most of Israeli society, I was exposed to testimonies from the field, mainly online. I am active in forums for political discussion. When I try to talk about these testimonies with people who are not exposed to them, I encounter a huge wall separating Israelis from what is happening 5 kilometers south of where they live. I don't know what kind of cultural upheaval it would take for them to start seeing testimonies coming out of Gaza on the Israeli news; at the moment [we just don't see it](#).

If you can talk about it, you have to: about the scale of destruction and death in Gaza, about the oppression, and about how deep the roots of apartheid are in the West Bank. There's a limit to how many [videos of] children without arms you can watch until you realize something is wrong.

*Palestinians bid farewell to their relatives killed in Israeli airstrikes, at Al-Najjar Hospital in the city of Rafah, southern Gaza Strip, April 21, 2024. (Abed Rahim Khatib/Flash90)*

**Moav:** My process was more personal. The main cause of my radicalization has to do with Israeli society and its opacity. In the end, I decided not to enlist because I was exposed to international content. I came to the understanding that the average Israeli knows less about what is happening 2

kilometers from his home than anyone who has access to the internet abroad, and you encounter zero sympathy from many people, some older than you, who are supposed to protect you.

**Do you see your refusal as a way to try to influence Israeli society — especially in today's extreme environment, where many have no desire to listen to anti-war voices?**

**Greenberg:** I think this is an important message to Israeli society: to start saying no. I urge my peers to think about what they are doing. Enlistment is a political choice, and that's how it should be treated. We have the right to choose what we believe in.

**Mueller:** Refusal is like holding up a mirror to Israeli society, first of all to show that it is possible to resist the militaristic death machine and the cycle of bloodshed. We don't have to take part in it. It's also a kind of platform that makes it possible to show Israeli society what's happening beyond what you see in the media, which doesn't really reveal what's happening in Gaza and the West Bank.

**Moav:** Unlike my friends, I'm less optimistic about the impact of what we do on Israeli society, and in the end it's also less important to me. First of all, I do this out of solidarity with the Palestinian people, and in the hope of elevating the voice of people in Israeli society who are waiting for the day when we can build a shared future. But my call is first and foremost to the Palestinian people.

However, it's very important for me to do this also for the people I love, to show them that there is another way. I can only hope that people will stop and think when they carry guns and are asked to do things they might not want to do. I also hope that it will reach the world, because in the end people from all over the world see the horrors that are happening in Gaza.



*Conscientious objectors Oryan Mueller, Itamar Greenberg, Yuval Moav participate in a protest at the Israeli army's Tel Hashomer recruitment center, near Tel Aviv, August 5, 2024. (Oren Ziv)*

Greenberg: I think our biggest message to Palestinian society is that there are people here who are fighting, maybe not enough, but still fighting, and are willing to pay a very heavy personal price for choosing to fight for justice and equality.

Mueller: There is the bigger picture of the conflict and the occupation, as a whole historical process, but there is also the immediate struggle of war and of death that needs to be stopped. And the most practical way to participate in this struggle is refusal.

Unlike many past refuseniks, your refusal comes during wartime. Do you think this gives additional meaning to the decision?

Greenberg: We had a discussion about the privilege of refusal, and I think that refusing during war really is a privilege. But refusing is also the strongest act we can do in the face of war.

Mueller: If I can prevent one Israeli from going to Gaza, from killing and dying, then that's worth it. And of course, we want to support and promote the struggle against the occupation. The change that the Israeli consciousness undergoes quite extensively during wartime turns our refusal into

something even more fringe than it was in the past. It's going against Israeli society and saying, "No, we don't need to build monuments to the dead if we can prevent the deaths in the first place."

**Moav:** At the end of the day, what is most important for me to say is that I refuse to participate in genocide. Speaking of privilege, I'm not going to jail with a clear conscience because I don't know if I'm doing enough, I don't know what my responsibility is in this situation. I recognize that younger people and children my age in Gaza and the West Bank cannot do something similar to me; they cannot decide that they refuse to raise arms, to communicate this act, and to try to improve the situation of both peoples.

Is your refusal also a statement against the militarism that has further intensified in Israel since the war?

**Moav:** Yes. We are people of peace. But there is something bigger here, a process that corrupts society. Ours is a society that can remain silent in the face of crimes of such magnitude. It's a society where right now the only thing I can do about it as a human being, as painful as it is to say, is separate myself from it. If repeating again and again, that I refuse to be complicit in genocide, or even to say this phrase at all, may harm my ability to reach the Israeli public, so be it.

**Greenberg:** It's a bit complicated. I'd really love to tell you yes, because I think militarism is one of the worst things. At the age of 12, I decided I would enlist because I understood that this was my way of integrating into Israeli society, and I think it was one of the most accurate observations I've made. It's such a great injustice to everyone who grew up in this society — this is the way to be part of it? Unfortunately, the answer is yes. But public refusal also has a militaristic aspect, of mobilizing for a cause, just a different one.



*Conscientious objectors Oryan Mueller, Itamar Greenberg, Yuval Moav at the Israeli army's Tel Hashomer recruitment center, near Tel Aviv, August 5, 2024. (Oren Ziv)*

### **Did you prepare for prison? Did you talk to refuseniks who already served sentences?**

**Mueller:** Within Mesarvot, there is a role called an escort: a former refusenik who served time in prison and helps prepare the future refusenik — whether it's mental preparation regarding the difficulties in the process leading to incarceration, or in understanding life in prison, learning tricks that can make everyday life easier, knowing the laws, procedures and routine.

More or less like a pre-military preparatory program.

**Greenberg:** A pre-refusal preparatory course — that's the dream.

**Moav:** The main tip was that the more you talk, the more you get screwed.

### **Books and CDs are allowed inside prison, subject to inspection and approval at the entrance. What will you bring with you?**

**Mueller:** First of all, "Israelis and Palestinians: From the Cycle of Violence to the Conversation of

Mankind” by [Jonathan Glover](#). It’s a great book but super difficult, and I’m reading it slowly. I’ll also bring Ilan Pappé’s “[The Biggest Prison on Earth](#),” and a lot of Hebrew prose. I have a Johnny Cash CD, “At Folsom Prison,” which he recorded in a U.S. federal prison. I also have an OutKast CD that I got from the refusenik Ben Arad, which I’m very excited to take.

**Greenberg:** I have several books on economics. My goal is to have the legitimacy to express an economic opinion, because right now I don’t understand economics. I have a book about Vietnamese economics, for example.

**Moav:** I will bring some good works by Marx, and other classics that in prison will be easier for me to read. I have to keep learning.

**Itamar, you grew up in an ultra-Orthodox home, and on the day you show up at the recruitment center, Haredi protesters are demonstrating in the very same place against mandatory conscription. How do you see their struggle against the draft?**

**Greenberg:** I can understand the ultra-Orthodox justification for refusing to enlist: it violates their religion, so they have no interest in acquiescing to it. I can also understand the feeling among “*Dalabim*” [a Hebrew acronym for “democracy for Jews only,” referring to the bulk of last year’s [mass protest movement](#) against the far-right government’s judicial overhaul] that the [security] burden should be equally shared.

We need to work on integrating the ultra-Orthodox into Israeli society and work toward equality — but not through equality in killing and oppressing. If we didn’t have security with 300,000 soldiers, then we won’t have security with 360,000 either.

**Oren Ziv**

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**P.S.**

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<https://www.972mag.com/israeli-army-refuseniks-moav-mueller-greenberg/>

• Oren Ziv is a photojournalist, reporter for Local Call, and a founding member of the Activestills photography collective.

• Our team has been devastated by the horrific events of this latest war – the atrocities committed by Hamas in Israel and the massive retaliatory Israeli attacks on Gaza. Our hearts are with all the people and communities facing violence.

We are in an extraordinarily dangerous era in Israel-Palestine. The bloodshed unleashed by these events has reached extreme levels of brutality and threatens to engulf the entire region. Hamas’ murderous assault in southern Israel has devastated and shocked the country to its core. Israel’s retaliatory bombing of Gaza is wreaking destruction on the already besieged strip and killing a ballooning number of civilians. Emboldened settlers in the West Bank, backed by the army, are seizing the opportunity to escalate their attacks on Palestinians.

This escalation has a very clear context, one that +972 has spent the past 13 years covering: Israeli

society's growing racism and militarism, the entrenched occupation, and an increasingly normalized siege on Gaza.

We are well positioned to cover this perilous moment - but we need your help to do it. This terrible period will challenge the humanity of all of those working for a better future in this land. Palestinians and Israelis are already organizing and strategizing to put up the fight of their lives.

Can we count on your [support](#)? +972 Magazine is the leading media voice of this movement, a desperately needed platform where Palestinian and Israeli journalists and activists can report on and analyze what is happening, guided by humanism, equality, and justice. Join us.

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