

An Israeli refusenik spent 197 days in prison for saying no to genocide in Gaza



By Humaira Ahad / PRESS TV

In a post on X, formerly Twitter, on March 4, Itamar Greenberg said the Israeli military had finally decided to release him after 197 days in prison, calling it a “long and exhausting time.”

“Evil should start trembling from this day forward because I’m in the fight against it with full force - until this world is a better place,” wrote Greenberg, who calls himself a “refusenik.”

It came only a day after he said he was going back to prison – for the sixth time – for “refusing to take part in Israel’s crimes” against Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank.

“No to genocide. No to oppression. No to occupation. No to apartheid. We refuse to hold a weapon. Will you refuse to supply it,” he wrote in the X post, which accompanied a video statement.

“The West Bank is burning. Gaza is destroyed. Tens of thousands have been murdered. This is not “defense” – this is a coercive regime that is losing its humanity. What is your red line? Mine is long gone.”

Who are refuseniks?

As military conscription is mandatory for most Israeli settlers after 18, some teenagers raised in the settler-colonial Israeli society have been refusing to enlist in the army.

These young people are known as “refuseniks.”

Conscientious objectors, also known as “refuseniks,” are typically tried at the military recruitment center and sentenced to between 10 and 21 days in prison.

Upon their release, they are called to report back to the recruitment center, where they usually announce again that they still refuse to enlist. Israel makes the refuseniks spend months in prison over several consecutive periods.

Coming from an ultra-Orthodox family with his father serving in the Israeli military made refusal all the more difficult for Greenberg.

“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,” he was quoted as saying by +972 magazine.

“It’s not easy... 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.”

As his political awareness grew, Greenberg declined to follow a system that was based on oppression and occupation unleashed against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank.

“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,” he added.

As the real face of Israel’s settler-colonial oppression of Palestinians comes to the fore, many youngsters are refusing to serve in the Zionist occupation forces.

In September 2023, 230 Israeli teenagers wrote a letter announcing their refusal to join the Israeli military. After the event, nearly 50 Israeli students signed a refusal letter with some even burning their conscription orders as they publicly announced their refusal to join the occupation army.

However, for the “refuseniks,” the path is full of difficulties. They face mass ostracization from the Israeli settler-colonial society. Many have been regarded as traitors as their objection to serving in the Israeli army is considered a sign of betrayal.

Greenberg has also been a victim of hate crimes from fellow settlers. He was attacked and faced abuse from those around him inhabiting the occupied territories.

“I was attacked this evening while standing in protest near a right-wing demonstration openly calling for more war and genocide against Palestinians. Children spat at me, tore my signs, and threw firecrackers at me. It’s heartbreaking to see what they are being taught,” he wrote on his X handle on February 27.

Greenberg is part of a growing network of young Israeli settlers refusing to serve in the army. They have formed a group called Mesarvot, Hebrew for “we refuse,” where young people support each other as they prepare their refusals to join the Israeli occupation forces.

Mesarvot provides refuseniks support in preparing for imprisonment and legal cases. The group also offers its members a sense of community as they face rejection from the Israeli settler society.

Iddo Elam has also been labelled as a traitor. “They treat me as a traitor. They laugh at my face when they see me with Palestinians. I realized that this whole system is very corrupting,” Elam was quoted as saying by the Intercept.

Elam plans to refuse to join the mandatory military service when his conscription date arrives a few months after graduation. He has also joined Mesarvot to receive moral support.

“Israeli society right now is very militaristic. I want to say to the world that peace and anti-apartheid, anti-occupation activists do not feel safe. A lot of them have been attacked, have been doxxed, have been threatened, arrested,” the teenager added.

Militarizing education

In the occupied territories, joint programs run by the regime’s education ministry and the military have existed for years. The collaborations are meant to instill allegiance to the illegitimate regime and to strengthen ties between Israeli schools and the military.

“Encouraging service in the IDF (Israeli occupation forces) is not a favor we are doing for the IDF, but a moral issue,” former Israeli education minister Gideon Saar once said in an interview.

Many programs are held that bring Israeli army colonels to schools to encourage students to join the army and sign up for combat roles.

According to Sahar Vardi, a member of New Profile, an organization that encourages reducing the military’s influence on Israeli settler society, “(The education system teaches youth that) what the army does is okay, that violence as a form of solving problems is legitimate. It’s not only legitimate but also promoted by society.” Vardi also refused to do her mandatory military service in 2008.

In an attempt to confront its conscription evasion crisis, the regime has also been directing university professors to encourage students to join the army,

As per a report by New Profile, “Israeli schools incorporate the military character into their educational curricula, with the knowledge and support of the education ministry. These schools recruit students under the age of 15 and force them to assimilate within a military nature imposed by the school administration.”

The regime’s education ministry is conducting projects to recruit hundreds of retired army and intelligence officers for educational and school management positions.

In 2017, an Israeli newspaper revealed that elementary school Israeli settler children had received training in the use of weapons, at a summer camp inside a settlement in the occupied West Bank.

“A lot of the Israelis that do not consider (refusing military service) because they were born into Israeli society, a society that from kindergarten teaches us about previous wars, about Israeli nationalist heroes,” Elam explained about Israeli society.

In 2016, a school in Tel Aviv gave a presentation on weapons to eight-year-old children. The training included the use of sound bombs, pepper spray, and electric detonators.

In 2015, the Center for Globalization Research, a Canada-based NGO, explained that “Israeli teachers believe that the army and schools work side by side.”

Rising awareness about the occupation

Greenberg has for long been raising awareness about the Israeli occupation among the settler community in the occupied territories.

“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.”

Greenberg is active in the occupied West Bank. He has been a firsthand witness to Israel’s brutality.

“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,” Greenberg said, explaining the Israeli brutality in the occupied West Bank.

Critical of Israel’s occupation, Evyatar Rubin, also a refusenik, admitted to having discovered the horrific realities of the occupied West Bank only when he was 16.

Rubin is 20 now and has spent four months in prison for having refused to enroll in the obligatory military service.

Another refusenik, Shahar Schwartz said that he declined to be a part of the mandatory military service after being exposed to the army’s oppressive policies in the occupied West Bank.

“My main problem is with what the army is doing in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, but when you say things like that in the (military) committee, they call it ‘selective refusal’ and don’t give you an exemption,” noted Schwartz.

“I decided to refuse because the main goal of the army is the ethnic cleansing of non-Jews, as they do in Masafer Yatta (occupied West Bank). This is something I cannot abide by— neither ideologically or morally. That’s why I chose not to serve,” Schwartz elaborated on his decision to be a refusenik.

Greenberg emphasizes that he will never “take part in this eternal hate and annihilation of people.” He believes refusal to participate in injustices is the first step toward change and reconciliation.

The young man wants the Palestinians to know that there are people 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.”

<https://www.radiohc.cu/en/noticias/internacionales/378352-an-israeli-refusenik-spent-197-days-in-prison-for-saying-no-to-genocide-in-gaza>



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