

“Insubordination in Wartime,” Ron Feiner, “Soldiers for the Hostages” & University of Haifa, 15.7.2025

Introduction

Hello and welcome to “Eyes on Gaza”, our daily gathering of protest and learning, where we examine the realities in Gaza and explore the broader context and forms of resistance. As part of this ongoing conversation, today we’re hosting Ron Feiner from “Soldiers for the Hostages”. He is also an undergraduate student in philosophy, economics, and political science at the University of Haifa. Ron was recently sentenced to prison after refusing to serve in the IDF reserves. He is here to speak with us about wartime refusal. Ron will speak for about eight minutes, followed by a brief discussion. A reminder: if you’d like to ask a question, please post it in the chat and I’ll read it out once Ron has finished his talk. Thank you so much, Ron, for joining us today.

Lecture

Thank you, Ayelet—and thanks also to Lior and Ido, and anyone else involved in organizing. I’m honored to speak here. As Ayelet mentioned, I’ll be talking about refusal during this war. I’ll try to keep it brief, since I think the Q&A will be the most meaningful part. I’ll highlight the main developments over the past year and a half to two years, the motives behind the act of refusal in this moment, the power we hold as a movement of refusing soldiers, and how I think we can persuade others. Just before diving in, I want to clarify that I’ll be focusing on soldiers who served in this war and then chose to refuse. There are also people who refused to enlist from the start, and I don’t want to draw a line between the two—it’s just that I know more about the former, and that’s the group I belong to. Let’s begin chronologically. I call the first moment the “Refuseniks of Rafah”. In May 2024, during a moment of negotiations that gave me hope that the war might end, the Philadelphi Corridor suddenly became a central issue. We understood this was a turning point: either we were heading toward a ceasefire—or a major operation in Rafah. At that moment, the first public refusal letter was released, signed by 42 soldiers. It was a clear, unequivocal statement: if an operation in Rafah were to begin, they would refuse to serve, without hesitation, without consideration, a clear refusal, not showing up. It was the first time in this war that soldiers publicly declared they would no longer participate.

In June 2024, three of those signatories gave an interview to the journal *Haaretz*, using their full names and showing their faces. In my circles, that article made a significant impact. That moment marked the beginning of a movement that has only grown since. By October 2024, another letter came out, this time under the name “Soldiers for the Hostages”. This letter continues to circulate and gather new signatures. It was slightly softer in tone—there was no explicit declaration of refusal, just a collective expression of doubt and deliberation. Some of the signatories did go on to refuse; others did not. I personally signed that letter but was still serving in October. A key development came in March 2025, when the most recent ceasefire was broken. The letter of “Soldiers for the Hostages”, which had 130 signatures in October, had grown to 198 by March—and an additional 100 signed on within the following six weeks.

By early May, as Operation “Gideon’s Chariots” (*Merkavot Gideon*) was launched, the number of signatories had reached 298. I’ve included here a campaign poster from the “Standing Together” movement, which began circulating widely at that time. Its message was “now is the time to refuse!”. It called out those seen as benefiting most from the war—Benjamin Netanyahu, Bezalel Smotrich, Itmar Ben Gvir—and cast the war as theirs, not ours. Today, the “Soldiers for the Hostages” letter has 347 signatories. Some have refused; others have not. But the group’s message has evolved—its social media presence and campaigns now clearly and unambiguously call on soldiers to stop serving. Let me pause here to speak about motives. I see four core reasons that drive refusal among “Soldiers for the Hostages”:

1. The horrors in Gaza – We hear about them every day here on “Eyes on Gaza”: the staggering death toll, food shortages, lack of medical supplies, forced displacement.
2. The abandonment of the hostages – There’s a deep sense that the state has given up on them.
3. Risk to soldiers’ lives – These are our friends, our classmates, our fellow students.
4. The destruction of any hope for long-term security – I personally believe that real security can only be achieved through agreements, reconciliation, and peace—not through endless war, which only deepens instability.

Others have added their own reasons. Some, for example, refuse because of the exemption of ultra-Orthodox Jews from military service. In our movement, we’ve grown to accept and support refusal for any reason—our primary goal is to stop this war. Finally, I want to speak about power—why I believe refusing soldiers have so much potential influence. First, we reach audiences that might otherwise be closed off. When a soldier who’s been on the battlefield speaks of war crimes, it carries weight. Take, for example, a pilot in our group who knows firsthand that airstrikes killed hostages. That kind of testimony makes people listen.

We’ve also built strong alliances, especially with mothers’ organizations—like “Mothers on the Front Line” (*Imahot baKhazit*), “Mothers’ Cry” (*Za’akat haImahot*), and “Awake Mother” (*Imah ‘Era*). They each started with slightly different agendas—some focused on military goals, others on draft equality—but many now oppose the war entirely. “Mothers on the Front Line”, for instance, came to protest outside the prison when I was jailed.

These alliances are powerful. Together, we undermine the war’s legitimacy—not only in the eyes of decision-makers, but also among the broader public. When soldiers who fought in the war speak out, it sends a message: this war is not justified. We also help expose truths that the Israeli media often avoids. As veterans, we’re more likely to be covered—and even when we speak to foreign outlets, like Sky News, that coverage forces Israeli media to respond. But our greatest challenge remains: influencing decision-makers. Many politicians support us privately, but are afraid to say so in public. Breaking through that fear is our next task.