

SHMINISTIM - ISRAELI YOUTH REFUSAL MOVEMENT

The Shministim (hebrew for "high-school seniors") youth refusal movement was founded by a group of young political activists who refuse to serve the occupation and war crimes committed by the Israeli Occupation Forces [da notare; invece di IDF, NdR] in the territories. Some have already sat in military jail for hundreds of days for this 'crime'.

In our protest letter to PM Ariel Sharon we write:

"When the elected government tramples over democratic values and the chances for a just peace in the region, we have no choice but to obey our conscience and refuse to take part in the attack on the Palestinian people. As youth about to be called to serve in the military we pledge to do all that we see fit so as not to serve the occupation. Some of us will refuse to serve beyond the green line, others will avoid military service in other ways - we view all these means as legitimate and necessary, and we call on other youth, conscripts, soldiers in the standing army, and reserve service soldiers to do the same."

1. How it all began:

In June 2001 ten people, mostly from the Tel Aviv area, gathered to discuss new ways of action to resist the occupation. The ten recalled a long heritage of protest letters, declarations by high school seniors who wrote to the prime ministers of Israel in order to protest the ongoing attack against the Palestinians. Israeli governments ignored these calls from peace activists and conscientious objectors, and persisted waging their wars with a 'business as usual' attitude - exacting a terrible toll from the Palestinians, as well as incurring harm on Israelis themselves both economically and in terms of personal safety.

Following the occupation of 1967 several groups of COs (Conscientious Objectors) united the voices of protest. The group recalled the authors of a letter in 1970, the COs who refused to participate in the invasion of Lebanon and the COs of the first Intifada who had spoken out clearly for justice and peace. During this hour of hardship, when Israeli aggression against Palestinians in the Occupied Territories reached heights that were formerly suffered by the inhabitants of Lebanon, we have decided to reiterate the call: Enough! We will not take part in this!

2. Our first high-school seniors' (Shministim) letter (2001):

Following the decision to issue a new "high-school seniors' letter" the founding group began a marathon of meetings. Some activists quit, others joined in, and ultimately a final text was agreed on. Among the authors of the letter were young people of various views: supporters of partition and proponents of the unification of Palestine, liberals and socialists, pacifists and supporters of violent resistance. The final version was therefore one that all signatories agreed upon, without committing to one political or social solution; this version condemned the occupation of 1967 and Israeli war crimes, and pointed to the connection between Israeli aggression and the increase in attacks on Israeli citizens by Palestinians. In August 2001 we published our first high-school seniors letter, with 62 signatories.

3. A new letter, a new movement (2002):

One year later, the number of signatories has more than quadrupled. Over the same time the situation has deteriorated. Sharon's government and the army have managed to carry out the plan to reoccupy the territories with sweeping public support, and persisted in their policy of heinous war crimes.

We, the signatories of the High-School Seniors Letter, felt a need, stronger than ever, to make our voice heard in protest against the occupation and its new-old horrors. Therefore we decided to organize our work in a framework to be named the Shministim (high-school senior students) movement, which will help us act and influence. In September 2002 we published our second letter to Israeli Prime Minister, now with more than 300 signatories.

4. What we do and will do:

In the last months we have protested on behalf of and supported several of the signatories who were sent to jail for their refusal to serve, among them Uri Yaakobi, Yoni Yechezkel, Dror Boimel, Haggai Matar, Shimri Tzameret, Yonatan Ben-Artzi, Matan Kaminer and many others. We also organized demonstrations in Tel-Aviv, a sukkah and several other organized protests on the hill in front of the Atlit jail facilities. We are planning many more activities for the near future.

The youth movement aims to expand the circles of conscientious objectors, and to promote awareness of this phenomenon, primarily in high schools and within youth movements. We also wish to advance these two aims among the general public and the international community. We carry out our work in solidarity vigils, demonstrations, and other direct actions.

In addition to street activity, the movement aims to support those who refuse to serve who are confronted by difficulties as a result, such as discrimination in the schools, at work etc. Among other activities, we accompany COs on the day they are drafted, and hold solidarity vigils.

The movement's strong point is that it is comprised of young people who want to make a difference, and who take action to do so. Activists' presence in schools, youth movements, and among people our age gives us direct access to youths before their conscription. We, the signatories of the letter, now more than 300 in number, address our peers in the hope it is not too late to change the dismal looking future of the state of Israel.

Protest letters

The Shministim youth movement publicized two protest letters; both were sent to PM Ariel Sharon and received significant coverage in both Israeli and international media. 62 youths signed the first letter, published during August 2001. A year later during September we sent a second letter, this time with more than 300 signatures.

19 August 2001

First high-school seniors' letter, published by the Shministim – the Israeli youth refusal movement:

To: Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

We, the undersigned, youths who grew up and were brought up in Israel, are about to be called to serve in the IDF. We protest before you against the aggressive and racist policy pursued by the Israeli government's and its army, and to inform you that we do not intend to take part in the execution of this policy.

We strongly resist Israel's pounding of human rights. Land expropriation, arrests, executions without a trial, house demolition, closure, torture, and the prevention of health care are only some of the crimes the state of Israel carries out, in blunt violation of international conventions it has ratified.

These actions are not only illegitimate; they do not even achieve their stated goal - increasing the citizens' personal safety. Such safety will be achieved only through a just peace agreement between the Israeli government and the Palestinian people.

Therefore we will obey our conscience and refuse to take part in acts of oppression against the Palestinian people, acts that should properly be called terrorist actions. We call upon persons our age, conscripts, soldiers in the standing army, and reserve service soldiers to do the same.

September 2002

The second letter:

To the Prime Minister, Mr. Ariel Sharon,

It has been a year now since we, 62 Israeli boys and girls raised in Israel, sent you a letter announcing that we will not take part in the continuing oppression of the Palestinian people. Today, with a worse situation in Israel and in the Territories, we say it again, together with many who have joined us: we refuse to be soldiers for the occupation.

The state of Israel commits war-crimes and tramples over human rights, destroying Palestinian cities, towns and villages; expropriating land, detaining and executing without trial, conducting mass-demolition of houses, businesses, and public institutions; looting, closure, curfew, torture, preventing the administration of medical care, constructing and expanding settlements - All these actions are opposed to human morality, and violate international treaties ratified by Israel. In these and other actions Israel systematically prevents Palestinians from maintaining any reasonable life. This reality leads to suffering, fear, and despair, which yield terror attacks. Therefore, the occupation is not only immoral; but it also damages the security of Israel's citizens and residents. Such security will be achieved only through a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

When the elected government tramples over democratic values and the chances for a just peace in the region, we have no choice but to obey our conscience and refuse to take part in the attack on the Palestinian people. As youth about to be called to serve in the military we pledge to do all that we see fit so as not to serve the occupation. Some of us will refuse to serve beyond the green line, others will avoid military service in other ways - we view all these means as legitimate and necessary, and we call on other youth, conscripts, soldiers in the standing army, and reserve service soldiers to do the same.

Copies:

Minister of Defense, Benjamin Ben-Eliezer

Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Moshe Ya'alon