

# Israeli Pilots Refuse Occupation Orders

by Dean Andromidas

Twenty-seven Israeli pilots have signed a letter refusing to serve combat missions in the Israeli occupied territories. Although over 500 Israeli reserve Army soldiers have signed a similar letter since early 2002, the signatories of this letter are all officers, including a brigadier general and two lieutenant-colonels, making it without precedent in Israel's history.

The pilots' act of courage sends a powerful message to the Israeli public, and to the military establishment of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) at the very moment Israel Prime Minister Ariel Sharon threatens to escalate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the assassination of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, and/or through relaunching massive military operations including a bloody invasion of the Gaza Strip.

The letter, sent to Israeli Air Force commander Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz and publicized in the Sept. 25 edition of *Ha'aretz*, declared, "We, both veteran and active pilots, who serve the state of Israel, are opposed to carrying out illegal and immoral orders to attack, of the type Israel carries out in the territories." The letter also declares their refusal to transport IDF troops on missions into and out of occupied Palestinian territories, or to provide air support for combat troops in those areas. The letter concludes, "We, for whom the IDF and the Air Force are an integral part of our being; who were brought up to love Israel and to contribute to the Zionist ideal, cannot take part in the operations in the center of populated civilian areas; and [we] refuse to endanger innocent Palestinian civilians. . . . The continued occupation is critically harming the country's security."

## Includes Air Force's Leading Pilots

Among the signatories was reserve Brig. Gen. Yiftah Spector, who is one of the most famous pilots in the Israeli Air Force. Although no longer in the active reserves, General Spector is the number-two ace in the Air Force's history, having shot down 15 enemy aircraft in various Israel-Arab wars. Certainly no peacenik, he reportedly was involved in the bombing of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981. Nonetheless Spector, like slain Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, has come to the conviction that if Israel is to survive as a democratic and Zionist state, it must support the formation of a Palestinian state.

A senior Israeli military source, now in the peace movement, told *EIR* that this letter was the "most interesting and important development in a long time." Israeli pilots in the past, on an individual basis, have refused to carry out orders

that have a “black flag” over them—the Israeli term for a blatantly illegal order. But, the source said, never have a group of officers signed such a letter refusing to carry out such orders. As for General Spector, he is from a very respected family: his mother was the chief secretary to the storm troopers of the Haganah, Israel’s pre-independence military force; his father died in World War II on a mission to sabotage oil depots in Vichy-controlled Lebanon. This attack had been launched in cooperation with the British wartime command.

The most important aspect of this letter, the source stressed, is that it sends a message to the establishment that it will have to offer the Palestinians an “honest” proposal for peace negotiations.

Among the 27 pilots are nine from the active reserves, who include F16 fighter pilots, an Apache helicopter pilot—the type of aircraft which the IDF has used for targeted killings—and two Blackhawk transport helicopter pilots. One of the officers is a training instructor of F-15 candidate pilots.

After delivering the letter, representatives of the pilots gave interviews to the *Yediot Aharonot*, the country’s largest circulating daily, and to Israel’s Channel 2 TV. A spokesman for the group, Captain Yonatan, said, “We are all loyal citizens of the State of Israel. We have taken this step after deep thought and much soul-searching. As officers and pilots, we have been given the heavy responsibility of operating a most powerful war machine. As people who were educated with the moral code of the IDF and the state of Israel, we have decided to . . . obey the order that obliges us not to carry out an order that is blatantly illegal.”

### ‘The Mother of All Dangers’

Israeli Air Force commander Major General Halutz, to whom the letter is addressed, has described the spread of such refusal as “the mother of all dangers.” Indeed, the pilots’ letter is sending chills down the spines of those of Sharon’s generals who have been busy planning targeted assassinations, massive arrests, and all forms of collective punishment. If a full-scale invasion of the Gaza Strip is launched, the possibility of pilots and officers refusing orders with “black flags” over them not only would be embarrassing, but could very well trigger mass peace demonstrations in a repeat of those during the 1982 Lebanon war.

Halutz announced that nine of the pilots will be immediately suspended from the Air Force. Furthermore, he said that the Air Force will deal with these latest refuseniks in the same way as those from the army, whose actions have been treated as disciplinary violations—thus avoiding what could become very embarrassing trials.

The Air Force commander tried to downplay the development, telling reporters, “We must keep things in the right proportions; we are talking about only 27 out of thousands of pilots.” Halutz said that the military will punish the pilots who wore their flight uniforms during their press interviews, as having committed a violation of regulations.

Halutz is one of the core of senior hardline general officers

whom Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has been promoting and relying on during the three years of bloody conflict with the Palestinians which began by Sharon’s election drive in 2000. These are the officers who have reportedly seen fit to study and apply the tactics the Nazis used to crush the Warsaw Ghetto, in order to crush Palestinian resistance. Many of them are said to be even more hardline than Sharon. As for Halutz, he happens to be one of Sharon’s favorite generals, and a man after his own heartlessness. Halutz is the chief proponent of Israel’s “targeted assassination” policy, and has perfected the helicopter gunship rocket attack technique that has become so notorious. It was Halutz who, in July 2002, ordered the dropping of a 1-ton bomb on a house in Gaza to kill Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh. That infamous attack killed 15 others, including 11 children and infants.

At that time, Halutz was interviewed by *Ha’aretz* and asked whether a pilot, after dropping such a bomb that kills not only the target but innocent civilians, has the right to ask himself how he feels. He replied, “No. That is not a legitimate question and it is not asked. But if you nevertheless want to know what I feel when I release a bomb, I will tell you: I feel a light bump to the plane as a result of the bomb’s release. A second later it’s gone, and that’s all. That is what I feel.”

It is a bitter irony that Halutz was able, in that interview, to claim that Israel’s policy is cautious when compared to the brutal bombing campaign carried out in Afghanistan by the Bush Administration, where thousands of civilians were killed.

### Will Sharon Respond With Flight Forward?

Israel’s Chief of Staff Moshe Ya’alon denounced the action of the pilots as “a political statement made in army uniforms. This is in no way legitimate.” Another super-hardliner, Ya’alon was in the Israeli National Security Cabinet which decided, sometime in recent weeks, whether Israel should expel or kill Arafat. He was in full support of the idea of killing Arafat, and is also the biggest supporter of launching an major invasion of the Gaza Strip this Fall.

Former Air Force commander Ezer Weizman also came out denouncing the pilots, saying that the group lacked “morality,” and that publishing the letter was a “disgrace.” There is a widely-seen irony in Weizman’s comments about “morality” and “disgrace,” since he had to resign as President of Israel after it was revealed he received the value of over \$250,000 in “gifts” from a French businessman.

There is now, however, a real danger that Sharon will deal with this latest rebellious move by members of the military itself, seeking to bring sanity back to Israel, by escalating the bloodshed. This is precisely how the Prime Minister blunted the momentum created by the Combatants Letter of 2002. At that time, he launched “Operation Defensive Shield,” which could be called “Operation Warsaw Ghetto”; it has led to the total military reoccupation of the West Bank. Will Sharon now relaunch “Operation Defensive Shield II” and reoccupy the Gaza Strip?