# Why these Israeli men volunteered to fight - but now refuse to return to Gaza

Every single person in his platoon knew someone who was killed. Yuval Green, 26, knew at least three. He was a reservist, a medic in the paratroops of the Israel Defence Forces, when he heard the first news of the 7 October Hamas attack.

“Israel is a small country. Everyone knows each other,” he says. In several days of violence,1,200 people were killed, and 251 more abducted into Gaza. Ninety-seven hostages remain in Gaza, and around half of them are believed to be alive.

Yuval immediately answered his country’s call to arms. It was a mission to defend Israelis. He recalls the horror of entering devastated Jewish communities near the Gaza border. “You're seeing… dead bodies on the streets, seeing cars punctured by bullets.”

Back then, there was no doubt about reporting for duty. The country was under attack. The hostages had to be brought home.

Then came the [fighting in Gaza itself.](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn5wel11pgdo) Things seen that could not be unseen. Like the night he saw cats eating human remains in the roadway.

“Start to imagine, like an apocalypse. You look to your right, you look to your left, all you see is destroyed buildings, buildings that are damaged by fire, by missiles, everything. That's Gaza right now.”

One year on, the young man who reported for duty on 7 October is refusing to fight.

Yuval is the co-organiser of a public letter signed by more than 165 - at the latest count - Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) reservists, and a smaller number of permanent soldiers, refusing to serve, or threatening to refuse, unless the hostages are returned - something that would require a ceasefire deal with Hamas.

In a country still traumatised by the worst violence in its history, those refusing for reasons of conscience are a minority in a military that includes around 465,000 reservists.

There is another factor in play for some other IDF reservists: exhaustion.

According to Israeli media reports, a growing number are failing to report for duty. The Times of Israel newspaper and several other outlets quoted military sources as saying that there was a drop of between 15% to 25% of troops showing up, mainly due to burnout with the long periods of service required of them.

Even if there is not widespread public support for those refusing to serve because of reasons of conscience, there is evidence that some of the key demands of those who signed the refusal letter are shared by a growing number of Israelis.

A recent opinion poll by the Israel Democracy Institute (IDI) indicated that among Jewish Israelis 45% wanted the war to end - with a ceasefire to bring the hostages home - against 43% who wanted the IDF to fight on to destroy Hamas.

Significantly, the IDI poll also suggests that [the sense of solidarity](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c70w95kzljjo) which marked the opening days of the war as the country reeled from the trauma of 7 October has been overtaken by the revival of political divisions: only 26% of Israelis believe there is now a sense of togetherness, while 44% say there is not.

At least part of this has to do with a feeling often expressed, especially among those on the left of the political divide, that the war is being prolonged at the behest of far-right parties whose support Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu needs to remain in power.

Even the former Defence Minister, Yoav Gallant, a member of Netanhayu’s Likud Party, dismissed by the prime minister last month, cited the failure to return the hostages as one of the key disagreements with his boss.

“There is and will not be any atonement for abandoning the captives,” he said. “It will be a mark of Cain on the forehead of Israeli society and those leading this mistaken path.”

Netanyahu, who along with Gallant is facing an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes, has repeatedly denied this and stressed his commitment to freeing the hostages.

## The seeds of refusal

The seeds of Yuval’s refusal lie back in the days soon after the war began. Then the deputy speaker of the Knesset (Israel’s parliament), Nissim Vaturi, called for the Gaza Strip to be “erased from the face of the Earth”. Prominent rabbi Eliyahu Mali, referring generally to Palestinians in Gaza, said: “If you don’t kill them, they’ll kill you.” The rabbi stressed soldiers should only do what the army orders, and that the state law did not allow for the killing of the civilian population.

But the language - by no means restricted to the two examples above - worried Yuval.

“People were speaking about killing the entire population of Gaza, as if it was some type of an academic idea that makes sense… And with this atmosphere, soldiers are entering Gaza just a month after their friends were butchered, hearing about soldiers dying every day. And soldiers do a lot of things.”

There have been social media posts from soldiers in Gaza abusing prisoners, destroying property, and mocking Palestinians, including numerous examples of soldiers posing with people’s possessions - including womens’ dresses and underwear.

“I was trying to fight that at the time as much as I could,” says Yuval. “There was a lot of dehumanising, a vengeful atmosphere.”