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LIMITING THE AUTHORITY
OF THE COUNTRY
Disobedience in the IDF
SHLOMO ABRAMOVICH

INTRODUCTION

DISOBEDIENCE AND THE military are two opposites, as discipline and obedience to the commanders’ orders are the basis of the military structure. However, every army faces cases of disobedience of soldiers, and each army has its own ways of dealing with these situations as well as avoiding them.

The case discussed in this essay is the disobedience of Israeli soldiers during the summer 2005 evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government decided to evacuate the settlements in a unilateral act, not as part of a peace agreement with the Palestinians. This decision was extremely controversial in Israeli society and triggered severe demonstrations by settlers and their supporters all over the country. The involvement of the army in the execution of the evacuation aroused the fear of massive disobedience by soldiers who would refuse to participate in this controversial act.

The reality was far from these predications, and the main topic of this essay is the reasons for the lack of massive disobedience, despite the predictions of such. The focus is on religious Zionist soldiers and their participation in the evacuation of the settlements. The reason for focusing on this group is that they strongly identified with the settlers and therefore were more likely to refuse to take part in their evacuation. Eventually, even the religious Zionist soldiers did not disobey for the most part, and various explanations for it will be presented.

Another reason for focusing on religious Zionists is that this case presented a few of the core questions and conflicts of this group. The obedience to the army in this case was presented in religious Zionism as a question of contradicting authorities—between
the military and religion, the commanders against the rabbis—and therefore it turned into a vital ideological issue. The different reasons for the lack of disobedience present different approaches in religious Zionism regarding its core values, which adds to the importance of this discussion.

**DISOBEDIENCE AND REFUSALS IN THE IDF**

The history of disobedience in the IDF (Israel Defense Forces) starts from its very first days. One of the famous first cases was the story of ship *Altalena*, when the few pilots of the new Israeli air force and artillery soldiers refused to bomb the cargo ship, which carried weapons and members of the Irgun, an underground paramilitary organization. Another famous symbol for refusals in the early days of Israel was Natan Hofshi, one of the leaders of an organization called Brit Shalom, who promoted pacifism and the refusal to serve in the Israeli army.

The first Lebanon War in 1982 and the First Intifada in 1987 were important turning points in the history of refusals in the IDF. The reason for that was the unique circumstances of these events, which stimulated the spreading of refusals to serve in the army over wider groups in society.

Ruth Linn presents two main reasons that can lead a soldier to refuse to follow orders:

In times of war, an individual may “refuse to play the patriot” either because he thinks his country has no right to go to war [*jus ad bellum*] or because he thinks the country may fail to maintain justice in the war [*jus in bello*] or both.

In the eyes of many, these reasons appeared in the First Lebanon War and the First Intifada. The First Lebanon War was the first war to be considered by many as a war of choice and not as a defensive war, and therefore not as a justified war. In addition, the suffering of the people in Lebanon and of the Palestinians in the First Intifada brought some people to claim that Israel lost its justification to fight due to its actions.

There might be other reasons for the rise of refusals in the IDF since the 1990s. The constant decline in the status of nationality in Israeli society, the emergence of strong individualism, and the weakening of the ethos of the army in Israel are among the social reasons for the appearance of more cases of refusal in the IDF.

Linn describes two types of disobedience in the army: an absolute objection to any type of military service and a selective conscientious objection. While pacifistic approaches still exist and there are some cases of absolute objections, selective conscientious objection has become more common in the past few decades.
The absolute objection is typically based on general pacifism, which leads to a refusal to be part of the military framework. However, in some cases, an objection to a specific policy of the military might lead some to refuse to take part in the army at all. The selective objection is usually motivated by the refusal of the soldier to take part in a specific act to which he objects. It might also be used as a tool to pressure the government to change its policy regarding specific controversial decisions.

Typically, there are two main reasons for a selective objection in Israel. On the left side of Israeli politics, the main reason is the objection to the settlements, which leads to a refusal to serve in the West Bank. On the right, the main reason is the refusal to participate in the evacuation of settlements. The focus of this article is on the latter.

FEARS AND REALITY IN THE EVACUATION OF THE GAZA STRIP

The plan to evacuate the settlements in the Gaza Strip aroused great tension between the government and the settlers. The latter and their supporters branded Prime Minister Ariel Sharon as a traitor, since he was actively involved in establishing many of the settlements and now was pushing to evacuate them. On the other hand, Sharon harshly criticized the reactions of the settlers and described their plan to resist the army during the evacuation as a revolt that should be treated as such, with force.

The Israeli leadership was concerned not only about the reactions of the settlers but also of the soldiers. The fear of massive disobedience of soldiers who supported the settlers or disagreed with the morality of this plan was widely presented in the media and became a major threat to the success of the evacuation. The army was the main source of manpower for the evacuation. Without the full cooperation of its soldiers, the plan to evacuate the settlements could not be accomplished. This fear was used by the settlers to pressure the government to call off its plan by stating that the army would not have the ability to carry out this mission due to the massive disobedience of soldiers. Sharon’s response was clear: he would not accept any threats, and any soldier who would refuse to carry out his orders would be harshly punished.

The public discussion focused mostly on the religious Zionist soldiers. Their identification with the settlers, most of whom were religious Zionists, made them main suspects for refusal. In addition, the dilemma of these soldiers was also presented as a question of their dual loyalty. Prominent religious Zionist rabbis called on the soldiers to refuse to take part in the evacuation, describing this act as against the Jewish laws. The religious soldiers were described as standing in a situation where they needed to choose between their rabbis and their commanders, to follow their religious commitment or their military obligation.
This is an example of the tension between religion and the military, which finds its expression in many other cases in Israel, among them the debate over the military service of Haredi [ultra-Orthodox] yeshiva students, and the conflict between the service of female soldiers and religious male soldiers. Stuart Cohen and Elisheva Rosman-Stollman describe this tension by using Lewis Coser’s term “greedy institutions,” as both religion and the army demand exclusive and undivided loyalty and do not accept competing authorities. The clash of two institutions of this type creates a serious conflict.

This was not the first time that religious soldiers were suspected of dual loyalty. However, in this case, the test for their loyalty was easy to determine: whether the religious soldiers would follow the orders of their commanders, or not. The results in this case were clear and undoubted.

Despite the predictions, very few soldiers refused to participate, and the evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip was executed as planned with no serious problems. The chief of staff of the IDF, Dan Halutz, reported in the Knesset that 63 soldiers refused, and the military prosecution reported about 163 cases of refusals. This is very far from what was predicted by both the government and the settlers. The question that will be discussed now is the reason for that sharp difference between the predications and the reality, especially regarding the religious Zionist soldiers.

**PRACTICAL EXPLANATIONS**

The main focus will be on the social explanations for this phenomenon, as the lack of disobedience points to several social structures that exist in religious Zionism. However, before getting to the more complex and hidden explanations, there are some practical reasons that might explain why most of the religious Zionist soldiers followed the orders of the army and not the orders of their rabbis. The different explanations do not contradict each other, as a complex social phenomenon has more than one reason for its occurrence.

The first possible reason for the fact that the soldiers followed the orders is that the army was ready and prepared for this mission. The fear of massive disobedience led the army commanders to take the mission of motivating the soldiers to follow the orders very seriously, as part of the larger mission to carry out the evacuation itself. The army was aware that without the full cooperation of the soldiers it would not be able to accomplish its mission, and therefore plans were made to avoid the predicted disobedience.

First, the army developed a well-designed program of preparing the soldiers who were assigned to take part in the evacuation of the settlements. Commanders and
soldiers participated in special training sessions, where among other issues they discussed the ethical and psychological aspects of the planned mission and the importance of discipline and order in the army in a democratic country. The goal was to prepare the young soldiers for the pressure they would experience during the evacuation from the settlers and their supporters and to strengthen their commitment to the army. These preparation programs were severely criticized by the settlers and were described by them as “brain-washing” of the soldiers, allegedly to make them act “like robots.” In the eyes of the army, however, these programs succeeded in their primary goal as very few soldiers disobeyed.

Second, the army chose carefully which units would participate in this mission. Units with a high percentage of religious soldiers, who were suspected of supporting the settlers—for instance the infantry brigade Golani—did not take part in the actual evacuation. Instead, the army picked units whose soldiers had more to lose from the consequences of their disobedience, such as cadets in commanders’ and officers’ courses or soldiers in permanent service. These soldiers would not want to risk their career in the military and therefore were less likely to refuse.

In addition, despite public declarations to the contrary, in practice the army was sensitive and open to personal requests from soldiers who asked not to participate in the evacuation. Soldiers who lived in the settlements in the Gaza Strip, had family or friends there, or were strongly opposed to this act and went quietly to their commanders and asked not to participate in many cases received favorable responses. In that way, the number of refusals was very low, since many of the soldiers who might have refused got permission not to participate.

The preparation of the army is one explanation for why there was no massive disobedience among the religious soldiers. Another is the claim that the fearful predications were exaggerated.

Cohen presents in detail the great distance between the image of religious Zionists portrayed in the media and academia and reality as he finds it in his studies. He illustrates various ways the false image of this group is created. Sometimes small extreme subgroups are presented as representing the entire group through the use of vague statistics to blur the actual numbers of these subgroups. Sometimes superficial understanding of religious terminology creates wrong understanding of statements and actions of religious Zionists. Cohen shows from various studies the types of subgroups that exist in religious Zionism and presents the power of liberal groups that do not fit into the extreme image of religious Zionism often being presented in the media and academia. According to his view, the fear of massive disobedience was a result of the false extreme image of religious Zionists, and therefore its absence should not be surprising.

However, despite these practical explanations, the question remains: why did almost none of the religious soldiers follow the orders of their rabbis? Even if the
predications of massive disobedience were exaggerated and the army was well prepared, the extremely low number of refusals among religious Zionists soldiers requires more explanation. Many prominent religious Zionist rabbis, some of them from the mainstream of religious Zionism, called upon their followers to refuse to take part in the evacuation, and yet most of them chose to follow the orders of their commanders. In this conflict between the rabbis and the army, the rabbis lost, and that requires more explanation.

This question will serve as a test case to present some of the main social structures that exist in religious Zionism. The different explanations represent different religious Zionist subgroups. Each has a different view of the core values of religious Zionism, but all of them eventually followed the army’s orders in the evacuation of the Gaza Strip, even if for different reasons.

SOCIAL EXPLANATIONS

The first two explanations are based on the studies of Eliezer Don-Yehiya and Charles Liebman, who present different responses of traditional religion to modernization and secularization. The conflict in the discussed situation, between obedience to the rabbis and obedience to the military, is an expression of this tension, and therefore the social structures developed by Don-Yehiya and Libman can assist in explaining the discussed case.

One of the responses of traditional religion to modernization and secularization, as presented by Don-Yehiya and Libman, is “rejection and segregation.” According to this response, the solution for the conflict is the separation of areas of authority. Religion keeps its total authority in some areas of life, but other areas are beyond its limits of responsibility. The rabbis’ opinion, according to this view, is irrelevant in certain areas.

In most cases this is not an ideological approach, but it is a practical solution used by many. It seems that many rabbis and religious leaders do not accept this view, as the exclusiveness and absolutism of religion are widely accepted concepts, but as a way of life it is a very common solution among many modern religious people.

One of the main implications of this view is the lack of the observance of halachah in certain areas of life. The segregation of religion into limited spheres of life eliminates the relevancy of halachah in other aspects of life. Therefore, some people might be very strict in following the Jewish laws in what is considered in their eyes as belonging to their religious identity, but at the same time they might be more lenient regarding other parts of their life, which they consider to be beyond the limits of religion.

An example for this can be found in the studies of Mordechai Bar Lev about the religious practices of religious Zionists. Bar Lev surveyed the norms and habits in
religious Zionism, particularly among high school yeshivot graduates in varied areas of life. One of his main conclusions was that religious Zionists live in separated spheres: areas that are considered as part of their religious life are controlled by Jewish laws, but in other spheres, like culture for instance, they do not follow the strict rules of halachah. For example, he shows that a high percentage of high-school yeshivot graduates keep the laws of kashrut and Shabbat, but at the same time 58 percent of them swim at mixed-gender beaches and swimming pools, even though it is halachically forbidden.

According to this view, the reason that the religious soldiers did not follow their rabbis but their commanders is that in their eyes this situation was not considered as part of their religious life. These soldiers did not accept the attempt of the rabbis who opposed the evacuation to describe it in religious terminology and compared the participation in the evacuation to other forbidden sins. Therefore they chose to follow the orders of their commanders, the primary authority in this area of life. According this view, there was no real conflict between the rabbis and the commanders, as they rule over different spheres of life.

Another response to modernity presented by Don-Yehiya and Liebman is “expansion and domination.” This response is the opposite of rejection and segregation: instead of isolating religion in specific spheres, this response expands the territory ruled by religion and gives it control over the entire spectrum of life. In the conflict between religion and modernity, the latter receives a religious meaning and becomes part of the religious world. Secular terms, ideas, or institutions receive a religious connotation and as a result gain importance in the eyes of the religious believers.

Don-Yehiya describes this approach as religious fundamentalism, as everything is under the authority of religion, the only existing source of authority. Nothing is left behind. In the religious Zionist thought, this approach is presented in the idea that there is no separation between religion and Zionism, since Zionism is also part of religion. One of the main implications of this perspective is the attitude toward the State of Israel and its institutions. According to this approach, often called mamlachtitiut or royalism, the State of Israel, its leaders, and also the army receive a fundamental religious importance and are even considered, in the eyes of some thinkers, as holy.

This approach presents a unique explanation for the discussed case: the soldiers followed the orders of the commanders because, in their eyes, these orders had a religious meaning and fulfilling them was a religious obligatory. The conflict between the rabbis who called for disobedience and the army is not a conflict between religion and an external source of authority, since everything is included in the realm of religion. The conflict still exists, but it has a different connotation as an internal dispute within the religious world. This approach creates conflicts and paradoxes that are hard to resolve. For example, what should a soldier do if his commander orders him to act against the Jewish laws—for instance, to break the laws of Shabbat? How can the
holy army act against the source of its holiness, the Torah? These cases often happen in reality, and they require creative explanations from the followers of this approach.

The evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip caused a major crisis among the followers of this approach. The aggressive act of the government against the settlers and the feelings that the country betrayed them led to doubts regarding the holiness of the State of Israel. For some, the indisputable loyalism to the country turned into skepticism and cynicism. In some cases those feelings were expressed in ceasing to say the prayer for the sake of the country in the synagogue, and in others it led to refusal to serve in the army.

A main representative of this approach—expansion and domination—with regard to the discussed case is Rav Shlomo Aviner, a prominent religious Zionist rabbi who opposed the rabbis who called for disobedience. He explained his view about the importance of following the army’s orders by using religious terminology and said that the holiness of the country and the army does not allow the soldiers to disobey its orders in this case.

Rav Aviner is a follower of Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook, whose followers are the main representatives of this approach. As mentioned, the different approaches represent different subgroups in religious Zionism. While the approach of expansion and domination represents some of Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook’s followers—a religiously strict observant subgroup—the approach of rejection and segregation is identified with subgroups who are more lenient with the observance of halachah. However, these opposing social groups arrived at the same conclusion and chose to follow the orders of the army, even if for different reasons.

The third explanation for the lack of disobedience among the religious Zionist soldiers is not identified with a distinct subgroup of religious Zionism but rather derives from the essence of the group as a whole. The claim is that disobedience and opposition to the larger society and its main leadership is against the DNA of religious Zionism.

Asher Cohen claims that an unconditional patriotism exists as the basis of the religious Zionist’s perspective and that this type of patriotism will allow a person to accept even extremely controversial decisions made by the government. His positive attitude toward this unconditional patriotism can be compared to Linn’s criticism of what she described as “blind patriotism.” Linn prefers the “critical patriot” who, despite “his positive evaluation of the group,” in extreme problematic situations might “let conscientious concerns take over regardless of the personal consequences.”

This unconditional patriotism is rooted in religious Zionism from its very beginning. Religious Zionists often compare themselves to the Haredim (ultra-Orthodox), particularly in cases of disagreements with the government. A common saying after the evacuation was that if the settlers were Haredim, it would not have happened due to their aggressive resistance. Religious Zionists often feel that the Haredim know better
how to fight for their rights, how to protest and demand, and so they are more likely to receive what they want. The conclusion of this thought is that they, the religious Zionists, should learn how to be more like the Haredim. However, it is more than a matter of behavior, how to act in certain situations. The difference between these two Israeli religious groups in their way of struggle with the government is an expression of a deeper difference between the leading narratives of these groups.

The Haredi society was formed as a minority who fight for their rights and survival against the strong majority. This was the ethos of Orthodoxy, which was reinforced in ultra-Orthodoxy in the historical battles against various modern movements such as the Reform movement and secular Judaism. This ethos is expressed in the separation of the Haredim from the larger society, as presented for instance in their unique clothes and their closed communities. Religious Zionism, on the other hand, was formed with an opposite ethos. The first religious Zionist political movement was called the Mizrachi, a Hebrew acronym for Merkaz Ruchani—a spiritual center—founded in 1902, and its goal was to inspire and influence the Zionist movement. This was the basis for one of the main values of this group: its involvement in the larger society. This is the reason religious Zionists choose to get involved in their surrounding culture and to serve in the army with the rest of society as part of this ideology.

Therefore, fighting with the government or refusing to follow the army’s orders is against the nature of the average religious Zionist. Despite the conflict with some of his rabbis, the religious Zionist soldier obeyed the orders of his commanders because he was raised to be part of, not to separate himself from, the larger society. It is not a matter of ideology, like the other explanations presented above, but it is a result of the basic religious Zionist subconscious, which appears to be stronger than any conflicting religious ideological statements.

Several studies point to different times of change, when religious Zionists tend to adopt a more Haredi attitude of separation from Israeli society. Gideon Aran claims that during the first years of the State of Israel, the fear of the strong secular nature of the new country caused a movement toward rejection and separation, as expressed in the establishment of religious Zionist yeshivot. Others point to the evacuation itself as a turning point in religious Zionism, when the deep disappointment with the actions of the government caused religious Zionists to change their attitude toward the State of Israel and to limit their involvement in Israeli society, as expressed in a decline in the motivation to serve in the army.

In practice, these changes happened only among distinct small groups in religious Zionism. A fear of the secularism of Israeli society, among other things, created the group Hardal - Haredi religious Zionists, who adopted some of the Haredi characteristics and separated themselves from the larger society in more aspects of their lives. However, the mainstream of religious Zionism has remained loyal to its original value
of involvement in the larger society and accepted the rules of democracy, even when those rules contradict their ideology. Therefore, it seems that future mass refusals of religious Zionist soldiers are not predicted.

**SUMMARY**

Conflicts between the authority of the country and religious authorities create situations that force religious soldiers to choose a side and to show to whom their commitment is stronger. The evacuation of the settlements in the Gaza Strip was one of these cases, as religious Zionist rabbis called on their followers to refuse to take part in it. In practice, very few soldiers refused, and in this case the authority of the country and the army overcame the authority of religion and the rabbis.

In addition to a few practical explanations for this result, several factors in religious Zionism were presented to explain the obedience of the religious Zionist soldiers. An approach of separating the authorities and limiting religion to specific areas of life made this case irrelevant to the religious authorities. The same result comes from an opposite approach, which extends religion to all areas of life and gives the State of Israel and the army a religious status. Therefore, there is no contradiction between religion and State, since everything is part of religion, and following the orders of the army is also part of the religious commitment of the religious Zionist soldier. Finally, resisting the army and the government is against the nature of religious Zionism, as involvement and cooperation with the larger society are at the heart of the ideology of this group.

Similar cases happen all the time, and pressure from rabbinic figures on religious soldiers to refuse continues. Every once in a while, when a new plan for a peace agreement with the Palestinians appears and includes evacuation of settlements in the West Bank, the discussion about refusals arises again. In addition, the fear of massive refusals if the army is asked to evacuate settlements still exists among the army leaders. Recently the Supreme Court acquitted two rabbis who were prosecuted for offering money to soldiers to refuse to evacuate settlements. The reason for the decision to acquit was that these rabbis have the right of freedom of expression, but also the Court estimated that there is little likelihood that soldiers will comply with the rabbis’ wishes.

Future studies might show whether this Supreme Court decision is still accurate. The changes and developments in religious Zionism, and particularly in the complex relationship with the State and its institutions, might weaken the unconditional patriotism of this group and make refusals more likely among religious Zionist soldiers. If that becomes the reality, it means that a fundamental change has happened in religious Zionism, as some of its core values, the DNA of this group, has changed.
NOTES

1. Yaron Unger, *The Limits of Discipline and Disobedience to the Military Order* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Knesset Research and Information Center, 2010), 4. This research paper contains a brief but detailed summary of the history of refusals in the IDF.


3. Ibid.


9. For example, Eliash presents the fear of the leaders of the *Maḥtrot* [paramilitary units] about the involvement of rabbis in religious units, which can cause conflict with authorities (Yeḥiel Eliash, *Ma’ase Ha’Ba Be’Chazon* [Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Merkaz Elitzur, 1983], 62).

10. It is true that not all the rabbis called for disobedience, as will be presented later in this essay, but a large group of prominent religious Zionist rabbis did call for it—enough to anticipate a larger number of refusals.

11. Efrat Weis, “Good Morning, I Came to Evacuate You” [Hebrew], Ynet (June 14, 2005), https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3096808,00.html, accessed August 7, 2019. The writer interviews a commander in the IDF who participated in some of those programs.


17. Ibid., 100–103.

18. Charles S. Liebman and Eliezer Don-Yehiya, Civil Religion in Israel (Berkeley: University of California, 1983), 185–86. Later in their book they discuss how these options appear in different religious groups in Israel.


21. Salmon presents an interesting argument, regardless of the different approaches in religious Zionism, and claims that in comparison to other types of national movements, Zionism has many religious characteristics (Yosef Salmon, Do Not Provoke Providence: Orthodoxy in the Grip of Nationalism [Hebrew] [Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2006], 12.)


24. After the evacuation, a group of high school students published a letter they sent to the army in which they said that they refuse to serve because of the army’s role in the evacuation. See Efart Weiss, “The Youth’s Petition: We Will Not Serve in the Army because of the Evacuation” [Hebrew], Ynet, September 1, 2005, www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3136125,00.html, accessed August 16, 2019.


26. A similar argument can be found in ibid., 19–20.