

# First Israeli Conscientious Objector of the Gaza War Is Jailed: 'I Know It's the Right Thing'

**Tal Mitnick, 18, is currently serving 30 days in a military jail after refusing to be drafted into the Israel Defense Forces on Tuesday. The government wants to 'deepen the occupation and disallow any kind of dissent,' he said on the eve of his sentencing**



Zen Read



Tal Mitnick, center, during the protest before he went into the Tal Hashomer army base on Tuesday Credit: Linda Dayan



Linda Dayan

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As a site of final send-offs from family and friends before Israeli teenagers become soldiers, the Israel Defense Forces' induction center in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan has seen unquantifiable hugs and teary goodbyes.

At the center of a large group of well-wishers Tuesday, Tal Mitnick, 18, hugged his mother and friends, smiled for group photos and waved farewell as a police officer guided him to the gate of the draft office.

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"It's not an easy time," said one person who had come to see him off over the din of cheers for Mitnick. "My friend is going to jail."

The teenager addressed his supporters before entering the base: "I'm standing here at the Tel Hashomer base and refusing to be drafted, refusing to take part in [the war in Gaza](#). I believe that slaughter does not solve slaughter. Violence does not solve violence," he declared.

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Tal Mitnick, center, holding a sign stating "An eye for an eye leaves us all blind." Credit: Linda Dayan

From there, he would enter the draft office and express his refusal to serve. He was then sentenced to a preliminary 30 days in military prison – which is three times as long as the normal first sentence for draft refusal. In a month's time, he will face the choice of either drafting or receiving another jail sentence.

"I'm a little stressed," he told Haaretz the night before, "but I know I'll get through it. And I know I'm doing the right thing."

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In September, as resistance against the Netanyahu government's judicial overhaul reached a crescendo, [Mitnick and a group of teens drafted a letter](#) declaring that they would not serve in the Israeli military, despite the country's near-universal conscription. "We, teenagers who are about to draft, say no to dictatorship – both in Israel and in the occupied Palestinian territories – and announce that we will not serve until democracy is guaranteed to all, to everyone who lives under Israeli rule," it read.

That letter quickly amassed hundreds of signatures. At a ceremony declaring their refusal to serve, members of the mainstream protest groups came to support the teenagers, who branded themselves Youth Against Dictatorship.

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Some included members of Brothers and Sisters in Arms, the protest group started by reservists, calling on their fellow veterans not to serve in voluntary reserve duty so long as the

judicial coup continued. "We want to show that there's a large amount of people who won't serve under this dictatorship that's been going on for dozens of years in the West Bank," Mitnick told Haaretz at the time.

Then came October 7, and Hamas' brutal massacre and abduction of Israelis mobilized the nation. Dissenting reservists immediately returned to duty and protest groups shifted to aiding displaced residents and soldiers in need. However, Hamas' incursion did not change Mitnick's mind.

"Since the start of the war, [my resolve] has only gotten stronger," he said. "The terrorist attack on October 7 was a horrible, illegitimate form of resistance that harmed the whole country. The pain reached every household and it just kind of showed how you really can't have an occupation and a siege 20 miles [12 kilometers] from your home and not feel it."



Tal Metnick leading the protest outside the IDF recruitment center at Tel Hashomer on Tuesday. Credit: Dina Kraft

His peers haven't always been forgiving.

"Some people have said to me: 'What, you're still against the occupation?' they can't believe it. Right after the war, inside the 1948 territories, there was a huge ramp-up of political McCarthyism against Palestinian citizens of Israel and also some

Israeli Jews who have spoken out in solidarity with Gazan civilians, against the war," he said of Israeli territory.

"People have gotten fired from their jobs, or even worse, arrested for just liking a post or posting on their [Instagram] story," he charged. "This society, this government, is basically using this war to enact the coup that they were trying to enact before, in order to strengthen themselves to deepen the occupation and disallow any kind of dissent."

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## 'It's a free country'

Before Mitnick surrendered himself at the draft office, he was accompanied by a couple of dozen protesters who brought drums, signs and a megaphone to voice their opposition to the war – and to call on the teens going in for their first IDF call-ups to refuse as well.





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Their signs, held up mostly by teenagers and young adults from a draft refusal network, read "War has no winners," "You can also refuse," "Flesh and blood, not cannon fodder," "In Gaza and Sderot, children want to live." Positioned in the center of the formation, Mitnick held a sign reading "An eye for an eye leaves us all blind."

Under the blazing sun, drummers set the rhythm for call-and-response chants: "Not as a secretary, not as a pilot, I won't go to the army!" "Soldier! Attention! Refuse the massacre!" "Free the hostages! Free the prisoners!"

Most of the people waiting at the bus stop just a few feet away were indifferent to the protest. Some soldiers came out to investigate the source of the din, take a couple of videos for Instagram and go back into the base. They seemed largely

amused. One young woman in civilian clothing muttered, "What an embarrassment to the country."

Now and then, people walked over to the policeman watching the protest, and asked him if it was authorized and if there was a way to put a stop to it. With fatherly patience he replied: "I know it's difficult, but it's a free country."

One small group of teenagers, who seemed to have just finished taking the military's extensive pre-draft intelligence test, seemed to want to scuffle with the demonstrators; they were deterred by the policeman's glances. Standing a few feet away, one of them picked up a stone from the ground, then thought better of it and put it down. They hurled epithets instead and performed obscene gestures. The protesters ignored them, chanting in Hebrew and Arabic: "End the war! End the war!"



Some of the protesters at Tuesday's demonstration outside the Tel Hashomer induction center on Tuesday. Credit: Linda Dayan

A young soldier, a staff sergeant who stood watching for a few minutes, agreed to speak with Haaretz. "It's a shame," he said of the protest. "You see what the army is doing for us after the massacre. They're taking all these measures to be careful, and this is what people do."

He added: "One comfort is that it's a small gathering."

## No exemption

Mitnick tried to be exempted from military service on the grounds of conscientious objection. He went before a board that sought to determine whether he is truly against war. "It was me in front of a bunch of army generals and one academic, deciding if I'm a pacifist – and they decided that I'm not," he said.

"They ask, for example, if you were in October 7, what would you have done? Would you have not done anything? I think that the army has a very weird way of seeing pacifism. They see it as this kind of caricature of a pacifist: someone who wouldn't touch a bug. A vegan, a tree hugger, that kind of stereotype – the hippie stereotype. And the second that someone talks about anything political, anything about how their pacifist values actually [manifest] in this land, opposing the violence that's happening here, for example, the occupation or the siege, then they consider it political, and not [coming] from your pacifist values."

Without an exemption, he did not have the option of national service (the alternative to military service).

Joining him for his send-off was Einat Gerlitz, a 20-year-old who refused to serve last year and sat in military jail for 87 days.



Protesters at Tel Hashomer on Tuesday. Chants included "Not as a secretary, not as a pilot, I won't go to the army!" and "Soldier! Attention! Refuse the massacre!" One young woman muttered of the protest: "What an embarrassment to the country." Credit: Linda Dayan

"When they brought me to jail, I didn't know if I would be there for two weeks or two years," she said. "I refused the draft because I don't think violence will bring a solution – we're seeing that more than ever. I only believe in a diplomatic solution, and I think that a violent organization like an army can't solve anything. The only way to guarantee a better future and to aspire toward justice, freedom and liberty for Palestinians and Israelis in this land is through refusal alone, and not through drafting."

Like Mitnick, the events of October 7 did not make her reevaluate her decision. "I have friends who are serving in combat in Gaza now. I have Palestinian neighbors who are facing a lot of violence. And I have grandparents from the Gaza border area who were evacuated. It's very complicated to live in this land, and I think that in the end, pain is pain and bereavement is bereavement, and it doesn't matter if it's Palestinian or Israeli bereavement."

As of Tuesday, 492 IDF soldiers have been killed since the war began, including in the October 7 Hamas attack; about 1,200 people were killed by Hamas that day in total. The terrorist group is still holding over 120 Israelis hostage in the Strip. The Palestinian death toll, as reported by the Hamas-run Gaza Health Ministry, is at over 20,000. On Monday, two Egyptian sources said that Hamas and the allied Palestinian Islamic Jihad rejected an Egyptian proposal that they relinquish power in the Gaza Strip in return for a permanent cease-fire.



A protester holding a sign stating: "Tal Mitnick: everyone's child." Credit: Dina Kraft

Israel has two options going forward, as Mitnick sees it. "Either what the right wing is offering, which is a genocide or an ethnic cleansing of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank – or for the vast majority of Israelis that I hope are against a genocide of the Gazan Palestinians, a way to solve this conflict by peaceful means. By recognizing that there are 7 million Palestinians living in this land, and 7 million Jews, and that no

one is going anywhere. It's not practical and it's not moral to make one of the peoples go away, or genocide one of the people," he said. "This will not bring us any security. The only way that we're going to be able to get security is by giving everyone equal rights and by giving people a safe place to live."

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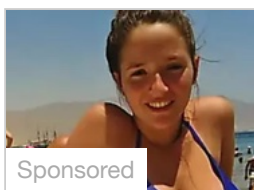
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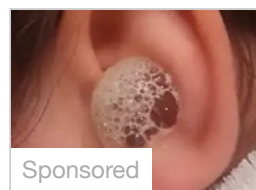
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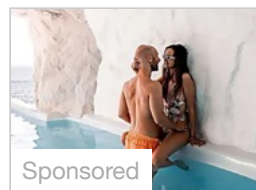


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