

Druze Arab boy being jailed for refusing to serve Israel's Army

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by Budour Youssef Hassan

Omar Saad, a Palestinian musician and high school senior from the [Druze](#) minority religious community, faces imprisonment over his refusal to take part in a recruitment test for the Israeli military on Wednesday (31 October).

Saad has bravely made his views known to [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), Israel's prime minister, and [Ehud Barak](#), its defense minister. In a letter to both men, Saad stated: "I will not be fuel to the fire of your war" ("[I'm Omar Saad and I will not be a soldier in your army](#)," Abir Kopty's blog, 27 October).

Speaking to The Electronic Intifada, Saad elaborated on why military service repelled him. "As a believer in nonviolence whose only weapon is his viola and as someone who believes in the right of all people to live in freedom, dignity and equality, I can never serve in an army that intrinsically opposes these values," he said.

Hailing from the [Galilee](#) village of Meghar, Saad belongs to a family with a proud tradition of defying Israel's diktats.

"I was raised in a politically-aware household. My father refused to serve in the Israeli army and, together with my mother, they entrenched in us a sense of belonging to the Palestinian people," he said. "From a very young age my siblings and I understood that we are an inseparable part of the Palestinian people."

Whereas most [Palestinian citizens of Israel](#) have been exempt from military service, conscription was forced on young Druze men in 1956.

Some 84 percent of Druze men serve in the army, according to data from the Israeli military ("[My uncle, the hero](#)," Ynet, 25 April 2012). While that figure indicates that Druze are even more likely to perform military service than Jewish Israelis, there is a strong refusenik movement within the Druze community.

Severe punishment

Saad's stance appears all the more courageous, considering that Druze tend to be punished more severely than Jewish Israeli conscientious objectors.

"Unlike pacifist Israelis, Druze objectors do not get exemption on conscientious grounds, as

if we have no conscience,” said Ajwad Zidan, a Druze citizen who has spent six months in prison for refusing to be conscripted. “We suffer from extremely harsh treatment during our imprisonment, which aims to intimidate us and scare other Druze from taking a similar decision.”

Samer Swaid, secretary of the Druze Initiative Committee, a group opposing military service, argues that the 84 percent statistic cited by Israel does not tell the whole story.

“A study conducted by a [Haifa University](#) professor in 2010 shows that two-thirds of the Druze youths would not enlist if given the choice,” he said. “Moreover, the national security conference in Herzliya has warned for two years against the increasing number of Druze youth who refuse to serve in the army,” he explained (see also “[Druze and military service in Israel](#),” Alternative Information Center, 17 June 2012).

Swaid, who works as an assistant to Hanna Swaid, a member of Israel’s parliament, the [Knesset](#), added: “Despite [more than] five decades of mandatory conscription, Druze villages suffer, like the rest of Palestinian villages in Israel, from institutionalized and systematic marginalization and discrimination. Many Druze youth see themselves as part and parcel of the Palestinian people and refuse to cooperate with a system that kills and oppresses fellow Palestinians and occupies their own land.”

Sowing divisions

The introduction of military service for Druze citizens followed talks between representatives of the Israeli state and a few Druze community leaders. The Druze people themselves were never given an opportunity to say if they consented to this move.

Israel forced military service on the Druze as part of plan to sow divisions among Palestinians. The Zionist leadership wished to exploit the status of the Druze community — a small minority without an organized leadership — to create a separate Druze identity that would be hostile to other sections of Palestinian society.

Conscription encountered significant resistance. In 1958, the Free Young Druze Movement was set up. One of its founders, Jamal Zidan, became the first Druze to be jailed for refusing to serve in the army. Other outspoken opponents of conscription included the poet Samih al-Qasim, who was also jailed for refusing to serve, and the writer Mohammad Nafa.

Inspired by the Free Officers Movement in [Egypt](#), the group mostly worked in secret due to the harsh martial law conditions imposed on Palestinians in Israel between 1948 and 1966.

Later — in March 1972 — activists from this group, along with members of the Israeli Communist Party, met at the house of Sheikh Farhoud Farhoud, and created the Druze Initiative Committee. It remains the leading Druze organization fighting compulsory service.

Fifty-six years after conscription was forced on his community, Saad underscores why Druze must keep on opposing it. “I want my Palestinian brethren to know that, even though there are Druze who serve in the army because they are convinced it is the right thing, the majority are against it,” he said. “Many of them are scared of paying the price of objection. But there are many who believe like me and many who have paid a hefty price for refusing.”

Unfortunately, the issue of Druze conscription is often ignored by Palestinian journalists. This reflects an unjust generalization against Druze Palestinians. The perception that the Druze

community are traitors plays right into the hand of the Zionist system that sought to divide and fragment the Palestinian society along sectarian lines. As it happens, collaboration with Israel is not confined to any sect or religion. Hundreds of Muslim and Christian Palestinians serve in the Israeli military voluntarily.

It is vital to understand that the Druze are victims of the Israeli occupation and militarism, just like the rest of us Palestinians. Understanding this reality is a necessary first step to encourage more Druze teenagers to refuse military service, thereby increasing Palestinian unity.

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