

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

AI index: MDE 15/021/2013

EMBARGO: Wednesday 4 December, 00:01Hs GMT

'I refuse to take an assault rifle and point it at another human being'

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/i-refuse-take-assault-rifle-and-point-it-another-human-being-2013-12-04>

Since he was a child, Arab-Israeli Omar Sa'ad knew turning 18 wasn't going to be easy.

A few days after his birthday on 17 November, the Israeli army called his father and told him Omar was due to start his induction for military service on 4 December.

The call wasn't surprising – military service is compulsory for most nationals in Israel – but what might happen today could mark him forever.

Today Omar will demonstrate his objection to participating in human rights violations by the Israeli army against Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

It's a protest with a difference.

He, his sister and two brothers, who together form the Galilee (string) Quartet, will play a rendition of "We wish you a Merry Christmas" in front of the office he must report to, after which he will refuse to enrol.

In response, it is highly likely that the army will arrest him and he will be sentenced to a minimum of 28 days' imprisonment, which could be renewed each time he refuses to serve.

"I refuse to take an assault rifle and point it at another human being. I abhor this violence and everything connected to violence. I detest and hate all violence," he told Amnesty International.

"I don't want to be part of the Israeli army because the Israeli government is responsible for the occupation [of the Palestinian Territories]. As an Arab Druze I consider myself part of the Palestinian people - so how can I be part of the army that occupies my people? I won't sell all my beliefs and my identity to anyone."

Omar is from the Druze village of Maghar in northern Israel. His struggle began when he was a little boy, knowing that when he turned 18 he would be forced to become a soldier.

Last year, he was called for a medical examination to confirm he was eligible for conscription in the Israeli army.

As a sign of protest, he wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Defence Minister, saying: "I refuse because I am a man of peace and I hate all forms of violence, and the military institution represents for me the peak of physical and psychological violence."

Since then, the threat of arrest has hung over him.

A question of conscience

Arab citizens of Israel – with the exception of Druze Arabs and Circassians - are exempt from compulsory service in the Israeli military and are mostly discouraged from even volunteering for service.

However, over the years, many young Druze like Omar have refused to serve in the Israeli military on the grounds that such service would amount to fighting a war against their own people.

Because of that, every year, a handful of Israeli teenagers are sent to prison each year, simply because they refuse to serve in their country's army on grounds of conscience.

Ajuad Zidan, a former Druze objector imprisoned for his beliefs, explained his refusal to enlist during 2010: "The loneliness of the prison cell is one thousand times better than standing in front of my people while pointing a gun at them, or imposing a curfew on them".

Although a "conscience committee" exists within the Israeli army to decide upon exemptions for conscientious objectors, such claims are usually only allowed for those who refuse to serve on religious grounds.

While Israeli law allows for pacifists to be exempted, individuals are required to argue their case before the "conscience committee", which is made up of military judicial officers who invariably reject their cases.

Human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, have long complained to the Israeli authorities about the treatment of conscientious objectors.

The right to object to military service on grounds of conscience is protected under Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Israel is a party.

The United Nations Human Rights Committee called on the Israeli government, in 2003, to review its legislation, to bring it in line with international human rights law.

"Omar Sa'ad should not be imprisoned. If the Israeli authorities decide to arrest him, he will be a prisoner of conscience and we will campaign for his immediate release," said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

"Instead of persecuting those who have a moral objection to serving in the military, Israeli authorities should establish a fully independent and impartial body to assess claims of conscientious objection in a fair and transparent manner."

Amnesty International also points to the contrast between the authorities' punitive measures against conscientious objectors and their general failure to hold accountable Israeli soldiers accused of human rights violations.

"Many people across the world support me. They support what I think and will stand with me. That gives me strength to go through this," Omar told Amnesty International as he prepared for the most difficult day of his life.