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Israeli reservist pans military campaign

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As the Middle East peace process reeled from a week of heavy fighting in the West Bank, about 250 Berkeley reservists packed a Unitarian church yesterday to renew their hope for an end to the violence.

Leading the calls for reconciliation was keynote speaker Tamir Sorec, one of more than 300 Israeli army reservists who has told his government he will not perpetuate the violence and fight for his country in the Israeli-occupied West

Bank and Gaza Strip. Sorec, a sociologist, comes to Berkeley to rally support for a peaceful resolution to the Mideast conflict. "The Israelis and the Palestinians are going to destroy each other," he said to the standing-room-only crowd at the Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists, at Cedar Street and Bonita Avenue. "The way to prevent them from doing this is to support us [objectors] and say [to the Israeli government] you don't have soldiers for this war."

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Tamir Sorec, left, an Israeli army reservist is joined by local peace activist Marcia Freedman, middle. The two activists spoke yesterday in Berkeley.

Former Israeli reservist brings a message for the Middle East

Sorec's avowal not to fight comes just two days after Israel began calling up thousands of army reserve officers in response to attacks by Palestinian militants that left dozens of Israelis dead last week. The Associated Press reported Friday that 20,000 Israeli reservists could soon be mobilized, marking the largest call-up since the Gulf War.

Sunday's second speaker Marcia Freedman, an Israeli peace activist who spent the last five months in Israel, was also quick to condemn the recent military escalation.

"[Israeli Prime Minister Ariel] Sharon is extremely shrewd and extremely brutal," Freedman said. "Israelis today don't really know what's going on... I really believe that if the people got to see this, the government would be operating in a different way."

Just hours before the Berkeley crowd assembled to soberly address Middle East violence, residents had gathered, at the Unitarian church to celebrate Easter Sunday.

In Israel, the Jewish holiday of Passover passed uneasily. Schools were closed last week to children, but opened for registering army reservists for active military duty.

As a reservist, Sorec told the Berkeley audience that it was his moral obligation to resist military duty in the occupied territories. He said military operations thwarted the peace process and served only to abuse and humiliate Palestinians.

"The situation in which 3.5 million people live under military control and without

civil rights is out of the question," he stated.

Israeli soldiers in the West Bank are killing innocent civilians, conducting unlawful searches of Palestinian homes, and denying residents access to their friends and family, Sorec explained.

He said that 800 Palestinian civilians had been killed in the last year and a half of fighting, while about 350 Israeli civilians have died.

As of yesterday, 383 conscientious objectors, including Sorec, had signed the widely-publicized declaration to refuse military service in the occupied territories. The protest is dubbed *Courage to Refuse*.

While Berkeley residents showed mostly admiration for the objectors, the dissidence has not been without its critics.

One member of the audience yesterday charged that the Berkeley forum was unfairly stacked with anti-Israeli proponents, claiming the two presenters had "warmth and love" for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

In Israel, government officials have also condemned the objectors, portraying them as fanatics going against the rule of the majority. Two reservists have been jailed for their protest, according to Freedman.

Israeli policy dictates that nearly all citizens serve in their military when they turn 18. Women generally serve until age 20, and men until age 21 — and in the reserves until age 45.

In 1996, Sorec explained that his opposition to Israeli military policy was born.

Though, it wasn't until January of this year that he made his sentiment public.

"We came to the conclusion that if we keep our objection silent and quiet we will never be able to change the political situation," he said.

And according to Freedman, Israeli civilians are now wanting to see the situation resolved. She said Prime Minister Sharon's approval rating had dropped from 57 percent in December to 35 percent in March because of the recent military campaign.

"Israeli has never known such a right-wing government," Freedman said. She feared that continued Israeli force in the occupied territories would prompt a backlash by the Arab world and launch the entire region into war.

She praised the activism of Sorec as a means of helping temper the conflict.

Most Berkeley residents, including audience member Myrna Sokolinsky, showed support for Sorec as well.

"I admire him and the other conscientious objectors who are making a sacrifice and risking going to jail," Sokolinsky said. "They understand the oppression of the Palestinians."

"I'm sympathetic to people trying to get a fair peace... The only real solution is for Israel to pull out of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and stop harassing and killing Palestinians," said Charlie Shain, a Berkeleyan. Sunday's event was sponsored by Bay Area Women in Black, a group of Jewish feminists and supporters.