

# Occupied Palestine: Female soldiers break their silence

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29 Jan 2010



**Six years after first collection of Breaking the Silence testimonies, organization releases booklet of testimonies from female soldiers who served in territories. Stories include systematic humiliation of Palestinians, reckless and cruel violence, theft, killing of innocent people and cover-up. Here are only some of testimonies**

*"A female combat soldier needs to prove more...a female soldier who beats up others is a serious fighter...when I arrived there was another female there with me, she was there before me...everyone spoke of how impressive she is because she humiliates Arabs without any problem. That was the indicator. You have to see her, the way she humiliates, the way she slaps them, wow, she really slapped that guy."*

The Breaking the Silence organization on Friday released a booklet of testimonies by female soldiers recounting various abuse cases involving Palestinians in the West Bank.

In recent years, females have been increasingly involved in combat and field operations in the IDF and Border Guard. Among other things, these female soldiers engage in daily contact with the Palestinian population – at roadblocks and in Palestinian communities.

According to the latest testimonies, many of these young women have trouble coping with the violent reality they are exposed to and find themselves facing situations that contradict their values. Some of them end up engaging in acts, or turning a blind eye to acts, that will burden them years later. Like their male counterparts, some of these females have a need to speak about what they saw.

"The girls have greater difficulties in telling the story, because they're the minority to begin with" the organization's director Dana Golan says.

### **'Each soldier would give them a pet'**

In the framework of the latest project, Breaking the Silence gathered the testimonies of more than 50 female soldiers who served in various posts in the territories. Ynet presents some of the highlights in this report.

Golan noted that female soldiers were not more sensitive to the Palestinians than their male comrades.

"We discovered that the girls try to be even more violent and brutal than the boys, just to become one of the guys," she said.



**Reporter took a picture, 'special patrol' sent to get them (Photo: Reuters)**

A female Seam Line Border Guard spoke of the chase after illegal aliens: "In half an hour you can catch 30 people without any effort." Then comes the question of what should be done with those who were caught – including women, children, and elderly. "They would have them stand, and there's the well-known Border Guard song (in Arabic): 'One hummus, one bean, I love the Border Guard' – they would make them sing this. Sing, and jump. Just like they do with recruits... The same thing only much worse. And if one of them would laugh, or if they would decide

someone was laughing, they would punch him. Why did you laugh? Smack... It could go on for hours, depending on how bored they are. A shift is eight hours long, the times must be passed somehow."

Most of the female soldiers say that they sensed there was a problem during their service, but did nothing.

Another female soldier's testimony, who served at the Erez checkpoint, indicates how violence was deeply rooted in the daily routine: "There was a procedure in which before you release a Palestinian back into the Strip – you take him inside the tent and beat him."

### **That was a procedure?**

"Yes, together with the commanders."

### **How long did it last?**

"Not very long; within 20 minutes they would be back in the base, but the soldiers would stop at the post to drink coffee and smoke cigarettes while the guys from the command post would beat them up."

### **This happened with every illegal alien?**

"There weren't that many...it's not something you do everyday, but sort of a procedure. I don't know if they strictly enforced it each and every time...it took me a while to realize that if I release an illegal alien on my end, by the time he gets back to Gaza he will go through hell... two or three hours can pass by the time he gets into the Strip. In the case of the kid, it was a whole night. That's insane, since it's a ten minute walk. They would stop them on their way; each soldier would give them a 'pet', including the commanders."

### **'Child's hand broken on the chair'**

A female soldier in Sachlav Military Police unit, stationed in Hebron, recalled a Palestinian child that would systematically provoke the soldiers by hurling stones at them and other such actions. One time he even managed to scare a soldier who fell from his post and broke his leg.

Retaliation came soon after: "I don't know who or how, but I know that two of our soldiers put him in a jeep, and that two weeks later the kid was walking around with casts on both arms and legs...they talked about it in

the unit quite a lot – about how they sat him down and put his hand on the chair and simply broke it right there on the chair."

Even small children did not escape arbitrary acts of violence, said a Border Guard female officer serving near the separation fence: "We caught a five-year-old...can't remember what he did...we were taking him back to the territories or something, and the officers just picked him up, slapped him around and put him in the jeep. The kid was crying and the officer next to me said 'don't cry' and started laughing at him. Finally the kid cracked a smile – and suddenly the officer gave him a punch in the stomach. Why? 'Don't laugh in my face' he said."



**'Palestinian beaten before being released to Strip' (Photo: AFP)**

### **Was there also abuse of women?**

"Yes" the same soldier replied. "Slaps, that kind of thing. Mainly slaps."

### **From men?**

"Also. From whoever. It was mainly the female combat soldiers who beat people. There were two who really liked to beat people up. But also men, they had no problem slapping a woman around. If she screamed, they'd say, 'Shut it,' with another slap. A routine of violence. There were also those who didn't take part, but everyone knew it happened."

Sometimes an entire "production" was necessary to satisfy the violent urges. "There's a sense of violence," a border policewoman in the Jenin area said. "And yes, it's boring, so we'd create some action. We'd get on the radio, and say they threw stones at us, then someone would be

arrested, they'd start investigating him... There was a policewoman, she was bored, so okay, she said they threw stones at her. They asked her who threw them. 'I don't know, two in grey shirts, I didn't manage to see them.' They catch two guys with grey shirts... beat them. Is it them? 'No, I don't think so.' Okay, a whole incident, people get beaten up. Nothing happened that day."

An education noncommissioned officer from the Border Guard took her officers for a Sunday of culture – a show in Tel Aviv. When they got back to their base in the Gaza Strip, they were appalled by the dissonance – one moment they're clapping in a theater, the next moment they're acting like beasts.

"Crossing the checkpoint, it's like another world... Palestinians walk with trolleys on the side of the road, with wagons, donkeys... so the Border Guards take a truck with the remains of food and start throwing it at them... cottage cheese, rotten vegetables... it was the most appalling thing I experienced in the territories."

The soldier said she tried to protest, but was silenced by the commanding officers. When she tried to go around them to higher authorities, she found a solution. "Almost immediately I got into an officers' course."

### **'You don't know which side you're on'**

Some of the testimonies document incidents of vandalism of Palestinian property, and even theft. The same female soldier who recounted her time at the Erez checkpoint said, "Many times the soldiers would open the Palestinians' food."

### **And would they take it as well?**

"Yes. They take things all the time at checkpoints in the territories. You'll never see a soldier without musabaha (chickpea past similar to hummus). And that is something they give many times... They are so desperate to pass that they even sort of bribe the soldiers a little..."

A female Border Guard officer spoke of how Palestinian children would arrive at checkpoints with bags of toys for sale – and how the Border Guard would deal with them: "Okay, throw the bag away. Oh, I need some batteries,' and they would take, they would take whatever they wanted."

### **What would they take?**

"Toys, batteries, anything... cigarettes. I'm sure they took money as well, but I don't remember that specifically." She also spoke of one incident in which the looting was caught by a television camera, and the affair blew up. "Then, the company commander gathered us and reprimanded us: 'How did you not think they might see you?'" No one was punished: "Really, it was an atmosphere in which we were allowed to hit and humiliate."

Some of the gravest stories come from Hebron. A Sachlav female soldier spoke of one of the company's hobbies: Toy guns. "Those plastic pellets really hurt... we had a bunch of those... you're sitting on guard and 'tak' you fire at a kid, 'tak' – you fire at another kid."

She recounted an incident in which a Palestinian reporter took a picture of one of the soldiers aiming a gun at a boy's head. She said a "special patrol" went into Hebron, and came back with the pictures. The soldier said they either paid the reporter, or threatened her.

**And the pictures were circulated in the company?**

"No, they were destroyed the same day."

**What did the company commander say about it?**

"He said it's a good thing they didn't reach the IDF Spokesperson's Unit."



**Company commander reprimands, but no one punished (Photo: Reuters)**

Some of the testimonies from Hebron deal with the difficult position the soldiers find themselves in, between Palestinians and settlers – who they say are even harder to handle. Some of the female soldiers were shocked with the level of violence the settlers' children used against the Palestinians. "They would throw stones at them, the Jewish kids," a Nahal female soldier said, "and the parents would say anything... you see this every day in Tel Rumeida."

### **Doesn't it seem strange to you that one child throws a stone at another child?**

"Because the one child is Jewish and the other is Palestinians, it's somehow okay... and it was obvious that there would be a mess afterwards. And you also don't really know which side you are on... I have to make a switch in my head and keep hating the Arabs and justify the Jews."

In her frustration, the same female soldier told of how she once spit on a Palestinian in the street: "I don't think he even did anything. But again, it was cool and it was the only thing I could do to... you know, I couldn't take brag that I caught a terrorists... But I could spit on them and degrade them and laugh at them."

Another female Sachlav soldier told the story of the time an eight-year-old settler girl in Hebron decided to bash a stone into the head of a Palestinian adult crossing her passing by her in the street. "Boom! She jumped on him, and gave it to him right here in the head... then she started screaming 'Yuck, yuck, his blood is on me'".

The soldier said the Palestinian then turned in the girl's direction – a move that was interpreted as a threat by one of the soldiers in the area, who added a punch of his own: "And I stood there horrified... an innocent little girl in her Shabbat dress... the Arab covered the wound with his hand and ran." She recalled another incident with the same child: "I remember she had her brother in the stroller, a baby. She was giving him stones and telling him: 'Throw them at the Arab'."

### **9-year-old shot to death**

Other testimonies raise concerns as to the procedures of opening fire in the territories, particularly crowd control weapons. A female Border Guard detailed to protocol she called "dismantling rubber" – the dismantling of rubber bullets from clusters of three to single bullets, and

peeling the rubber off of them. She also said that, despite the clear orders to fire in the air or at the demonstrators' feet, it was common procedure to fire at the abdomen.

A female Border Guard officer in Jenin spoke of an incident in which a nine-year-old Palestinian, who tried to climb the fence, failed, and fled – was shot to death: "They fired... when he was already in the territories and posed no danger. The hit was in the abdomen area, they claimed he was on a bicycle and so they were unable to hit him in the legs."

But the soldier was most bewildered by what happened next between the four soldiers present: "They immediately got their stories straight... An investigation was carried out, at first they said it was an unjustified killing... In the end they claimed that he was checking out escape routes for terrorists or something... and they closed the case."

A female intelligence soldier who served near Etzion recounted an incident in which snipers killed a boy suspected of throwing a Molotov cocktail. The soldiers coordinated their stories, and the female soldier was shocked, mainly by the happy atmosphere that surrounding the incident: "It was written in the situation evaluation after the incident that from now on there will be quiet... This is the best kind of deterrence."

### **'They don't know how to accept the women'**

The female soldiers repeatedly mention the particular difficulties they had as women, who had to prove that to were "fighters" in the midst of the goading male soldiers on the one hand, and the Palestinians, who have a hard time handling women in uniform on the other hand. The following story of a female Border Guard officer sums the matter up.

When the interviewer asked her if the Palestinians "suffer even more from the women in the Border Guard", she said: "Yes. Yes. Because they don't know how to accept the women. The moment a girl slaps a man, he is so humiliated, he is so humiliated he doesn't know what to do with himself... I am a strong and well-built girl, and this is even harder for them to handle. So one of their ways of coping is to laugh. They really just started to laugh at me. The commander looks at me and tells me, 'What? Are you going to let that slide? Look how he's laughing at you'.

"And you, as someone who has to salvage your self-respect... I told them to sit down and I told him to come... I told him to come close, I really approached him, as if I was about to kiss him. I told him, 'Come, come, what are you afraid of? Come to me!' And I hit him in the balls. I told

him, 'Why aren't you laughing?' He was in shock, and then he realized that... not to laugh. It shouldn't reach such a situation."

**You hit him with your knee?**

"I hit him in the balls. I took my foot, with my military show, and hit him in the balls. I don't know if you've ever been hit in the balls, but it looks like it hurts. He stopped laughing in my face because it hurt him. We then took him to a police station and I said to myself, 'Wow, I'm really going to get in trouble now.' He could complain about me and I could receive a complaint at the Military police's criminal investigation division.

"He didn't say a word. I was afraid and I said. I was afraid about myself, not about him. But he didn't say a word. 'What should I say, that a girl hit me?' And he could have said, but thank God, three years later I didn't get anything and no one knows about it."

What did it feel like that moment?

"Power, strength that I should not have achieved this way. But I didn't brag about it. That's why I did it that way, one on one. I told them to sit on the side, I saw that he wasn't looking. I said to myself that it doesn't make sense that as a girl who gives above and beyond and is worth more than some boys – they should laugh at me like that because I am a girl. Because you think I can't do it..."

**Today, when you look at it three years later, would you have done things differently?**

"I would change the system. It's seriously defective."

**What does that mean?**

"The system is deeply flawed. The entire administration, the way things are run, it's not right. I don't know how I would... I don't think I did the right thing in this incident but it was what I had to do. It's inevitable under these circumstances."

**You're saying the small soldiers on the ground are not the problem, but the whole situation surrounding them?**

"Yes, this entire situation is problematic."

**The Israel Defense Forces Spokesperson's Office said in response to the publication:** "These are anonymous testimonies, without any mention of a time or a place, and their reliability cannot be examined in any way. The IDF is a controlled state organization, which learns and draws lessons, and cooperates with any serious body with the shared goal of exhausting any inquiry when such an examination is inquired.

"The forces in the Central Command are engaged in a daily battle against the terror organizations. The soldiers undergo a professional training which includes a special reference to the contact with the Palestinian population, mental preparation led by professionals, a routine training by their commanders and ongoing control.

"Another aspect in the supervision over the IDF's activity is the investigative-legal aspect. The IDF includes a number of bodies whose job it is to probe incidents in which any activity against the orders is suspected. Appealing to these bodies is the right, but also the duty, of any soldier or commander, who feels that any activity is being done against orders. Female soldiers and commanders receive the same training given to the fighters."

<http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3841480,00.html>

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