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(insurgent)
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Israeli soldiers tell of indiscriminate killings by army and a culture of impunity [Post [293943371](#)]

Category: News & Opinion (Specific) **Topic:** Warfare and Conflict: Israel-Palestine

Synopsis:

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Whistleblowers' testimony shows desire for revenge on Palestinians

Conal Urquhart in Tel Aviv
Tuesday September 6, 2005
The Guardian

From a distance of 70 metres and through the sight of his machine gun, Assaf could tell that the Palestinian man was aged between 20 and 30, unarmed and trying to get away from an Israeli tank. But the details didn't matter much, because Assaf's orders were to "fire at anything that moved".

Assaf, a soldier in the Israeli army, pressed the trigger, firing scores of bullets as the body fell to the ground. "He ran and I started shooting for a few seconds. He fell. I was a machine. I fire. I leave and that's that. We never spoke about it afterwards."

It was the summer of 2002, and Assaf and his armoured unit had been ordered to enter the Gaza town of Dir al Balah following the firing of mortars into nearby Jewish settlements. His orders were, he told the Guardian, "'Every person you see on the street, kill him'. And we would just do it."

It was not the first time that Assaf had killed an innocent person in Gaza while following orders, but after his discharge he began to think about the things he did.

"The reason why I am telling you this is that I want the army to think about what they are asking us to do, shooting unarmed people. I don't think it's legal."

Assaf is not alone. In recent months dozens of soldiers, including the son of an Israeli general, all recently discharged, have come forward to share their stories of how they were ordered in briefings to shoot to kill unarmed people without fear of reprimand.

The soldiers were brought into contact with the Guardian with the assistance of Breaking the Silence, a pressure group of former soldiers who want the Israeli public to confront the reality of army activities. The group insisted on anonymity of its witnesses to protect the soldiers from persecution and prosecution.

Although those speaking out are a tiny proportion, their testimonies reflect a widespread culture of impunity, according to Sarit Michaeli of the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem.

"During the first intifada, there were printed rules of engagement. In the second there are none and what rules exist are kept secret. This leaves a wide scope for interpretation for officers and soldiers," she said.

According to B'Tselem, 3,269 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces in almost five years. About 1,700 are believed to have been civilians and 654 minors.

According to the army, over the same period it has investigated 131 cases of soldiers misusing firearms, resulting in 18 indictments and seven convictions. As a result of the testimonies received by the Guardian and Breaking the Silence, army prosecutors are looking at a further 17 cases of alleged criminal activity.

The death toll, the testimony of the soldiers and the small number of convictions appear to contradict the Israeli army's stated aims. "Soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property," the Israeli Defence Forces website says.

The doctrine of the IDF clearly places the rule of law above military expediency. "IDF soldiers will be meticulous in giving only lawful orders and shall refrain from obeying blatantly illegal orders."

Despite his qualms about legality, Assaf says he would carry out the same orders again when he returns to reserve duty.

Another soldier, Moshe, told the Guardian he and his colleagues came under pressure to obey illegal shoot-to-kill orders. As part of his sergeant's training course, he and his fellow trainees were ordered to set up ambushes in Jenin in May 2003. He said there was "pressure to get kills".

Before the operation, the soldiers were briefed that they were on the lookout for armed men. But their targets also included children and teenagers who habitually climbed on armoured personnel carriers as they lumbered through the narrow streets. On a few occasions, machine guns had been stolen from APCs.

"We were expressly told that we were just waiting for someone to climb on an APC, and ordered to shoot to kill," said Moshe. "After a day or two, a 12-year-old climbed on one of the APCs. There were a lot of guesses about his age. First they

said he was eight, later that he was 12. In any case, he climbed on an APC, and one of our sharpshooters killed him. The neighbouring company also had an incident with a kid or teenager who was killed."

The statistics collected by the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group show that on May 14, Diya Gawadreh, 13, was killed by a live bullet. Kamal Amjad Nawahda, 13, was shot by Israeli soldiers on May 22. He died on May 27.

After Moshe returned to his paratroop unit, he said there were several incidents when children and teenagers were killed after bullets aimed at their legs hit their chests. The attitude was, he said, "so kids got killed. For a soldier it means nothing. An officer can get a 100 or 200 shekel [£12.50-£25] fine for such a thing."

A common theme in the soldiers' testimony was the desire to avenge Israeli casualties and inflict collective punishment on Palestinians.

May 2004 was a bad month for the Israeli army in Gaza. Four soldiers were blown to pieces when their explosive-laden APC hit a roadside bomb in Gaza City. As the army took over, another seven soldiers were killed in a similar incident in Rafah, at the other end of Gaza. In response the army launched an operation "to secure the neighbourhood along the Philadelphi Road [the border between Gaza and Egypt] and to make sure they are clean from terrorists," said Major General Dan Harel, the local commander.

Thousands of Palestinians were expelled from their homes, and around 50 died, of whom between a quarter and a half were civilians. According to Rafi, an officer in the Shaldag, an elite unit connected to the air force, the whole mission was about revenge. "The commanders said kill as many people as possible," he said.

He and his men were ordered to shoot anyone who appeared to be touching the ground, as if they might be placing a roadside bomb, or anyone seen on a roof or a balcony, as if they might be observing Israeli forces for military reasons, regardless of whether they were armed.

Asma Moghayyer, 16, and her brother Ahmed, 13, were shot as they went to collect clothes from a rooftop washing line. The Israeli army insisted the children had been blown up by a roadside bomb. However, journalists visiting the morgue saw only single bullet wounds to the head.

The truth, said Rafi, was that they were shot by an Israeli soldier following clear orders to shoot anyone on a roof regardless of their role in the conflict.

Rafi says that his overriding impression of the operation was "chaos" and the "indiscriminate use of force". "Gaza was considered a playground for sharpshooters."

Eli, a staff sergeant in the paratroopers, was sent on an arrest mission to Askar refugee camp in Nablus on November 27 2002, during Ramadan. He saw another squad of troops notice a man on the street in the early morning. "They shouted, 'Wakef' [stop in Arabic]. The man started running away; they started shooting at him, chasing him.

"They also saw this object he was carrying and feared it was a bomb. [They] shot him and verified the kill - threw a grenade at him, and then shot him once more in the head," he recounted.

The man, 24-year-old Jihad Mohammed al-Natour, was carrying a drum with which to wake the camp before dawn so that they could eat before beginning their fast. It is a traditional role. The drummer is known as the musaharati. "No one bothered telling us and for that the guy died," Eli told Breaking the Silence.

The wave of suicide bombings that began in 2001 made many soldiers feel that their families and country were under serious attack and helped create a culture where army crimes were not questioned.

In testimony to the group, Avi recounted how a soldier in his unit was allowed to get away with the murder of an innocent Palestinian. A staff sergeant in the paratroopers, Avi was serving in Hebron on October 13 2000 when he heard one of his men firing from the lookout position above him. "We knew the man was crazy ... out of his mind," he said.

The soldier denied shooting, but was contradicted by a film made by an intelligence unit. "You see a live video recording of someone shooting towards the square - towards someone who was just unloading some stuff from his vehicle. A twentysomething-year-old ... The man is being hit in the back. A day later we were told he died."

The man was Mansur Taha Ahmed, 21, a coffee merchant, who left a wife and three children. Avi said: "We keep our dirty laundry inside, so the company commander decided to silence this event. He made the [video] cassette vanish and the soldier had to do 35 days of chores ... after which he came back to the company."

All the soldiers, with the exception of Assaf, were shocked by their experiences but uncertain of how to act. "The belief in the ethics of the Israeli army is so fundamental to Israeli society," said Rafi. "People do not want to hear the reality."

Colonel Liron Libman, the chief military prosecutor, said testimonies brought to light by Breaking the Silence had resulted in 17 investigations, some of which were still going on. Investigation of the testimonies, he said, revealed that some were exaggerated and some relied on hearsay. However, the incidents described to the Guardian and Breaking the Silence by the soldiers match deaths recorded by human rights groups and in the media.

Col Libman said his department was independent of the army and that a criminal investigation could be triggered by media reports, non-governmental organisations, Palestinian sources and complaints from within the army. "However, because of the nature of the situation, which we describe as armed conflict short of war, it is not possible to investigate the death of every Palestinian civilian."

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Horrific. These types of military murders are also going on all over Iraq. The US and Israel are in it together.

"They made themselves a fearful monument! The wreck of old opinions ..." Lord Byron, 1816 - he must have been writing about LF.

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Here we have a group of individuals who just confessed to murder.

clayman

We offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the hills, but they shrank from bearing it and were afraid of it. Yet man assumed it. How he has proven a tyrant and a fool.

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The IDF are not soldiers; they're murderers. And so are those who support them in any way.

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