

Israeli soldiers reveal official “shoot to kill” policy towards Palestinian civilians

Rick Kelly
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A number of Israeli soldiers have provided statements to the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain confirming the existence of a military policy of inflicting indiscriminate murders and reprisals against the Palestinian people.

The testimonies, published September 6, provide a damning insight into the brutal realities of the Israeli occupation, and again highlight the criminal character of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s government.

The troops contacted the newspaper through a support group for former soldiers, *Shovrim Shtika* (Breaking the Silence), and asked to be identified only by their first names due to fear of prosecution and persecution. Despite the significance of the *Guardian*’s report, the international media has largely ignored the story.

One soldier named Assaf entered the Gaza town of Dir al Balah with his armoured unit in the summer of 2002 and was ordered to “fire at anything that moved”. He told the *Guardian* that the orders were, “‘Every person you see on the street, kill him.’ And we would just do it.” Assaf described how he shot dead a young unarmed Palestinian man who was attempting to get away from an Israeli tank.

“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,” he explained. “I don’t think it’s legal.”

Another soldier, Moshe, told how he was ordered to set up ambushes in Jenin, a West Bank refugee camp, in May 2003. There was “pressure to get kills,” he related. The troops were also ordered to wait for any children or teenagers to climb onto Israeli military vehicles before killing them. In one incident Moshe witnessed, a boy he thought to be aged between 8 and 12 was killed by an Israeli sniper.

The soldier explained how there was a general culture of impunity within his unit, including with regard to the killing of Palestinian children. The attitude was, “so kids get killed,” he said. “For a soldier it means nothing. An officer can get a 100 or 200 shekel [\$US22 or \$US44] fine for such a thing.”

A number of troops described how the orders they received were issued with the explicit intent of inflicting

collective punishment on the Palestinian people. In May 2004, Israeli forces launched an operation in southern Gaza that resulted in the expulsion of thousands of Palestinians from their homes, and the deaths of 50 Palestinians, up to half of whom were civilians (see: “Israel escalates war of terror in Gaza”).

Rafi, an officer in an elite unit connected to the air force, told how the entire mission was about revenge. “The commanders said kill as many people as possible,” he said.

Orders were also given to kill anyone seen on the rooftops of homes, irrespective of what they were doing or whether they were armed. Among the casualties were Asma Moghayyer, aged 16, and her brother Ahmed, 13, who were shot as they were collecting clothes from their rooftop washing line. Rafi described how his impression of the operation was “chaos” and the “indiscriminate use of force”. “Gaza was considered a playground for sharpshooters,” he said.

In other incidents, senior commanders covered up evidence of murder. Avi, a staff sergeant in the paratroopers, was serving in Hebron in October 2000, when one of his men shot Mansur Taha Ahmed, a 21-year-old unarmed Palestinian, in the back. Ahmed was married and had three children.

“We knew the man was crazy ... out of his mind,” Avi said, referring to the Israeli soldier who committed the shooting. Despite an Israeli video recording of the crime, the soldier was never prosecuted. “We keep our dirty laundry inside, so the company commander decided to silence the event,” Avi told the *Guardian*. “He made the [video] cassette vanish and the soldier had to do 35 days of chores ... after which he came back to the company.”

Other ex-soldiers spoke with Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio on September 5. Former platoon commander Yehuda Shaul described how he was ordered to fire grenades into the Palestinian Abu Sneineh residential neighbourhood in Hebron. “It’s not a game, it’s a grenade machine gun,” he said. “I did it every night for three... almost three months. Every night around 50 grenades inside

a neighbourhood. That was my first experience in Hebron.”

Aharon Blemker served during Israel’s “Operation Defensive Shield” invasion of the West Bank three years ago. As well as explaining how snipers murdered unarmed civilians, the former staff sergeant told how soldiers engaged in petty theft. “After a while people start stealing things,” he said. “In the beginning it’s just souvenirs, it goes onto stealing cigarettes and then to stealing money. We never stopped to think about it. We never talked about is it wrong or not, we just did it, and people started after a while beating people up just for fun.”

The Israeli military has opened 17 separate investigations in response to the testimonies publicised by Breaking the Silence. Colonel Liron Libman, the chief military prosecutor, nevertheless sought to cast doubt on the evidence, claiming that initial enquiries found that some of the soldier’s statements were exaggerated and others reliant on hearsay. This assertion is contradicted by the fact that the incidents described by the dissenting troops have been corroborated by casualties recorded by human rights groups and the international media.

“[B]ecause of the nature of the situation, which we describe as armed conflict short of war,” Libman continued, “it is not possible to investigate the death of every Palestinian civilian.”

This callous statement is again indicative of the culture of impunity and lawlessness that has been promoted within the Israeli military, and more broadly within the Zionist state, towards the Palestinian people. While some of the military investigations may result in the prosecution of individual soldiers, such action will inevitably be aimed at scapegoating lower ranking troops, and obscuring the more far-reaching conclusions that must be drawn.

More than 3,200 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces since the beginning of the second intifada in September 2000; over half of these were civilians, and according to the Israeli peace group B’Tselem, 654 were minors. Any serious investigation into who bears responsibility for this terrible death toll would have to begin not with the Israeli soldiers involved, but with the Likud-Labour coalition government led by Sharon.

Sharon came to power promising a tough crackdown on the Palestinian people, following the eruption of the intifada sparked by his provocative visit to the Al Aqsa mosque. The Likud leader has based his entire political career on provocations and military repression in the territories under Israeli occupation, and his term in office has been marked by an unrelenting assault against the Palestinian people.

The abuses and crimes committed by Israeli troops on the ground are a direct consequence of the Sharon government’s policies of house demolitions, property seizures,

assassination campaigns, mass arrests, repressive checkpoints and road closures, and settlement expansion in the Occupied Territories.

And while the Bush administration and Israel’s other international allies have celebrated the evacuation of the Zionist settlers from Gaza as representing a major step towards peace, Sharon’s “unilateral disengagement” manoeuvre has not in any way affected the bloody realities of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory.

On August 24, an undercover Israeli unit entered the West Bank town of Tulkarm and killed five Palestinians, including three teenage boys. Military spokesman later insisted that all five were “terrorists” who had resisted arrest. On September 7, *Haaretz* published the results of a joint investigation it conducted with B’Tselem. The newspaper found that the three teenagers were not members of any militant organisation, nor was one of the older men. The other man killed had been active in Islamic Jihad, but had reportedly left the organisation, and even turned himself in to the Palestinian Authority and slept at police stations for protection.

A number of witnesses contradicted Israeli claims that other militants in the area opened fire and threw Molotov cocktails. The five men had been sitting around an outdoor table in a largely enclosed courtyard. Witnesses reported seeing the Israeli troops open fire on the men before giving them a chance to surrender, and that several victims were subsequently shot at close range by soldiers “confirming” their kill. The military has denied these claims, but announced that an investigation into the incident will be held.



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