

Facebook postings of abuse of Palestinians highlight polarisation of Israeli society

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Photographs showing a young female soldier posing with a smirk on her face in front of blindfolded and handcuffed Palestinian men have sparked anger and outrage in Israel and internationally. Though the press moved to reject the comparison, the shots recalled the pictures of American soldiers posing with Iraqi detainees being tortured at Abu Ghraib prison, which were revealed in 2004.

Eden Abergil, a former conscript, posted the photographs of herself posing with prisoners on Facebook, the social networking site, in an album entitled “Army—the best time of my life”. Most people were disgusted, but some of Abergil’s friends found the photographs amusing.

The photos and Abergil’s comments surfaced after bloggers posted them on the Internet last week. Afterwards, others uploaded similar photos to their Facebook pages, to demonstrate that such abuse and attitudes were widespread.

The *Jerusalem Post* reported that Abergil had written on her Facebook page that she would “gladly kill Arabs—even slaughter them” and that “in war there are no rules,” on her profile page.

According to *Ynet*, the Israeli news web site, Abergil was combative in the face of the media storm and hostile response. “I can’t allow Arab-lovers to ruin the perfect life I lead,” she allegedly wrote. “I am not sorry and I don’t regret it.” “I am in favour of a Jewish-Zionist State,” she added. “I defend what has been rightfully mine for ages”.

When another surfer remonstrated with her over her lack of humanity, Abergil responded: “I’m not humane towards murderers.” Later she wrote, “I hate Arabs and wish them all the worst. I would gladly kill them all and even butcher them; one cannot forget their actions.”

Abergil gave a radio interview defending the photographs and her comments, revealingly stating that it had never occurred to her that “the picture would be problematic,” because lots of soldiers have themselves photographed with Palestinian detainees. When asked whether the photos might harm Israel’s international image, she replied, “We will always be attacked. Whatever we do, we will always be attacked.”

The Israel Defence Force’s initial response to the photographs was to describe them as “base and crude”, while claiming they were an isolated event. As the media storm grew, the IDF described the incident as “shameful”, while a spokesperson said that the photographs were “a serious violation of our morals and ethical code”. The IDF has stripped Abergil of her military rank and excluded her from future reserve duty.

In fact, the debased sentiments expressed by Abergil are not a violation, but an expression of the political code of the Zionist state—which employs military aggression, including against defenceless civilians, as an instrument of policy.

Successive wars and land grabs have deepened an atmosphere of noxious Israeli chauvinism, deliberately cultivated by a religious and ultra-nationalist layer committed to the annexation of more Palestinian-held land into a greater Israel. The logic of Israeli policies—the construction of a barrier walling off Palestinians in the West Bank from Israel, or the mass bombing of civilian targets in Gaza last year—is not fundamentally different from the views of Abergil. It treats the Palestinians as enemies who can be remorselessly targeted for killing.

The recently posted Facebook photos lift a small portion of the veil of political silence that hides the

daily oppression of the Palestinian masses. Palestinians are forced to march blindfolded and handcuffed while under armed guard. They have been subjected to curfews, roadblocks, evictions and house demolitions, detentions without trial, torture and abuse, uprooting of orchard fields, deportations, targeted assassinations and countless military assaults on an unarmed civilian population.

Breaking the Silence, an organisation set up by Israeli soldiers to expose IDF abuse of Palestinians, said that the “norms” the photos exposed were the “necessary result of a long-term military control of a civilian population”.

The organisation has released pictures of Israeli soldiers and border guards alongside blindfolded and handcuffed Palestinian detainees, some of them dead. It has set up a group on Facebook, named “the norm denied by Avi Benayahu [the Israeli military spokesperson]”. It told *Ynet* that it had mounted a new campaign following the Abergil scandal, “in order to show the prevalence of this phenomenon among IDF ranks”.

Breaking the Silence added, “The photographs that had been published are merely the tip of the iceberg. Many people possess thousands of photos, but only a small part is being published ... we turned Eden into a scapegoat, while the norm is what needs to be targeted.”

Opposition to the brutalisation of Palestinians is a major political problem for the Israeli ruling elite and its state forces. Domestic outrage over the photos was widespread. Most posts to Abergil’s and other sites were hostile and some came from soldiers, while a web page supporting Abergil attracted only a couple of hundred subscribers.

Israel requires its young people, both men and women, to serve in the army. For many, it is a brutalising experience, particularly for those who serve in the occupied territories and are required to carry out the military’s humiliation and suppression of the Palestinians. Many young people therefore seek to avoid service in the occupied territories or even conscription altogether.

Poll after poll has shown that the majority of Israelis want an end to the conflict. Numerous Israeli activist groups have arisen to express solidarity against evictions, to expose Israel’s crimes against the

Palestinians, and to provide evidence to the international investigations with which Tel Aviv refuses to cooperate. They have faced accusations of disloyalty, increasing legal constraints on their funding, censorship, and crackdowns.

The response of the military to oppositional sentiment, particularly following the 2009 invasion of Gaza, has been to bring in ultra-nationalist rabbis to promote the suppression of the Palestinians as a religious war. The army’s mission has also found ideological support amongst the settler population and the Israeli right, of which Abergil is clearly a representative. She responded to one hostile comment posted on her site by declaring that she does not talk to “lefties”.

Some soldiers have spoken out against their experiences in the army. Dana Golan told the *Observer* newspaper that she saw elderly Palestinians being humiliated on the streets, “and I thought these could be my parents or grandparents,” and that she was discouraged from reporting army misconduct.

She spoke of her worst moment, when she was part of a nighttime raid on a Palestinian home in search of nonexistent weapons. She said that the small children of the house were terrified and “I thought, what would I feel if I was this four-year-old kid? How would I grow up? At that moment, it occurred to me that sometimes we’re doing things that just create victims.”



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