

Former Israeli soldiers tour US to speak out against occupation of Palestinian territories

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A group of former Israeli combat soldiers are in the midst of a US tour to speak out about the reality of the long-term occupation of the Palestinian territories. The tour, which began in Philadelphia last week, has been organized by Breaking the Silence, an organization of veteran soldiers who “have taken it upon themselves to expose the public to the reality of everyday life in the occupied territories.”

Breaking the Silence was founded in 2004. As explained on its website, “we collect and publish testimonies from soldiers who, like us, have served in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem since September 2000.”

“Soldiers who serve in the territories witness and participate in military actions that change them immensely,” Breaking the Silence reports. “Cases of abuse toward Palestinians, looting and destruction of property have been the norm for years, but these incidents are still described officially as ‘extreme’ and ‘unique’ cases. Our testimonies portray a different—and much grimmer—picture, in which the deterioration of moral standards finds expression in the character of the military orders and rules of engagement that the state considers justified in the name of Israel’s security.”

The organization holds lectures and other events, conducts tours in Hebron and the South Hebron Hills in the West Bank, and collects testimonies, including video testimonies, from soldiers who have served in the territories. It has collected such testimonies from more than 1,000 Israeli soldiers; a reflection of the growing disenchantment, especially among young people and those who have seen the reality of occupation, over what has become a permanent and vicious assault on the fundamental rights of the Palestinian people in the lands occupied by Israel after the 1967 War.

The statements from the soldiers are all “meticulously

researched,” confirmed by other witnesses, and cross-checked. Most of the soldiers ask for anonymity, due to pressures from within the military as well as outside.

Breaking the Silence has been denounced as “unpatriotic” and “traitors” inside Israel, and has faced what it describes as “violent intimidation and persecution.” While it has brought delegations of Israeli veterans to the US frequently, the current tour is the first featuring “lone soldiers,” the *Haaretz* website reports. This term describes soldiers whose families live outside Israel. About 3,500 are serving in the Israeli army at any one time, with about one-third of these coming from the US.

The current tour, which includes 20 events in New York, Philadelphia, the Boston area, St. Louis and Washington D.C., features six former soldiers who are all originally from the US. Their trip has received almost no coverage in the American mainstream media.

Haaretz interviews a number of the soldiers on the US tour, including Nathan Hersh, who now lives in Philadelphia. Hersh states that his tour of duty in the West Bank revealed that “this was more about protecting the [Jewish] communities in the West Bank than about protecting the state ... All of a sudden, it was about nonlethal enforcement, about interrupting traffic and about arresting people in the middle of the night.”

The former soldiers explain, in a letter published by Breaking the Silence, “All of our experience—from things that felt ethically gray to the moral wrongs that keep us up at night—were the result of policies that are integral to the occupation and settlement enterprise.” They describe their tasks in the West Bank: “Patrolling Palestinian towns and cities, ‘making our presence felt’ by raiding homes in the middle of the night, arresting Palestinian youth and using riot gear to disperse demonstrations.”

Many of the feelings and motivations of the Israeli soldiers are similar to those of the US GIs whose experience in Vietnam drove them to rebel against the war and support the antiwar movement. Their aim is confined, however, to ending the occupation, which for them is bound up with attempting to awaken liberal public opinion, both in Israel and the US.

This is connected to the work of J Street, the liberal Zionist lobby in the US which has criticized Israeli policies, and the Netanyahu government in particular, and has won some support among younger US Jews as well as within the Democratic Party. In opposition to the free “Birthright” tours to Israel offered to young American Jews by the right-wing Zionist establishment, for instance, J Street has begun offering tours that include visits to the occupied West Bank. Breaking the Silence presented its own photo exhibit at the annual J Street conference held in Washington in late October.

J Street and other Zionists fearful or repelled by the crimes committed daily in the occupied territories have no alternative to offer, however. They attempt to separate the defense of the Zionist state from the occupation, but the growth of the settlements and the virtual veto power exercised by the ultra-right settler leadership in Israeli politics express the logic of Zionism itself.

The former soldiers are correctly exposing the apartheid-like oppression they have been told to enforce, and their testimony reflects the growing opposition both within Israel and in the US, including among American Jews, to the de facto annexation of the West Bank, in the context of more than 50 years of occupation.

It is necessary, nonetheless, to draw deeper conclusions. The occupation, with settlers now numbering more than 622,000 (including East Jerusalem), is itself an outlet for the growing class tensions within Israel itself. The Zionist state, established through the dispossession of the Palestinian people, has only been able to maintain its grip through a combination of massive financial and military support from US imperialism, along with the cultivation of an openly fascist layer within Israel itself, and within the settler leadership.

As the soldiers point out, the conditions they reveal are not the result of “bad apples,” but are rather “integral to the occupation.” But the occupation is

integral to the Zionist state, and none of the feeble attempts to resuscitate the moribund “two-state solution” can change that historical fact.

As the WSWs observed several years ago, “A garrison state maintained by an unending flow of military and economic support from world Zionism and US imperialism has only temporarily masked the explosive class tensions within Israel, which are bound to explode in the not too distant future.” The answer to the crimes exposed by the Israeli “lone soldiers” can only be the fight to unite Arab and Jewish workers in a common struggle against the capitalist nation-state system and in the fight for socialism.



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