

Breaking Ranks: Inside Israel's War

Israeli soldiers document war crimes against Palestinians in Gaza

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ITV, a British TV terrestrial channel, has screened a 75-minute documentary presenting first-hand accounts of the Israel-Hamas war by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) veterans and reservists who have served in the conflict.

Their testimonies are first-hand accounts of war crimes perpetrated by the self-proclaimed “the most moral army in the world”, flatly contradicting the IDF’s insistence that it operates in accordance with international law and takes measures to minimise civilian harm in its genocidal assault on Gaza.

Breaking Ranks: Inside Israel's war, produced by Matan Cohen and directed by the award-winning British Iranian filmmaker Ben Zand, presents valuable evidence of Israel’s crimes. But it is nevertheless limited. Showing film of the October 7 attack, it accepts the narrative of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that this supposedly entirely unforeseen event was the cause of the now two-year long war of annihilation, failing to mention he had been given numerous warnings that attack was imminent, and he had stood down the security forces.

The documentary provides no historical context to the plight of the Palestinians in general and that of Gaza in particular, who have for decades suffered wars, ethnic cleansing and dispossession at the hands of the Zionist state. It does not explain that since taking office in December 2022, Netanyahu’s far-right government, aided and abetted by gangs of fascist settlers, launched one provocation after another aimed at eliciting precisely such a retaliation by the Palestinians that could be used to justify an all-out war on the Palestinians. Much less, does the documentary place the war in the broader context of US imperialism’s plans to reorganise the resource-rich Middle East in its own interests, using Israel as its attack dog to fight “wars on seven fronts”.

In essence, *Breaking Ranks* presents the war as a just one that got out of hand.

It shows footage of the war and the destruction of Gaza; excerpts from key speeches by Netanyahu, his former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant demonstrating genocidal intent and by President Isaac Herzog claiming that “It is an entire nation out there that is responsible” for the October 7 attack on Israel; interviews with an Israeli law professor from Haifa University who set out the international law on warfare and the way that

the IDF conduct potentially departed from it; soldiers’ video clips of incidents in Gaza; as well as drawings to illustrate some of the events they described.

Crucially, however, it cites the recollections of veteran soldiers and reservists who willingly, even enthusiastically, signed up to serve in the IDF’s genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza after the October 7 attack, amid frenzied calls for bloody revenge.

Some 10,000 Palestinians were killed in the three weeks of October 2023 alone amid a “sense of excitement and satisfaction”. One month later, the scale of destruction had surpassed the saturation bombing of Dresden by Britain’s Royal Air Force in World War II.

However, their views changed as the war proceeded, particularly after Israel broke the ceasefire agreed in January this year. They recount the “indiscriminate bombardment, instances where Palestinian civilians were used as human shields, and an operational culture that some soldiers characterized as ‘no innocents in Gaza.’” They question the decisions made by their commanders and reveal the hidden realities of a war largely shielded from public view internationally and especially within Israel where filthy propaganda is ubiquitous.

While some spoke to camera directly, some chose to obscure their faces. They all spoke of the way the official code of conduct concerning civilians was disregarded.

Daniel, the commander of an IDF tank unit, said the rhetoric declaring there were no innocents in Gaza seeped down into army ranks. “You hear that all the time, so you start to believe it,” he said. “If you want to shoot without restraint, you can”.

Some extremist rabbis also pushed this line, with Rabbi Avraham Zarbiv, saying, “Everything there is one big terrorist infrastructure.” He claimed credit for pioneering a tactic adopted by the IDF as a whole—the mass purchase of armoured bulldozers to level the damaged and destroyed buildings.

Major Neta Caspin said, “One time, the brigade rabbi sat down next to me and spent half an hour explaining why we must be just like they were on October 7. That we must take revenge on all of them, including civilians. That we shouldn’t discriminate, and that this is the only way.”

Captain Yotam Vilk, an armoured corps officer, said, “In

basic training for the army, we all chanted ‘means, intent and ability’ in reference to the official IDF training guidelines stipulating that a soldier can fire only if the target has the means, shows intent and has the ability to cause harm”. But, he added, “There’s no such thing as ‘means, intent and ability’ in Gaza. No soldier ever mentions ‘means, intent, and ability’. It’s just a suspicion of walking where it’s not allowed. A man aged between 20 and 40.”

Eli, another soldier, said, “Life and death isn’t determined by procedures or opening fire regulations. It’s the conscience of the commander on the ground that decides” who is an enemy or terrorist. He explained, “If they’re walking too fast, they’re suspicious. If they’re walking too slow, they’re suspicious. They’re plotting something. If three men are walking and one of them lags behind, it’s a two-to-one infantry formation – it’s a military formation”.

Eli described how a senior officer ordered a tank to demolish a building in an area designated as safe for civilians, saying, “A man was standing on the roof, hanging laundry, and the officer decided that he was a spotter. He’s not a spotter. He’s hanging his laundry. You can see that he’s hanging laundry. Now, it’s not as if this man had binoculars or weapons. The closest military force was 600-700 metres away. So, unless he had eagle eyes, how could he possibly be a spotter? And the tank fired a shell. The building half collapsed. And the result was many dead and wounded.”

The soldiers gave evidence about the use of Palestinian civilians as human shields, known as the “mosquito protocol”. Daniel said, “You send the human shield underground. As he walks down the tunnel, he maps it all for you. He has an iPhone in his vest and as he walks it sends back GPS information. The commanders saw how it works. And the practice spread like wildfire. After about a week, every company was operating its own mosquito.”

He said later, “I feel like they’ve destroyed all my pride in being an Israeli – in being an IDF officer. All that’s left is shame.”

Sam, a contractor who worked at food distribution sites run by the Gaza Humanitarian Fund, said he witnessed the IDF killing unarmed civilians. Describing an incident at one distribution site where two young men were running in the general rush to get aid, he said, “You could just see two soldiers run after them. They drop on to their knees and they just take two shots, and you could just see... two heads snap backwards and just drop.” In another incident, an IDF tank near one of the distribution sites destroys “a normal car... just four normal people sat inside it”.

The documentary also gives a voice to the Palestinians, which is important given the lack of on-the-ground reporting by the international media. Israel banned foreign journalists from entering Gaza independently since October 2023 and the IDF has killed at least 250 journalists, reporters and cameramen.

Matan Cohen, the producer who interviews the soldiers,

explains, “The ability to expose the reality of what happened on the ground in this horrific situation is what journalism is for. These testimonies shine a light on actions and decisions that the world was never meant to see, and they challenge us to confront what really happens in conflict when accountability is lost.”

Their testimonies confirm countless reports of the savagery of the Israeli forces. Notably, former IDF chief Herzi Halevi recently acknowledged that more than 200,000 Palestinians had been killed or injured, saying, “We took the gloves off” and that “not once” had legal advice constrained their military decisions in Gaza.

The soldiers’ statements also testify to the impunity with which the IDF operates, despite constant claims that allegations of criminality are always investigated.

The IDF’s military advocate Maj. Gen. Yifat Tomer-Yerushalmi has brought no prosecutions against soldiers for killing civilians in Gaza, even after high-profile attacks that have prompted international outrage and were clearly in breach of international humanitarian law, including the killing of hundreds of medical and health care workers and 562 aid workers, according to the UN Human Rights Office, not to mention tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians.

According to a report in *The Guardian* last August, the IDF’s military advocate said the IDF had launched 74 criminal investigations into alleged misconduct by soldiers since the start of assault on Gaza, including 52 relating to deaths and mistreatment of detainees, 13 to theft of enemy ammunition, 3 relating to the “destruction of civilian property without military necessity” and 6 concerning the “alleged illegal use of force”.

Very few of these resulted in formal charges: five reservist soldiers were charged with aggravated abuse and causing serious bodily harm to a Palestinian detainee at the Sde Teiman detention facility, downgraded from initial allegations of rape, one soldier was sentenced to seven months in prison for abusing detainees and two were dismissed after a strike killed seven aid workers from World Central Kitchen.

Just last week, there was uproar after Tomer-Yerushalmi, the IDF’s top lawyer, revealed that it was she who leaked the infamous video in August 2024 of soldiers raping a blindfolded Palestinian detainee and causing serious injuries. She became the target of a right-wing campaign of vilification, arrest and possible prosecution.



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