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# The Battle of the Truth

## *The Role of Israel Defence Forces in Polarised Discourses Today*

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# Abstract

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) is a significant symbol of Jewish culture, and of the Jewish people's persistence and resistance. Based on fieldwork in Jerusalem and interviews with IDF veterans, I look at how the lived experience of serving in the IDF influence ideological discourses of today. Different historical narratives of the creation of the contemporary State of Israel are considered, and an in depth look at what 'Jewishness' is. Identity, individual and collective, play major roles in ideological discourses, and you are both shaped by the discourses, as well as shaping them. After completing their conscription, IDF veterans are left with a variety of views and opinions on the morality of the Israel Defence Forces and their actions. I look more closely at two veteran organisations, Breaking the Silence and My Truth, where I find that albeit very similar experiences and backgrounds, the personal experiences of service and the ideology that is learned in the IDF has influenced them to become polar opposites in the Battle of the Truth.

# Acknowledgements

# Introduction

"I believe there is an absolute truth. … There are historical facts, and someone may say something else happened, but facts are facts. … There are facts, the truth, then narratives and opinions. There is a history, which are facts, the truth. Others may say other – incorrect – things happened. … If you say others also have a truth, you've already picked a side. Using terms like Palestinian, West Bank, Occupation, you have already picked a side." – David

In 2019 I spent 6 months conducting fieldwork in Israel. Arriving in Jerusalem in January I was set to look into different conceptions of childhood and I was especially interested in speaking to soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) about this. I could not get myself to believe they were all the monsters enjoying shooting children that they were often portrayed as (Pells, 2017; Times of Israel, 2019). However, I quickly realised this was not a topic anyone was really interested in speaking about, nor did they have many opinions on it. This was of course interesting in itself, however a topic that stood out during my time in Israel was the clear divide between the ideological discourses of 'pro-Israel' and 'anti-Occupation', or 'anti-Israel', positions.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 men and women, all but three who had served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), and in all the interviews, this topic came up one way or another. Some were firmly attached to one side; others were more concerned with the polarisation and problems this was causing. It was particularly dominant in the conversations relating to understandings of Israel as

demonised by the United Nations and how the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, aiming to create awareness and impose economical strain on Israel through boycotts, divestments by companies and sanctions for violations of international law, and other international 'anti-Israel' communities were attacking Israel. I started to realise that this specific topic was all-around at all times. It was not something I had prepared for beforehand, but it was predominant in the meetings with participants and society through different organisations and individuals. To better understand either side of this divide, I attended tours, lectures, and seminars from different actors with different perspectives on Israel.

There were also several of the participants who were on the 'other' side of this discourse, that considered the international media, the UN and NGOs to be correct. Who was right? Who was wrong? How do you know what the truth is? Is what I have learned of the history correct? Is it biased? Does everyone have an agenda? What is my agenda? I needed to find out more.

As I had expected, several of the participants were also concerned with how Israeli soldiers were portrayed by this anti-Israel community, as mentioned above often as 'monsters', and had a strong need to tell their stories and make their voices heard. Common amongst these participants was a strong sense of belonging to the IDF. They had been formed as individuals in their years serving, and they felt that the IDF was a crucial part of Israeli society and the construction of an Israeli and/or Jewish identity. The participants who were concerned with this, were also the ones most attached to the 'pro-Israeli' side.

One participant labelled this war between the polar opposites "the Battle of the Truth", conducted through knowledge creation and narratives in the media, with organisations and individuals fighting an ideological battle by reaching out to different audiences, often through social media.

These experiences led me to ask if there is a connection between the identity creation in the Israeli Defense Forces, and the 'Battle of the Truth'. How is identity created in the space of Israel Defense Forces? How does this IDF identity influence

the combat against the international anti-Israel community? One participant spoke of the IDF as the 'fusion corps', there to assimilate all into the same society. How is this fusion corps working to create identities in groups and individuals that will fit their purpose?

I met predominantly with Jewish Israelis between the ages of 20-40 who had served in the IDF, some were older. Even in this group of people, the polarisation of the debate was very clear – and they had mostly served in the IDF at similar times. It was very much a feeling of either / or, you were on one polarised side or the other, there is seemingly no middle ground. "They" are wrong, "we" are right – whichever side that would be. This polarisation is mainly regarding the occupation narrative: is there an illegal occupation of Palestinian land? Is Israel breaking any laws by having settlements in the West Bank / Judea and Samaria? Have Israel committed war crimes? Or is Israel legitimately defending its citizens from terror? While the international community, including the United Nations, have labelled the settlements as illegal and the control of land and people in the West Bank / Judea and Samaria an occupation (see for example (Norwegian MFA 2020; B'Tselem 2017; UN News 2020; US Department of State 2021; Human Rights Watch 2016; UN Security Council 2016, 1979, 1980) there are strong forces within Israel who claim these definitions are based on wrong interpretations of international law (Israel MFA 2015; Dore 2011; Leiter 2020). In addition much of the criticism of Israel or its soldiers actions towards Palestinians is met with an opposition stating that Israel has a legitimate right to defend themselves, and the context to each incident needs to be understood. They do however also confirm that mistakes do happen, and as IDF soldiers are human beings, they can make mistakes and things that should not have happened do.

It is essential to clarify that this thesis is not a human rights report, and I will not attempt to conclude on matters of international law. The aim is to look at the differences within the 'occupation narrative' and better understand the ideological discourses. It was always a part of the project to understand those I had a hard time

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agreeing with, primarily because of the polarised debate.

I will argue that within the sphere of the Israel Defence Forces, as a significant symbol of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, where soldiers are trained and serve, formed into individuals fused together in a sense of belonging and purpose, personal lived experiences either confirm or collide with the official narrative of protection of the Jewish people.

The aim of the thesis is to further research the connections, based upon fieldwork, between the processes of identity creation within Israeli society, the Israel Defence Forces, and the current combat against 'anti-Israel' organisations and individuals. This could in a minor way help contribute to creating a better understanding of one of the many ideologies within this conflict.  I also hope the thesis can be a source for a better understanding of the current situation amongst the individuals and organisations that are in the midst of this 'battle of the truth'.

Early on during fieldwork it was already getting very complicated, and I still, at this point, did not quite understand where the pro-Israel side was coming from. Somewhat naively I wondered if I had misunderstood it all? I only started to grasp these complex narratives when I learned more about the dual histories of Israel and Palestine.

David, whose quote on the truth opens this introduction, spoke to me about the history of Israel. A history of the Jewish people and their biblical connection to the land, which is now called Israel. Efrayim had similar knowledge and is an observant orthodox Jew with family members who are Ultra Orthodox. However, while he also knew the biblical history, he does not see this as a reason for there to be a pure-Jewish state. "The Jewish state should remain and be a safe place for Jews from around the world, especially if persecution of Jews will come again. Muslims also need a safe space, and hate towards Muslims is probably more prominent than anti-Semitism Semitism these days." The biblical history of the Jewish connection to the land is important. And so are the historical narratives of what happened in 1948 and after. Efrayim stated that "Between 1948-1967 there are many narratives, none of

them are completely true. I do not know what is true or not – both sides have truths, both sides probably have parts of their narrative that are not true." This is an excellent point to make but adds another aspect that makes this infowar more complex.

The overarching topic of the thesis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, is one filled with major emotions, where life and death is a prominent part of everyday life for all those involved. It is extremely complex, and difficult to separate from emotional attachments to people and places. Looking into ideological discourses of one small, but yet major, part of these narratives may at the outset seem to not be particularly relevant. However, by understanding these important beliefs and world views of veterans of the Israel Defense Forces gives a glimpse into the bigger Israeli, and Palestinian, community. And this is an important step into a more holistic understanding.

What first got me interested in the Israel Defense Forces was also connected to both emotions and my own world view. And a meeting with three different soldiers from the same company of the Israel Defense Forces in 2016 is what got the ball rolling.

*The Three Soldiers*

My first personal meeting with IDF soldiers was in the H2 area of Hebron (the area where Jews live which is under Israeli control, and has a constant presence of IDF soldiers) in 2016. I was walking around the Palestinian area with a local woman, learning more about their situation there, especially of families and children. Hebron have steep hills, old houses made of stone, narrow streets, and a couple of market streets with anything you could want or need. The main street with shops, Shuhada Street, has been closed down by the IDF to the extent that Palestinians whose houses

are located there need to enter through back doors, and is often referred to as a 'ghost town'. The market street in the centre of H2 has often been the place for high tension between the shop owners and Jewish Israelis living in the buildings above. There are hardly any cars, especially because in much of H2 Palestinians are not allowed to drive. Unfortunately despite my best efforts, I was not able to meet with Jewish Israelis living in Hebron.

The first meeting with soldiers were at a fortified checkpoint leading from the H1 area into H2, set in a narrow street. At the time it had turnstiles and a screening room with an x-ray machine and metal detector, and IDF soldiers conducting ID checks behind bullet proof glass. We waited outside the turnstile for the light above to switch from red to green, signalling that the turnstile was open. We walked through one at a time, into the screening room. I checked my pockets, sent my bag through the x-ray machine, showed my passport to the two soldiers behind the bullet proof glass window, and walked through the airport style metal detector. I picked up my bag and walked out of the screening room, through another set of turnstiles, and waited for my guide on the other side. Besides showing my passport I had no other interaction with them.

We continued our walk through the Old City of Hebron, and up a hill towards an archaeological site with a view over the city. We paused at the hill to take in the view, as Layla pointed out important places and Israeli settlements. As we continued up the hill we bumped into a young IDF soldier in what I perceived as full combat gear with a massive weapon. Being born and raised in Norway probably means most weapons look massive to me, so I can't confidently say anything about the reality of this weapon. Another soldier came up behind him and it looked like they were out on patrol, having a break in the shade of some trees. The soldier asked us who we were, what we were doing there, where we were from. As he asked questions and asked to see ID I noticed his voice was unsteady, and his hands were shaking as I handed him my passport. He seemed to be extremely nervous about our presence. I was a bit baffled, as a Norwegian holding a camera and a bottle of water I

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didn't quite see what would cause such a reaction. We were allowed to continue and I didn't see these two soldiers again.

A while later as we were going back down another hill to the house of Layla, we came to a checkpoint set up between a Palestinian and a Israeli neighbourhood. It only had a metal crowd control barrier and was manned by two soldiers at the time. Layla told me as we walked towards them that she probably would not be let through, it was only for Israelis or for Palestinians who lived in the specific area. Layla just wanted to walk through as it was the quickest way home for her. As we approached the checkpoint we were asked to stop at some distance from the fence. We were again asked who we were, where we were going, where are you from. We were allowed to approach slowly with our ID's so he could check. This soldier was also young, but a lot more relaxed. He checked Layla's ID against a list of Palestinians living in the area and hence having permission to pass, but as she was not on the list he called up his commander to ask whether or not we were to be let through. As we waited for him to finish the conversation, a few Palestinian children showed up and stood back and watched what was happening. We were then told I could go through as I was an international, but Layla could not. "I just want to go home" Layla said to the soldier, "I know, me too" he replied. He was not aggressive in any way, not rude, and there was no feeling of imposed authority (except the uniform and weapon). He seemed genuine when he said he just wanted to go home too. A completely different interaction to the first one.

I was not going to leave Layla behind and walk through this neighbourhood myself. I also had no idea where I was at the time, so sticking to someone who knew their way around was a good plan. As we considered what we were going to do the Palestinian kids approached and said "you can go through our garden". We followed the kids in behind a fence, where what I assumed was their parents were waiting. They showed us to a steep, uneven and narrow path at the end of their garden. We walked down slowly holding onto branches to not fall. At the bottom of this path was another man waiting for us who walked us to a waist high concrete

wall with an open area a few meters below. I looked around and realised we were meant to climb over the wall and down an unstable looking ladder. I'm scared of heights, so I didn't really want to throw myself off a wall (it was obviously what I was imagining would happen due to said fear), but I realised this was the only way through to the neighbourhood we needed to go to. So I handed my bag to the man standing below, he put it on the ground and held onto the ladder as I nervously climbed over the wall and down the ladder. I was fine, of course. As I waited for Layla to come down the same way, a pregnant woman came walking up towards the ladder. She was on her way home and used this route daily to get to and from the market and shops. So there I stood watching a pregnant woman with her groceries climb up an unstable ladder and over a concrete wall, before heading up the narrow, steep path we had just come down. Palestinians living in Hebron H2 definitely found ways to move around despite the restrictions imposed by the IDF.

As I was leaving to go back to where I was staying later on in the day, we met another soldier. This time leaning, seemingly bored, over a metal fence not far from the Ibrahimi Mosque, or Cave of the Patriarchs. We were just going to walk by, it was not a checkpoint, more a post where they had soldiers in case of something happening. But we were asked to stop. "ID" he demanded from me, but Layla answered back "Why? Why does she have to give you an ID? She has been checked all day. What is the reason for this?" He didn't reply with anything but demanding the ID again. As he checked my passport slowly and thoroughly – a lot more thoroughly than anyone ever had before – he emanated superiority and authority. I was left with a negative feeling of this soldier, and his presence around Palestinians with his attitude.

Although very different, these three meetings were the ones who put the idea in my head to research IDF. Later, after learning more about the IDF, I realised that these three soldiers would have had to be part of the same platoon – living and working closely together. Why were there such different attitudes and ways to deal

with people? Of course they are different people, but wasn't there some sort of a standard in how to behave?

## Outline of thesis

The thesis starts with a look at the field, methodology (chapter 1), historical background and context (chapter 2) in order to lay a foundation for the argument. They are by no means comprehensive, and books can be written about all of the aspects I have included. Chapter 3 looks into Jewishness and Jewish identity, and the importance of this both in and for ideological discourses. Chapter 4 takes identity and ideology further into the Israel Defence Forces, looking at morality and experiences of being a soldier. The Battle of the Truth takes shape in chapter 5, comparing discourses and ideologies of two IDF veteran organisations, Breaking the Silence and My Truth. IDF veterans have shared experiences and discourses, yet the people of these two organisations are on polar opposites in regards to what is and is not moral within the context of the Israel Defence Forces and the State of Israel. Chapter 6 is a short look at what the thesis has shown.

# Chapter 1. The Field and Methodology

The field within which I conducted research consisted of the physical geographical places of Jerusalem, all places I visited in Israel proper, settlements and Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank. In addition the space of the field include the abstract space which connects IDF veterans, the space that connect the pro-Israel community, and the space that connect the anti-Occupation community. Although the participants were all, but a few, in the IDF veteran space, they also occupied distinctive other spaces in the polarised infowar. The individuals connected in different abstract spaces, creating different fields for research.

To be able to understand better the individuals and groups occupying these spaces and places I used several different research methods, including participant observation and semi-structured interviews. I also gathered data from the websites of different organisations, in particular soldier testimonies, and my attempts to reach out to potential participants through social media became an interesting part of the research overall.

## The Field

As a 33 year old Norwegian, and very white and blonde, woman I would be noticed wherever I went, except perhaps in Tel Aviv. I have the look of an outsider, a foreigner, and it is something I had working both against me and to my advantage. I was an outsider with access to any area I wanted to go to, be it in Israel proper, settlements or the Palestinian territories. This, in addition to not being Jewish nor speaking Hebrew or Arabic, also set a boundary between myself and the

participants. I was not a part of their group and would never be. With a background from children's rights activism in Norway and a social democratic political view on the world I was also often met with suspicion of my agenda for being there. But I chose from the start to be open about my background and political views, and about not knowing enough about the Israeli and Jewish side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and I believe this did help in building rapport and I had many incredibly good, informative and fun conversations.

## *Jerusalem*

Jerusalem, known as ירושלים / Yerushalayim in Hebrew and القدس / Al-Quds in Arabic, is a city filled with contrasts. As of 2021 approximately 952 000 people reside in the city, 38% Arab Palestinians and 62% Jews, with an even divide between Ultra Orthodox, religious observant and secular, which is distinct for Jerusalem compared to the rest of Israel (Korach and Choshen 2021). Whereas the Jewish residents of Jerusalem are Israeli citizens with all rights included, most Palestinians are not citizens of Israel, but 'permanent residents' of Jerusalem/Israel, leaving them without the same rights – they are for example prohibited from voting in general elections, but can vote in local elections (Human Rights Watch 2021). Some neighbourhoods

have somewhat a mix of Jews and Palestinians, but it is mostly segregated – some by fences or a 9 metre high wall (Churches for Middle East Peace n.d.) – but mostly it is less intrusive and more abstract separations within Jerusalem itself. Palestinians also have their own bus system which serves the Palestinian neighbourhoods where the Israeli buses do not go. There is however no restriction for Palestinians to use the Israeli public transport system



Security barrier, deemed illegal by ICC, going through a Palestinian neighbourhood in East Jerusalem. (Photo by author)

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For the majority of my time in Jerusalem I rented a room in an apartment owned by a Palestinian Christian in a neighbourhood called French Hill, close to one of the campuses of Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This is an example of a neighbourhood where there was a mix of people living. Both secular and Ultra Orthodox Jews, Palestinians and foreigners lived as neighbours, with the majority being Jewish. It was a calm area of town with good access to both the Israeli and the Palestinian public transport systems. It is, according to the majority of interpretations of international law, an occupied part of Jerusalem since 1967, and is considered an illegal settlement (Peace Now n.d.) . Around 10-15 minutes walk from where I lived, and close to the university campus, is the Palestinian neighbourhood of Isawiyya, where violence and clashes between Palestinians and Israeli Border Police, Magav, happen regularly due to the conditions the residents of the neighbourhood live under and police policies (see for example Hareuveni 2020; Sudilovsky 2020; Rasgon 2020).

One day when I was walking down the hill to the tram stop heading into the centre of town, I suddenly realised the houses next to the stop were Palestinian. You can easily see it if you look at the roofs, as Palestinian houses have large water tanks which Israeli houses do not have. Confused as I am about directions and where I am in relation to other places I had to look it up on my phone. I learned it was the Shu'afat neighbourhood, where a refugee camp is also located with Palestinian refugees, established in 1965-1966 (Friedman and Seidman 2006). I realised I had lived for weeks in a bubble where I was blind to the Jerusalem reality of Palestinians and Jewish Israelis living side by side on contested lands.

My first thought of this bubble was when I was in a taxi from my hotel to my apartment when moving in. The drive was from one side of Jerusalem to the other, and I didn't see anything even remotely resembling Palestine. I had been in Jerusalem before, and in the West Bank, but then I stayed in a hotel in the Old City, which is in the middle of the Israeli-Palestinian tension. Now I was in a part of Jerusalem where Palestine did not seem to exist. And it took even me – someone

who knows about the conflict and is aware of both the segregation and the everyday lives of the Palestinian people - weeks to realise there was a Palestinian neighbourhood 5 minutes walk from my house. It made me realise something else that I had been wondering – just how Israelis could live their everyday lives right next to Palestinians without realising it or considering how their everyday lives are compared to theirs.

## *The Old City*

The Old City of Jerusalem – one of my favourite places in this world. It's vibrant, full of people and has a magical feel to it. I often enter the Old City through Damascus Gate. Outside there are several bus stops and stations for both Israeli and Palestinian buses, and a stop for the Jerusalem light rail. The Damascus gate entrance is surrounded by stairs, like an amphitheatre, where youth often gather to hang out in the evenings. Facing the gate, if you go right you will end up in central Jerusalem – the Israeli part, or "West Jerusalem". If you go left, you will end up in the main shopping street in the Palestinian centre. At the top of the stairs, to the left, is a police watch post. Walk down the stairs and up to the entrance to the Old City, there is another watch post to your right. These permanent structures are quite new, it used to be just waist high crowd control barriers with police behind. They are most often manned by Israeli Border Police – known by their Hebrew acronym Magav – which is a part of the Israeli police service. You draft to serve in Magav through IDF, and serve your conscription period in this unit (Israel Defence Forces n.d. a; Misgav 2014).

Walking through the gate you're met with small shops with mobile phone accessories, sunglasses and other small items. Continue on around the corner and there is a slight downhill with stairs and a slope for carts – there are no cars. There is

a restaurant to the left, and a small cafè with fresh fruit juice to the right. And more often than not, 2-3 Border Police stationed next to this café. In the middle of the brick lane, there are elderly Palestinian women selling fruit and vegetables, mint and maramiye (sage). There are piles of tomatoes and cucumbers, oranges and strawberries, all depending on what's in season. This is the Muslim Quarter of the Old City. There are numbers of small shops with sweets, coffee and spices – and there is a scent of a mixture of spices and the distinct Arabic coffee, often enjoyed with a Shisah outside your shop if you are an elderly Palestinian man. The atmosphere is of busyness and everyday life, mixed with tourists who are in awe, and often slightly confused as myself – the Old City isn't necessarily easy to navigate with the narrow streets, stairs and alleyways. I feel a great sense of openness when I'm there, especially in the Muslim Quarter. The Palestinian shop and cafè owners always say hello, welcome, and have time for a chat. They are interested in who you are and you are always made to feel very welcome. The kids run around playing, or race around on bikes – which I still don't understand how they manage in packed, narrow streets with ancient cobble.

There is a combination of houses, schools, mosques, churches, synagogues, shops, restaurants, carts selling falafel and cold drinks, and café's. It can be difficult to tell when you walk in from one quarter to another, in particular if you are looking for souvenirs, which are all around. Christian and Jewish artefacts next to posters of 'Free Palestine' and keffiyeh's in an assortment of colours. In the Muslim Quarter there are Border Police stationed all around on streets and corners, carrying large assault weapons and riot gear, with less police presence in the Christian and Armenian quarters. In the Jewish quarter, the only visible police are guarding the entrance to the Western Wall and the Temple Mount, or Haram al-Sharif; the grounds of Al Aqsa and Dome of the Rock – again depending on who you ask.

A day in June I decided to go for a walk in the Old City and see if I could figure out how many CCTV cameras there were in a certain area. I walked in through Herod's gate, which leads right into a residential Muslim neighbourhood.

The area is very relaxed, with hardly any tourists, so I took my time to walk down towards Via Dolorosa, stopping to get an iced lemon mint drink from a cart. I kept on counting cameras, taking some pictures, but I gave up after around 10 minutes. Every corner, every street, had at least one, often multiple CCTV cameras. There is what seems close to a complete surveillance. If you are there, you can be found on multiple recordings. There are both public and private cameras. Jews who have moved into houses in the Muslim Quarter have significant surveillance and security that is very visible if you pay a little attention.

The first few times I was in the Old City, I was overwhelmed by the whole atmosphere, as I imagine most people are. I noticed Border Police presence, which I thought were soldiers at first, and several times the Christian groups walking in the steps of Jesus Christ towards the Church of the Holy Sepulchre singing hymns and carrying a large cross. But it took a while for me to notice everything else that was going on around me. This day in the heat I sat down to rest at a cafè in the Muslim Quarter, where there was shade and a cold drink. There were a lot of people around, and I enjoyed just observing life that day. It was busy but not stressful, a great day to relax and observe. I noticed a group of people walking towards me; 3 men dressed in all black surrounding a woman with a stroller. When they got closer I saw this was an Orthodox Jewish woman with a stroller and two small children walking with her. The men were armed private security guards, protecting her whilst walking through one of the busiest areas of the Old City, and in Jerusalem, when it was full of tourists and with police and Magav all around. Scenarios like this is a daily occurrence, and a daily reminder of the tension which is very much present in Jerusalem.

A Palestinian friend I made in Jerusalem explained the tension of the city as a 'pressure cooker', it is always present, and the pressure gets higher and higher, until something happens. Even on relaxed days that are very much peaceful and calm, I could feel the tension wherever I was in the city. I think this is especially true for Palestinians who live under Israeli control, with checkpoints and regular stop-and-

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search by police, and for those Jews who live in the Old City or other areas with a large or majority Palestinian presence. You can burst the bubble of Jerusalem life where the conflict has no place, but if you do – living there can be intense.

*Military Presence*

In Jerusalem the presence of the IDF is strong. The city is a connection point for buses all over the country, so soldiers going home on leave or back to their base are a constant presence. The Central Bus Station was a great place to just observe soldiers, however there's limits to what kind of relevant data you get from observing soldiers waiting for the bus. It took some time to get used to taking the tram through the city centre standing next to five soldiers with rifles, but after a while it became the norm. It was completely normal to push your way through the crowd in the Shuk (the market) next to an armed soldier. Speaking with soldiers also taught me that the combat soldiers practically have to live with their weapons for their entire service, and some even name them.

Another presence that to most people seem like military are the Magav, the Border Police, who are stationed around in the Old City and especially present outside Damascus Gate. They have similar looking weapons and a military style uniform in contrast to other Israeli police. It definitely gives an impression of a militarised society.

## Navigating the field

As an outsider both in Israel and Palestine I had the opportunity to navigate in between different contexts and geographical areas without much problems. There

were no problems for me going to Tel Aviv or Ramallah, it was just a bus ride to both places. Rather than being just travel between different places with different cultures, it was moving between spheres. Going from one neighbourhood in Jerusalem to another could be moving between completely different spheres, where the culture, behaviour, values and language was different. This experience gave me great advantages through a range of different insights, and also difficulties as adapting to different spheres often several times a day meant that it was not possible to become absorbed into one specific sphere, space or place as a researcher.

## *Qalandiya Checkpoint*

Ramallah is not far from Jerusalem, but through the Qalandiya check point. You're not checked on the way in Ramallah, but when you return there is a border control. Going by car with me in the front seat next to the driver this was never an issue, blonde, fair skinned, clearly a foreigner, I never had to show my ID in this situation. However I also did travel to Qalandiya by minibus, where I then had to cross the border on foot, and get a bus down to Jerusalem on the other side. And this border control was like an international border, airport style.

The Qalandiya checkpoint had recently been upgraded. I had been there in 2016 where it consisted of metal fences effectively caging people in while they waited in line outside. This has been the focus of many images for articles talking about checkpoints. The new one is very different. There is a building on the left hand side when you arrive at Qalandiya. The buses and cars go straight ahead and are checked by IDF soldiers stationed there. There are some stairs leading up to the building, and you walk in to what feels like a small airport, with aircondition and bright lighting. The fences for waiting in line are constructed as in an airport, with a zig-zag pattern and slow moving que.

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One day I was there it was in the middle of Ramadan and still early afternoon. I admittedly quite liked the aircondition, but the whole set up felt a bit condescending. When I got inside it was well marked in English and Arabic (perhaps Hebrew? I don't remember) where to go and what to do. When I got in line there weren't too many people in front of me, but I had to wait for perhaps 15 minutes. It was open into the security and ID check area, so I saw soldiers sitting in the booth behind bullet proof glass, one with his legs on the desk, seeming utterly bored. There was a standard metal detector and x-ray machine for bags, exactly like at a airport only a bit smaller. On the other side there were writings on the wall saying "Welcome to Israel" in different languages.

This was something I didn't expect. "What?" I thought, knowing that the international community consensus on this is that East Jerusalem, which is where you arrive to on the other side of Qalandiya, is illegally occupied by Israel since 1967. I must have raised my eyebrows and rolled my eyes. If they want to avoid confrontation and aggressive behaviour stating "Welcome to Israel" on the wall at a checkpoint from Palestine to Palestine is probably not the best idea. Palestinians forced to stand in line here after going through processes of getting permits to enter would probably not agree that Israel is on the other side, or that it is particularly welcoming.

Although the aircondition was pleasant, this is one aspect that is highlighted when speaking about how good the improved checkpoints are. But as you stand there going through what must be an humiliating process for many, controlled by Israeli teenagers (early 20's at the most), aircondition and shopping mall "muzak" in the background, this is probably not something that would build a more positive image of Israel for the Palestinians who pass through.

Getting from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv is cheap and easy, and takes at most around one hour. There is a train, but I never used it. I went by bus from the Central Bus Station to either one of the bus stations in Tel Aviv, or by Sherut (minivan taxi). On the bus I could use my RavKav – a credit card sized travel card – or buy tickets. In the Sherut you pay directly to the driver in cash.

The first time I was getting the Sherut I didn't know how the payment worked so I attempted to pay the driver before getting on – but was just told "later later". So I took a seat and waited for later. When we had got out on the motorway outside Jerusalem, the other passengers started to pass money forward to the driver, who passed the change back through the minivan. If you are in the back, you will send your money forward for it to reach the driver and you will get your change back. And if you're in the middle or the front you will be the middle-man in this exchange. Being from Norway I am not used to having to interact much with other passengers when I travel, it is seen as odd to talk to strangers on the bus, but here it was an integral part of the travel routine. It became natural and comfortable to do the payment this way early on, but even at the end of my time there I always waited for someone else to start forwarding their money and I never quite grasped what the appropriate time is to do it.

Arriving in Tel Aviv there is a lot of traffic and a lot of people. The atmosphere is completely different from Jerusalem. Here it is relaxed, with people wearing more western style clothing and I felt more at place here than anywhere else. There are café's and restaurants everywhere and the city has a distinct urban European feel to it. If you don't want to walk to your destination you hop on an electric scooter and use the bike lanes to get through traffic and pedestrians. This is especially convenient along the near 8 km beach promenade stretching from Tel Aviv port in the North to the Old Port in Jaffa.

In the supermarket I found bacon, and in a restaurant they served pork. This is something you would never find in Jerusalem, as it is more religiously conservative. While Jerusalem living can get intense, as there is an atmosphere of tension around you rather often, Tel Aviv is very much more laid back. I went here to take a breath from Jerusalem living, relaxing on the beach, watching the ocean, the people, and reading.

*Clothing*

Something I noticed after a while was how I was considering what to wear based on the location I was going. Not in terms of a different outfit for a day out and an important meeting, but where in the city of Jerusalem I would go, or if I was going outside of Jerusalem.

If I was going to the Old City, which is filled with sites of religious importance in Judaism, Islam and Christianity, I would always dress quite modestly. I would at least cover knees and shoulders, and not wear anything low cut. I almost always carried with me a shawl to wrap over my shoulders in case this was required. In East Jerusalem and the Palestinian areas near the Old City I went for the same style, perhaps sometimes more wearing the shawl around my shoulders because it is not a particularly touristy area like the Old City – it feels more like being in someone's home. I also tended to have my hair up at least in a ponytail. If I was going somewhere in West Jerusalem, the Israeli part, I dressed less modestly and more western, showing arms and shoulders, having my hair down. I also brought a different handbag, and could wear more jewellery – not that I had anything particularly fancy or expensive, but it was in a way showing off more. Here as well I did bring a shawl or something to cover up with, but this was predominantly for the bus or light rail ride into the city. More so if I took the bus, as

it went through some more religious neighbourhoods and a lot of orthodox Jews used the same bus.

Going to Tel Aviv and I was dressing full on western style, with beach attire, summer dresses and loose hair. Tel Aviv is very much secular and resembles a western European city both in atmosphere and dress styles amongst the locals. I would never think about wearing this in Jerusalem, perhaps in the most "hip" areas in West Jerusalem, but since I lived in the East I would have to travel through the city wearing the same clothes, something I did not feel comfortable with.

I was in Hebron in the West Bank a few times. It is a place with tension and conflict, and it is also a very important place in both Judaism and Islam, with what Jews call the Cave of the Patriarchs, and Muslims call the Ibrahimi Mosque. The people who live in Hebron are conservative, be it Muslims or Jews, and all dressed modestly. And this also reflected the style of my dress. I always covered my legs to the ankles, and my arms to my elbows at least. The shawl I carried was used to cover my hair – which was always up in a bun or a hair clamp and away from my face - if it should be necessary. Elsewhere in the West Bank I wore the same style, although in Ramallah it could be a bit more relaxed especially in certain areas where youth gathered. For me though, dressing modestly was a strike of genius as I avoided the worst sunburns.

Above is just a few examples of different spheres I navigated between during my time in fieldwork. It was not particularly challenging, I made sure to know the appropriate way to dress before visiting places, and I followed the locals in how to act. When I became aware of how different I acted in these spheres, it also became interesting data.

## Participant Observation

To get information from participants about their time serving in the IDF I needed to conduct semi structured interviews, where I prepared some topics that could be interesting to talk about but went in the direction of the participant's concerns. I started with asking if they could tell me something about themselves, and something they would want an outsider to know about IDF and Israel. As I specifically looked for participants with a background in the IDF it was a given that this was a topic for our conversation. I tried to find participants from the Border Police as well, but I was not successful here.

As I was interested in researching the people of the IDF it was not possible, for obvious reasons, to conduct what Spradley (1980) classifies as 'complete participation'. Complete participant observation happens when the researcher is completely an ordinary participant in the social group beforehand – which means I would have to be an IDF soldier either currently or previously to be able to reach this level of participation. However, it is not necessarily a negative aspect that I was unable to conduct this type of participation, as Spradley (1980: 61) explains "the more you know about a situation as an ordinary participant, the more difficult is to study it as an ethnographer". And getting an outside view on the military may be a good starting point. Doing participant observation involves "alternating between the insider and outsider experience, and having both simultaneously" (Spradley, 1980: 57). You will have to work with a dual purpose, of where you are both an outsider observing, and an insider participating, and at the same time as a participant keep a "wide-angle lens" to make yourself explicitly aware of things that others take for granted (Spradley, 1980: 58).

Outside of 'complete participation', Spradley (1980) has defined three other levels of participant observation and 'non-participation, for example, studying TV programs as modes for conducting ethnographic research. Although I could not

participate within the IDF or had the experience as an IDF veteran, I conducted research based on participant observation outside of the interviews. The most interesting data probably came from "passive participation" (Spradley, 1980: 59-60), where I was "present at the scene of action" but did not "participate or interact with other people to any great extent". Situations where this happened range from observing IDF soldiers walking around with their uniform and rifle (this is mandatory) while on leave, whether around Jerusalem, on buses to and from base and cities, at the central bus station, to observing Magav (Border Police) in the Old City of Jerusalem conducting their everyday work and observing IDF at checkpoints around the West Bank, and in Hebron, on guard, on patrol, at checkpoints. As a spectator just watching everyday life go ahead in Jerusalem and other places in Israel, and as a bystander in Hebron and at checkpoints. In the two latter situations, it was evident that I, as a foreigner, was there, which may have altered the behaviour of the IDF soldiers. By observing the interactions between IDF soldiers, or Magav (Border Police) among themselves, and Palestinians and Jewish Israelis, and foreigners, I gained an understanding about how things happen. Even if I did not hear or did not understand everything said (I do not speak Arabic or Hebrew, but I understand some words and phrases), the tone of voice and body language were telling. Also, observing whom they were stopping for ID checks and who were not, and how Palestinians, Jewish Israelis and foreigner were treated significantly differently gave significant insight into thought processes and policies even without confirmed knowledge on it.

An example, which I will go further into in chapter 4, was in Hebron near the Cave of the Patriarchs / Ibrahimi Mosque. Here I one day observed religious Jews living in the area out for an afternoon run, back and forth on a street which is half closed off for Palestinians. They ran pass the soldiers several times, without any questions. But when a little boy sped of on his small bike when out playing, the soldier stopped him and refused him to carry on with his journey through the street. The part he approached was not allowed to be on for Palestinians.

The two other levels, moderate and active participation, was something I conducted in my everyday life in Israel and Palestine, moving around from one place to another, taking public transport, shopping in supermarkets, markets, eating out. Moderate participation involves trying to maintain a balance between being an insider and an outsider and participating without achieving the skills of a regular insider. Active participation happens when the participant seeks to do what other people are doing and fully learn the cultural rules for behaviour. My everyday life was a mix of these two. On one hand I was never fully accepted as an insider with neither Israelis nor Palestinians, I was very much a foreigner. However, in everyday activities like using public transport I did achieve to learn and use the cultural appropriate behaviours of the insiders. So whilst I could not conduct this type of research with soldiers or border police, I did so in everyday life and did then get more of an understanding of the cultural rules of Israel, and Jerusalem in particular – which is very different than that of Tel Aviv.

## Experiences from the field

When I arrived in Jerusalem I was a bit lost in how to meet people who would be willing to participate in the research. I decided to reach out on Facebook, as there are several local groups with hundreds of active members, to see if I had any luck. I got in touch with a few people right at the beginning and met with them early on. These again introduced me to others, but I also posted on Facebook a couple of more times just to see if there were anyone new or with different experiences to those I was already speaking with.

In the afternoon I posted on the open-to-all group 'Secret Jerusalem' in a hope to get more participants for my research. Based on previous experiences with posting in this group to find participants, I made sure to include I was not sponsored by any organisations or working with any organisations.

*"Hello hello! It's the researcher from Norway again!*

*I am still looking for people to speak with me for my research project. I am especially interested in speaking with anyone who has something they'd want to say about the State of Israel / the Jewish state, the conflict with the Palestinians, experiences from IDF or Border Police, and life in Israel today. If any of these seem a little interesting to you - please get in touch! It is completely anonymous of course. Feel free to contact me with any questions.*

*It's an independent research project for my masters thesis in Social Anthropolgy at the University of Oslo. I am not sponsored by any organisations, nor am I working with any organisations."*

Around 3 hours after it was posted, the moderators switched off the comments, as it was getting a bit out of hand. There were 74 comments, some who say they are interested, and many who go on the attack. Two of them also found my Twitter account and posted screenshots of my timeline – mostly of 'retweets', saying I spread anti-Israel hate. One commented "I smell a security rat". Others posted warnings about me. "Who is Mona?" – with a longer post in the same manner. After the moderator switched off commenting I could not reply – so I sent this person a personal message. I was then told I use people for my own agenda, and I am out to "get" Israel. One of my favourite comments: "Do not engage with this person. Remember the old New Yorker cartoon, two dogs on a computer and one turns to the other and says on the internet no one knows you're a dog. If this were a serious thesis investigation she would be on the ground in Israel doing her research." I was

of course in Jerusalem, but realised that this fact was not included in my post. At this points the ability to comment was stopped so I could not reply.

Another person stated that bashing Israel is sexy in academic circles, so I would get my degree due to this, and completely unrelated to the truth. One member of the group who came too late to the show, when the comments were already switched off, felt the need to Private Message me with his opinion. His final comment, when I didn't quite understand his ranting about Iran, Iraq and Syria and asked for clarification was "No prob, worst of luck". Another private message: "You could not be more wrong about the hateful things you spew about Israel. Why bother asking for information if you're totally going to ignore it and spin lies? You are truly a pathetic, loathsome person."

Several also attacked the research method. It is not proper research to look for participants on Facebook (those with quantitative questionnaires does not seem to get these comments). Qualitative research also does not mean one does not need a representative sample of people from all over Israel. No one who makes these comments seem ever to have done anthropological research. They may have conducted research, some work in science, but they do not understand the anthropological method – which is fine. One did ask if I had checked the method with my adviser, and they were shocked when I said yes and did not need a "quantitative representative sample".

When I posted a similar request in 'Secret Tel Aviv' a few weeks prior I was called both Hamas, Hezbollah, and BDS (pro-Palestinian organisation promoting boycott and divestment of and sanction against Israel) supporter. The post was deleted and the moderator was furious saying the group is only to help newcomers in Israel to settle in. I did not get any new participants with that post.

What is very interesting with this specific post on June 13th is that I got 11 new participants. So many that I didn't manage to meet all of them before I left Israel at the end of July. It was clearly not working to warn off other people of how bad I and my agenda was. It seemed as if the more bad comments there were, the more

people wanted to participate.

This was, and still is, a fairly common response to me if I say I'm writing a thesis and did research on Israel/Palestine, IDF or just Israel. Particularly from those who adhere to the ideology of the pro-Israel supporters, which is the basis of this thesis.

# Chapter 2. History and contextual narratives

There are a diverse variety of narratives about the history of Israel, from British Mandate Palestine to the creation of Israel in 1948, the ensuing war, the Nakba, and the 1967 war which led to the current internationally recognised borders between Israel and the Palestinian territories. These narratives are part of different ideologies spread and reproduced through discourse from different social groups, which I will come back to in Chapter 3. In this brief chapter I will outline some historical events of significance, and look at one example of lived experiences within one of the current contextual narratives often pointed out by the pro-Israel supporters.

## The Creation of Israel and Israel Defence Forces

There are numerous events that are relevant to the creation of the State of Israel. However, I will shortly summarise here a few relevant facts. Further information on events that aren't mentioned here can be found in the Appendix.

Theodor Herzl published in 1896 the book 'The Jewish State' and is known as the founder of the Zionist movement. The movement grew in the early 1900's and had a major breakthrough in 1917 with the Balfour Declaration, a letter written by the British foreign secretary declaring that the British government supported the creation of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, and two years later followed up stating that the current inhabitants, the Arabs, would not be consulted, as the hopes and needs of the Jewish people was of greater importance (Bose 2007:

216).  Following this at the San Remo conference in 1920, the League of Nations established the British Mandate over Palestine, which ended in 1948 with the establishment of the Jewish State of Israel (Bose 2007; Israel MFA 2013 a, c.). During the 1920's and 1930's there were several violent periods between Palestinians, Jews and the British, and more than 300 000 Jews immigrated. During the Arab Palestinian revolts against the British in 1936-1939, all sides committed atrocities, including armed rebels against Jews, and the militant Zionist groups including Irgun against Palestinians. The British also created a further divide between Jews and Palestinians by recruiting Jews in counter attacks against Palestinians. In this time the British introduced the practice of demolishing houses of insurgents, a tactic the IDF still use against Palestinians today (Bose 2007).

In 1947 the United Nations resolution 181 on the partition of Palestine into a Jewish and a Palestinian state was approved in the General Assembly. In 1948 the British withdrew, and on 14 May Israel declared independence (Bose 2007; Israel MFA 2013 c). From the day after the resolution in 1947 until the declaration of Israel there was a civil war within Mandate Palestine,  the day after the declaration in 1948 five Arab armies invade Israel and what is known as the Arab-Israeli war for some, and the War of Independence in Israel, ensued and ended in month 1949. Land was won and lost, and the partition borders approved by the UN were not in place.

During this time, from 1947-1949 there was also a mass expulsion, or migration, of Palestinians from Israel into the territories intended for a Palestinian state (Sand 2012; Morris 1997; Pappé 2006).

When Israel declared its independence, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) was established. Before 1948 the Haganah was the primary defence force for the Jewish community in British Mandate Palestine, and they became a full-scale force after the Arab revolt in 1936 – 1939. Among their three central units, they had the Palmach as an elite fighting corps, from which today's Nahal Brigade descends. In addition to the Palmach, Jewish soldiers who fought for the British Army during World War II became the "backbone of the IDF's combat forces". Haganah, along with

underground paramilitary organisations Etzel, Lehi and Irgun that operated in British Mandate Palestine, was dissolved in 1948 and became a part of the Israel Defence Forces (Israel MFA 2013 a, b).

Since its establishment the IDF has fought in six major wars, including the 1948 War of Independence and the 1967 Six Day War which have become fundamental to the understanding of the current situation, and conducted a range of military operations.

Israel Defence Forces consists of conscripts and career personnel who choose to continue after their mandatory service, and all who have left active service are reservists up to approximately the age of 51 where they train for 30-45 days per year, and are called in should it be necessary. In addition to the ground forces there is the Israeli Air Force and Navy who are all under the command of the Chief of the General Staff appointed by the government on recommendation by the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. The Chief of the General Staff is responsible to the Minister of Defence.

Conscription is compulsory for all eligible men and women at the age of 18 for 30 and 24 months respectively, with women in combat also serving 30 months (Fulbright 2020), however exemptions are made on various grounds. You can also choose to do National Service instead of drafting to the IDF, which means you spend the same amount of time volunteering on community projects. Israeli Arabs and Bedouins are as minorities also exempt from the compulsory conscription but can volunteer to serve. In addition to Israeli citizens, many Jews from around the world volunteer to serve in the IDF and are often called 'lone soldiers' as they move to Israel without family for this purpose.

The borders after the Six Day War in 1967 is what is currently referred to as the 'green line' – and is what causes the West Bank term to emerge (named such due to it being the west bank of the river Jordan). Today these are the borders where the definitions of occupation and illegal settlements lay within. Israeli settlements built outside of the 1967 green line, within what is called the Palestinian Territories (PT)

(or Occupied Palestinian Territories – OPT), are considered by the international community as being illegal. This includes building projects and neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem, which after 1967 were part of OPT (see for example Human Rights Watch 2016, 2021; UN News 2020; Norwegian MFA 2020). Many Jewish Israelis, and most of the participants, refer to this area as Judea and Samaria – this includes Picture 1. Israeli government (Leiter 2020).

The Oslo Accords in the 1990s divided the West Bank into different security zones (see picture 1) – areas A (under Palestinian Authority (PA) control), B (under PA governance and Israeli security) and C (under Israeli control). The city of Hebron, a holy place for both Jews and Muslims and a place where tensions run high, is divided into two areas; H1, which is under PA control and security, and H2, which is under Israeli control and where the Palestinian population is governed in large part by the IDF. In contrast, the Israeli population has different laws and is dealt with by Israeli police should there be an issue (see for example Human Rights Watch 2021; Hareuveni 2019).
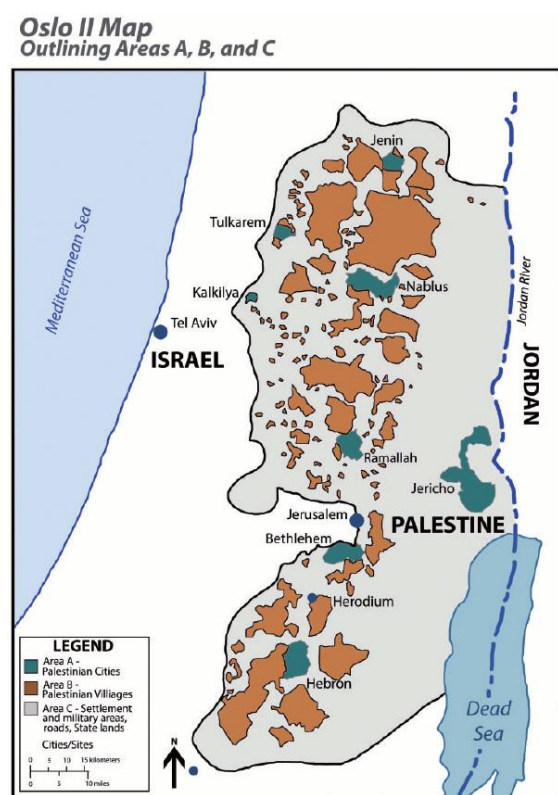


Kersel 2014

## Israel Under Attack

When a rocket is fired from Gaza toward Israel, there are headlines around the country of 'Israel Under Attack' both from the media, and local and international

organisations – especially on social media. Living in Jerusalem I never heard the warning sirens that goes off predominantly in the south of the country close to the Gaza border. I did hear the sirens when they were tested, and in commemoration on memorial days, and they are loud and pierce through the noise. I was still very curious to learn about this side of the conflict. What is it like to live in 'rocket-range' from Gaza? During a 3 day 'rocket barrage' from Gaza in May, one siren did go off in Tel Aviv, but other than that it was only in places where I hadn't visited. Shortly after this I was able to join an organisation on a tour of the border region with Gaza. I'm not sure what I was expecting, and I'm still not sure what it left me with.

For another tour with the same organisation to settlements in the West Bank, there was a large bus for us, even though we were just a few people, because it was armoured – just in case something would happen. Showing up for the trip to the border region, where we would drive just about up to the Gaza border fence, I was met with a small minivan. Nothing armoured or rocket proof about that. I was a bit puzzled. Weren't we just about to the most dangerous place in Israel? I soon realised it was because we were only going to be in Israel. We weren't going to any 'Arab' or 'Palestinian' areas. We were not going into enemy territory. I, who had spent time in the Palestinian areas of the West Bank and spoken to many Palestinians, didn't realise the type of fear of situations where Israelis and Palestinians were in contact with each other, especially in the West Bank. I was much more worried about the 20 year olds standing around with assault weapons in 35 degrees heat in full uniform being bored all day. But alas, for our trip to the border region, off we went in our minivan.

The first stop was a lookout point with a memorial for fallen Israeli soldiers, where the view was of Gaza. We went with our two guides, one local and one with extensive experience from the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), to find some shade – a recurring search throughout the summer months – and learn more about the situation. Our expert guide told us about the history of the conflict and the evacuation of the Jewish settlements in Gaza in 2005. While he was presenting the

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history and we were looking at the view, here was a constant, quite loud buzzing sound above us at all times. Like an extremely annoying, and loud, mosquito that just wouldn't go away. It got me thinking about reports from civilians in Gaza about the constant sound of the drones. And yes, the annoying mosquito was indeed a drone buzzing over Gaza. For good measure there was also a shooting range close by, where some soldiers on IDF reserve duty were training – so the soundscape was fitting.

We went on to Sderot, a city close to the border where the police had gathered rockets from Gaza outside their headquarters. They varied from what looked like homemade from street sign poles, to – allegedly – Iranian rockets smuggled in by boat to the Gaza coastline. The bus stops all had bomb shelters, and the apartment building across from the police station had additions to every floor made of concrete, which made certain rooms bomb shelters. This part of the tour had a feeling to it that Israel was indeed under attack.

Continuing on we went to the home town of our local guide. A small town closer to the border. She explained to us some of the changes that had recently been made due to incendiary balloons – balloons carrying explosive aimed at setting vegetation or buildings on fire. They had several new fire extinguishers placed around town. They were quite used to the rockets, and every now and then it fell on a house in town – including twice on our guide's home. But the incendiary balloons were new, and had caused a lot of problems, especially since there were agricultural areas around. A playground in town was built around a concrete block, and had slides, swings, and places to climb. It looked like a normal playground, and was quite large. Our guide Lea pointed out to us a small opening in the concrete block. The playground had a bomb shelter underneath. But, Lea said, there's really not much point. From the siren sounded they have 15 seconds to get into the shelter. And most of the time, they didn't. When Lea was at home and the siren sounded, she told me she would rather stay on the sofa enjoying her life for the last 15 seconds, than attempt to get to the sheltered room. The only time she did was if her

young nephew was around, then they made it into a game and hurried up to 'fly' him like an aeroplane into the shelter. But, Lea explained, they hardly ever made it on time. However, when there was the 3 day barrage of rockets from Gaza, they moved into the room which doubled as shelter, and mostly stayed there for the entire time.

I think I may have expected a more aggressive attitude from someone who lived so close to the border, and who twice in her life had had her home hit by a rocket from Gaza. But Lea was very insistent that she had a good life. She and her family did not want to move, this was their home. And compared to the life the people of Gaza had, a bit of an inconvenience with having to go into a bomb shelter was nothing. "They, those who live in Gaza, are the ones who are suffering. I have a good life. I have a job. I have opportunities. I can move, but I choose not to" Lea said. I was somewhat taken aback, this was not the attitude of someone living in the middle of the 'Israel Under Attack' headlines. But growing up this close to the border, the people of Gaza had been her neighbours her whole life. It changed with the 2005 evacuation of the settlements, and many Palestinian residents of Gaza lost their jobs in the Israeli border areas. "My only inconvenience from that is that the road over there used to go right to the beach" Lea said and pointed towards the Gaza border wall, "but now it's closed for security reasons, so we have to go around the other way".



House on the border with Gaza hit by a rocket in May 2019. (Photo by author).



Rockets fired from Gaza gathered on display outside the police station in the border town Sderot in Southern Israel. (Photo by Author)

This chapter is meant as a very brief introduction to decades of very complex conflicts and negotiations. The chapter also aims to show some of the context Israelis live under today, namely the threat of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad sending rockets and incendiary balloons from Gaza into the communities of southern Israel. This is a scenario which is used by many pro-Israel organisations to justify the policies of the State of Israel, and the actions of the Israel Defence Forces, and is an important aspect of the current day narratives. But, as we have seen, it is not necessarily considered in the same way by those who live their daily lives on the Gaza border. In the next chapter we head into the concept of 'Jewishness' – looking at identity, ideology and discourse.

# Chapter 3. Jewishness, Identity and Discourse

The role of Judaism in the creation of individual and collective identities that can be found within the ideological discourses in Israel today is crucial. But what is Judaism? Judaism, Jewish, Jew, and Jewishness are vague, but also concrete, ambiguous but also unambiguous terms to describe a specific group of people. It references identity, ethnicity, religion, nation, and people. The participants prefer the term 'tribe' to describe the group which Jews belong to, as the term in their eyes encompass all these different concepts. However they also have a strong individual identity as 'Jewish'.

Jenkins (2014: 6) describes 'identity' as "a multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it, as individuals and as members of collectives". It is a classificatory tool for humans to cognitively make sense of the world around them and the people in it. Collective identity is a collective of individuals who ascribe to the same description of what a part of their individual identity is and what is their collective identity. Identity is a process that we *do* rather than a thing that we *have* (Jenkins 2014) which can be seen as people acting out their identity, collective and individual, in their everyday lives.

All the above terms are rather abstract and can be difficult to get proper hold of when attempting to explain unfamiliar notions of identity, like the Jewish identity is for me, and how this comes to play in different scenarios. Identity affects and includes how we act and behave and what we do or not do. However, it is not natural, it is not nature that decides how we behave due to our identity or ethnicity. Identities are created and formed within social groups, as *sameness* within the collective, and as *difference* against those who are not part of the collective (Jenkins 2014) and the *sameness* in the collective is part of the *unique* in the individual (van Meijl 2010). Even though it may seem natural to be born into a certain identity, the

identity is a constant negotiating process which humans conduct. You are for example Jewish if you are born to a Jewish mother, but Jewish identity is not a natural aspect, it is a socially constructed aspect of human organisation.

Identity has become an everyday word which people use to describe in particular themselves and the collectives to which they belong. And rather than being an abstract concept that is hard to grip, it matters that identity is concrete to individual and groups. The participants saying "I am Jewish" is concrete and meaningful. For an anthropologist it is important what *they*, the people who you wish to find out more about, think and mean is going on and is important, and it has to be taken seriously. Individual and collective identity hence has to be taken seriously at the face value of participants – they say it is real, so it is real. It has real meaning, and it has real consequences.

Identity is a process, not a thing, so it also changes through life and experience. For this reason it is important to go further into this concept, in particular in relation to Jewishness, and to Israel Defence Forces. The service in IDF is a major part of the life of conscripts in Israel and take up a significant amount of time, which affects the processes of identity and identification, both in relation to the individual and the collective. Serving in the IDF equips you with another part to your personal identity and a new collective, which will stay with you when you move on from this time in your life in one way or another.

## Processes of Identity in Israeli Society and IDF

Within a military there is a need for unity and a common understanding in order for soldiers to be capable to fulfil their duties. Røislien (2010) argues that religion is a crucial part of the Israel Defence Forces, and that

*"Judaism helps to create unity in values, judgment, purpose and opinion, and it forges a sense of moral unity that situates the individual soldier within the context of a larger community with a particular mission and outlook." (Røislien 2010: 9).*

I will take this a step further and agree with Røislien that Judaism is crucial to build comradeship and moral unity that is necessary for a military, but that Judaism is broader and encompasses more than a religion. Being Jewish does not necessarily mean you are religious, but it still binds a group of people together. Jewish is both a collective and an individual identity which connect people around the world.

Jewishness is part of collective and individual identity that both *influences* the Israeli society and hegemonic and ideological discourses and *is influenced by* the Israeli society and the hegemonic ideological discourses that are taking place today. IDF is crucial for Israeli society for the sense of unity amongst the people and for protection. IDF also serves as a symbol for the fight of the Jewish people and overcoming persecution, pogroms and the Holocaust, and the ongoing strength of the Jewish people in the face of annihilation and destruction by hostile neighbours (Gil 2012; Weiss 1997). Gil (2012: 77) argues that "collective memory employs the past in order to provide unity, uniqueness, and continuation, creating a collective identity", and these memories are utilised by the dominant class of society, especially politicians, to solidify the notion of a united Jewish State based on a collective identity.

Perhaps one of the first theories that comes to mind in anthropology when we think of belonging and unity in a military, is the concept of 'communitas' presented by Victor Turner in 1969. Communitas is a bond that is forged between a group of people who experience a liminal phase together, where the social structures of everyday life as they know it are no longer there, and structures and social bonds are formed in this specific space and time (Turner, 1969). This will create a special bond of unity among this specific group of people. Mandatory conscription of all eligible men and women in Israel at age 18 brings most of the young people together in a

liminal phase that lasts more than two years. In this phase they have a new way of life, they live in close quarters with their units, and meet new people they have to rely on and trust. It is a life where the hegemonic ideology of the protection of the Jewish people and the Jewish state is of utmost importance. This ideology is something the Israeli teenagers have grown up with in the educational system (Weiss 1997), and it culminates in them becoming the protectors of the Jewish people. The experiences create extremely close bonds between people who serve together, and most of the participants spoke of having brothers for life. There is also a unity across generations and gender; having served in the IDF gives you a special place in Israeli society.

While these common bonds of unity are created, there is also a process of creation for your individual identity through your personal experiences. The idea of a "dialogical self" (Bakhtin [Emerson] 1984, Van Meilj 2010) where an individual and personal identity is always shaped in response to something that was before and something that is in the future is especially interesting in the realm of the Israel Defence Forces and Israeli society. The history of the Jewish people, the Holocaust, and the creation of the State of Israel is a continued notion of identity for everyone I spoke to during fieldwork.

Within the IDF there is a focus also on a nearer history, specifically the 2nd Intifada in the early 2000's with a number of suicide bombings and a general sense of fear throughout the everyday life, and the three military operations in Gaza in 2008/2009, 2012 and 2014. The measures IDF does today and what conscripts and soldiers are trained to do is to keep security so that these past events can not be repeated by the 'Other' – the Palestinians or the Arabs from the neighbouring nations. This focus on past and future in the present, is a major part of the process of identity creation within the IDF. This is also one notion that will be taught to all soldiers, as a 'fusion' into the community they want within the IDF, and of Israeli society. Yet, your personal experiences of the past and present, and views on the future, are also part of a creation of an identity in the dialogical self, which makes

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your personal identity different, yet similar, to the other soldiers.

As religion, or the broader concept of Judaism, is an important part of the IDF, it is also an important part of the State of Israel and the Israeli society. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) argues that what is existing in Israel now is a "'security theology', a system of production and reproduction of fear followed by necessary security measures against the Others; "… [I]n order to maintain a productive global and local industry and political economy that produces and reproduces fear, Israel's "security" was transformed into a religion, an indubitable theology" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015: 14). Security penetrates all levels of society and everyday life.

The actual and perceived security threats Israel is living with in daily life has created a fear of the Others, leading to justifications of what could otherwise be seen as violations of international humanitarian law and human rights. This production and reproduction of fear is then combined with "biblical claims of the Chosen People/Promised Land narrative" (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015: 15), leading to a narrative and understanding of Israel and the Jewish people as a victim of terror and persecution from biblical times up until this day.

The different narratives about the history of Israel are part of identity creation both within Israeli society and the Israel Defence Forces. Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015) points to how narratives of security have been established as truths and are influencing law and policies. Further in this chapter I will look at fundamental understandings that operate within the spheres of the Jewish State, the understanding of who the Jewish people are.

## עם (Am)

To explain what Jewishness is in English is not an easy task. There really isn't a word or words that completely encompass what it means to be part of the Jewish People.

The word that many feel encompass it is the Hebrew word עם – pronounced 'Am'.

One of the first realisations I had during my fieldwork was how wrong the assumption of Judaism as "just" a religion was. This was what I had been taught from school; Judaism is a religion first and foremost. I did not understand how Israelis could be so offended by criticism of Israel, which I just understood as a State like any other, it was not criticism of Jews? This understanding changed when I was chatting to Ethan about outsider's criticism of Israel over lunch one day. "The Jewish people and the State of Israel are deeply intertwined. When someone states that 'Israel is a racist endeavour' or that 'the State of Israel is at its core racist', it says that the hope of Judaism is racist. Judaism and Israel are inseparable." I would like to say a light immediately went off in my head and I suddenly understood, but what it did was leave me thinking about this statement for months. Who *are* the Jewish people?

"Judaism is not just a religion, it's a national identity." Netanel, a 41 year old former artillery corps soldier, told me a couple of months later. "For example – if you are a Jew, and you convert to Christianity – in Israel you will still be a Jew. It's language, identity, traditions – you were a Jew long before there was a Jewish religion." This is where the word עַם (Am) comes in. The words that continue to be mentioned in attempts to explain what Jewishness are, are language, identity, traditions, history, heritage, culture and religion. עַם (Am) is often translated to mean 'nation', 'people' or 'peoplehood'. However it is the word 'tribe' that most people tell me they feel is the nearest and most appropriate English word to use. "Tribe?" I asked a group of participants online during the Covid-19 pandemic where Zoom has become a part of everyday life. "Tribe? Are you *sure*?" I asked again, having the anthropological connections to colonialism in mind and being wary of not labelling the Jewish people in an unfavourable way. "Yes", they all replied, and explained that this is the English word that mostly encompasses all it means to be Jewish. I explained that the word and concept of 'tribe' is not much used in anthropology any longer, due to the vague definitions available, and the connotations of colonialism of the past. However, a quick definition from Britannica (Pauls n.d.) describing 'tribe'

as *"a notional form of human social organization based on a set of smaller groups, having temporary or permanent political integration, and defined by traditions of common descent, language, culture, and ideology"* shows that their choice of word could be very useful to help outsiders understand the concept of 'Jewishness' and עַם (Am). 'Tribe' also refers back to the biblical 12 Tribes of Israel (Forces n.d.).

Alon describes 'Jewish' to be a meta-tribe of multiple tribal groups that all are somewhat different but are all still part of עַם (Am). "Religion only takes on beliefs set by G-d, but it is so much more" Neta adds, "tribe encompasses all that, and also have a religious aspect". Back in Jerusalem Netanel told me that it is "Jewish nation identity. Jewish identity, not religion." עַם (Am) or 'Jewishness' / the 'Jewish People' can then be seen as a Jewish identity based on the belonging to a 'tribe' who's connected through traditions, common descent, language, culture and ideology (Pauls n.d.). The common ideology can be seen as the common religion which is in some ways part of Jewish life whether you are religious or not. Being less religious, or even atheist or converting to a different religion does not mean you are no longer Jewish. All those who practice the Jewish religion are Jews, but not all Jews practice Judaism (Røislien 2010: 161). Am Yisrael is then what can be understood as the nationhood of the Jewish people, which is what legitimises the claim for the Jewish State, of Medinat Israel, which then gives the Jewish people a Jewish nationality – in the nation of Israel (Cohen 1993: 197).

Another word often used to speak about 'Jewishness' is *ethnicity*, which is another complex concept in anthropology. Tzipora said perhaps a more understandable word to use for עַם (Am) could be 'ethnoreligion', a combination of ethnicity and religion. Barth (1969) defines an ethnic group as a group of people who constantly negotiate and re-negotiate the abstract boundaries of who can be considered to belong and not belong. This is not static, but constantly changing under negotiation where people can be included and excluded, with a focus on the boundaries and the social relationships between groups rather than what is defined as within the group. Although the boundaries of Jewishness can be said to have been

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negotiated and re-negotiated to an extent, such as non-religious, atheist and secular Jews being included (Røislien 2010: 26), it is still a fairly static set of boundaries who decides who is and is not included into the Jewish People. Some people can through a lengthy process convert to Judaism (Posner and Shurpin n.d.) and in this way be included, however most are born Jewish and hence naturally placed within these boundaries. You can leave the religion of Judaism, but you would still be considered part of עַם (Am) and always be Jewish, as Netanel pointed out.

Røislien (2010) concludes that "Jewish" is an ethnic category based on there being a "specific group membership within the State of Israel" (2010: 161), but it also includes religion. Ethnoreligion is often used to describe the Jewish people (see for example (Karpov, Lisovskaya, and Barry 2012; Rebhun 2011; Winter 1992). However in light of the participants finding the term 'tribe' more appropriate to describe 'Am', or who the Jewish people are, I will use this term. As Geertz eloquently phrased it in 1974:

"To grasp concepts which, for another people, are experience-near, and to do so well enough to place them in illuminating connection with those experience-distant concepts that theorists have fashioned to capture the general features of social life is clearly a task at least as delicate, if a bit less magical, as putting oneself into someone else's skin."

(Geertz 1974: 29)

Looking at aspects from fieldwork from the native's point of view is in my view a main task for an anthropologist. To be able to translate experiences that natives have into academic concepts as a tool for the outside world to understand one aspect of this unfamiliar world. And it is in this spirit that I rather use the term 'tribe', as it is this which in meaning is the closest to the natives terminology and it is possible to use definitions and descriptions to convey their view.

## עם ישראל (Am Yisrael) vs Israel

The saying עַם ישראל (Am Yisrael) is something I heard often, and also עם ישראל חי (Am Yisrael Chai) and ארץ ישראל (Eretz Yisrael). Three sayings all including the word 'Israel' – which for me meant they were talking about the current State of Israel. However this is a lot more complex than my understanding would allow for at the time. עַם ישראל (Am Yisrael) means 'People of Israel', עם ישראל חי (Am Yisrael Chai) means 'People of Israel live', and ארץ ישראל (Eretz Israel) is the Land of Israel. And none of these mean exactly the same as 'Israel', or מדינת ישראל (Medinat Israel), which is the current political State of Israel, although they are all connected. Confused?

The complexity of the use of the language to refer to contemporary, historical, religious and traditional aspects of 'Israel' is something that can lead to a whole range of misunderstandings and to a less nuanced understanding of a highly complex reality. "'Israel' is a political term", Sarah explained. The terms עַם ישראל (Am Yisrael), שראל חי (Am Yisrael Chai), and ארץ ישראל (Eretz Yisrael) are terms based in Judaism, not in a political contemporary reality. Yisrael is the God-given name of Ya'akov, a patriarch of the Jewish people. The terms are thus connected to this religious aspect of Judaism. This means that עַם ישראל (Am Yisrael) are the people of Ya'akov / Yisrael, which were preceded by בני ישראל (Bnei Yisrael) – the children of Yisrael / Ya'akov meaning the decedents of Ya'akov / Yisrael - the Jewish people - עַם ישראל (Am Yisrael). The Jewish people were given the land of Yisrael by God - ארץ ישראל (Eretz Yisrael). The land of Yisrael is then a geographical location which can be traced back to biblical times, however it is as much a connection to Judaism and Jewishness - ישראל (Am Yisrael) – as it is to the physical geographical location. This does not mean however, that the biblical and religious importance of the geographical location of the land is not used for political purposes today.

As much as the terms are connected to a religious aspect of Judaism rather than the contemporary political State of Israel, it is not necessarily possible to

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separate the two. "Israeli identity is so intertwined with being Jewish. Israelisness without Jewishness is a difficult concept" said Neta and continued that "to ask Israelis to pinpoint what is Israeli and what is Jewish is difficult". Røislien (2010: 161) concludes from her research with IDF soldiers that "Jewishness, "Israeliness", and Judaism are inextricably linked". "Jewishness" and "Israeliness" are terms referring strongly to identity, whilst Judasim points to religion as well as part of an identity. As we can see these concepts are near impossible to separate, and the term "Zionism" can in many cases also be included.

## Jewish and Israeli Identity

As mentioned above, identity is an ambiguous term. Identity is *uniqueness* for individuals and *sameness* for groups, and for individuals, a sameness in a group identity is part of their unique individual identity of the self (van Meijl 2010). It is a way to categorise and make sense of the world. 'Jew' is a category which describes a group of people who, as mentioned above, share traits such as traditions, history, heritage, culture and religion. This group is referred to as 'the Jewish People', while the individual is a 'Jew'. Being part of the 'Am' – the collective group to which Jews belong – will then also have an influence on the individual unique identity of each person. Members of the Jewish People share a common sameness, which is also in itself different between groups within 'Am' and individuals within the groups. Such groups could be religious observant or atheist, and within religious observant there could be orthodox or reform identities. But in the end, all are Am Yisrael – the People of Israel.

The sameness within the group is often built on cultural traits. 'Culture' is a complex concept of anthropology, and refers to practices, values, symbols, and

traditions, amongst other things (van Meijl 2010; Cohen 1993), which the group considers 'theirs' and hence part of their group identity. Practises are often traditions, for example the traditional practise of breaking a glass in your wedding ceremony to resemble the destruction of the second temple. As for symbols of Jewish culture and identity there are many. Some of the most well known would be the Magen David (Star of David) and the Menorah. The Magen David is the centre of the Israeli flag, and there is a Menorah on the front cover of Israeli passports, meaning there is a clear connection between the contemporary political State of Israel and Jewish culture.

Another significant symbol of Jewish culture, I argue in this thesis, is the Israel Defence Forces. IDF is a symbol of Jewish persistence and resistance, the army defending the Jewish State and the Jewish People after thousands of years of persecution and exile. Here also there is a strong connection between the contemporary State of Israel and Jewish culture. IDF is a symbol of contemporary Israel, but also of the Jewish people and their culture. IDF has integrated religious units and has its own Rabbinate which advice on religious matters and is responsible for soldiers religious traditions and needs (Røislien 2010; Israel Defence Forces n.d. b.)

Another major aspect of Jewish history and identity is the Zionist movement and Zionism which led to the creation of contemporary Israel and is still a strong identifier for many Jews around the world.

## Zionism

Theodor Herzl published his vision for 'The Jewish State' in 1896. He describes the need for a state for the Jewish people due to persecution and suffering, driven by antisemitism. He pictures a voluntary migration fuelled by the antisemitism in

Europe and other places in the world, as there is no people who have as many misconceptions of them spread as the Jews. The Jewish State will be one based on equality and labour. Herzl also points out that the Jewish emergency situation is not the only one in the world, and that there should not be created more divisions between people, no new borders but rather eliminate the old ones. In the conclusion he states that within the Jewish State "[w]e shall live at last as free men on our own soil, and die peacefully in our own homes." (Herzl, Harket, and Dahl 2005)[1896].

This is a basic understanding of Zionism that many have, however, there are probably as many versions and understandings of Zionism as there are Jews. Some of those I have spoken to define Zionism solely as the right of the Jewish self-determination, others say it's the right to self-determination in their historical homeland. Herzl considered both Argentina and Palestine as appropriate places for a Jewish State, although did point out the historical significance of Palestine (Herzl, Harket, and Dahl 2005 [1896] pp. 41-42). Palestinians often do look to Zionism as responsible for their current situation, and  it does seem like the original Zionist project of a Jewish State ended up being at the cost of another people rather than not creating more divisions or borders.

Zionism is for many considered part of a collective identity, and it is also a strong individual identity. And, Zionism is specifically a part of a Jewish identity. Zionism and Judaism are difficult to distinctively separate (Røislien 2010), they are intertwined like "Jewishness", "Israeliness" and Judaism. Jewishness and Israeliness are strongly connected to Zionism, and to Eretz Israel and Am Yisrael. The specific connections between Judaism, the Jewish people and Eretz Israel were reasons the Zionist movement in the early 1900's found Palestine to be the desired homeland for the Jewish state for the Jewish people (Thorleifsson 2014). The Zionist ideology has then been concerned with how to bridge the gap between a historical homeland Jews had been expelled from for nearly two thousand years and creating a contemporary Nation State. To do this Weiss (1997: 98) argues that the Zionist movement has created a mythology which links "its present project of nation building with the

remote Jewish history" of the land.

Most of the participants considered themselves to be Zionists and proud to be Jewish, and it was a definite part of their identity. But what Zionism meant ranged from self-determination and safety to expelling all Arabs from Eretz Israel, the homeland of Am Yisrael, the Jewish people. For many, it is a struggle that Zionism is seen as something evil by outsiders, internationals and Palestinians, as well as that IDF soldiers are held as being automatically and individually 'evil' by association to the Zionist system. Although most of them do see how the creating of the State of Israel on the basis of the Zionist movement in 1948 have caused suffering to the Palestinian people today, there are many different narratives on how and why this happened.

*Memorial Narratives*

Considering the sense of belonging both Jewish and Palestinian people have to the geographical location that encompasses both Israel and the Palestinian territories today, the concepts and theories revolving around locality and belonging that are presented in Lovell's (1998) edited volume are interesting to look at. There is a focus on the importance of memories and historical narratives of belonging to a geographical space as a way where unity and connection is established between people both in the space and not in the space. The historical narratives of both the Jewish and the Palestinian people are strong when it comes to the connection to the physical land and geographical space. For both there is a historical memory of 'my people' belonging to a certain geographical location, which is an aspect that creates unity amongst Jewish people both in the land and in the diaspora, as well as unity among the Palestinian people both in the land and in the diaspora.

In the creation of individual and collective identity there are several aspects

that come together. Collective memories or narratives of the past help create a common unity. For an individual both the past and what is to come in the future come together to create an identity for the present (van Meijl 2010, Bakhtin [Emerson] 1984). The past is represented by both historical narratives and past experiences, and the future is shaped by these, and also by the present experiences and narratives, and how you see the future in these lights. For the Jewish people there is a history of pogroms, expulsions, and persecution that culminated in the Holocaust during the second world war. These are a combination of memorial narratives and lived experiences, and experiences learned from close family such as parents or grandparents. How do these memorial narratives affect the individual and collective narratives of today?

## The Shoah

The Holocaust, or the Shoah in Hebrew, meaning 'disaster', claimed the lives of six million Jews by the Nazi regime during the Second World War. Two out of three Jews in Europe were killed (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2021), which was more than a third of the global Jewish population (Oster 2020). The Shoah ended just 75 years ago, and is a living memory for survivors to this day. The children and grandchildren of survivors also have an emotional connection to the horrors that faced the Jewish people and their families. This collective memory of the attempt to exterminate the Jewish people all together is an employment of the past to create a unique and collective identity (Gil 2012). Through the decades since the focus on the aftermath have gone through different stages. At first the resistance fighters from the Jewish ghettos were in focus and were given heroic status. The main focus shifted to the millions of victims during the 60's and 70's as major events such as the Eichmann trial unfolded. In the 1980's the focus shifted once again, from

the horrors of extermination to the heroics of survival, and the survivors of the Shoah "became heroes adorned with military glory" (Gil 2012: 89) and represent victory over the Nazi's. This representation sees a link drawn between the victory over the Nazi regime, the Shoah and the State of Israel. "The independent state is not only the justified result of World War II, but also symbolizes the victory over Nazism" (Gil 2012: 94). With the major part of the global Jewish population living through this first hand, and their children and grandchildren growing up in the aftermath, the stories and memories are kept alive and included in the Jewish identity. There are memorial museums and sites all over the world, and memorial ceremonies held both on International Holocaust Day and on Yom HaShoah, which is the day of commemoration in the Jewish calendar which is observed in Israel.

On Yom HaShoah in 2019 I was invited to join a group of Lone Soldiers in the IDF from around the world for an evening of sharing family stories and remembrance. The space was decorated with pictures of family members of the soldiers that perished, and the atmosphere was sombre and respectful. Sharing stories and having a survivor or close family member of a survivor telling their story is common on this day. We sat in a circle, some on chairs, some in a sofa, some on the floor. All the young soldiers had personal family stories to share. A young female soldier shared the story about how her family were helped and hidden in chicken crates for a whole year, only rarely getting out to move their bodies. The people on the farm who hid them came with food and water, but sometimes it was too risky and it would be days in between. I have heard many stories from the Holocaust, I have read books, watched Schindler's List at 15 as preparation for the school trip to Auschwitz where a Norwegian survivor, a political prisoner, accompanied us. I heard horrific stories on the tours of concentration camps on that trip. But I had never heard a young woman speak so vulnerably about her own family's fight for survival. It was incredibly moving, and a sense of unity was in the room.

After everyone had told their stories, we lit candles in memory of those who

no longer had family members alive to remember them. The candles had their names and some information about them and their lives, and where they died. I lit a candle with Hebrew inscription: "Dr. Tzemach Feldstein. 1884 – 1944. Lithuania, married to Fania, father of three, director of the Hebrew Gymnasium in Kaunas, died in a camp in the south of Germany". The candles were placed on a table on top of the Israeli flag.



Yom HaShoah 2019. Pictuers by the author.

The Jewish fighters in the ghettos were mainly members of Zionist youth organisations, and they were given honour as to have 'died for the homeland' (Gil 2012: 81). Since the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 there has been created a link between the extermination of Jews during the Shoah and a potential similar scenario to be inflicted by the Arabs. The Shoah has been used to explain and justify security measures within Israel and along the borders, and some go as far as saying the Shoah has been abused by people in power to strengthen Zionism. As a vivid collective memory, the Shoah as part of Jewish identity, has been used to unify the

State of Israel and the Jewish people, and this specific part of history makes a clear distinction between Israel and other nations (Gil 2012).

## Ideology and Discourse in Contemporary-Historical Narratives

The narratives of history and present in Israel today are on both sides ideological and are spread and reproduced through discourse (Van Dijk 2013). Here I am analysing different polarised ideologies, how the Israel Defence Forces have influenced them, and how the different ideologies are spread and reproduced through discourse. The discursive methods used to spread and reproduce these ideologies are text and talk (Van Dijk 2013), including social media and private conversations, but also the use of images. As social media platforms like Instagram (pictures) and TikTok (videos) become more popular, the more important the discursive element of images become.

Ideology is often seen as a trait of the Other that they have, but We have the truth and hence do not need ideologies, which can be considered as an imaginary understanding of reality (Van Dijk 2013; Eagleton 1991). However, ideology is defined here as consisting of "ideas and beliefs (whether true or false) which symbolize the conditions and life experiences of a specific, socially significant group" (Eagleton 1991: 29). False does not mean that it simply is not true. False can mean that it is a real and true lived experience of, for example, all Palestinians you have encountered being antisemitic, but if you take a much broader look at the whole you will see that the claim of all Palestinians being antisemitic is not correct. It can also mean picking the parts necessary for your narrative from history and ignoring the others. It does not mean what your narrative say is false, or that you are purposefully ignoring parts of history, but it is false in the sense that it has left out certain events that are also true, and hence create a false picture of the whole. In short, ideologies consist of both truth and falsehood, some falsehoods are not

directly untrue, while others can be made up. If there were no truth to ideologies, they would not symbolize the lived experiences of a social group.

While ideologies can be considered a system of meaning for a particular socially significant group, it is the processes of discourse that produces and reproduces ideologies. Discourse comprises the knowledge within the ideology, gaining this knowledge, and spreading and reproducing knowledge through the relations between knowledge and the social aspects of lived experiences (Foucault 1970). Ideology is therefore spread and reproduced through social aspects such as text, talk and images within the ongoing process of lived experience. Ideology and discourse are both multifaceted. Thus, ideology is a social system of meaning based on knowledge gained through discourse and lived experience. On the other hand, discourse is the production and reproduction of knowledge utilised through lived experience as a system of meaning.

Historical narratives are of utmost importance in the everyday lives of Jewish Israelis and their connection to the Jewish tribe. Hylland Eriksen (2010: 85) states that "history is not a product of the past but a response to the requirements of the present". The historical narratives are "present day *constructions* of the past" (2010: 87, original emphasis). These constructions of the past are important in keeping an ideological discourse together, to maintain cohesion within an 'ethnic group' (2010: 70), within the Jewish tribe, in order to keep spreading and reproducing the ideology which is specific for this particular socially significant group. As Weiss (1997) argued, the Zionist movement constructed a mythology which linked the project of a Jewish State in the land of Palestine in such a way that it could be a connection within the ideology of the Jewish People in a meaningful way.

The narratives of how Israel was created, what unfolded during the wars and what happened to the Palestinian people are many and diverse. It is outside the scope of the thesis to go into all of them in detail, thus I will focus on two hegemonic narratives; the one where Israel was attacked by Arab countries in 1948 and had not at any point done anything but defend the Jewish State, and that where Israel committed ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in an effort to make demographic change to ensure a Jewish majority of the Jewish state so the nation would be upheld. Both these historical narratives are aspects of two different ideologies; the ideology of the 'pro-Israel' side and the ideology of the 'anti-Occupation' side.

The unbiased and objective truth probably lies somewhere in between these two narratives. As Efrayim said during our conversation on Israel and Jewish connection to the land: "Between 1948-1967 there are many narratives, none of them are completely true. I do not know what is true or not – both sides have truths, both sides probably have parts of their narrative that are not true.".

Stein (2011) writes that before the emergence of the 'New Israeli Historians' in the 1980's the narrative of the creation of the State of Israel was the following: the day after the declaration of Israeli independence in 1948, they were invaded by five Arab armies with the intent to bring forth the destruction of Israel. Israel heroically defended their new state with a high moral and the spirit of "purity of arms", later a core aspect of the ethical code of the IDF, where "innocent civilians would never deliberately be harmed and prisoners of war treated with respect" (Stein 2011: 130). Although Stein (2011) claims this was a former narrative within Israel and that the 'New Historians', at least a few of them, brought new light on the historical events during the years prior to and post independence this narrative is one that I hear most often.

Netanel spoke passionately about the Jewish connection to the specific geographical area, the Holy Land. "Recently a 3000 year old coin with Hebrew inscriptions was found", which shows also that Hebrew, the language of the Jewish people has a historical connection to this specific land. "The Jewish nation is much older than Arab nations" he said and continued that "there is DNA that is specific just to Jews!". DNA is one aspect of the modern world that is adding to the discourses of 'ethnic identity', confirming that Jews have specific genetic markers that are exclusive to them, hence solidifying an ideology of belonging to the Jewish tribe. It is "a story of genetic and territorial continuity" (Hylland Eriksen 2010: 88).

Ethan also mentioned the genetics of the Jewish people as being specific, and a trait that tied the Jewish People stronger together, in a way as there is scientific proof of a common belonging. Ethan is a reservist in his early 20's, and a student, knowledgeable and passionate about his views. With a confident but relaxed demeanour, he is a great conversational partner. Ethan also told me about the creation of Israel, especially from the war in 1948. "Israel and Palestine have not yet recognised that the 1948 war is over. They keep the conflict going as if it has not already been settled!" "How has it been settled?" I asked. To which he replied "We won, they lost, they need to move on". His ideology includes the historical narrative of the writers that came before the 'New Historians', a victorious and heroic Israel fighting Arab nations for their existence.

As Ethan expressed an interest in meeting a Palestinian to discuss and learn more, I invited him to meet with myself and Noor, a Palestinian woman I knew in Jerusalem. The conversation between the two of them was particularly interesting in the context of ideological narratives. While Ethan spoke about the ancient and biblical Jewish connection to the land "from the first Jews that lived here on this land 3000 or so years ago", Noor was more interested in current events than several thousand year old history. Noor pointed out the ethnic cleansing of 1948, the Nakba, and the continuation of discrimination and inequality up until this day. For Ethan this was due to the bad choices of Palestinians, specifically the Palestinian leaders.

"It is a religious conflict between Jews and Muslims" Ethan stated confidently. "I disagree", said Noor calmly, "I have no interest in getting rid of the Jews. The conflict is about land rights and equal human rights". As the current situation was of more pressing interest for Noor, the conversation also turned to how the IDF specifically, and the Israeli Society more generally, valued Jewish life over Palestinian life. "My life is not worth as much as yours" said Noor to Ethan, a former IDF combat engineer, who looked her in the eyes and replied nonchalantly: "But you chose this", not referring directly to her personally, but to the Palestinian people. The Palestinian people and their leaders made bad decisions and need to move on from the 1948 war where Israel was victorious and the Palestinians lost. That Palestinian life is worth less is a consequence of these actions only.

I spoke with Ethan several times, and although these words on paper seem harsh, this is his worldview, his ideology. The connection of the Jewish People to the land, ancient and biblical, the victory in the 1948 war, and the consequent wars who were fought because the Palestinians did not accept that they lost and did not move on. And by no means was Ethan the only one with these views.

As I mentioned above the historical narrative of the writers who came before the 'New Historians' in the 1980's (Weiss 1997) was the one I heard most often. Rarely did I get to hear an Israeli Jew like Ethan speak about this in a calm and respectful manner with a Palestinian like Noor. For the most part this narrative and the present day ideological discourse it is a part of was told by Jewish Israelis to other Jewish Israelis, or at times to "naïve foreigners" much like myself, who had a leftist ideological view of different narratives for the same history.

David, who's quote about truth opened the introduction to this thesis, is another who shared this ideology. An interesting aspect about my conversation with him was that he did not want to talk about himself or his own experiences at all, he was only there to tell me about the truth, to which there can be no other, about the Jewish history and connection to the land. The whole conversation was a lesson to me about Jewish history, through a specific ideological discourse.

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Another aspect of this ideology and discourse is that there is a sense that the Jewish people are superior to others. This is not something everyone agrees with, and most definitely do not say so explicitly, but implicitly it is said through rhetorical grips of calling Palestinians "Arabs" and hence erasing a part of their identity and connection to the land. But Shimon who grew up in the Ultra Orthodox, or Haredim, neighbourhood of Mea Sheraim in Jerusalem as an Ultra Orthodox Jew told me stories of his days in Yeshiva – a school for only religious education which boys only of Ultra Orthodox parents attend. These boys do not get regular schooling learning science or languages, they only study the Talmud and the Torah. They are taught from a young age that they are the chosen people, and that for this reason they are better than others. The ideology within the Ultra Orthodox communities is different from the Zionist ideology, which is at its core secular, and the communities are closed and not easy to get a foot into. Shimon left the community and the religion, and when we met he was an anti-Occupation activist, and was pursuing the education he never got as a child to be able to get a university education.

Netanel has adopted some of this ideology regarding superiority, and stated that he believes, and so does Israel, that "Judean-Christian values are superior to others, for example values coming from Muslim countries". After this I have heard many Jews criticise the use of the term 'Judean-Christian' and only refer to is as Judean values, as Christianity did spring out from Judaism. I can not say for sure that Netanel is correct in his belief that Israel has an ideology where the superiority of Judean values is built in, but it is interesting to look at this possibility in relation to the ideological discourses and how those on the 'pro-Israel' side use the discursive language and methods to further their ideology.

Both narratives are connected to Judaism, Jewishness, Israeliness, Zionism – and Jewish identity. They are part of different ideologies presented by different discourses. The next chapter will take up the importance of Israel Defence Forces in these ideological discourses for both pro-Israel and anti-Occupation supporters. All

veterans of the IDF, no matter which ideology they adhere to, have been influenced by their time in the Israel Defence Forces.

# Chapter 4. Israel Defence Forces

Israel Defence Forces, or IDF, is the symbol of heroic Jewish soldiers defending their freedom. For others IDF is the symbol of Zionism turned settler colonialism, occupation, human rights violations and war. The IDF is at the core of todays ideological discourses about Israel and the conflict with Palestine, within and outside Israel. The IDF is used to promote Israel to the world, and as a symbol to call upon action from the Israeli Government and the international community for injustice. They are praised by the Israeli government and their supporters around the world, and the soldiers are often the centre of attention for pro-Palestine activists. Much have been said about the policies of the Israeli Government and the mandates given to the IDF for conducting operations. This is however not the focus of the thesis, and legal justifications of operations or violations of International Humanitarian Law (IHL – 'Rules of War') is not considered. The thesis is rather focused on the men and women who serve and how their service affects their ideologies post-service, which is the theme of chapter 5. This chapter includes discussions on the ethical code of the IDF, soldiers' own experiences of service predominantly in combat roles, and the importance of morality for all of the participants, regardless of their ideological affiliation.

All Israeli men and women who are Jewish, Druze or Circassian and who are eligible to serve have mandatory conscription into the Israel Defence Forces. Israeli Arabs and Bedouins, are exempt and so are religious women and married individuals. However you can volunteer to serve regular service even if not conscripted and several does this every year (Israel Defence Forces n.d. f; Israel MFA 2013 b). Since July 2020 the time of service is set at 2,5 years for men and 2 years for

women, unless they volunteer for a position that requires longer service, for example a combat unit (Fulbright 2020).

Jager (2018) however, is predicting an end to mandatory conscription, referring to more draft-evasion and less interest in combat roles, as well as youth not seeing the same level of benefit to serve in the IDF as before. The enlistment rate of those obliged to serve have dropped to less than 50% in 20 years, and while you can be charged with objection to serve, few are (Jager 2018). During fieldwork some participant thought only those who publicly declared a political reason for not serving, often called 'contentious objectors', are charged and serve jail time. Most of those who avoid enlistment get medical exemptions, or like Shimon who left the Ultra Orthodox community showed up on for his draft interview and said he was not motivated, and was released.

Despite these predictions from Jager in 2018, the soldiers and reservists I met in 2019 were motivated and saw the importance of the IDF and their integral part in Israeli society.


## IDF in Israeli Society

The Israel Defence Forces serves as more than a defence force for Israel. It is an integral part of everyday life in the country and has programmes to help both immigrant soldiers and the civil community. Lorch (1997) describes how "[n]ot to have served in the IDF has in the past been regarded as a disgrace; moreover it has been a real impediment to future civilian careers." Conscription and service in the IDF is integral to the Israeli society. While Lorch stated this in 1997, this is still how both Netanel and Dror sees it when we meet on separate occasions in 2019.

Dror served in a special unit in the Combat Engineer Corps which he specifically aimed for due to the value it would have for him in his civilian career after his service, and spoke at length about the importance of the IDF to Israeli

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society: "In the army you meet many different cultures, and people from all walks of life. You expand your horizon in the social context. For example on reserve duty, the grocery shop worker is the commander and the top lawyer is the truck driver." Netanel spoke of how you in Israel are assimilated into the society and that "there is no real interest in multi-culturalism and integration, you have to become one of us." The importance of the IDF in this assimilation into becoming part of the Us rather than the Other. "The IDF is a huge part of the assimilation process, as everyone has to go through it. Many jobs have nothing to do with combat, but they are still a part of the IDF system which is shaping youth into the same.", Netanel continues that the IDF is also, by some, called the "fusion corps". Some positions within the IDF that may not be particularly common within other armies are options to serve as a clown or a magician to help in  humanitarian missions. There are also Hebrew teachers to help Lone Soldiers or new immigrants with their Hebrew as part of their training.

IDF and its soldiers are also an integral part of the Jewish tribe and ideology as they are seen as the sons and daughters of the nation, a discourse that is prominent when there are casualties, or perhaps worse, kidnappings of IDF soldiers by enemies. Israel and the IDF will do what they can to get soldiers released or their bodies returned for burial. In 2011 Israel released 1027 Palestinian prisoner in exchange for IDF soldier Gilad Shalit who had been held hostage by Hamas since 2006 (Israel Defence Forces n.d. d.)

Media coverage of the IDF has evolved from news articles and TV reports to in the later years having an ever increasing presence on social media, with mixed reception from the public.

## Media Strategy

The Israel Defence Forces are active not only in the mainstream news media, but also on social media. They have various Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok accounts. They come in different languages such as Arabic, Spanish and English, as well as from different units. Shavit (2017) argues that between 2000 to 2014, from the start of the 2nd Intifada until post 2014 'Operation Protective Edge' in Gaza there has been an intensified 'mediatizing' of the IDF. Ranging from giving journalists more access, to sending army photographers out with troops in battle, and embracing social media. This is according to Shavit (2017) an intentional effort to shape the social construct of their own warfare. This social construction of warfare is attempt of perception management. Starting in Israel but also reaching out to the rest of the world, the IDF wants to be able to somewhat control the perception of their soldiers and activities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, several of the IDF veterans I spoke to expressed that they found it personally problematic that IDF operations in general and IDF soldiers in particular were considered 'evil' by way of being connected to Zionism. However, these perceptions from the public opinion also came from media and social media coverage of the IDF.

The need for the IDF to be in control of the narratives and perception of their activities and soldiers is connected with the need for legitimacy. Legitimacy for military operations, conscription, receiving military aid from the US (USAID 2021) and the need to develop new and more advanced weapons (Iddon 2021). There is much critique of IDF's operations, ranging from 'collateral damage' to checkpoints (see for example Human Rights Watch 2019;). I will not go into a conclusion on whether or not the legitimacy or justification, but rather how the IDF work on social media to legitimize the IDF and military operations.

Part of this perception management is the IDF Spokesperson's office "hasbara policy that would present the IDF's position to the public through the local and

international media" (Shavit 2017: 38). Hasbara means 'to explain', however it has popularly become the name of what is seen by some as Israeli propaganda (Turner 2015; Schleifer 2003; Meir 2005; Levy 2015). One aspect is the careful choice of words to describe events. Shavit (2017: 44) mentions 'armed conflict' instead of 'intifada' – which is the Arabic word for 'uprising', 'warning shots' instead of 'deterrent shots' and 'targeted killings' instead of 'liquidating terrorists'. These phrases are from the time of the 2nd Intifada in the early 2000's.

These days one word that I have particularly noticed is that the IDF, and other Israeli security forces and authorities, use the word 'neutralise' rather than 'killing' or 'injuring' when it comes to stopping potential or suspected terrorist which is also prevalent in the yearly lookback of 2019 on the IDF's website, where the updates on events are accompanied by official tweets from throughout the year (Israel Defence Forces n.d. e). The use of word 'neutralize' is also controversial as Feldman (2016) points out in a Haaretz opinion piece titled "'Neutralize' a Terrorist? Just Say a Bullet to the Head". The article refers to the trial of Elor Azaria, a soldier who was charged after shooting an injured Palestinian, who had just attempted a stabbing against a soldier, in the head as he lay motionless on the ground. I spoke at length about this specific case with several participants, and I will come back to it later in this chapter.

This media strategy is as mentioned aimed to influence both local and international public opinion. International public opinion has become increasingly important to the IDF, especially as the popularity of social media grows and images and videos are published by witnesses either live or within minutes of the event. One example of a struggling image for Israel amongst the international public is the attention 'Operation Pillar of Defence' in 2008/2009 and 'Operation Protective Edge' in 2014 got. In 2008/2009 two Norwegian doctors were present in Gaza working as part of the trauma team at Al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City. They went live on news channels daily to talk about the immense suffering of the civilian population of Gaza, and later published a book with their stories. There were stories of children with devastating injuries and IDF's use of white phosphorous (Gilbert and Fosse

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2010).

Gilbert was also in Gaza at the Al-Shifa hospital during 'Operation Protective Edge' in 2014 (Gilbert 2014) which escalated from an Air Force campaign to a ground invasion, which several of the research participants took part in. The use of advanced media technology in the battlefield became central for the IDF during 'Protective Edge' in 2014 (Shavit 2017: 152). Images and videos were released almost immediately by the IDF to the world, from soldiers on the ground to video clips in black and white showing bombings of targets in Gaza. One such video clip showing the Israel Air Force targeting a Hamas tunnel going from Gaza into Israel may have been what pushed the IDF into a ground invasion as the images made the public aware of the existence of such tunnels and their purpose, which was for Hamas terrorists to infiltrate Israel and attack civilians (Shavit 2017: 153). A ground invasion that was announced by the IDF on the social media platform Twitter at 21:41 on 17 July 2014.

← Tweet

**Israel Defense Forces** ✔
@IDF

BREAKING NEWS: A large IDF force has just launched a ground operation in the Gaza Strip. A new phase of Operation Protective Edge has begun.

21:41 · 17 Jul 14 · Twitter Web Client

**3,524** Retweets **879** Likes

## Social Media

Israel Defence Forces use social media not just to inform the public of current events, almost as a press release, but also to build a positive image of itself and its soldiers.

Twitter has become a platform for short and effective "real-time information and updates" (Israel Defence Forces n.d. g) as their Twitter bio states, about ongoing operations, rocket alerts, incidents where soldiers are attacked, or allegedly attacked, most often in the West Bank. There are also historical lookbacks in tune with the ideology of Israeli soldiers as heroes of the Jewish people. In addition to the serious real-time updates, there are a wide variety of meme's, humorous images often including a sarcastic or funny message on a topic. Their twitter discourse is a balanced mix of serious updates on defensive (never offensive) efforts, successful missions, historical achievements, information about the enemy and jokes. The picture above (@IDF



Posted 9 May 2019) explains a successful operation involving both stopping a cyber attack and then the bombing of a specific building in Gaza. To the right is a post @IDF Posted commemorating heroic soldiers from the Six Day War and their achievements. They also post videos as the one posted during Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021, where IDF explains that the reason people in Gaza are suffering is Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and other militant groups, and them alone. Israel is not responsible for any suffering. All these three posts are part of the ideological discourse, and are perfectly in line with both the current narrative and the historical-contemporary narrative. And then we have the meme's. The example



here is from 3 October 2019, also known as 'Mean Girls Day' as labelled by fans of the teen comedy Mean Girls (Waters 2004). A movie about teenage girls being bullies and deciding where people can and can not sit, what they can and cannot wear. And according to the IDF, a great portrayal of Iran, here represented by Ayatollah Khamenei
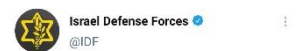


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and the commander of the elite forces Qassem Soleimani, and Hezbollah, represented by their leader Hassan Nasrallah.

## The Most Moral Army in the World

*"It's better to shoot someone in their sleep. Or in the back, that's also a good way to shoot someone." – Saul, Major (Res.) IDF*

A common saying about, and from, the Israel Defence Forces, is that they are "the most moral army in the world". It is something that is often used as an answer when someone ask questions about legitimacy of the use of force by the IDF against Palestinians. Bombings of Gaza are a common occurrence, with a few strikes whenever there is a rocket fired, and intense bombardment in times of severe conflict. It is inevitable that there will be civilian casualties when bombs are dropped on a densely populated area that Gaza is. When children are killed by airstrikes, the IDF comes back with the answer that they had warned the residents of the building beforehand to evacuate because the building would be bombed and/or that Hamas use civilians, also children, as human shields and refuse them to leave. It is true, they do – at least most of the time – warn those who live in the buildings around an hour before the bombing, to give them time to evacuate. They call building owners or managers, send mass texsts, mass calls to residents or drop flyers. They also proceed with two 'roof knocks' – smaller bombs that make little damage but a lot of noise to alert anyone - before the actual bombing, giving a few minutes to get out.

Precautions like these is what they say makes them the 'most moral army in the world'. In addition all soldiers in the IDF are given and taught the ethical code of the IDF – 'The Spirit of the IDF' – and weight is put on every soldiers personal morals and responsibilities.

I had several conversations with people about the morality of the IDF and have given it a lot of thought the more I have learnt about the people. I am not going to be able to give an answer as to whether IDF is the most moral army in the world or not, my task here is to tell the stories of the people I met.

The quote by Saul above about how it is best to shoot someone did not come out of nowhere in a vacuum without context. Although I was taken aback when he said this, and it has stuck with me ever since, there was a reason he thought this was something he needed to point out to me during our conversation in his garden that day.

Saul served in the IDF as a combat soldier for many years and has been part of dismantling terror cells, stopping suicide bombers, and pulling dead school children out of a bus after a Palestinian suicide attack. In the army you sometimes have to shoot, and sometimes shoot to kill. It is your job. In this conversation we were speaking about the mental health of combat soldiers, and the rates of PTSD in Israel, as well as how terror is combatted. For a soldier's personal mental health, it may be so that shooting someone without looking them in the eyes is a better option, if you know you have to kill them. Is it moral or not? Does it matter if this man is the brain behind a string of suicide attacks against civilians?

When a known or alleged terrorist is killed, the language used is that the terrorist has been "neutralised". This, for me at least, takes away the humanity of the person behind the terrorist and may perhaps give a false image of what soldiers and other security forces are doing. "I neutralised a terrorist" sounds very different from "I killed a human being".  Perhaps this wording is not only used to control the perception of the IDF in the world, but also to protect soldiers from the brutal reality of their job?

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Saul was once told when talking about how to combat Hamas in Gaza, that the IDF should just go in and "kill them all". "Do you want to kill a child?" Saul had responded. The man who made the suggestion got uncomfortable. "How would we go about doing it? Line them up 20 at a time at the edge of a pit and shoot them so they fall in? Do you see anything wrong with this picture?" Explaining the scenario in this way caused a sudden awareness of what the reality would look like, and this reality was not pleasant. Even if Saul talks about how it is best to shoot another human being, there is still a morality and consciousness about what it entails. The soldiers of the IDF are not robotic killing machines, they have to weigh up different scenarios against each other and there are strict rules of engagement for each different operation that they need to follow. Killing everyone in Gaza is clearly morally wrong, killing the brain behind a string of suicide attacks would have a different moral judgement to it.

*"Soldiers personal moral is important, and it is what they need to make sure they can cope with what is being done. The army is not a democracy, you follow orders. You do what is necessary to do to carry out and complete the mission. Not more. For example in a civilian house in Gaza, you will not sit on the chairs or sofas, because this is not a necessary part of completing the mission, if you have to sit, you sit on the floor. You might need to break down the wall if you suspect the door is booby-trapped to enter the house, and stand on chairs and other furniture to look for weapons or explosives – but you will not sit on them afterwards to rest. You don't touch, you don't steal, you don't use the bathroom if there are other alternatives."*

*Isaac, Sergeant Major (Res) IDF*

Isaac told me this during one of the first meetings I had with a participant. For him the importance of morality in the IDF and the personal moral of the soldiers was of the significant. Isaac had served for several years in a combat special forces unit and climbed the ranks through to Sergeant Major, a second in command over a battalion. In other words, he was responsible for the soldiers below him in rank during combat operations. As is quoted above, the personal moral and how you act in a combat situation is necessary to uphold in order to be able to cope with what you are a part

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of. Isaac does think what the IDF is doing is necessary, but also understand the potential suffering for Palestinians they interact with. Therefore, although a necessity for security and safety for the people of Israel, keeping your moral standards high will help you cope with also being part of far more intense operations than breaking down a wall to enter a house.

## The Spirit of the IDF

The importance of morality within the IDF is enshrined in their ethical code commonly referred to as The Spirit of the IDF:

"The purpose of the IDF is to preserve the State of Israel, to protect its independence, and to foil attempts by its enemies to disrupt normal life within it. The soldiers of the IDF are obligated to fight and to devote every effort, even at the risk of their lives, to protect the State of Israel, its citizens and residents. Soldiers of the IDF shall act according to the values of the IDF and its commands, while abiding by the law, upholding human dignity, and respecting the values of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state."

The ethical code consists of three fundamental values, and 10 values, all which need to be followed by every soldier within the IDF.

"*Defense of the State, its Citizens and its Residents*. – The purpose of the IDF is to protect the existence of the State of Israel, its independence, and the security of its citizens and residents.

*Patriotism and Loyalty to the State*. – Service in the IDF is based on patriotism and on commitment and devotion to the State of Israel – a democratic state which is the national home of the Jewish people – and to its citizens and residents.

*Human Dignity*. – The IDF and its soldiers are obligated to preserve human dignity. All human beings are of inherent value regardless of race, creed, nationality, gender, status or role."

While the fundamental value of human dignity includes all and is non-discriminatory, the value of patriotism and loyalty to the State underlines that Israel is a Jewish state. You need to be both committed and devoted to the Jewish State while serving in the IDF. The ethical code is part of the ideology of Israel Defence Forces, and hence also of the State of Israel, and producing it as the core values for all soldiers is a discursive method that gives these specific points high validity amongst those who are shaped into who they are by service in the IDF.

The moral code of conduct also has a list of ten values in addition to the fundamental values. I have selected three of significant importance for identity and moral within the IDF.

"*'Purity of Arms' (Morality in Warfare)*. The soldier shall make use of his weaponry and power only for the fulfilment of the mission and solely to the extent required; he will maintain his humanity even in combat. The soldier shall not employ his weaponry and power in order to harm non-combatants or prisoners of war, and shall do all he can to avoid harming their lives, bodies, honor and property.

*Discipline.* The soldier shall do his utmost to carry out fully and successfully whatever is required of him, according to the letter and the spirit of the orders. The soldier shall issue only lawful orders and shall not obey those which are manifestly unlawful.

*Comradeship*. The soldier shall act out of solidarity and devotion to his fellow-soldiers, and shall always come to their assistance when they are in need or depend upon him, despite all danger and hardship, even at the risk of his life."
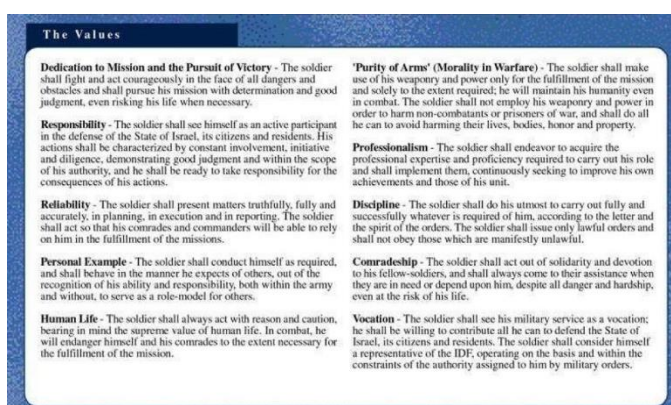


Morality, a major focus in the different discourses about the IDF and Israeli society, is within the ethical code defined as 'Purity of Arms'. It is linked to appropriate use of weapons and explosives, to

avoid harming civilians. Or, as it is also considered in International Humanitarian Law, non-combatants. This is ultimately a choice of words, however, within a discourse of morally right or wrong, and about what the truth is, a term such as non-combatant could ultimately be used as a discursive method to point to 'collateral damage', as it is, after all, war.                                   In light of creation of identity, where young men and women are trained and shaped into belonging to a certain ideology, comradeship is important. Here we see again the link to 'communitas' (Turner 1969), and the liminal phase the soldiers can be said to be in while completing their conscription. And the communitas they form, both between those who go through training together, and the wider communitas of all who has been through this, is incredibly important for ideological production and reproduction. The core ideology, that which is also enshrined in the ethical code, is reproduced while new ideologies in correspondence to changing times is produced by those who are part of the IDF as they happen. This could be, as we have seen above, new ideologies in response to evolving technology which allows for new platforms of communicating the discourse through to the public, who also needs to be incorporated into the wider ideology in order to keep it in place.

## The Making of an ID  F soldier

*"All your life you are taught to be nice, when you get to the IDF this is broken down, you need to be taught how to kill".*

*Ezra, Officer (Res), Special Forces*

The process of making a soldier for the Israel Defence Forces is ongoing throughout the lives of Israelis. As we saw in chapter 3, the Israeli educational system has

incorporated the Israel Defence Forces into the lives of all their students, especially through memorial ceremonies and lessons on the heroic acts that created the Jewish State of Israel (Weiss 1997). The institutional way of thinking that exist within the ranks of the IDF (Danielsen 2018) is transferred through discourse into the everyday lives of Israeli children, in preparation for them becoming the new, heroic protectors of the Jewish people. Although this is an important part of life in Israel, it is not a State which trains its children to become soldiers in the most common understanding of the word – those who are able to kill. Ezra, who is quoted above, points out to me during our conversation that the training of combat soldiers in the IDF involves a breaking down of the values most children are brought up with, to be kind and not violent towards other people. As you draft into the Israel Defence Forces to become a combat soldier, you start what Danielsen (2018) defines as an institutional apprenticeship, it is here men and women are socialised into becoming soldiers.

In the documentary 'Beneath the Helmet' (Kopping 2014) we get a glimpse into how this socialisation takes place through training within the ideological discourse of the IDF, by following a group of conscripts preparing to become Paratroopers. It follows the group from their first days, through mentally exhausting training, learning how to shoot and preparing for battle, to the final day of their institutional apprenticeship – the day they become Paratroopers and receive their red berets. Especially interesting is it to see how the conscripts are brought to Jerusalem to learn about the history of the State of Israel, where they amongst other places visit the military cemetery on Mount Herzl, where the discourse of the heroic acts of those soldiers before them who made the ultimate sacrifice so that they could have a safe, Jewish State to call home.

Also after the training has concluded, the process of making a soldier continues through their everyday experiences of soldiering. The story of Ido, a sniper serving on the Gaza border during the Great March of Return is an example of the continuing process as you have to live the battle your training prepared you

for, and the meeting between the soldier and the child shows how these processes continue during events and interactions you have not gone through months of training to prepare for.

## A Sniper on the Border - The Great March of Return

Ido who served as an infantry combat sniper was stationed at the Gaza Border fence during parts of 'The Great March of Return', a Palestinian protest starting in the 70th year since many Palestinians were made refugees as the State of Israel was created. It started on March 30th 2018, the day considered 'Land Day'. It is commemorated due to protests against Israeli state confiscation of Palestinian land in 1976, where several Palestinians were killed and injured. 'The Great March of Return' was a protest to call for the right of return for Palestinian refugees which happened every Friday, and until the end in December 2019 it also included protests against other grievances (Ibraigheth 2021; Medicines Sans Frontieres n.d. a). The Great March of Return was seen as a mostly peaceful protest by most Palestinians and many others, but by the Israeli media and IDF it was portrayed as a violent riot orchestrated by Hamas with attempts by terrorists to infiltrate Israel to kill Jewish civilians. When reports (Medicines Sans Frontieres n.d. b) came of killed and injured civilians, journalists and paramedics, there was one narrative saying this was due to Hamas using them as human shields and IDF had warned civilians to stay away as they were placing snipers on the border.  Ido was one of those snipers, and for him the experience was different from the ideological discourses happening around it.

When I met with Ido it was a while into my fieldwork and I was used to these meetings with strangers about incredibly sensitive topics. Ido was nervous however, which gave me a bit of a wake up call that these people were actually sacrificing quite a lot by talking to me about their experiences. I perceived him as very young, I

was at least 10 years older, but also mature. However I had spoken to some IDF reservists in their mid-30's as well, and had a picture of commanders and officers being older and more experienced even though I knew this is not the case. I realised here sitting across from Ido that they are not, they are all barely in their 20's.

Ido was one of the youngest participants and he was still in the IDF when we met. This means he was not actually allowed to speak to a researcher, at least not without explicit permission. When you have completed your service you are allowed to speak of your experiences to a degree, but there are still things you don't speak about. Some of the participants may have crossed that line in conversations with me.

This was another cafè meeting, as the setting worked well for first meetings; casual and public, but still possible to have private conversations. We sat down in a quiet corner and started chatting. He told me a bit about himself, he explained a lot about the organisation of IDF and about different weapons used by different units. I needed a bit of a lesson in weapons as 'machine gun' apparently is not the right term for any black rifle any soldier is carrying.

It took a while before Ido got more into his service and he told me he had been stationed at the Gaza Border during the Great March of Return, as a sniper. When he had said this, he got quiet. I could see he was getting emotional and that this was not an easy topic to talk about. I am in no aspect qualified to deal with personal trauma, so I did not push for more information, but waited to see how he wanted to continue the conversation. He then told me more about what it was like being a sniper at the Gaza border.

It was clear from our conversation that as a sniper at the Gaza border, Ido had seen and done things that would likely affect anyone's mental health. "We shoot and kill those who try to break through the fence", he said. It was pretty straight forward what the rules of engagement were. According to the UN independent report on the Great March of Return the IDF rules of engagement were as follows:

"The rules of engagement apparently permitted live fire at demonstrators as a last resort in

the event of imminent threat to life or limb of Israeli soldiers or civilians. They permitted snipers to shoot at the legs of "main inciters" as a means to prevent a demonstrating crowd from crossing the separation fence, because the Israeli forces viewed crossing as a potential imminent threat, in part because the crowd might include militants. The rules also permitted the use of lethal force against any demonstrators "directly participating in hostilities", such as an armed attack against Israeli forces."

(UN Human Rights Council 2019)

This is in line with what Ido says about shooting those who do try to break through the fence. However, the same report found after investigating all fatalities related to the Great March of Return demonstrations, or riots as they were often referred to in Israel, and more than 700 injuries until the end of 2018, a year before the end of the weekly protests, there were "reasonable grounds to believe that the use of live ammunition by Israeli forces were unlawful", with the exception of two cases (UN Human Right Council 2019: IX 94, p. 18). This was rejected by the Israeli Government, who pointed to the commissions failure "to consider the threat posed by violent acts from Gaza" (United Nations 2020).

Speaking about being a sniper, Ido explains that he as a sniper do not make the decisions to shoot himself. The decision comes from above in a chain of command, and he does as he is told. In a fast moving environment like a protest of this calibre is, with at times tens of thousands of people gathered, the split second decisions to shoot aimed at or beside one person can end in a fatal shot of someone else. People move, suddenly the one you are aiming at falls or turns or bends down, and you hit the person behind. This person could be a paramedic, a child, a journalist. "Mistakes happen" Ido tells me. This is of course true. Mistakes can happen, human error can happen. But by the look of his face and the emotions in his voice when he tells me this, it is clear that these mistakes aren't necessarily so easy to deal with.

All shots snipers take are debriefed with those in the chain of command who were involved. Who said what, who gave a command, when, how, what was the outcome? But there was no debrief on how the person who fired the possible fatal

shot felt about the situation. It was to make clear that this was done in accordance with rules of engagement. In May 2021 Israeli TV Channel 13's investigative programme HaMakor (The Source) aired a documentary about sniper procedures on the Gaza border. The IDF Spokesperson responded to what was published confirming Ido's experience that all decisions to shoot were made by senior officers in the field based on their professional assessment. They also confirm that there is a debrief after each incident and that they have learnt from these debriefs and did make some alterations. All shootings with fatalities are always investigated by IDF, with further investigations if there were suspicions of violations of the rules of engagement. IDF also stated in this response that all soldiers underwent professional and mental preparation for their positions on the Gaza border, and that in all units there was help available for mental health (HaMakor 2021). This does not seem to be in accordance with Ido's experiences.

Ido was visibly affected when speaking about his time at the Gaza border. "Mental health and PTSD is an issue" and it is not something easy to deal with when serving in the IDF. "You can not ask for help in the IDF, then you are weak, and you might be sent away from all your friends". If you struggle with mental health issues as a combat soldier whilst serving, it may be considered that you should not be there serving alongside your friends. With a major focus throughout training and service on forming friendships for life, this prospect of getting help for mental health needs might be too much to deal with. You will be separated from the people who are closest to you, who go through the same experiences as you, the ones who may be some of the only ones you feel can support you.

Down the street and facing the Ibrahimi Mosque is a shop with souvenirs and drinks, small tokens and ceramics. I was out in the Old City with two locals being given some advice and an orientation about their work in Hebron. We sat down with the owner of the shop and a couple of others where I was, as is customary, offered delicious Arabic coffee. It has added cardamom and other spices and reminds me a bit of muelled wine, or "gløgg" as we say in Norway. It's served in small cups when there are guests. We were sat outside the shop around a small coffee table talking about life in Hebron, and all the Norwegians they knew who had worked for TIPH (Temporary International Presence in Hebron), which just a week or so before had left after 25 years when not getting their mandate renewed by the Israeli government (UNOCHA 2019). "Do you know him?" They asked, but I had only heard of some of them.

It was February, and quite chilly, but at least it was not raining. Across the road from the shop was a IDF checkpoint, but only consisting of a few crowd control barriers, the waist high metal fences, and a squad of soldiers. To the right of the shop the road was closed to Palestinians, so the checkpoint was there to ensure Palestinians did not walk on this part of the road. There is only this fence on the side of the road, there are no physical barriers in the road itself. Jews living in Hebron are allowed on this road, and a few of them were jogging back and forth for their daily exercise. Whilst listening to the group of elderly men talk about their lives and all the Norwegians they knew, I was watching the soldiers, and they seemed bored. In the street to the left of the shop a few children were playing (there are hardly any cars, only Jewish Israeli cars are allowed), and a small Palestinian boy around 3-4 years old was on his little bike whizzing around at super speed and loving every

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second of it.

He continued straight on and had quickly crossed the invisible border onto the 'no go zone' for Palestinians. A soldier watching this checkpoint shouted at the boy and told him to stop and go back. The young soldier repeatedly tried to stop the little cyclist from going further. A Palestinian teenage boy at around 14 years old saw this happening and hurried over to try to turn the bike around to get the boy to the other side of the border. But the cycling whizz would have none of it – he wanted to pedal on, he was having fun. Eventually the teenager managed to get him back over to the "right side". The teenager looked worried, perhaps scared, when approaching the boy who was stopped by soldiers, and had to go a couple of meters across the border himself.

The two examples above show a very small part of what being a soldier in the Israel Defence Forces means. It is also an important aspect to consider how the subjective experiences of these types of situations is that which will be carried with the soldier and influence how they relate to ideologies and discourses post-service. It is the post-service period the next chapter is about, where we will see how soldiers of the IDF serving at similar times come out on the other side and develop completely polarised ideologies on the morality of the actions of the Israel Defence Forces.

# Chapter 5. The Battle of the Truth

What is called "The Battle of the Truth" is these days fought on different platforms, between individuals and organisations, in the media, on social media, educational tours, seminars and reports of various kinds. This battle is one between ideologies, in a reality where armed conflict is part of everyday life for most, if not in person then through discourses. There are truths set in stone on all sides, and the other side is often accused of lying or covering up information. As I laid out in chapter 2, there are certain events and dates that can be confirmed, but everything from what exactly happened to the intentions behind it are contested.

There is a prominent divide between the ideological discourses of those former IDF soldiers who support Israel and the security measures, and those who do not. Whilst the former leans on various discourses from the State of Israel and organisations who support Israel around the world, the latter leans on discourses brought forward by human rights organisations, pro-Palestine organisations and activists and many times academics.

This chapter will analyse discourses of different ideologies. First I look at the two veteran organisations Breaking the Silence and My Truth, which both has at its core testimonies from soldiers. I will analyse four soldier testimonies from Operation Protective Edge in 2014 from these two organisations and compare both content and discourse delivery. There is also input from the participants on several aspects of the ideologies and discourses, and I look particularly into the case of Elor Azaria, a soldier who shot and killed an injured Palestinian, which

was and still is a case that divides people, but perhaps not always in the way one would expect.

The previous chapter focused on the time serving in the IDF. In this chapter focus is on the participants today, as reservists or veterans, as activists and people.


## Reservist Organisations

There are organisations of many kinds in Israel who has some level of focus on Israel and Palestine, on IDF, Israeli policies, and on soldiers. There are a few reservist or veteran organisations, and here we focus on two of them; Breaking the Silence (BtS) and My Truth. Breaking the Silence is by part of the Israeli and international community very popular, and their tours to Hebron and other areas where they have served as soldiers are often full. On the other hand BtS is extremely unpopular and seen as harmful to both the IDF and Israel. BtS base their advocacy on soldier testimonies of everyday encounters between IDF and Palestinians, including during times of war. Their aim is to end the occupation, based on the belief that it is immoral.

My Truth was created as a response to Breaking the Silence, and also publish testimonies, but in order to provide a different narrative to the public. One where the IDF soldiers are faced with difficult situations, moral and ethical choices and considerations, and to counter narratives to those proposed by BtS, or at least opposed to those narratives many believe BtS deliver in the testimonies. Their focus is on morals and ethics, and the difficult but necessary and important choices soldiers need to make.

The differences in opinion of the two organisations were not particularly surprising, however they are important to look into in order to understand the

ideological discourses of today, and how they have been influenced by the Israel Defense Forces. What was surprising was the similarities and how despite these the narratives remain polarised.

*Breaking the Silence*



Banner made by pro-Israel organisation Im Tirtzu about anti-Occupation organisation Breaking the Silence. Hebron, spring 2019. (Photo by author).

Breaking the Silence was founded in 2004 by former soldiers of the Nahal Brigade, descendant of the Palmach from the British Mandate period, who had served in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) during the 2nd Intifada. They publish soldier testimonies to reveal to the public what is happening on a daily basis in the West Bank and Gaza (Breaking the Silence n.d.). The everyday happenings and doings of the IDF in the Palestinian territories are not necessarily illegal, but for the people of BtS they are a part of an immoral system of occupation – so the actions are, legal or not, immoral.

Opinions of the organisation from the public and media is as polarised as the rest of the inforwar. I have frequently been told that all Breaking the Silence says are 'lies', that they are out to 'target' soldiers of the IDF, and that they have an 'agenda' – which is portrayed with negative connotations. BtS does have an agenda, their aim is clearly stated on their website as "to bring an end to the occupation" (Breaking the Silence n.d.). Their way to do this is by showing how the system and policies are immoral, something which many see as a target not only on IDF but on individual soldiers. "Breaking the Silence, and the things they say, it hurts me personally" Ethan told me when we met. "The testimonies are false. Using sound and light bombs in the middle of the night, come on!". Both Dror and his wife Leora agreed that the testimonies were mostly based on lies and pointed out that "Breaking the Silence are sponsored by European governments, also Norway". Chaim stated "It's all lies". The majority of the participants were of this opinion, and they are not alone. The Jerusalem Post published an opinion stating that Breaking the Silence "promote false testimonies based on lies and self-hatred", that they are "built on a pack of lies", and that "The fact that most of their activity takes place within foreign organizations proves that their main goal is to make defamatory statements against the State of Israel and to incite hatred and anti-Israeli sentiment" (Akerman 2017). The latter perhaps an indication that BtS are in fact foreign agents out to destroy Israel, which might seem a stretch, but I was myself accused of being a foreign agent when looking for participants. Another opinion in the same newspaper labelled the people of BtS "self-hating Jews … who spread falsehoods about IDF activities against Arabs" (Bingham 2021), in 2018 there were two separate incidents of violent attacks against Breaking the Silence guides in Hebron (Magid 2018), and in 2016 BtS was chosen for an award by the Middle East Studies faculty of Ben-Gurion University which was subsequently cancelled by the university President reasoning that Breaking the Silence "is an organization that is not in the national consensus" (Kashti 2016). These are just a few examples of resistance Breaking the Silence are facing.

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Another example is the picture at the top of this section, which I took when I joined Breaking the Silence on a tour to Hebron. It was paid for by the pro-Israel organisation Im Tirtzu and hung along the route of the tour in a Jewish neighbourhood of Hebron. It is eye catching and can't be missed with a massive picture of Pinocchio to illustrate their point that Breaking the Silence are lying. However, from the impression I got from those who were participants on the tour, this did not put anyone off the ideology of BtS, rather the opposite.

The day I joined Breaking the Silence on their tour to Hebron there were also some journalists there. While we were listening to the guides I noticed the journalists interviewing the international spokesperson for the Jewish community in Hebron, Yishai Fleisher, so I walked a bit closer interested to hear what they had to say. I had tried to get in touch with them to get their points of view on the intense and often hostile situation in Hebron, but unfortunately it did not work out so what I had to work with were mainly interviews given to media. This day Yishai Fleisher was being interviewed by several media outlets, and it was like an impromptu press meeting when he showed up at the tour. He spoke about organisations like Breaking the Silence, but also other anti-occupation organisations, and stated: "The vision of these groups is to throw the Jews out. A racist, terrorist view. Luckily we are different". Shortly after the interviews took place, Yishai Fleishers wife, Malka Fleisher, also a prominent activist for the Jewish community and for Israel, pulled up in her car next to the tour group and shouted out the window "these are all lies, do not believe them" whilst laughing and smiling. The guides responded with "don't worry, she is always around, just ignore her".

Neviah, a 26 year old former COGAT officer (Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories) in Israel Defence Forces, was already waiting for me when I hastily arrived after some not particularly unusual bus delays out of Jerusalem. Winter had turned into spring, and the cold and rain had turned into, for a Norwegian native, another very hot and sunny day. Sweaty and a little stressed, I ordered a cappuccino and water, tried to find some shade – the everlasting hunt in the summer months - as we were sitting outside, and asked her to tell me her story.

Neviah is now, after finishing her mandatory IDF service, involved with Breaking the Silence. The organisations purpose, Neviah explains, is "to make the public aware of what occupation looks like". Breaking the Silence is navigating within the infowar in Israel, in Palestine, and in the world. They have a solid ideology, and a discourse they present, produce and reproduce in a number of spheres and on different platforms. Their stated aim to end the Israeli occupation over Palestinian territories (Breaking the Silence n.d.) as mentioned above is based on personal lived experiences of all of the employees and all those who have provided testimonies. These experiences are similar to many other former IDF soldiers. But the subjectivity of the experiences is strong, and soldiers in the same or very similar situations, experience this completely differently.

They all navigate within the infowar that has become the battle of the truth. This battle is filled with contrasts and similarities, tension, discourses and ideologies, attacks and counter attacks, defensive and offensive tactics. The ideologies are shaped, produced and reproduced within this sphere and all sides come out with an ideology of morality and truth.

As seen above, there is a lot of resistance against the work of Breaking the Silence, and the collective of ideologies that do not accept their personally lived experiences is an integral part of today's infowar. This is an important boundary

against which the ideology, collective and individual identity is shaped. See this in the light of Barth's (1967?) theory on ethnic groups and boundaries, one could argue that these collective social groups on the opposite sides in the battle of the truth are separate ethnic groups. There is constant negotiation and renegotiation about who is In and who is Out, and the boundary is rather negotiated against the Other, than based on what is sameness within. As they have all served in the IDF, and most are Jewish and hence belong to the Jewish tribe there is a distinct and untouchable sameness, but they are sure about one thing; they are the Other. It is here, where the boundary is drawn between Us and Them, that polarisation arise and continue to influence the ideologies on all sides.

Back to the cafè in the young, hip district, where a dog comes with its owner and gets water in a bowl as the owner chats with her friends. Neviah is still focused on her work, despite encountering problems personally in Israeli society due to her role, and the knowledge of threats and violence against co-workers. "The Israeli narrative about the conflict and occupation involves a silence, where this is no longer a part of public debate. It's a status quo that just exists" said Neviah. The silence has not only led to a status quo where politicians do not seem to have too much concern about this topic, it has led to a polarised infowar; "the battle of the truth."

This battle has also become a fight for who has the legitimacy to speak on issues relating to the conflict, the occupation and the Israel Defense Forces. As discussed in chapter 4, the IDF has strategic efforts in place to influence the perception among the public and the international community. This is also a concern for State of Israel, they have a Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy to "to act against the delegitimization and boycott campaigns against the state of Israel" (Prime Minister's Office n.d.). Breaking the Silence is one organisation that is accused of acting against the State of Israel. From the media coverage mentioned above we see how there is discourse that aim to place BtS as an organisation which does not have the legitimacy to speak on these issues.

Breaking the Silence base their work on soldier testimonies from their time

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serving in the IDF and want to bring about "a conversation on the system. A moral conversation, not a legal conversation", says Neviah. I asked her what she thought about those who say that everyone in Breaking the Silence are liars, that the testimonies are false. "We lie about what?" she replies. "The testimonies are not in factual dispute. Most of the testimonies are of perfectly legal, everyday scenarios that happen. It is just that we find it immoral, and they do not." Neviah also says that the Israeli courts several times has ruled that it is an occupation and points to then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's comments in 2003 where he stated that "You may not like the word, but what's happening is occupation. Holding 3.5 million Palestinians under occupation is a bad thing for Israel, for the Palestinians … " (Bennet, 2003). "There is military control over a civilian population, and the sovereign is the Israel Defense Forces" states Neviah.

Chapter 4 also addressed morality in the IDF, in the ethical code and personally for soldiers. Throughout my time in Jerusalem I did not manage to grasp how people defined 'morality'. 'Morality' as a concept has a big place in all the ideologies I came across, and it is a big part of discourse on all sides. Breaking the Silence wants to bring a moral conversation on the system, but there seems to be a moral conversation, at least on the IDF. For example, BtS says the system and the actions of the IDF are immoral. And the IDF, the Israeli government, and many former soldiers say it is the most moral army in the world. Isaac, Seargeant Major (Res), spoke at length about how important personal moral of soldiers is, and that he expected his soldiers to be moral.

Neviah also addressed that "people may think that if you understand morality, you will not do it, but the founders of Breaking the Silence were on the left side politically, and they still imposed 177 days of curfew on Hebron during the 2nd Intifada". So even the "leftie" Israelis who served in IDF, and had and understood moral, imposed an immoral system upon the Palestinian people. "Perhaps some have thought "I can change the system from within, be a good soldier" – but if you're functioning within an immoral system, you will have to commit immoral

acts". Morality is also a focus of the testimonies that will be analysed later in this chapter.

## My Truth

My Truth was founded in 2015 in the aftermath of Operation Protective Edge in Gaza in 2014. According to Breaking the Silence they were founded to counter the narrative of BtS. My Truth states on their website that they are a non-profit organisation whose "mission is to enable IDF reserve soldiers to share their values, first-hand experiences, and the high moral standards they strive to meet. My Truth soldiers speak openly about the unparalleled ethical dilemmas and complexities they face, and present an objective view of their conduct and fierce commitment to the IDF's ethical code." Further they "[share] the reality regarding the way IDF soldiers conduct their actions. Through our educational platforms and testimonies, we counter the misinformation and false claims being waged against Israeli Soldiers." And that they "contest those who advance political agendas by cynically manipulating stories of Israeli soldiers and slander them worldwide under the pretence of "creating a public debate" or in the name of so-called "full disclosure"." (My Truth, 2018). Although they do not explicitly state that they started the organisation in an effort to counter the discourse of Breaking the Silence, the reference to contesting those who advance political agendas, as BtS do by stating their aim is to end occupation, and their own aim which is to counter misinformation and false claims against Israeli Soldiers and IDF does point to this being one of the reasons for the foundation of My Truth.  When I met with Aaron however, I got the absolute impression that he is both dedicated and sincere in bringing forward also more positive stories from IDF soldiers and how difficult the ethical dilemmas can be in the field. I was an incredibly interesting conversation where he would come with several examples of ethical dilemmas an IDF soldier could face in the field and

asked me how I would solve it. I will come back to this in the next section.

If the founders of My Truth share the ideology with many of the participants that Breaking the Silence lies, promote false testimonies and is out to smear Israel, it is understandable that this organisation was set up to counter this. But it is also an organisation set up by IDF reservists and veterans in an attempt to bring more nuance into the debate. Not everyone had the personal experiences of those who testifies to Breaking the Silence. And not everyone agrees that the occupation is immoral, or if they would consider that it is, they would still say it is necessary.

As stated before this thesis is not an attempt to find out who is right and who is wrong, or who holds the truth. The main focus is to see how serving in the IDF influence ideological discourses among IDF veterans. As we have seen the lived experiences during service and after being discharged, has influenced their ideological discourses a great deal. Identity as a process is ever changing in meetings with new experiences, and although most members of these organisations are Israeli Jews, and probably proudly identify as such, these two organisations show how different Jewish identity can be even within the tribe of the Jewish people. Both the ideological discourses held by Breaking the Silence and My Truth have developed from a sense of belonging to the collective of the tribe of the Jewish people. One might think that their background and upbringing would be fundamentally different to have such different worldviews and stances in this infowar as adults, but peoples backgrounds are diverse and there are, for some, significant changes in the ideologies and social groups they connect with towards either side.

*Aaron*

Aaron was one of the first participants I met, and I was quite nervous as I attempted to find my way around Jerusalem to the place where we had decided to meet. This day I was surprised to see the entire city filled with IDF soldiers walking around in

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large groups, carrying packs of water bottles. They were everywhere, from the Palestinian neighbourhoods in East Jerusalem close to the Old City, to the area of the Knesset and the Prime Minister's residence in West Jerusalem. Carrying their rifles across their bodies the young men seemed to just appear from everywhere. As I arrived at the location to meet Aaron I could not help myself any longer, and I walked over to a couple of soldiers who were lagging a bit behind their group. "Hi, can I ask what you guys are doing here? There are so many of you?!" "We are in training to be Officers, we are learning about Jerusalem" one of them replied smiling before they hurried after their group.

This did not strike me back then, but after returning home and focusing more on ideology I realise that these Officers in training were being shown around Jerusalem to learn the IDF's narrative of Jerusalem and its people and life. Aaron who I was meeting was also an Officer in the IDF, although now a reservist, he was in a combat unit for around five years, two years more than the requirement was to serve at the time. He had also been part of such a tour of Jerusalem, building bonds with the fellow soldiers, on their journey to climb the ranks of the IDF.

I found the place and sat down to wait, I was a bit early as I had planned for plenty of time to get lost as was a daily occurrence in the early days, but I made it without too many wrong turns this day. As I waited I pondered about the great presence of the IDF in Jerusalem, and in Israeli society at large. I still found it strange that there were young people all around me walking with rifles across their bodies as if this was the most natural thing in the world. In my notebook I wrote "what kind of influence is this on children and youth?". This is an interesting thought that I brought with me throughout the fieldwork and expanded to include "what kind of influence does this have on anyone". In different phases of life, from different backgrounds and in different social groups. The ever presence of the IDF is a constant reminder in Israel that there is a threat to the Jewish people, and they need to be protected.

Aaron arrived a few minutes late, having driven in from a Jerusalem suburb.

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An IDF combat reservist involved with My Truth. We chatted a bit about his life now, as a father and husband, and I asked about My Truth to steer the conversation to the IDF. Aaron has been involved with the organisation for some time, and said that this organisation has "no agenda, other than to tell our own stories". The website however does state that their aim is to counter false narratives about Israeli soldiers, and contest those who use this as a political agenda. It is an interesting observation that even though it is clearly stated on the website, the members do not see this as an agenda, but rather as countering agendas of Others. My Truth is only here to allow IDF soldiers to share their truth, which in this discourse is also *the* truth.

Aaron, who is now a family man in his 30's stresses the importance of soldiers following morals, himself included, and how this is paramount to how the actions of the IDF come out. Morality is certainly important to both My Truth and Breaking the Silence, and probably to most IDF soldiers. The Spirit of the IDF, as seen in chapter 4, is an ethical and moral code to be followed. At this time it seems that 'moral' and 'morality' are terms that perhaps is not best used to describe what is right or wrong, just or unjust, as discourses in this battle of the truth are filled with standpoints, notions and narratives of the moral or immoral actions of the IDF, often referring to the same policies or operations. If we look at Breaking the Silence and My Truth, and the ideological discourses they portray in their public and personal statements on the actions of the Israel Defense Forces, they are very much similar. Where they do differ is in the important aspect of whether or not the security of the Jewish people and the Jewish state is reason to label the system, IDF and its soldiers moral or not. The morality of the system is more in focus for Breaking the Silence, whilst the morality of soldiers and their actions is the predominant focus for My Truth.

As I mentioned above Aaron was particularly concerned with the ethical dilemmas soldiers face on the ground. It is as if Breaking the Silence and other organisations are leaving out crucial parts of the stories they tell, the parts about how decisions are made in a split second. There might have been a night raid –

where several soldiers, often 10-15, break into a Palestinian house at night either to do mapping, or to arrest someone. There may have been things happening in this situation where a soldier has done something which could be seen in a negative light. But that there is not a focus on how and why this decision was made. However, as I understood Breaking the Silence, they would say the fact that there is a 'night raid' at all is immoral. And they are not speaking about arrests of big men within terrorist organisations, but when this happens to families with children and their older brother is taken away in the middle of the night suspected of throwing rocks, or when it is just a 'mapping mission' where they enter the house of people who are not under any suspicion to 'map' who lives there and what the house looks like.

"Picture this" Aaron said, "you are out with your company to make an arrest of someone who is suspected of being part of a suicide bombing. It is a man in his 20s, unmarried, living with his parents and siblings in a big house. You break down the door, throw a stun grenade to shock those in the house so there is not time to gather for an ambush. You walk in with your guns raised, asking everyone to gather in the living room. A woman who could be the mother comes in, joined by a couple of children. The father is there, and you ask where the son is." Aaron continues, "the father says he is not there. But then you hear someone turn the shower off in the bathroom. You ask who is in there. The father answer it is his daughter". "What do you do then", Aaron ask me. "Do you trust the father? Do you go into the bathroom where his daughter has just got out of the shower? The father can be lying. It could be his son, the terrorist you are looking for, who is in the bathroom. Do you just wait around to see who comes out of the room, knowing there is a potential that this person may be armed and dangerous? Would you not put the whole family in danger if there is to be shots fired? What about the children who are in the room?". I had no answers. "We could probably wait in this instance", Aaron said, "but this decision has to be made within seconds and constantly evaluated until the door opens. If it opens. Perhaps he jumped out a window? Or maybe he will not come out

at all, but wait, armed with a rifle or perhaps a bomb belt, waiting for us to break down the door. Or we open the door and there is a teenage girl who has just got out of the shower. And if we do that, it will be spread by mobile phone videos and pictures that we broke down a door to drag a naked 14 year old girl out of the bathroom." For IDF soldiers this is not a scenario that is unlikely. To protect Israel and the Jewish people, citizens of Israel and all civilians, there is a need to enter houses to make arrests and prevent terror attacks.

"The main goal is always to protect Israel and its citizens", says Aaron. This requires IDF soldiers to have personal moral, which is the core of what makes IDF the 'most moral army in the world'. 'Personal moral' might be as difficult to define as 'moral', especially within this battle of ideologies of truth. All have a high moral standard, but there is a disagreement as to what this is should be. In any case it is important to recognise the ethical dilemmas soldiers face when in service, and how these choices may affect them afterwards. For Aaron and My Truth, the knowledge that they have acted in an ethical and correct way is important, even if the tasks they carry out is not always pleasant.

In the testimonies in the next section, ethics and moral are also important topics. And we will see how the discourse present the different ideologies in public testimonies, which are the basis of both Breaking the Silence and My Truth.

*Testimonies*

Breaking the Silence and My Truth are both, as mentioned above, based upon sharing testimonies from IDF soldiers' time in service, their lived and subjective experiences. The main difference is that the latter predominantly publish testimonies from identified soldiers, who speak about their experiences with their full name and picture, and often video, whilst BtS publish anonymous, though rigorously verified,

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testimonies. Both organisations send the testimonies to the Israel Defense Forces for censorship clearance, meaning that they are checked for graded military information that is not to be shared with the public. Hence, neither organisation publish anything that is considered illegal.

Testimonies are published on their websites, and in project booklets that are distributed, often at events such as tours, lectures and talks by employees or members. They also use the stories when in meetings with foreign governments and organisations such as the United Nations, where both organisations have been present.

Although My Truth do not explicitly state that the reason they base themselves on non-anonymous testimonies is because of Breaking the Silence and their anonymity, it would probably be fair to say that this is at least one of the reasons. As we have seen Breaking the Silence has been targeted for lying and providing false testimonies. This is an easier statement to make if the public themselves do not have a chance to verify the content. A name, face and at times a video is a discursive method used by My Truth in order to put a stamp of realness on the testimonies they provide.

I asked Neviah about the verification process they have for testimonies. It depends on what the testimony is about, if it is about unlawful killing or abuse, there is a need for further verification from more people. But in general they cross check information with media and IDF spokesperson statements, if there is any mention of this specific incident. In addition they find at least one, but most often two, eye witnesses from the IDF, and also Palestinians who were present. If it can not be verified, it is not published. About 50% of the testimonies given to Breaking the Silence are never published. Some are not particularly relevant, and hence are not attempted to verify, but the majority of those testimonies that are not published are because they can not be verified. A testimony published by Breaking the Silence is checked against several sources for its validity. It is also the reason attempts with moles giving false testimonies has not worked.

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My Truth has a similar verification process, where they always verify with others who were present, but not necessarily as much with Palestinians as with other IDF soldiers, and then send it through IDF for approval.

When Breaking the Silence was first founded in 2004, Neviah tells me, there was not a specifically negative public opinion about the organisation, and its members were even invited to speak at the Knesset (the Israeli Parliament). This changed however after Operation Cast Lead in December/January 2008/2009. At the time some attempted to silence the organisation by questioning the truthfulness of the testimonies because they were predominantly published anonymously, leading to questions about the testimonies being made up. This is still as we have seen effective and important aspects of an opposing ideological discourse. This shift in public opinion continued after Operation Protective Edge in July/August 2014, when the conversation moved from what they were doing releasing anonymous testimonies, to whether or not the people of Breaking the Silence have the legitimacy to speak at all.

If we look back at chapter 4, we see that this period following the 2nd Intifada that ended in 2005 was one where there also was a shift in media strategy in the IDF. The Israel Defense Forces saw the need to influence and manage the perception amongst the public, and developed new strategies to bring this into the strategies of military operations (Shavit 2017). In 2015, the year after Operation Protective Edge, the Ministry of Strategic Affairs and Public Diplomacy were also handed the task of countering the deligitimization campaigns against Israel (Prime Minister's Office n.d.). The discourse changed, even if the core ideology was still the same, and the discursive methods were evolving.

The importance of Operation Protective Edge in these discourses is clear. After this operation more criticism was raised *by* Breaking the Silence and other organisation speaking out against the actions of the IDF, and more criticism was raised *against* Breaking the Silence and others who spoke up. The next year My Truth was founded, to give a voice also to those IDF soldiers who did not see it in the same

way as BtS, but still acknowledging difficulties and dilemmas.

Both organisations have several testimonies from soldiers who took part in the ground invasion of Gaza in July 2014. I will now look at four testimonies from these 50 days, two from each organisation.

## Operation Protective Edge

My Truth and Breaking the Silence stand what it seems far from each other in the ideological discourses and narratives of the battle of the truth. Even though both their foundations are personal experiences and stories from IDF soldiers, it is divided into personal experiences of those who are within opposing social groups adhering to opposing ideologies. For this reason I want to look closer at some different testimonies from soldiers from the 2014 Operation Protective Edge. This was a 50 day long military operation in Gaza, which may have shifted public opinions about which narrative presents the 'truth'.

Operation Protective Edge commenced by air raids during the night and early morning of July 8 2014, after nearly 250 rockets had been fired from Gaza and towards the southern communities of Israel over three weeks, forcing the IDF to react. After Hamas militants infiltrated Israel through tunnels during a ceasefire, a ground operation started on July 17th to destroy 'terror tunnels'. After nearly 50 days of fighting, a ceasefire was established (Israel Defence Forces n.d. c.).

Below are excerpts from four different testimonies from four different soldiers who all served in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge. The excerpts are collected from the English language websites of My Truth and Breaking the Silence, and hence publicly available, but I will also keep the testimonies from My Truth anonymous.

**In contact with the enemy**

1. Breaking the Silence

"We entered the house when it was already daylight. Half the battalion waited in the courtyard of one of those houses and then they fired a MATADOR (portable anti-tank rocket). See, the battalion commander doesn't want to go in through the front door, so you open up a way in through the side. There was an outer wall and an inner wall, and he shot a missile, which passed through the outer wall and then through the inner side one. A sweep was conducted in this really large house, which apparently belonged to one really big family. It was four stories high, there was enough room in there for the entire battalion. ... the occasional hole you would see in the house that was made by a shell, or ones made as firing posts – instead of shooting from the window, where you would be exposed, you would make a hole in the wall with a five-kilo hammer and that was used as a shooting crenel. Those were our posts. We had a post like that and we manned it in shifts. We were given a bizarre order that every hour we needed to initiate fire from that room. Toward what? There was a mosque identified [as a hostile target] that we were watching over. This mosque was known to have a tunnel [opening] in it, and they thought that there were Hamas militants or something inside. We didn't spot any in there – we didn't detect anything, we didn't get shot at. Nothing. We were ordered to open fire with our personal weapons in that direction every hour. That was the order."

2. My Truth

"At the entrance to one of the neighborhoods in the Gaza Strip, right at the first intersection, there was a very large mosque that we had intelligence regarding a tunnel that was inside the mosque. We entered the mosque, went down the cellar and immediately identified the tunnel. It was a small room with a tunnel inside it and another small tunnel shaft beside it that went into the wall. We also found there Hamas speckled military uniforms. We understood that it was a main junction of tunnels. There was a smaller tunnel that connected the houses of the neighborhood and another well-organized tunnel with concrete and a ladder that went down, apparently very deep. In retrospect, we found out that the tunnel crossed into Israel. We identified the tunnel and waited for the designated special force to investigate it and see where it goes. During that time there was still combat activity taking place in the houses around us, and we were trying to identify to where the tunnel actually connects while maintaining readiness for anything coming out of it. Part of the team was in the room where the shafts were and the other part was upstairs, on the second floor securing the area. Simultaneously, the rest of the unit was flanking and clearing the houses in the direction of the tunnel in search for terrorists. During the scan, they identify all kinds of weapons but did not encounter terrorists. At some point, five terrorists started running towards the mosque. We recognize them from about 20 meters away and the machine gunner opened fire taking four of them down. The fifth terrorist manages to enter the mosque and started going down the staircase into the basement in order to escape into the

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tunnel. We identified the fifth terrorist and shoot him down. He actually reached right up to us, into the basement where the tunnel was. Apparently the terrorist did not know we were inside and their goal was to escape into the mosque which is the main junction of the tunnels. The terrorists use the mosque as a base for tunnels and escape to it, with the belief that we will not be there. But we were ready for them and managed to take them out."

These two testimonies could very well be from the exact same area describing a mosque with militant tunnels used for military purposes, but this is not confirmed. It is however a similar context. They are also good examples of the different ideological discourses from Breaking the Silence and My Truth. We see in the testimony from BtS that the soldier seems to be unsure about the legitimacy of what he is doing and whether the information he was given was true. Whether this is something he considered while he was there or if he considered this episode in this light afterwards is not known. The soldier use phrases such as *"See, the battalion commander doesn't want to go in through the front door"* as an explanation for why they broke down a wall to enter the house in question, and notes that the order to shoot at *"nothing"* at regular intervals as *"bizarre"* without being shot at. The mosque in question was identified as a hostile target, and the soldier describe it as *"they"*, likely meaning his superiors, thought there were Hamas militants *"or something"* inside, and even though they never spotted anything they were still ordered to shoot. Although the descriptions of the breach of the house are straight forward and in a 'military language', there is still a tone that show the soldier is questioning the orders, the actions, and possibly their presence in this location.

The testimony from My Truth is different. It is possibly the same mosque as in the first testimony, identified as a hostile target with a militant tunnel inside. This soldier describes an operation where they enter the mosque to confirm intelligence that there is a tunnel. The language throughout this testimony is more militarized than the testimony from Breaking the Silence, it also has a sense of being more confident. The soldier use phrases such as *"designated special forces"*, *"combat activity"*, *"maintaining readiness"*, *"flanking and clearing"*, and more notably *"terrorists"*.

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"Terrorists" or "terrorist" is mentioned seven times in this testimony. In the testimony from BtS, "terrorist" is not mentioned once. This is a significant difference between the two testimonies.

Although the soldier testifying to Breaking the Silence is aware there is a hostile target with a tunnel used by militants, which is the word he use, he does not seem to be in the same sphere as the soldier testifying to My Truth. The sphere where there are *terrorists* is different from the sphere where there are *militants.* A militant could be seen as a member of enemy armed forces, while a terrorist is someone who is out to kill. This is at least the impression one gets from these testimonies. The soldier sharing his story with My Truth continues to describe the incident where five *terrorists* appeared who where subsequently *"taken down"*, *"shot down"* and *"taken out"*. These were terrorists, they were dealt with accordingly. The wording and phrases are in a sense deprived of humanity; it is a purely militarized language speaking of an enemy. Between the lines you can also see a sense of purpose. The soldier here is, in contrast to the soldier testifying to Breaking the Silence, aware and sure of why he is part of Operation Protective Edge, what he is doing, and most importantly, that what he is doing is the right thing.

This is also what is at the core of the polarised divide between the ideologies held by Breaking the Silence and My Truth, the disagreement about whether or not the actions of the IDF is "the right thing" to do.

The next two testimonies are surprisingly similar. They both address making use of Palestinian houses during operations and how to behave appropriately in such a situation. Neither say it is in any way wrong of them to be there.

## Entering Palestinian Houses for Operational Needs

3. Breaking the Silence

"In regards to looting, there was a pretty strict dialogue, in general. It was clear that that kind of thing wasn't going to take place in our company, that it would not be tolerated.

Once, we got into an argument over eating fruit [belonging to Palestinians], whether it's ethical. This was an internal dialogue, within the company. 'In the houses you were in, where would you pee?' Usually outside, because usually there was no water [in the toilets]. Whoever was first to enter sometimes had the luxury of one flush, but nothing beyond that. The whole issue of making use of the [Palestinians'] houses was marked by serious tension. On the one hand, for some people it was a difficult and unpleasant experience to enter someone's house and realize that it's their home. You see the kids' room, the parents' room, the living room, and you don't want to take advantage of the things in there. On the other hand, you also know that using some of those things could drastically change your stay there. For example mattresses, which are found in every house."

### 4. My Truth

"One day we were in a certain building. We finished a briefing and I began to move with the soldiers, divided them into sections in the rooms, divided into positions. Then I came to a certain room and encountered writing on one of the walls which said, "The Israeli people live" (Am Yisrael Chai, see chapter 3. Authors note).
That had, apparently, been written by an IDF soldier who had previously been there.
I stopped everything – on the spot – and gathered all the soldiers. We only had a few free minutes to rest or to sleep, which is rare when you're in Gaza. However, when I saw the writing, I woke everyone up and explained to them that no one leaves this house, no one does anything, doesn't eat, or drink anything, until that writing is erased. It is also important for us to come and make it clear to the soldiers that even if we are to remain there for a long time, or if we leave an hour later, we don't leave a trace of our presence behind or harm anything, unless there's an operational need.
I do not think these cases happened often. In retrospect, I heard about all kinds of cases that happened in different brigades, in different units … I can't recall any other case that left me as a commander, confronted with a dilemma related to values. I am aware of other incidents that occurred in other units, such as a soldier who stole money or other property. These things happen. We are human beings, none of us are perfect. There will always be those who make mistakes. Such incidents need to be taken in proportion."

The first thing that strikes me with these two testimonies is that the two soldiers, one speaking to Breaking the Silence and one speaking to My Truth – who aim to counter such narratives as the testimonies from Breaking the Silence entail – agree. They are saying the same thing. There is no apparent difference here as to what is or is not the moral way to act in these situations. The soldier from Breaking the Silence states that they do not want to take advantage of the houses they are in, the same goes for the soldier testifying to My Truth, at the same time neither is of the opinion that they should not be in the houses, there is an operational need.

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There is however a difference in how this very similar discourse is presented. From Breaking the Silence there is a sense of a person telling a casual story, not using much military jargon. You know that it is a soldier, but except for two mentions of *'company'* there is not much that would reveal this if it was not known beforehand. From My Truth there is most definitely a soldier speaking about an experience from a military operation. *"Briefing"*, *"move with the soldiers"*, *"divide into sections"*, *"divide into positions"*, *"brigade"*, *"commander"*, *"units"* are all words and phrases that indicates it being a military operation. It is also the perspective of someone who is in charge, that is at the top of this specific hierarchy. He gives orders, the soldiers follow them. It is his responsibility that the soldiers behave and act appropriately, according to the values of the IDF, and this is a responsibility he takes seriously.

Another point in the testimony from My Truth is that the soldier makes the statements that *"We are human beings, none of us are perfect. There will always be those who make mistakes."* There will always be human mistakes within a military, and this is recognised. However the soldier is also speaking about proportionality. This can of course be interpreted in several ways, but considering the ideological discourse to which My Truth adheres, where there unfortunately is a need to protect Israel and its citizens from terrorists and potential annihilation of the Jewish people, speaking about someone stealing some money or tagging 'Am Yisrael Chai' on a wall is not the most important aspect of all this.

## The Case of Elor Azaria

"Azaria, the so-called "Hebron shooter," was found guilty last year of killing Abdel Fattah al-Sharif, who several minutes earlier had attacked two IDF soldiers with a knife. In February 2017, Azaria was sentenced to an 18-month prison term, which IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot later shortened by four months. … Then-Sgt. Azaria shot and killed Sharif on March, 24, 2016, some 11 minutes after Sharif had been shot and disarmed when he and another Palestinian man attacked two IDF soldiers in the West Bank city of Hebron." (Gross, 2018).

A mobile video of this shooting went viral and caused a lot of media attention on the case. The video, a bit shaky as the person filming isn't standing still, shows the scene after two Palestinians attacked IDF soldiers with knives. It starts from when the IDF soldier is given medical attention by the paramedics and assisted by Azaria to the ambulance. The two Palestinians are shown laying on the ground, and the atmosphere is calm with people walking by the two Palestinians, also close by, without hesitation. At the scene are several IDF soldiers, paramedics, two ambulances and civilians. Sharif is moving his head slightly from one side to the other a couple of times as he lay injured on the ground, barely moving but clearly still alive. After a couple of minutes, after Azaria has assisted his fellow soldier to the ambulance and it drives off, the video clearly shows Azaria taking up his rifle, cocking it, asking two fellow soldiers to move out of the way, as he walks forwards and shoots Sharif in the head.

Aviva, who is strongly connected to and proud of the IDF, said that Elor Azaria should "definitely be punished", but the punishment should be for not following orders and command. "By taking actions into his own hands and shooting the injured Arab terrorist in the head, he put all his fellow soldiers in danger", she stated. This is because there are strict regulations on how to handle these situations, and the injured terrorist should be checked for a suicide vest before being handled

by anyone. "It was lucky that he didn't have one, or he might have blown up all his fellow soldiers, his brothers."

Former combat soldier and reservist Lior on the other hand thought the incident should be treated as a mistake. "He made a mistake. He should not have done that. Had I been his commander I would have angrily asked him why he did this. He did not commit an execution; it was a mistake. The mistake was that he didn't have an explanation for why he did it. He changed his explanation several times. He should be punished for his mistake, but it was a mistake." Adding that "I will never apologise for protecting my country. I can apologise for mistakes, for civilians getting hurt, but I will never apologise for protecting my country."

Ezra, who served 7 years in IDF special forces, highlighted that Elor Azaria is "the exception that shows how the others really are. It's not what the IDF stands for, soldiers don't act this way." He was satisfied that Azaria got convicted and punished, as he could then officially use this event as a teaching on how not to do things. I had seen the video a few times at this point, but Ezra pulled out his phone and searched for it to show me how he knew that this was wrong. "Look at how he picks up and cocks his gun, it's like bad guys do it. We don't do it like that in the IDF". He explained to me that the way he picked up his gun, away from his body and upwards, cocked it and decisively walked forward, showed that he had an intention behind it, that it was not a reaction to a threat. According to Ezra, Azaria had told his troop commander at the scene that "he stabbed my friend and deserved to die". During the trial Azaria had a different version. Ezra spoke passionately about the morals of the IDF, and the importance and difficulties of making quick decisions. "Those who just 'follow orders', they are just like the Nazis" Ezra stated firmly, "you can always think before you shoot". It is, in the end, also the soldiers responsibility to adhere to the Spirit of the IDF, where it also specifically stated that you should not follow an order that would be illegal. The legality of an action in war can change in a split second, but most important to Ezra is the moral choices of the soldier, that they are trained to think before pulling the trigger, and the obligation

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soldiers have to do so.

Dror, reserve IDF commander, on the other hand stated that Azaria "should not have been sent to jail. Sending him to jail will make it more difficult for other IDF soldiers to use their weapons in a situation when they feel threatened. If they know there may be the consequence of jail it will be more difficult for them. This is why they are nervous, because they know they may be punished if they use their weapons."

These four examples from My Truth and Breaking the Silence has shown that even though the testimonies are from similar events, similar contexts and on the same topics of values and ethics, there is a distinct difference in how the discourse is presented. The case of Elor Azaria shows a variety of different opinions from IDF veterans, ranging between should not have been punished to not punished enough. But for me, what stood out was Ezra's approach to this case. He still trains combat soldiers, he is a combat reservist, and is adamant that Azaria's act was unlawful. Even with his moral standpoint, he was opposed to Breaking the Silence, and was firmly within the ideological sphere of Israel Defence Forces as protectors of the Jewish State. Israel Defence Forces is a moral army, for the most part, and it is the responsibility of the soldiers to make sure that this morality is upheld, so that injustices are not committed.

# Chapter 6. Discourses in The Battle of the Truth

From the early days of education in Israeli schools, to the time after finishing their service in the Israel Defence Forces, soldiers are surrounded by different narratives, ideologies and discourses. In the history of the Jewish people and the land of Israel, the narratives are many and often far apart. The same goes for the present day narratives about the Israel Defence Forces and the contemporary Israeli state. Within these ideological discourses, the participants are influenced in identity creation, and in becoming who they are today. However, it is the lived experiences that cause the most significant impact. Some experiences confirm what you know and strengthen it, others collide with what you know and you may change your ideological viewpoint. Anyone can experience either confirmation or collision, and that does not say anything about which discourse suits you better.

The most significant influences on identity and ideological adherence comes when there is a collision between the discourse you came into the Israel Defence Forces with, that you were trained in, and the reality that met you as a soldier. From being a patriotic defender of one of the strongest symbols of Jewish culture, IDF as a living symbol of Jewish persistence and resistance, to questioning whether or not this symbol should even exist in the form it does today. The shift that comes with this breaks a bond between you and your comrades from the time in IDF, another lived experience that shapes a persons identity by the use of ideological discourse and perhaps a need to 'break the silence'. That your comrades change their discourse in this way is then a significant lived experience of those who remain within the ideological discourse of the IDF, who may gain a need to let the world know what the actual truth is.

Who holds the truth? The answer is everyone, and no one. Everyone holds their own truth, and no one holds the actual truth. As Efrayim said about the

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historical narratives "the truth probably lies somewhere in between", which can also be said about the discourses within the battle of the truth. However, it is the personal lived experiences of the soldiers which is the most important aspect – this holds their truth, whether it fits within a set discourse or not.

As we have seen being Jewish is an important aspect of identity. Even though the discourses are many, the shared identity of 'Jewish' still connects all into one tribe, the Jewish People. And for the Israel Defence Forces, the Jewish people in the Jewish State is the reason they are here – to protect in the aim to maintain a safe space for Jews from around the world in the meeting with antisemitism and persecution.

The Battle of the Truth continues, and within this battle, all truths are produced and reproduced in ideological discourses, by individuals with personal identities as part of collectives with shared identities and memories. A battle which within the process of the truth moves and evolves with changing times.

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# Appendix

The Spirit of the IDF

# THE SPIRIT OF THE I.D.F

**The Israeli Defense Force** is the army of the State of Israel. Its activities are subject to the authority of the democratic civil government of Israel and to its laws. The purpose of the IDF is to preserve the State of Israel, to protect its independence, and to foil attempts by its enemies to disrupt normal life within it. The soldiers of the IDF are obligated to fight and to devote every effort, even at the risk of their lives, to protect the State of Israel, its citizens and residents. Soldiers of the IDF shall act according to the values of the IDF and its commands, while abiding by the law, upholding human dignity, and respecting the values of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state.

## Spirit of the IDF - Definition and Sources

*The Spirit of the IDF* defines the value identity of the IDF. It ought to underlie the activities of every IDF soldier throughout his or her regular or reserve service.

*The Spirit of the IDF* and the practical rules derived from it are the ethical code of the IDF. *The Spirit of the IDF* shall direct the IDF, its soldiers, commanders, units and corps in the shaping of their activities. According to *The Spirit of the IDF* they shall conduct, educate, and examine themselves and their fellows.

*The Spirit of the IDF* draws its inspiration from four sources:
- The heritage of the IDF and its combat legacy as Israel's army of defense.
- The heritage of the State of Israel, its democratic principles, laws, and institutions.
- The heritage of the Jewish people throughout the ages.
- Universal moral values based on the value and dignity of all human beings.

## Fundemental Values

**Defense of the State, its Citizens and its Residents** - The purpose of the IDF is to protect the existence of the State of Israel, its independence, and the security of its citizens and residents.

**Patriotism and Loyalty to the State** - Service in the IDF is based on patriotism and on commitment and devotion to the State of Israel -- a democratic state which is the national home of the Jewish people -- and to its citizens and residents.

**Human Dignity** - The IDF and its soldiers are obligated to preserve human dignity. All human beings are of inherent value regardless of race, creed, nationality, gender, status or role.

## The Values

**Dedication to Mission and the Pursuit of Victory** - The soldier shall fight and act courageously in the face of all dangers and obstacles and shall pursue his mission with determination and good judgment, even risking his life when necessary.

**Responsibility** - The soldier shall see himself as an active participant in the defense of the State of Israel, its citizens and residents. His actions shall be characterized by constant involvement, initiative and diligence, demonstrating good judgment and within the scope of his authority, and he shall be ready to take responsibility for the consequences of his actions.

**Reliability** - The soldier shall present matters truthfully, fully and accurately, in planning, in execution and in reporting. The soldier shall act so that his comrades and commanders will be able to rely on him in the fulfillment of the missions.

**Personal Example** - The soldier shall conduct himself as required, and shall behave in the manner he expects of others, out of the recognition of his ability and responsibility, both within the army and without, to serve as a role-model for others.

**Human Life** - The soldier shall always act with reason and caution, bearing in mind the supreme value of human life. In combat, he will endanger himself and his comrades to the extent necessary for the fulfillment of the mission.

**'Purity of Arms' (Morality in Warfare)** - The soldier shall make use of his weaponry and power only for the fulfillment of the mission and solely to the extent required; he will maintain his humanity even in combat. The soldier shall not employ his weaponry and power in order to harm non-combatants or prisoners of war, and shall do all he can to avoid harming their lives, bodies, honor and property.

**Professionalism** - The soldier shall endeavor to acquire the professional expertise and proficiency required to carry out his role and shall implement them, continuously seeking to improve his own achievements and those of his unit.

**Discipline** - The soldier shall do his utmost to carry out fully and successfully whatever is required of him, according to the letter and the spirit of the orders. The soldier shall issue only lawful orders and shall not obey those which are manifestly unlawful.

**Comradeship** - The soldier shall act out of solidarity and devotion to his fellow-soldiers, and shall always come to their assistance when they are in need or depend upon him, despite all danger and hardship, even at the risk of his life.

**Vocation** - The soldier shall see his military service as a vocation; he shall be willing to contribute all he can to defend the State of Israel, its citizens and residents. The soldier shall consider himself a representative of the IDF, operating on the basis and within the constraints of the authority assigned to him by military orders.