

Breaking the silence

Conference in Paris (Sciences Po CERI) – 10th of October

Nota Bene: These notes were taken by a person who attended the conference. These notes are a summary of what the different consultants said during the conference. Nothing had been added to their speaks. For more information on the NGO 'Breaking the silence' you can go on their website: <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/> or on their facebook page.

Samy Cohen (hosting the event).

- Introducing the NGO "Breaking the silence" established in 2004, after the Second Intifada.
 - Projects done: photo and writings exhibition
 - Book: "*Our harsh logic*" book – contains testimonies from the soldiers (published under a different name in French "*Le livre noir de l'occupation israélienne*") and it is one of the most important books of our century about the Israel-Palestine relations.
- Other similar groups/people
- Amos Oz, author of the bestseller "*Seventh day*". Oz (when meeting with Cohen): "If I was a soldier today, I would join breaking the silence"
- Today, some Israelis consider Breaking the silence activists as traitors.
- 1978 Peace Now –initiative, among other things against the massacre in Sabra and Shatila
- Existence of other groups of conscious defectors in Israel.
- Not all of these groups agree with each other, but part of the same movement of whistle blowers

Yehuda Shaul, one of the founding members of "Breaking the silence":

- **ARE WE GOOD GUYS?**

We believe that the Israeli army should be a defense organization, not a tool of occupation to suppress our neighbors.

Unfortunately, our military service forces us to do many bad things.

→ *About Yehuda*: he is 30 years old, born and raised in Israel. Served for three years in the Israeli forces, until the peak of the second intifada. Started working on *Breaking the silence* during the last part of his service.

- **WHAT 'BREAKING THE SILENCE' IS ABOUT?**

- Collecting testimonies, cross-checking them, recording them.
 - Aim: to depict our understanding of the occupation.
 - Used to publish testimonies, publishing a book was a new thing.
 - Means: Interviewed 700 soldiers, felt that they could tell something more.
 - Aim: To understand and make people understand how does the system work, how are the Palestinians controlled.
 - Cannot get access to judiciary system or the secret police. Thus the NGO has to rely on the testimonies only.
 - Few testimonies from soldiers from the high ranks
- Israeli forces: Not only defending Israel, but also the settlements. Playing defense is the small part of the game, **playing offense is a much bigger part.**

→ The book (*Our harsh logic*) is constructed around four code words used by the forces

1. **Prevention.** Targeted prevention = assassination.

- Concept of prevention has become very large: even offense is considered defense. Arrests.
- Mass arrests: rounding up all Palestinian men from a certain age. **"Making our presence felt"** in order for the Palestinians to be afraid. Walking around, breaking into houses, searching. This is being done constantly.

→ *Every Palestinian needs to feel that the Israeli forces are right there, that they feel being persecuted.*

- Palestinian violence has come drastically down (less and less Israeli soldiers are getting killed).
- **Mock arrest.** Choose the safest Palestinian village. Choose a house; make sure that the person living there is innocent. Come back again during the night, surround the house, arrest and release the owner of the house.

WHY DO WE DO THIS?

One reason is training the soldiers.

Second answer is that this is another way to make the presence felt. If you don't know what's happening (why is the person arrested and then released?), you feel scared.

- Lack of logic is best kind of logic

→ There is nothing a Palestinian can do not to live under intimidation.

2. **Separation.** Most of us are in favor of separation.

- Separation is mainly about fragmentation, making Palestinians fragmented among themselves. Making sure nothing can come together. Checkpoints are not about separation. For example, blocking the entrance of a village, not letting the cars pass through for a couple of hours. Then the head office calls the soldiers to get back for a lunch. The way will be unblocked again, the soldiers in the next shift will come to close it later.

3. **Fabric of life.** Invention of the Israeli military.

- *Official version: making the least impact possible on the life of Palestinians.*

→ **But would Israelis live under the fabric of life that the Palestinians face?**

- Civil administration: in reality branch of the military that takes care of Palestinian's lives under the occupation. Everything is military (health, construction ministries...).
- Extreme situations are not stable in the long term so if you are nice for us, you will be rewarded. Everything nice in the village you get is because of the grace of Israel.
- At the same time, there are many ways to punish people for stone throwing, for instance: blocking bank transfers, work permits etc.

4. **Law enforcement.** Law by Israel for Israel.

- Military and civil law. **Martial law imposed on Palestinians.**
- Settlements are just another arm of control over Palestinians.

→ **Where does the military end and civilian start?** Lines are blurred.

The book has been published under many different titles in different languages. In Hebrew: The Occupation of the Territories.

For many Israelis, occupation is a historical story. But **OCCUPATION IS HAPPENING EVERY SECOND.**

Alain Dieckhoff:

→ The book is impressive with all its testimonies. It enters the daily world of occupation; you see the mechanics of it. This confirms what we already knew from the Palestinians and NGOs. But **seeing the occupation through the eyes of the soldiers is powerful.**

- Occupation is different from case to case. Some soldiers disobey. Others obey. Not everybody is a hero. Afterwards, however, they think of what they have done, and this is why they also want to give testimonies.

- The army has a very rigid structure.

→ Terminology is very important:

- Overstretching the term “prevention of terrorism”.
- Administrative territories instead of occupied territories. Some terms could be called

Orwellian (i.e. term used for adjectives describing a situation identified as being destructive to the welfare of a free and open society).

- *Destruction of life instead of fabric of life.*

AIM: HIDING THE REALITY WITH THE TERMS.

→ Dual regime: Palestinians governed by military law while Israelis under civilian law. Settlers privileged in the Israeli society: for example they have more benefits to build the houses.

→ Settlements are an excuse for the presence of the army. How otherwise justify an armed occupation for such a long time? *Settlements are a necessity*, as paradoxical as it sounds.

- Breaking the silence is an example of the activity of the Israeli civil society.
- **Occupation cannot be legal.** It can be more or less harsh, but never legal.

Question: All this tremendous work by the NGOs does not have an impact on the Israeli society. Why is this the case?

Yehuda answers:

In the beginning of the occupation, there was military administration, now it is called civil administration. However, settlers are not our reason to be there. I would say the opposite. If we had had settlers in the south of Lebanon, the occupation probably wouldn't have ended.

Settlements are not an obstacle for peace. I think the lack of political will is the real obstacle.

Israel just does not want to end the occupation.

→ **Silence is not an Israeli disease, it is a human disease.** If you don't look too nice, you don't spend hours in front of the mirror.

When an Israeli civilian is killed, it is a sad thing. When a soldier dies, it is even worse, as he is the son/daughter of all of us.

- We don't want to raise the mirror and see who we are.

Israelis don't want to give up their privileges just like that. This will happen only when forced.

- RIGHT IS NOT SOMETHING YOU GET, IT IS SOMETHING YOU TAKE.

Questions from the audience

- *How do you solve the occupation?*

Yehuda's answers: How do you solve the occupation? You end it! We might be laughing, but this is how it is. ISRAELI OCCUPATION IS A UNILATERAL ISSUE: Israel occupies the Palestinians. Why the hell should the Palestinians negotiate their freedom from us?

→ Why do we occupy? Because it is a security issue. But *we're undermining the right to existence of our country if the Palestinians don't have the same right.*

I don't think there is any doubt that Palestinians would not fight again against us. Our system is not stable.

The only way to preserve Israel is to cut it from the occupation.

→ Occupation started in 1967, the conflict started a long time before. Israel is a legal fact.

→ “Breaking the silence” is not popular in Israel. 2009 in June it was the least popular, when we published a book of testimonies. Even the PM attacked us. However, according to a poll 43% of Israeli Jews believed in what the NGO was doing. For me this is a number I am happy with.

→ We are not a human rights NGO. We are soldiers, trying to break the occupation.

Are we persecuted in Israel? No way. But neither is it very comfortable to do what we do. But just as we have the right to speak out, other people have the right to get angry.

→ The problem is not the military. The problem is the political mission that the military gets. That is why changing the political mindset is what matters.

We don't believe that the military can change.

- *Don't people know what the soldiers are doing, if such a large part of the population does the military service?*

Soldiers do not talk at home. And not everybody serves – this is a big lie. *Less than 50% are supposed to join the draft. About one third of them don't finish their service.* But perception is what matters.

Public trusts the army more than any other public institution.

- *What is the perception of young people in Israel on the occupation?*

Young people in Israel? I think we are in a very bad situation in Israel today.

→ The only way they see Palestinians are through their gun or as terrorists on TV. Same on the Palestinian side: settlers and military personnel. There is absolutely no human contact.

→ **Young people don't know a different world.**

- *How do your family react on your work?*

Some don't talk to me that much anymore. My father was the only person that came to our first photo exhibition.