

## Discussion Paper-II

### A Sleep in a Sterile Zone

*This military campaign too, is a part of the same regime* \*

The familiar sight of a Palestinian room - colorful blankets wrap those sleeping on the floor, crowded against each other. A khaki sleeve caught my eye. A ray of light crossing the frame from the right led to it. Then it became easier to notice a pair of army boots peeking under another blanket, a flexed knee in uniform and an upside-down helmet. These are Israeli soldiers. They are sleeping in a Palestinian home in Gaza. There is no trace of the inhabitants. They must have "fled" once more as refugees.

This photograph landed in my e-mailbox ten days ago with about another twenty. The accompanying letter iterated: "We should all be proud of the IDF... these brave kids defend our country" and, following, provided a recommendation which is also an authorization to distribute these images. This e-mail was signed by the CEO of the Israeli branch of a large European firm. His full personal data were prominently noted at the bottom of the letter. This is the most abstract photograph of a very harsh series, the last two of which come with a warning: these are not to be viewed by children. According to the sender, the rest may apparently be shared with them as a part of this war's booty.

Images similar to the one of soldiers asleep in a Palestinian home were disseminated to date only by soldiers who are members in *Shovrim Shtika* (Breaking the Silence) as a part of their sobering-up process from the missions the army had required them to carry out for the sake of 'state security'. Their photographs are not made public in the press but are exhibited in alternative venues. In Israel, at least, the occupation of a Palestinian home to provide soldiers with a place to sleep is not a media item. Were a press-photographer to shoot such a frame, the editor would not print it for 'lack of public interest'. But now the press has been kept away from Gaza, and it has a very meager supply of images of the ongoing horror there. Israel allows press-photographers to set themselves up on a hill adjacent to the Gaza Strip and shoot – long distance - the smoke billowing over the horizon, thus screening the inferno within. The hill overlooking Gaza is open to local tourist-visitors. For their convenience, someone has placed benches there as well as site-scape information booths. In the last few weeks, people have been arriving with children and binoculars to show their kids and watch Gaza being bombarded, and to take pleasure in Israel's might. When the man standing with his back to the camera returns home, he

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\* English translation: Tal Haran  
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will download the photographs he took and distribute them to family and friends. He will show them that he too, was there, holding his fingers in a victory sign for the camera, while Gaza goes up in flames in the background. From time to time, this screen that insulates us from Gaza is ruptured by photographs transmitted via e-mail by Gazan photographers; unbearable images of severe destruction to civilians and their immediate environment. Very few of these are printed in the Israeli daily press. Those that are published are provided by Reuters (whose Gaza office was bombed yesterday) or AP. Some probably reach these news agencies by the Gazan agency Ramatan that currently employs 150 journalists and photographers in Gaza and has become a major supplier of news photographs worldwide (except to Israel). The person who proudly forwarded the photograph at hand did not see in it that which the soldiers of Breaking the Silence saw in the images they published in the past. They or others like them have refused to go to war this time around. Those who refused have been tried and incarcerated. The Israeli press has not reported this at all. The media's silencing their refusal joins the similar silencing of demonstrations by Jewish Israelis against the war, or the arrest and incarceration of dozens of demonstrators. No one will prosecute the soldiers in this picture or the one who photographed them, all having invaded a home and removed its inhabitants in order to have a place to sleep. Theirs is an 'act of state'.

The photograph I have chosen is a not particularly harsh sight. It shows soldiers asleep in Gaza. Even in the midst of battle soldiers need their sleep. The difficulty arises when one recalls that these colorful blankets in which the soldiers are curled up are not their own, that the dwellers of this home where they now sleep have been made homeless. One of the soldiers, wakened by a first ray of morning light before his mates, is taking pictures - for them, for their families, a souvenir - an image of a night's sleep in Gaza.

But, after all, this is Gaza. How can Israeli soldiers who participated in the destruction of Gaza - the devastation of entire neighborhoods, public buildings, fatal ruin of vital infrastructure, wounding thousands, bombing hospitals, civilian shelters, schools, killing of over one-thousand human beings - how can these soldiers who are "not exactly welcome guests" in Gaza, how can they possibly afford to sleep so peacefully in the midst of the inferno they have produced without sensing any immediate danger to their own lives? The answer lies in one of the Occupation's practices, most common since its inception - creating a 'sterile zone'. What is a sterile zone? An area emptied of Arabs so that the military can carry out its missions. In this image we are most likely witnessing the heart of the sterile zone. We have no knowledge of its range, its perimeter, but for these soldiers to sleep so serenely, so safely, not only the dwellers of this house had to be removed from the sterile zone, but the residents of the entire area.

For the Israeli soldier, a Palestinian home is a violable space. This point has not been born in the recent Gaza campaign. The history of this violability goes back slightly over sixty years old. At that time, the voices opposing the expulsion of Palestinians were hushed by another that

overtook the military and political leadership of the Jewish public, making expulsion a *fait-accompli*. This leading voice stammered in its official declarations but was nonetheless determined in its practical aspects and managed to expel 750,000 Arabs from the areas of British Mandate Palestine. For a whole year Jewish soldiers went from village to village and, when called upon, from home to home, tearing the Arabs away from their dwellings and lands. At times they used indirect means - rumors and truck convoys - and at others, violence and direct threat. Since then, the Palestinian home has not ceased to be threatened by the very thinking and operating pattern that to the Israeli public (as well as to world public opinion) presents that very home as an existential threat.

The residents of the Arab towns of Ramle, Bir Al-Saba, Majdal and Isdud, occupied by Israeli forces in the 1948 war, either escaped or were forcibly expelled and most of them were removed to Gaza and tripled its population at once. At the end of the war the Egyptians controlled Gaza and instated their own military administration. Israel did not manage that last "military victory" - the conquest of Gaza - before signing the ceasefire agreements with Egypt in 1949, thus giving birth to the narrow, troublesome 'strip' at the edge of the State of Israel. A 'strip' is a military-political term that expresses temporariness and designates a region that must be dealt with as undetermined, its situation to be solved. 'The Gaza Strip' was born as a problem. Since this birth, Israel has never ceased proposing 'solutions to the problem'. In 1949 Israel proposed a 'political' solution, aiming to annex the strip along with some of the refugees it harbored. But this political 'solution' with its military scent was rejected by the parties involved. In the 1956 Sinai campaign, the Strip was occupied along with the entire peninsula and Israel imposed its military administration. This did not last long for under American-Russian pressure Israel was forced to retreat from the territory it conquered. In 1967 Israel managed to re-conquer the Strip and take control of the 1948 refugees yet once again. Since then, for over forty years Israel has controlled the Palestinian population in Gaza. At least ever since the general closure Israel imposed upon the Gaza Strip in 1991 during the first Gulf War, such control entails cutting off the Strip from the West Bank as well as strict control over any entry and exit from it. By means of administering the crossings, Israel regulates life in Gaza. Since the Second Intifada, and ever more tightly since its 'disengagement', Israel has been managing a measured, chronic disaster, ever-watchful not to cross the fine line of a 'humanitarian catastrophe', enabling or preventing the flow of goods, people and means.

Since 1948, the Palestinian home is never the private domicile that shelters its dwellers from invaders and strangers. Israelis do not conceive of themselves as invaders or strangers, and the Palestinians are not regarded as homeowners in the simplest sense of the term. Their homes are vulnerable to nightly incursions, bulldozer activity, bombs dropped upon them from the skies, missile barrages or simply shootings that make them uninhabitable, expropriate them to create army outposts, positions and

headquarters, all given to changing circumstances and the increasing 'security necessities'. The explanation given for these ritual actions is that they are crucial in order to 'flush out the terrorists from their nests', 'suppress resistance' or 'destroy insurgent infrastructure'. Thus the Palestinian home is presented as a military outpost of the enemy, calling for military intervention. The Palestinian home constitutes a problem, and military intervention its solution or at least a means to 'solving the problem'. More precisely, the home becomes penetrable and violable because it has been perceived by some local Israeli commander as a 'security problem' or its solution, but it tends to be regarded again and again as a problem because it is always seen as penetrable.

Israel usually manages to carry out its destruction with a public silencer, without reverberating in Israeli or international public discourse, maintaining the status quo. Whenever its operations were intensified and expanded and the Palestinians persistently resisted Israeli military might with the meager means at their disposal, Israel has turned to 'the world' for help, to halt the self-same campaign it initiated and bring about a 'ceasefire' agreement. Usually, while conducting these negotiations, it manages to grab the chance for some more destructive actions and invades more homes. Any such military campaign renews the state of emergency, re-justifying its permanent validity since 1948, mobilizing one and all and helping to forget the preceding emergency. Most importantly – it prevents citizens from identifying the source of this state of emergency: the regime itself. This regime needs the state of emergency. It cannot survive without it. To this end it has been mobilizing its citizens for the past forty years and more to continue fighting its non-citizens subjects. The source of the real state of emergency is the existence of a regime that denies all of its subjects – both citizens and non-citizens – the viable possibility to build for themselves joint frames of living in their area; it does not let them exorcise themselves of the language of occupation in which any Arab is a potential member of the 'killer gangs' as they were termed in the 1940s, 'infiltrators' in the 1950s, 'militants' in the 1960s and 1970s, and 'terrorist organizations' ever since the 1980s.

"A ceasefire is enough for us", Ben Gurion wrote in 1949. "If we chase peace – the Arabs will expect us to pay a price – either borders or refugees, or both. Let us wait a few years." Ben Gurion wrote this in the very year the State of Israel was accepted as a member nation in the UN. In spite of its mass expulsion of Palestinians and the devastation of their habitat, Israel was recognized as a 'peace-seeking' state.

Within this pattern of suspending the final solution – be it peace, war or mass expulsion – the current campaign, too – constitutes colonial expansion and violent suppression of resistant people who have been made refugees. This recognition, namely the alliance of sovereign nation-states that back each other up in the wars they conduct against civilians who have been made refugees in their own land or outside, continues to condone Israel's countless military campaigns in the territories it has occupied.



Anonymous, Gaza, 2009