

## Position Paper - The impact of relations between settlers and IDF soldiers in the West Bank

Since the establishment of Breaking the Silence in 2004, we have interviewed over 1,000 soldiers who served in the territories. The variety of testimonies provide a picture of the principles according to which the IDF operates when it implements the missions entrusted in them to carry out by Israel's political leadership. Amongst other topics, the testimonies shed light on the extremely close relations and strategic partnership between the IDF and the settlers. The testimonies demonstrate the way in which settlers take part in - alongside and in coordination with security forces - the enforcement of control over Palestinians.

Alongside millions of Palestinians, living under a military regime in the West Bank, subjected to the law of Israel's military rule, live hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens, subject to Israel's civilian law. In this way, Settlers are judged in the Israeli court of law and the laws enforced on them are those of the State of Israel. Nevertheless, the settlers are not solely Israeli citizens who enjoy the protection of the army and the Israeli rule of law to which they are also subject to: rather, testimonies, from over the years, demonstrate that settlers are also active collaborators in the enforcement of military rule over the Palestinians.

A strong connection exists between the settlers and the IDF: many IDF units are stationed directly beside settlements, sometimes even inside them; settlers commonly feed soldiers and provide them with snacks and hot drinks, provide historical,

geographic and political presentations to the soldiers, and even host them for meals in their homes.

There are even testimonies that describe settlers taking part, or being directly integrated in military activities, through training and commanding soldiers, or even participating in policy decision making for military operations (for example by attending military situation assessments). It is common for soldiers in the field to receive and carry out the orders of settlers and the settlement security coordinators, especially in relation to the settlements' security policies, and the expulsion of Palestinians from agricultural areas adjacent to the settlements. In this sense, settlers have succeeded in dispossessing Palestinians of their land, and even in expanding settlements through the exploitation of soldiers serving in the region, in the name of "creating facts on the ground." Often, settlers attack or provoke Palestinians, in part to instigate the intervention of the army in order to spark a confrontation between Israeli forces and Palestinians.

The testimonies also point to evidence that even when settlers' actions deviate from the policies set-down by the security establishment and the law - usually in reference to situations in which settlers attempt to displace Palestinians from their lands, harass or harm them - the settlers and Israeli establishment remain united in their stance. In such cases, a "compromise" is most often made between the security establishment and the settlers, in which the IDF's interest of settling and quietening any conflicts between the settlers and the Palestinians is set against the settlers interest in grabbing additional land and expelling further Palestinians from the area. As such, actions that under regular circumstances would be considered indisputable infringements of the law, often transform into "differences of opinion" between the settlers and the security forces, resulting - at the end of the day - in a compromise usually made to the detriment of the

Palestinians and their rights. In fact, it is precisely in these moments of “crisis” that this deep-seated partnership is exposed, in the way that the Israeli rule of law, incumbent on the settlers as citizens of the State of Israel, is not enforced on them at all. As compromises between the IDF and the settlers represent the interests of the settlers, the IDF’s actions solely serve to express the settlers’ political aspirations.

It is important to note, in cases in which the IDF enforces the law on settlers - for example in arresting settlers who have committed violent acts, or to prevent future violence against Palestinians - settlers have responded, more than once, through sabotage of IDF missions and even in violence against Israeli law enforcement agencies, the army, and the police. These kinds of activities, which aim to prevent or deter security forces from their missions, often include the use and exploitation of personal relationships that exist between settlers and security forces, or of the IDF’s systems and operational methods (for example, IDF radio frequencies), to which the settlers have access as part of their integration into operational activities.

The close ties that have formed between the army and the settlers are not accidental: mechanisms of military control in the territories have been developed, over a long period of time, in a manner in which settlers play a key role in managing the lives of Palestinians and guaranteeing Israel's control over the occupied territories.

It is apparent that from the perspective of the Israeli security forces, the settlers are allies who share a common enemy with them - they are not ordinary citizens, but active partners in the control over Palestinians. The soldiers’ testimonies reveal the special status of settlers in the occupied territories: they are used as operational partners in

being Israeli citizens who are protected by Israeli law, while simultaneously being exempt from complying in accordance.