



Israeli soldiers talk about the Occupied Territories

April 12, 2016

To: Chief of General Staff of the IDF, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot  
Email address: [mapa@idf.gov.il](mailto:mapa@idf.gov.il)

Re: Examining the impact of settlers on IDF soldiers in the West Bank

Esteemed Lt. Gen. Eizenkot,

Recently new details were revealed regarding the shooting incident in Hebron, in which an Israeli soldier shot a wounded Palestinian terrorist, killing him. Among the details revealed, was the deep involvement of some Hebron settlers in the occurrence itself, as well as the prior relationships that had developed between some of the soldiers and extremists among the local settler population.

As an organization of former soldiers who served in the occupied territories, which has carried out in-depth interviews of over 1,000 soldiers over the years, we are familiar with the close relations that exist between IDF soldiers and members of the, often quite extremist, settler community. We have previously warned you of the dangers and challenges that these relationships pose before the soldiers carrying out their duties (attached is a position paper). From the hundreds of testimonies that we have gathered on the relationship between IDF soldiers and settlers (attached is a sample compilation), it becomes clear that their relations and collaboration spreads out over a wide range of areas: Many military units are stationed near, or even within, settlements; soldiers are regularly hosted in the homes of settlers; various bodies representing the settlement movement enter IDF bases to present historical, political, and geographical reviews based on the “settler narrative”; settlers are integrated into significant operational activities – sometimes as the soldiers’ and officers’ guides in the field; and there is even collaboration in operational decision-making processes.

As the IDF Chief of General Staff you are responsible for the well being of IDF soldiers. As the individual entrusted to ensure the army’s appropriate ethical functioning and the security of the State of Israel, we request that you do not close your eyes in the face of the disturbing reality painted by both the occurrence in Hebron and the hundreds of testimonies that we have gathered for over 10 years.

Therefore, we request that you order an investigation into the nature of the impact of the close relations forged between settlers and IDF forces operating in the West Bank over the years, and how they affect, and sometimes interfere with, soldiers’ ability to carry out their missions.

Sincerely,

Yuli Novak  
Executive Director of Breaking the Silence

Dear Mr. Zaidel,

I hereby approve that your inquiry from April 12, 2016 was received at the Chief of General Staff's headquarters, and our response is as follows:

Regarding your assertion about the location of IDF soldiers in proximity to Israeli settlements, and at times within the settlement's territory itself, we note that this is necessary for the purpose of implementing missions, in light of analyses of operational necessity, the area's history, and the prevailing security situation in each area. In many cases, the most suitable and effective security response requires positioning IDF forces within settlements' territory or in immediate proximity to them, alongside providing regional defense (positioning forces in security facilities, on roads, and other points in the area).

As to claims regarding soldiers being hosted in settlers' homes, we will note that according to the army's directives and Central Command policies, soldiers serving under the Central Command are instructed not to accept gifts or offerings from civilians, Israelis, or Palestinians alike. However, the Central Command does not enforce a sweeping prohibition on participating in events organized by Israeli settlements or on soldiers being hosted in residents' homes. In some cases this is authorized, as part of a supervised relationship between the army and the civilians it protects. This has been carried out over the years in villages in other areas, such as villages near the border with Gaza and Israel's northern border. Insofar as participation in events is supervised in accordance with directives and follows commanders' discretion, we do not see hosting of this kind or participating in events in settlements (i.e. Independence Day events or other holidays) as any kind of deviation from appropriate policy, or as harming soldiers' professionalism or qualification.

It should be emphasized that, as indicated even in some of the testimonies submitted with the inquiry, a soldier who is not interested in interacting with settlers (in a context that is not part of his mission), is not obligated to do so in any sense. Moreover, commanders

supervise contact and interactions between soldiers and residents, and in cases where any suspicion of improper conduct arise, clear instructions are given by the commander.

In your letter you further claim that settlers are involved in operational activities, as “leaders of the forces in the field,” highlighting the civilian security coordinators. Regarding this matter, we stress that civilian security coordinators are legally certified security entities, and that they operate strictly in defined territories, as subject to the instructions and directives of regional defense bodies across all brigades. Civilian security coordinators’ authority is bestowed upon them by the Central Command in accordance with the 1971 decree concerning Settlement Guard duty (Judea and Samaria) (No. 432), regulating the authorities of the civilian security coordinator. As part of their duty, civilian security coordinators are expected to assist IDF forces and the Israeli Police in fulfilling their missions, as necessary, which includes the provision of security-related information and insights to the forces.

It should also be emphasized that civilian security coordinators have no command or hierarchical authority over soldiers, and are separate from the chain of command, as they are an entity appointed by the army, who exercises its authority in accordance to directives from the military echelon.

On the same matter, a claim was made that certain settlers are involved in decision-making processes and even partake in shaping operational policies, and to that end, an example was given of participation in military leadership’s periodic situation reports. On this matter we should note that there are joint discussions attended by the leadership and municipal security entities, as is customary in many other locations in Israel, yet a clear distinction is made between discussions conducted with settlement entities and internal military discussions. And in any event, decisions are made strictly by the authorized military echelon.

Regarding the claim that IDF soldiers are exposed to political content and are given lectures provided by settlers’ population, Central Command forces are directed not to

participate in any event with political or partisan characteristics and to heed to army commands, in not even attending any lectures or descriptions of this kind.

As noted above, the claims in your letter were presented in a general format. As such, we can only respond in a general manner and say that IDF forces are responsible for the well-being, security and protection of Israeli citizens, whatever their ethnic, religious or political orientation might be. For this purpose, IDF forces often operate in areas in which these civilians reside, and it is possible that over the years various types of relationships will form between IDF forces and residents, as they do in other places in Israel, between other security entities and the population in the area in which they operate.

The IDF sees the defense of civilians living in the region of Judea and Samaria as a mission of primary importance, and ensures that the interface between Israeli civilians in Judea and Samaria and IDF forces in the region is conducted in accordance with army commands as well as in an appropriate and dignified manner.

The claim that the existing relationships disrupt IDF soldiers' ability to fulfill their missions is incorrect. On the contrary, the relationship with civilians, and in particular with those carrying security-related roles in settlements in the region of Judea and Samaria, is a significant factor in the IDF's capacity to fulfil its security responsibility in the territory, so long as it is conducted in accordance with commands.

Thank you for your inquiry.