

Summary

The High Command

Settler influence on IDF conduct in the West Bank

The shooting incident in Hebron in which IDF soldier Elor Azaria shot to death a wounded Palestinian terrorist (hereinafter: the Azaria Affair) sparked public debate about the degree to which Hebron settlers impact the IDF's operational conduct. Testimonies collected by Breaking the Silence over the years demonstrate that the settlers' impact on IDF activities in the territories is not unique to this incident, but is rather a widespread phenomenon that represents an integral aspect of the reality in which IDF soldiers operate throughout the West Bank.

As a result of the Azaria Affair, Breaking the Silence presented the IDF Chief of Staff with a representative collection of soldier testimonies describing the nature of the relations that have developed between the IDF and settlers. The Chief of Staff's response to this appeal exposed a deep gap between the practices defined by the Ministry of Defense offices in Tel Aviv, and what actually happens on the hilltops of Yitzhar, the alleyways of Hebron, and throughout the West Bank. While the Chief of Staff's bureau claims there are explicit protocols regulating IDF relations with the settler population, the soldiers describe a much different reality. What the soldiers talk about in their testimonies corresponds with reports in the media in the wake of the Azaria Affair, as well as with testimonies provided during Azaria's trial.

Soldiers testify to significant settler involvement in, and influence on, IDF activities, as well as the obscurity or absence of explicit orders on how they are expected to act when faced with incidents of settler violence, theft, or destruction of property, which have become commonplace. Settlers often take advantage of the circumstances in order to determine facts on the grounds and initiate new procedures in the field in a way that serves their political, ideological and territorial interests.

The report focuses on three main aspects that exemplify the close connection between settlers and the army, along with its characteristics and implications.

1. **Settler involvement in operational activity:** Settlers are often active partners in operational activities and military control implemented in the territories and on the Palestinian population. Despite the bureau of the Chief of Staff's denial of the phenomenon, the testimonies clearly demonstrate that the civilian security coordinators (civilian settlers employed by the IDF to oversee settlement security detail) – who are usually residents of the settlements with an explicit political agenda – are perceived by the soldiers and officers in the field to be, for all intents and purposes, a military authority. Oftentimes the civilian security coordinators take advantage of

their broad authorities and the close relations they enjoy with military figures in order to advance their ideological and territorial interests. In tandem, and in direct contradiction of the bureau of the Chief of Staff's statement, settlers do participate in official military discussions (for example, situation assessments in the area) and even exert pressure on making decisions that serve their interests. In some cases, settlers even partake in determining the kinds of missions in which security forces should engage.

2. **Failure to enforce the law on settlers harming Palestinians or their property:** The testimonies point to impotence regarding addressing settler violence and other criminal activities. This stems from the murkiness of the directives defining IDF soldiers' authority in instances of settler violence, and is aligned with the prevalent understanding that soldiers' role in the territories is reduced to guaranteeing the safety and security of the settlers – and not the Palestinians who live there. These characteristics lead to total lack of effective law enforcement and leave Palestinian residents defenseless in the face of settler violence.
3. **Settler violence against IDF soldiers:** Soldiers, who are positioned in points of friction by virtue of their roles, often find themselves the victims of settler violence without being provided the tools to respond or desist. In some cases, soldiers are given explicit instructions not to act at all when faced with settler violence, even when it is directed at them.
4. **IDF soldiers guarding settlers' events and recreational activities:** Soldiers in the field are sometimes required to secure and escort events or recreational activities held by settlers. Some of the events take place inside Palestinian villages or cities. In the framework of these security operations, the IDF is required to invest resources and allocate many forces, while placing its soldiers in danger and disrupting the lives of Palestinians.
5. **Proximity and close personal ties between settlers and soldiers or their property:** Settlers in the West Bank often forge close relationships with IDF soldiers and commanders. Many military units are stationed adjacent to settlements in the West Bank – in some cases even inside the IDF posts themselves. Though it is forbidden, settlers often provide soldiers with gifts, visit them in their guard posts, offer them food and beverage, and even host them for meals in their homes. The testimonies demonstrate that these meetings, of which the commanders are not only aware, but also authorize, are often used to lobby and preach political ideologies in order to proselytize the soldiers to adopt settler ideologies.
6. **Integrating settlers and their political ideologies into IDF educational activities:** While official guidelines prohibit IDF soldiers from taking part in any politically oriented activities, soldiers participate in lectures and tours in the territories that are based on the political narrative of the settler

movement. Sometimes settlers guide these educational activities or participate, integrating their nationalist and racist messages that preach hatred of Palestinians and encourage national and religious separatism.

The relationship between settlers and the IDF, and its implications on IDF conduct in the West Bank, are an unavoidable product of the longstanding regime of occupation that integrates the powerful and highly influential settler movement. The destructive consequences of this situation were displayed during the Azaria Affair, but are even more apparent from soldiers' testimonies, constituting a permanent feature of their routine service in the territories.

The systematic failure of consecutive Israeli governments to address the issues and phenomena elucidated by this report, enable the further entrenchment of this conduct to become a permanent fixture of IDF activities in the West Bank. It is unfortunate to discover that the IDF's senior command chooses not to address this misconduct and to disregard the testimonies provided by soldiers in the field.

A thorough reading of the report begs the question: Who are the parties interested in maintaining the status quo and why is it permitted by senior political and military brass?