

## **Lone Soldiers speak about the occupied territories, November 2019**

We are a few of the hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were sent to uphold Israel's 52-year military occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. We are also a few of the thousands of young Jews from the Diaspora who join the Israeli military every year, usually after making Aliyah (becoming citizens in accordance with Israel's Law of Return). We made this decision because we hold a deep connection to the country and to our Jewish identity in accordance with the values on which we were raised, and because we believe that Israel is the homeland and safe haven of the Jewish people. Our commitment to the safety of Israel's citizens brought us to tie our fate with that of our Israeli-born brothers and sisters, accepting that we might face life-endangering situations. We are referred to as Lone Soldiers, as we served without immediate family in Israel.

Though our values and beliefs motivated us to enlist, our service in the occupied territories led us to question the morality of the ongoing occupation. This includes daily tasks that the State considers necessary in order to uphold it, and with which we were tasked: patrolling Palestinian towns and cities, "making our presence felt" by raiding homes in the middle of the night, arresting Palestinian youth and using riot gear to disperse demonstrations.

We did these things. And over time, we came to recognize these forms of control as morally unacceptable. We enlisted as 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds, believing we would fight to protect our fellow citizens. Months later, we found ourselves in eight-hour shifts at checkpoints in which we limited Palestinians' ability to move and prevented people from reaching their homes. In other instances, we were given the power to decide whether or not Palestinians could see their family members, escort their loved ones to the hospital, or even participate in their funerals.

It was easy to miss the transformation we underwent as young men and women in uniforms. Though we began as principled young recruits, over time we were gradually corrupted by the power we held. Our daily environment made it feel natural for us to consider the civilian population we controlled as somehow inferior.

Our experiences and memories from policing a civilian population and engaging in combat in densely populated areas haven't escaped us and have followed us since.

We are not alone. In breaking our silence about our experiences during our service we join thousands of Israeli veterans who have done the same. Together we are calling for an end to the occupation.

Because each year, thousands of passionate youth from our Jewish communities in North America decide to serve in the Israeli military or move to Israel knowing they will be conscripted, we believe our communities should understand the implications of this decision. All of our experiences – from things that felt ethically gray to the moral wrongs that keep us up at night – were the result of policies that are integral to the occupation and settlement enterprise. These moral catastrophes will continue so long as those in power in the Israeli government choose to continue enforcing the occupation, and American support enables these decisions.

We know first-hand that the occupation is tearing at the moral fiber of Israeli society; it is a stain on the ethics and values of the Jewish Diaspora as well. We believe ending the occupation is a crucial first step for a peaceful and just future. We call on members of our American Jewish community to reject the notion of unconditional support of Israeli policies in the occupied territories. The only ethical position is to apply our values to our support for the Israeli people and state, and this means using every resource at our disposal to oppose the Israeli government's ongoing decision to keep Palestinians under military occupation.