

---

# Struggling with Complicity

## Anti-militarist Activism in Israel

by Erica Weiss

---

Most Jewish Israeli anti-militarist activists frame their critiques within the boundaries of explicit loyalty to Israeli society and allegiance to Zionism, a stance that contributes to their mainstream appeal. They often frame their dissent as an attempt to rescue Israeli society from military abuses, but in doing so are often unwittingly co-opted as “internal affairs” officers for the military, exposing misconduct but also strengthening the military’s claims to moral propriety. As a result, we see the persistent seepage of militarism and militarist values into anti-militarist activism. Thus, Jewish Israeli activists face a number of ethical and political dilemmas as a result of their “insider” position, including whether to abandon their activist practices or renounce their national allegiance.

---

“Insider” activism is fraught with strategic and ethical pitfalls. This is due to the fact that insider activism is conducted by people who benefit in various ways from the very laws and policies they are opposing and who often feel a particular ethical responsibility to the society against which they bring their accusations. Jewish Israeli anti-militarist activists experience challenging entanglements, contradictions, and dilemmas on a daily basis. One of the most challenging is the constant seepage of military values and even military personnel into their activism, a process that often causes them to feel that their attempts at dissent have morphed into complicity.

After years of debate regarding the perils of engagement, today some Israeli anti-militarist organizations are examining some of the unintended effects of their activism and reevaluating their approach. Some in this community have concluded, paradoxically, that their activism has at times served to bolster the Israeli military and its reputation. Critics from within the left have begun to argue that Israeli anti-military and human rights organizations are effectively serving as ombudsmen, or internal affairs officers, for the military (Rotem 2015). Consequently, instead of achieving their explicit goal of protecting Palestinians from Israeli state violence, they have unintentionally allowed the military to assure the public that they are held to the highest ethical standards due to critical civilian oversight (Levy 2010).

This article seeks to consider the process by which militarism perpetually seeps into anti-militarist activism in Israel. I present this process not as one of intentional co-optation but, rather, as a gradual process of slippage from both sides of the activist-military divide. “Insider activism” allows entitled members of society to trade on their privileged inclusion in

the body politic and presumed loyalty to further their activism. The “insiders” of insider activism are recognized as such by themselves and also the broader society. In the Israeli case, insiders are Jewish Zionists, often with military bona fides. Non-Jews, anti-Zionists, and especially Palestinians are not able to engage in this type of activism even if they hold Israeli citizenship because they are not considered real insiders. Insider activism is not monolithic and includes a variety of approaches that reflect differences in ethical vision as well as political strategy. Yet, collectively, insider activism can be contrasted with activism that positions itself as an outside intervention, in this case with Palestinian or international critiques of Israeli policy. Because of its explicit declaration of community allegiance and the “in the family” stance of insider activism, insider activists often claim that they have greater potential to change hearts and minds. Claims made from a position that maintains national allegiance and consents to hegemonic divisions between “us” and “them,” claims that “we” should do the “right” thing for the ethical benefit of “our own” society’s “conscience” or “soul,” are often experienced as tough love rather than as an external attack. In Israel, this stance can be expressed by the popular “pro-Israel, anti-occupation” sentiment, which claims that loyalty to the state is maintained even when military policies are challenged.

However, we will see that this approach often entails significant political and ethical entanglements that make it difficult for insider activists to maintain their intended balance between loyalty and dissent. The persistent reentry of militarism into dissent activism often is not the result of nefarious forces or state conspiracy but, rather, is due to the mainstream militarist values circulating in society that influence the mainstream population and insider activists alike. Insider activists are very aware of this seepage of militarism into their activism, often bearing witness to their own co-optation in real time, and they experience a great deal of consternation in the process. As we will see, sometimes this seepage reaches a breaking point, and

---

**Erica Weiss** is Assistant Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology of Tel Aviv University (Ramat Aviv, Israel [weiss.eric@gmail.com]). This paper was submitted 17 XI 17, accepted 15 VI 18, and electronically published 5 IX 18.

activists decide to call an end to their compromised practices. The decision to stop or shift activist practices is fraught with ethical dilemmas, both theoretical and practical. In this paper, “co-optation” is an emic concept used by my interlocutors in the field rather than an analytic category. I am not accusing anti-militarist organizations of being co-opted by the military and the state, but, rather, I am describing their emic experience of co-optation as described to me and as the impetus for recent policy changes among activist organizations. My interlocutors employed “co-optation” (a Hebraicized version of the English word), as well as similar concepts such as being used as a fig leaf, being used as a subcontractor, and being used for legitimacy.

I will first contextualize one of the most prominent dilemmas of anti-militarist insider activism, the negotiation between nationalism and militarism, in Israel and elsewhere. The tight historical and ideological connection between these two social forces is one of the main enablers for the seepage of militarism into the politics of dissent. I will then describe the most common approach of activist organizations against the military. This approach attempts to wrench apart nationalism and militarism and seeks to oppose the latter in the name of the former. I will discuss the organizations *Courage to Refuse*, *B’Tselem*, and *Breaking the Silence* in comparative perspective. These examples demonstrate that while this nationalist approach is effective in generating widespread and even institutional support, it also results in unintended entanglements that some activists come to experience as co-optation by the military. I argue that what is experienced as co-optation can, in etic terms, be more accurately described as a disturbingly banal process often accomplished through well-intentioned slippages on both sides rather than a Machiavellian plot by the military or the state, as a few of my interlocutors perceived it. I suggest that this dilemma faced by activists is not only a manifestation of the classic political choice between working inside the system or outside of it. It is not only a matter of ideology and strategy, but it also concerns the ways in which group membership defines political horizons and the ways in which national hierarchies of “us” and “them” are difficult to escape even when activists explicitly seek to undermine these hierarchies.

### The Nation, Nationalism, and Defining the “Us” through the Military

Nationalist sentiment is very strong in Israel and is widely considered a positive force among its Jewish population (Handelman 2004; Zerubavel 1995). Most Israeli Jews are proud of the state, defensive of its leadership, and intolerant of public or international criticism of both. In some political environments, explicit ideologies—“isms”—are viewed as the enemy of independent thought and moral accountability. But Israel’s official ideology, Zionism, is widely accepted as a reliable ethical guide. Furthermore, the explicit inculcation and socialization into the principles and values of Zionism are considered good and upright education rather than brainwashing.

This situation defines the domestic conditions in which Israeli anti-militarism activists operate. In many countries, including Israel, the forces of militarism use nationalism as their main ideological engine and propaganda tool. Military activities, interventions, and conquests are legitimized to citizens in terms of the good of the country (rather than, e.g., the interests of private enterprise, which is often the reality [Ferguson 2005]).

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) is the military of the Israeli state. Part of its deep penetration into Israeli society and culture is related to its policy of universal conscription, practiced since the beginning of the state. Theoretically, all citizens, men and women, must perform service, but a number of groups are exempted, significantly including ultra-Orthodox Jews and many of Israel’s Palestinian citizens. Most of the activists I describe in this article served in the military prior to their activism, and they describe the difficulty, both strategic and emotional, of publicly going against an organization they once revered and in which they served. I describe their activism here as anti-militarist. Though most of them do not call for the complete elimination of the military, I refer to it in this way because of their systematic challenges to Israeli policies they themselves often deem militarist, including the occupation of Palestinian territories, hawkish military interventions and rhetorical bluster in lieu of diplomatic efforts, the application of military legal framework to civilian situations, and the military’s legal and social shielding of soldiers who commit human rights violations.

Nationalism and modern militarism are linked historically in their emergence as well as in their political doctrine. In fact, mass conscription of the citizenry was created during the French Revolution, a watershed moment for modern nationalism. In modern militaries, individuals are conscripted into the military as ordinary citizens (in contrast with prenational professionalized or mercenary models or earlier levy or military slavery systems [Pipes 1979]). Though it is well known that nationalism legitimates militarism, the inverse is also true. The military has often served a central role in the generating of national sentiment (Mosse 1975). Charles Tilly (1985) describes the formative role of state violence and war making in the establishment of the nation-state and national unification, defining the sense of “us” that modern citizens often feel.

In Israel, nationalism and militarism are entwined by additional resonances. The principle of Jewish self-defense is central to Zionism. It is widely believed that, whereas in exile, Jews, lacking an army, were vulnerable to attacks and pogroms that culminated in the European Holocaust, the Israeli state returned Jewish security to Jewish hands (Almog 2000). With the establishment of the state, the military claimed a role at the center of Israeli collective consciousness: symbolically, the military embodied the state and Zionism, and military leaders effectively became influential political figures in determining state policy. The military has largely sustained this prominent position by politically manufacturing an ongoing existential crisis in which citizens perpetually believe that the state’s very existence, and

by extension their own existence, is at risk (Ben-Eliezer 1998; Kimmerling 2005).

The centrality of the military extends to cultural values and social realities. Sara Helman (2000) has demonstrated the way that the militarism constructs the “life-world” of Israeli men by creating an imagined community of fellow soldiers, a social system that extends far into civil society. Orna Sasson-Levy and others have shown how militarism shapes Israeli notions of femininity, masculinity, and gender roles (Sasson-Levy 2002, 2003). Mirra Furman describes how soldiers and soldiering are brought into children’s lives with positive connotations from an extremely young age, socializing them into future service from the time they can speak (1999). Positive images of the military are apparent in children’s school workbooks, in street names, in advertising, and in civic discourse. The veneration of the military in Israel is uncontested except in tiny circles of the radical left and the fringes of the ultra-Orthodox community. Baruch Kimmerling (1993) described the situation as one of “civil militarism.”

### The Slow Creep of Militarism into Israel’s Anti-military Activism

Most of the groups seeking to combat the military and state violence in Israel emphasize their insider status by declaring their national allegiance and describing their activism as trying to save Israel from the destructive influence of the military’s activities. Courage to Refuse was one such organization of elite combat soldiers turned conscientious objectors who objected to the military’s aggressive policies during the Second Intifada and to the Israeli occupation more generally. The refusal of these soldiers, especially by the pilots and commandos who held enormous prestige, shocked Israeli society and made many reconsider the military’s policies (Weiss 2014b). Consider, for example, the language of a letter written to this organization in 2002:

*We, reserve combat officers and soldiers of the Israel Defense Forces, who were raised upon the principles of Zionism, self-sacrifice and giving to the people of Israel and to the State of Israel, who have always served in the front lines, and who were the first to carry out any mission in order to protect the State of Israel and strengthen it.*

We, combat officers and soldiers who have served the State of Israel for long weeks every year, in spite of the dear cost to our personal lives, have been on reserve duty in the Occupied Territories, and were issued commands and directives that had nothing to do with the security of our country, and that had the sole purpose of perpetuating our control over the Palestinian people.

We, whose eyes have seen the bloody toll this Occupation exacts from both sides,

We, who sensed how the commands issued to us in the Occupied Territories destroy all the values that we were raised upon,

We, who understand now that the price of Occupation is the loss of IDF’s human character and the corruption of the entire Israeli society,

We, who know that the Territories are not a part of Israel, and that all settlements are bound to be evacuated,

We hereby declare that we shall not continue to fight this War of the Settlements.

We shall not continue to fight beyond the 1967 borders in order to dominate, expel, starve and humiliate an entire people.

We hereby declare that we shall continue serving the Israel Defense Force in any mission that serves Israel’s defense.

*The missions of occupation and oppression do not serve this purpose—and we shall take no part in them.*

The letter is as much an affirmation of allegiance to Zionism and the signatories’ loyalty to Israeli society as it is a condemnation of the Israeli military. It uses the common insider rhetoric of seeking the redemption of Israeli society through its critique of military policy.

This approach varies from “strategic” to “sincere” across groups and individual activists and should not be broadly characterized as one or the other. In speaking with conscientious objectors (between 2007 and 2009) and other anti-militarist activists (2007–2009, 2012–2016), sometimes the adherence to rhetoric of solidarity was discussed as a strategic approach to appeal to the Israeli mainstream, to make their message more palatable for the audience they are trying to convert (Weiss 2014a). At the same time, many of the conscientious objectors I know saw their anti-military stance as a patriotic act of love for the country. A significant number continued to consider themselves Zionists. They were aware that their combination of nationalism with an anti-military stance was perceived as a contradiction by many, but they insisted that this did not have to be so. Many Palestinian activists have long claimed that a just peace is not possible within the Zionist framework (Salaime 2016), but Jewish Israeli activists feel accountable not only to Palestinians but also, or even primarily, to other Jewish Israelis. Some believe Zionism is compatible with justice, while others, believing that change lies in Israeli hands, are reluctant to abandon the rhetorical and symbolic force that Zionism holds with the mainstream as a resource for persuasion and a tool of self-defense against the hostilities of the right wing. This inward orientation is the fundamental appeal of insider activism. These activists are not trying to convince Europeans, Americans, or Palestinians but, rather, only their “own” community. This distinction points to the political power of insider activism as well as the paradox activists face.

During my fieldwork with conscientious objectors from the Israeli military, many of whom had been part of Courage to Refuse, this tension between using the prestige of the military and challenging it was a constant source of low-level tension. Conscientious objectors drew on their Zionist credentials and

prestigious military careers for moral authority that they then traded in to justify their subsequent refusal of military service. This simultaneously served to convince the public of the truth and legitimacy of their anti-militarist claims as well as to cement Zionism and military service as the proper sources of moral authority. These dual contradictory effects caused tension within the conscientious objector community, as well as with activists who did not have access to these sources of authority, such as women and Palestinians.

### Breaking the Silence and the General

Breaking the Silence was founded in 2004 by soldiers serving in Hebron. Hebron is an occupied Palestinian city in the West Bank with a small number of Israeli settlers accompanied by a large number of soldiers. It has become a symbol for the political left of the evils of the occupation. Breaking the Silence is composed of combat soldiers who have served in the Occupied Territories, and their goal is to expose Israeli society to the realities of the occupation, including the abuse of Palestinian civilians, looting, beatings, destruction of property, and more. They collect the testimonies of active combat soldiers regarding the abuses they have seen and participated in. Their explicit goal is to end the Israeli occupation.

This organization also emphasizes that it acts out of a sense of moral and ethical responsibility to Israel and Israeli society. It expresses the belief that the military occupation of Palestinian territories is a stain on Israeli society and suggests that Israel would be a healthier, more vibrant democracy without the occupation. Further, it claims that ending the occupation would also be a step toward a more moral army and a more moral country (Schatz 2016). It argues that the Israeli military is not living up to its code of ethics, especially the military's code of Purity of Arms: "IDF soldiers will not use their weapons and force to harm human beings who are not combatants or prisoners of war, and will do all in their power to avoid causing harm to their lives, bodies, dignity and property." The implication is that the military is currently failing to live up to the worthy ideal of its national ideology. For example, Breaking the Silence's Dana Golan (2015) says in an opinion piece in an English language news outlet widely read in Israel and abroad:

As opposed to other places in the world where you can live an entire lifetime without meeting soldiers, the Israeli army is a microcosm of our society. Soldiers are our brothers, sisters and children. The IDF is the face of the Israeli people, and its values are our values. For years we have been hearing from commanders and politicians that the IDF is the most moral army in the world. But its policy of massive fire killed hundreds of innocent Palestinians last summer and destroyed entire neighborhoods. Humanistic words, public declarations and official documents like the Code of Ethics are meaningless when you hear the soldiers' testimonies and see the results in the field.

This statement accomplishes a number of things. It demonstrates loyalty to Jewish Israeli society with words like "our"

and references to civic metaphors of extended family. It also expresses faith in national values and reaffirms their potential to establish a just society. It does not challenge national solidarity but, rather, military practice. The statement attempts to pry apart the nation, often ethically romanticized among the left in its "pre-occupation" form as not involved in a colonial or imperial project (Dalsheim 2014), and the current military occupation.

Since 2015, several right-wing politicians have launched a sustained campaign against Breaking the Silence. The government has sought to ban the organization from military activities and to keep them out of Israeli schools. There have also been attacks on their sources of funding (Sales 2015). Israel passed a law forcing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to reveal foreign funding in all official reports, as well as in all dealings with officials and on TV, newspapers, billboards, and online. This law was transparently targeted at Israeli anti-military and human rights organizations (Harkov 2016). In March of 2016 Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon accused Breaking the Silence of treason, a dramatic allegation that severely damaged the organization's relationships with the soldiers they rely on for their testimonies regarding military abuses. These attacks are part of a sustained and ongoing effort to smear the organization and raise public antipathy toward it, which was at least partially successful, as the group was disinvented from speaking events, and a prestigious award, the Berelson Prize from Ben Gurion University, was revoked after intervention from the university's president.

However, while many right-wing politicians attacked the group, many from within the military spoke out in support of the organization, claiming that the organization's activities strengthen the military, preserve its morality, and ultimately protect the IDF. When Breaking the Silence was put under investigation for collecting classified information, the chief military censor, Col. Ariella Ben-Avraham, took the unusual step of countering these claims and confirming that the organization had passed all of its materials through the censor in advance and was in full compliance with military censorship requirements. IDF chief Gadi Eisenkot said he welcomed the cooperation of the organization with the IDF's legal division. Others within the military argued that the organization served as a watchdog for abuses and that the Israeli military requires such criticism in order to maintain high moral standards (Yanai 2015). A number of high-profile security figures have emerged in favor of Breaking the Silence.

General Amiram Levin, former commander of the IDF Northern Command and a household name among many Jewish Israelis, was the first to step forward, arguing that Breaking the Silence strengthens the IDF and its morality and that silencing it is harmful to the army. "The IDF is sent by the state to the front to rule and manage the occupation," said Levin. "This is a difficult and complex assignment that naturally tends to morally corrupt. In order to preserve its morality, the IDF, which is a moral army, needs the criticism and the openness to correct itself, to learn, and to warn both itself

and the political echelon” (Yanai 2015). He also personally took out a half-page advertisement in the newspaper *Haaretz* under the headline “I Am Also Breaking My Silence,” defending the group and arguing that the IDF should support Breaking the Silence. He argued that whistle-blowers will ultimately benefit the Israeli military by helping it correct its misdeeds and informing Israeli society of the conditions of the occupation.

Others followed suit. Israel police Maj. Gen. (ret.) Alik Ron and General Ami Ayalon argued that the new political attacks and guidelines meant to silence the group are what truly damages and weakens the army. Yuvak Diskin, the former head of Shin Bet (Israeli FBI), discussed the group on Facebook, writing that while he opposes the activities of NGOs and journalists “who don’t love their country,” he supports Breaking the Silence, “even if they are aggravating, even if they are often inaccurate and don’t always do their work properly from a professional perspective—their contribution is very important and helps us maintain the required vigilance about the most sensitive human issues” (Cohen 2015). Later two additional former heads of Shin Bet, Ami Ayalon and Carmi Gillon, threw their support behind the organization. These statements of support from such well-known military and security figures were considered a major coup for the group. After this, Breaking the Silence received an influx of monetary donations from the Israeli public. They also began to receive offers from a number of high-level military brass to host house meetings at which they could present their group.

Critics on the left have argued that this type of support is in fact a form of co-optation by which the military seeks to use civil oversight as a propaganda tool to demonstrate its dedication to high moral standards. Co-optation has a connotation of manipulation and conspiracy—a stratagem in the service of power. Such ideas are fueled by populist notions of government and military conspiracies, featuring military elites or public relations specialists plotting how they can most efficiently neutralize the civilian threat against them. I think this case demonstrates a very different process. It starts with an organization criticizing the military, which, partially in order to secure mainstream support, frames their stance as one of national solidarity. They are attacked by far-right politicians for their activities. Important military figures hear not only the attacks but also the activists’ message and are convinced by the anti-militarist organization’s claims that they are acting in the interests of Israel. These military figures are offended by the undemocratic and repressive acts of right-wing politicians and decide to throw their support behind these activists. For these generals and high-ranking security figures, the support for Breaking the Silence is not an overt attempt at co-optation but a sincere support of their critique, and it reflects a realistic awareness that their own reputation, status, and social capital in Israel—accrued through revered military service—can lend significant prestige and authority to Breaking the Silence in their struggle.

The military brass in question are trying to help counter the most oppressive autocratic political forces. The support of

these generals, from the perspective of public legitimacy and acceptance, is a major boon for the activists and makes their movement much more mainstream. As Yorai, a leader from Breaking the Silence, told me, “When Amiram Levin says something, people listen.” At the same time, this is a somewhat ironic endorsement. This mainstream appeal to some extent trades on the public authority of the military generals, reproducing the validity of their social clout, which they have gained through the very practices of state violence that the organization seeks to criticize. Yorai told me that, after they started getting military support, many in the organization began to ask, “Do we really need these generals? We don’t need them to confirm what we already know.” Ben, a Breaking the Silence witness, told me:

I think it is a good thing, but obviously it is complicated. Breaking the Silence shouldn’t be dependent on the approval of generals because that will take the truth out of our hands—the regular soldiers who were there and saw what is happening—and put it in their hands. But at the same time, everyone knows him [Levin] and he has so much credibility. Part of you wants to say: “See, he says we are right. We told you so!” as though he [Levin] is the one above us all who can say what is true or not.

It is only because of Israel’s civil militarism that the names and reputations of high-ranking military and security personnel are widely known among ordinary citizens. On the one hand, this support gave Breaking the Silence credibility and also access to the upper echelons of the military establishment. On the other hand, this support can pull anti-military activism under the military’s protective wing in a way that makes some activists uncomfortable. Though the organization does not oppose the military per se, and its members continue to think of themselves as ordinary rank and file, they do fiercely fight the military’s current activities and the Israeli occupation more generally, which has earned them the honor of becoming the most publicly vilified NGO in Israel.

### The Breaking Point: A “Fig Leaf” for the Occupation?

In the spring of 2016, the human rights organization B’Tselem took an unprecedented step and announced that they would no longer be cooperating with the Israeli military in investigations of infractions, violations, and abuses conducted by Israeli soldiers. Collecting evidence of such infractions and representing Palestinians legally in their complaints against the military had been a central part of their activism since the organization was created in 1989. This decision was the result of a long discussion within the organization and within the anti-militarist activist community generally, regarding whether the political effects of their activism might be quite different from their intentions. Concerns had been raised that the organization was serving as a “fig leaf” for the military, specifically, that the military’s inves-

tigative division was using up the organization's resources in sisyphian exercises that almost never led to disciplinary consequences for the soldiers or commanders who were violent or abusive. In their decision to end cooperation, B'Tselem reported that they had lodged 739 cases on behalf of Palestinians since 1989, and only 25 of these had resulted in charges being brought against the implicated soldiers (B'Tselem 2016).

The infractions at issue include the killing or injuring of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers, the beating of Palestinians, the use of Palestinians as human shields, and the destruction of Palestinian property. In cases such as these, Palestinians are theoretically entitled to lodge an official complaint with the military. However, this is extremely difficult to do without assistance. Palestinians theoretically can file complaints with military police directly; however, this is unlikely because there are no military police investigative units based in the West Bank, and Palestinians are not granted authorization to enter Israel for the purpose of filing a complaint against the military. Palestinians may also file complaints with military police officers in the West Bank; however, this also is often exceedingly difficult. The schedules of police officers are often either not publicly available or not adhered to. Often Palestinians are kept waiting for hours or are turned away because they have no one to translate from Arabic into Hebrew. From this point, the process only gets more Kafkaesque. Investigations are marred by frequent delays, stalling techniques, misplaced paperwork, highly suspicious claims regarding the inability to locate accused soldiers and witnesses, postponements, and more. Paperwork often vanishes, and there is almost no transparency regarding the progress of the investigation or, more often, the lack of progress. Often each step of the investigation procedure would only be performed after repeated inquiries and demands for progress and information by B'Tselem.

B'Tselem, as an organization with dedicated full-time workers, extensive legal expertise, long-term experience working with the military system, native and high-level Hebrew, and access to Israeli bases and relevant bureaucrats, often found such investigations to be extremely time consuming, unresponsive, and frustrating. It is hard to imagine that a Palestinian layperson would be able to force an investigation to proceed. While other Israeli civil rights lawyers can pursue complaints for Palestinians outside of B'Tselem's purview, the organization was the most prominent and systematic access point for aggrieved Palestinians. For this reason, the decision to end cooperation with the military greatly hinders the ability of Palestinians to lodge complaints with the Israeli military, and in many cases there is virtually no redress for crimes committed by soldiers against Palestinian civilians unless the military decides to initiate an investigation on their own. As such, walking away from their practice of representing Palestinians was a difficult decision, especially for an organization whose *raison d'être* is fighting human rights violations.

However, many in B'Tselem felt that their involvement and assumption of responsibility for investigations was being co-opted by the military. Often the military would delegate re-

sponsibility for the investigation to B'Tselem. The military expected B'Tselem to be the intermediary between the army and Palestinians on all matters, for example, to coordinate with Palestinians to set up interview appointments rather than being in direct contact themselves. They expected B'Tselem to provide medical records and to file paperwork, despite the fact that the military has access to these items. B'Tselem complied with military requests with the knowledge that, if they did not, the investigation would not proceed. Sometimes, the failure of progress in investigations was blamed on B'Tselem's supposed failure to provide enough information to the military, as though it were the organization's responsibility to prove its case and not the military's responsibility to investigate in good faith. But B'Tselem's efforts disappeared into a void. Today, activists at B'Tselem express confidence and pride in their decision to discontinue cooperation with the military.

Here we see another case of slippery entanglements resulting in unintentional complicity. The intention of B'Tselem has been to advocate for redress of the abuse of Palestinians by Israeli soldiers. In the process, they were dragged into the role of being responsible for pushing investigations forward through constant nagging, collecting evidence, and other administrative tasks. All the initiative to pursue cases fell on the organization and its resources, outsourcing the military's official responsibility. Again, this analysis is not entirely conspiratorial. The Israeli military is a large and inefficient bureaucracy, something that is evident in many areas beyond the military police investigative unit. In encountering Israeli bureaucracies generally, the onus typically falls on the "client" to push and advance his or her own interests. Military bureaucrats followed classic bureaucratic practices of shifting the burden of labor onto an external party, a tendency as much about work avoidance practices among government employees as about indifference to human rights violations, in a process previously described by Michael Herzfeld (1992). Udi, a human rights lawyer representing Palestinian clients, told me he thought laziness was as much to blame as ideology or political motivations when army bureaucrats stonewall and try to outsource their jobs.

They don't speak any Arabic, they don't know who to talk to, they . . . basically if something is not 100% obvious or needs to be figured out, they are just going to ignore it because they don't want to deal with it. It's a hassle for them, so they will put it aside and wait for you to come back and solve the issue for them.

B'Tselem came to see "cooperation" as a slippery slope to complicity, but, as with *Breaking the Silence*, some of this slipperiness originated on the side of the organization itself. In an effort to reassure visitors to their website that B'Tselem is not working against Israeli interests, they advertised:

While B'Tselem reports on some of the least attractive aspects of Israeli policy, in doing so we highlight some of the best aspects of Israeli society. B'Tselem is part of Israel's vibrant, civil society, working in spite of the difficult security situation to improve our society from within. We are proud

to represent this part of Israel to a world which is all too often unaware of it. (B'Tselem website, ca. 2016)

Before their decision to end their cooperation with the military, they also appealed to mainstream audiences by emphasizing their close and productive relationship with the Israeli military:

B'Tselem maintains an extensive and multi-faceted relationship with the Israeli authorities. Every year we send hundreds of individual cases to the relevant authorities asking them to investigate allegations of wrongdoing. In turn, these authorities request B'Tselem's assistance in conducting investigations, . . . B'Tselem is also invited to participate in Knesset hearings and meets regularly with military and government officials to voice our concerns. (B'Tselem website, ca. 2016)

These public reassurances are important for the reputation and appeal of such an organization, but the struggle to demonstrate national allegiance while critiquing state violence is difficult to maintain.

Israeli activist and blogger Noam Rotem wrote a stinging op-ed in the decidedly left-wing news outlet +972, in which he claimed that organizations like B'Tselem “serve as the humanitarian arm of the IDF. They give the Palestinian population assurances, or hope, of a non-violent, bureaucratic resolution—in the name of the occupier.” He further claimed:

There must be solutions for the civilian population—it's just that those solutions shouldn't come from Israeli organizations as a part of Israeli colonialism. The occupier “solving problems” for the occupied people is not healthy, and it even helps perpetuate dependence on systems of oppression. (2015)

Sociologist Yagil Levy (2010) presents a related critique. He argues that civilian oversight generally benefits the military's public relations efforts. He shows that increased civilian oversight over the Israeli military has actually produced increased legitimacy for the military and military actions. In other words, Levy shows that critical civilian attention casts the military in a good light and gives the impression that the Israeli military is meticulously monitored and highly controlled. (This despite evidence of judicial rubber-stamping of military actions.) As evidence, he draws attention to an interview with Israel's military advocate general Avichai Mendelblit's statements about those organizations in an interview with *Haaretz* in 2009, which I offer in an expanded version below:

These organizations are a pipeline for transmitting information about very important things, so that the IDF's activity will be normative. My aim is not, heaven forbid, to put a scalpel on commanders' belts. It is to arrive at the truth and they really do help us in this. The cooperation with B'Tselem is the most outstanding example. They help to arrange meetings so we can speak with witnesses, clarify complaints. They do their job and I do mine. The interests aren't the same, but

with all the organizations' criticism of us, their objective is an investigation of the truth. (Harel 2009, my emphasis, quoted in part in Levy 2011)

The reference to normalizing the IDF activity is a red flag for leftist activists in Israel. They are very aware of the anti-normalization initiative in Palestinian civil society, which seeks to disrupt and resist interactions that would allow the status quo to be understood as an acceptable political situation. This initiative seeks to avoid the normalization of even quotidian interactions between Israeli and Palestinians under the conditions of occupation, so the idea of normalizing Israeli military activities is far beyond the pale.

This idea that activism only bolsters militarism is by no means the consensus among anti-military and human rights activists, but it is a position that is becoming increasingly heard. This is clearly a pessimistic outlook on activism, and many have pointed out that, even if true, the ends (allowing the human rights situation to deteriorate to end the occupation sooner) do not justify the means (leaving Palestinians entirely defenseless in the hands of the Israeli military; Mohar 2016). For example, Rema Hammami has described the ways that Israeli and international activists use their physical presence to preempt state violence against Palestinians in the West Bank (2016). These activities have been accused of creating a more “humane” occupation, thus serving state propaganda efforts and promoting the occupation's legitimacy, yet Hammami's account also calls attention to the Palestinian lives and bodies that would be put at risk in any abandonment of such activities in an effort to avoid complicity.

Recently, B'Tselem experienced this dilemma in a particularly acute way. After their decision to stop filing complaints on behalf of Palestinians, they restricted their activities to documenting incidents and releasing them publicly. This approach seemed to bear fruit after they released footage of an Israeli soldier, Elor Azaria, executing a disarmed Palestinian assailant in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron. This video caused an uproar, and the soldier was eventually convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to prison, a very rare prosecution of IDF personnel. This experience would seem to suggest that the shift in strategy had been successful. But shortly afterward, the Palestinian B'Tselem volunteer who had shot the damning footage, Imad Abu Shamsiyeh, began to receive death threats. When he tried to file a complaint, he was prevented from doing so by the Israeli police, who tried to send him away and threatened him with arrest. At this point, B'Tselem found their hands tied, having decided to no longer file such complaints on behalf of Palestinians such as Abu Shamsiyeh. Instead, B'Tselem has made public statements “complaining”<sup>1</sup> to the police regarding their refusal to accept Abu Shamsiyeh's

1. B'Tselem press release: [http://www.btselem.org/press\\_releases/20160901\\_btselem\\_volunteer\\_life\\_threatened](http://www.btselem.org/press_releases/20160901_btselem_volunteer_life_threatened).

complaint and “encouraging” them to provide protection for him and his family,<sup>2</sup> neither of which has happened.

### The Pitfalls of Insider Activism

Most Israeli insider activists present themselves as Zionists who seek the best for Israeli society by challenging militarism. An exception to this rule can be found in Anarchists against the Fence. This group has never claimed allegiance to Israeli society, or sought to better it, but, rather, defines its purpose as solidarity with the Palestinian struggle. This group not only critiques militarism but also opposes nationalism, rejecting the allegiance required by “insider” activism explicitly. This anarchist group emerged in 2003 as a protest to the separation/apartheid wall that divides Israel from the Palestinian West Bank (often cutting deep into Palestinian territory). Since this time, participants in the group have returned again and again to West Bank towns like Mas’ha, Budrus, and Bil’in to protest the wall. The realities of this type of activism, dedicated to “direct action” and not ideology, is striking. Protestors are often subjected to violent attack, including tear gas and rubber bullets, by the Israeli military.

This group does not struggle with the feeling of co-optation or complicity in the same way as do the other groups discussed. Military and security officials do not praise the anarchists or suggest that their presence strengthens the military or Israeli society. At the same time the question of relevance looms large. The movement is considered fringe and extremely radical in the eyes of mainstream Israelis. The group is widely considered a “deligitimization organization,” meaning that it acts against Israel and the legitimacy of the Israeli state and not against certain specific policies. Very few Israelis, even proclaimed leftists, would be able to identify with these activists and their movement, often because of their insufficient demonstrations of patriotism. Those within the organization have struggled with their failure to attract a mainstream audience as much as their mainstream counterparts. They have felt, at the same time, dedicated to their radical stance and also very frustrated at their inability to bring their critiques of the Zionist peace movement to ordinary Israelis who might be politically sympathetic. While most organizations have rejected this approach, we can see above that some are reconsidering the political costs of their choices.

Anti-militarist activists face a trade-off between relevance and complicity. They find themselves threatened with irrelevance if they are not able to attract the attention and sympathies of a mainstream Israeli public audience. This fear of being perceived as irrelevant or marginal is not unfounded. The left in Israel is increasingly perceived as elitist and out of touch with the values and beliefs of average Israelis. Nissim Mizrahi (2016) has shown that human rights organizations have largely

alienated major sectors of Israeli society and are perceived very negatively, often with visceral disgust.

Co-optation is generally understood as a trade-off in which activists trade in social capital for access, institutional resources, power, and privilege, but here the anti-militarists do not start from a position of great social capital—of which the military holds much more. Their rhetorical moves toward the national collective and their institutional moves toward the military in the form of cooperation are not a trade-off of their social credibility but, rather, an attempt to gain it. Part of the challenge they face is that they are not simply trying to change public opinion, or to advance a minority stance, because the inherent moral goodness of the military is not a matter of partisan opinion to most Jewish Israelis; rather, it is tacit knowledge. A radical critique of Israeli nationalism is beyond the interpretive possibilities of most citizens and is interpreted as an attempt to delegitimize the natural collective.

Examining the maneuvers from the military side yields yet more interesting insights. In the scholarly literature, the co-opting institution, state, or corporation is tacitly assumed to have a clear and unified intention of disarming critics through co-optation (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Jaffee 2012). This motivation for the co-optation process is taken for granted, and the operational question falls on the mechanism. But this case shows a very different situation, as the “co-opting agents” are actually those institutional elements that are most sympathetic to the activists and their message and seek to lend them legitimacy and social capital. Indeed, the military leadership that speaks out on behalf of these critics are people who see themselves as public servants and understand themselves as protectors of the public good. They do not see themselves as spokesmen for an ideological position or as loyal to the military as an institution above their own ethical principles. They are not adopting an adversarial position as a matter of professional ethics, but rather understand their professional and personal stance as unified. They understand themselves to be engaged in a moral enterprise, and they are loyal to the greater good as they understand it. They are not cynical, which contrasts with our basic assumptions about state co-optation. In other words, in this case, co-optation is a processual effect rather than a deliberate strategy or goal.

This is a challenge not only for Israeli anti-militarist activists. Erin Fitz-Henry (2011) found that most of the residents of Manta, Ecuador, support the large American military base there. Even though antibase activists articulate their ideology as defending local people from American imperialism, often these activists are perceived as more imperialist than the US military. Indeed, in many places, leftist activism is charged with accusations of elitism and cosmopolitan indifference to local concerns (Song 2011; Hochschild 2016). One can compare and contrast this case with the “support the/our troops” phenomenon in the US and Canada. “Support the troops” is a moral norm that claims that proper patriotism requires the explicit support of military personnel, whether or not one agrees with the government’s foreign

2. *Jerusalem Post* report: <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/BTselem-asking-for-military-protection-for-volunteer-who-filmed-Hebron-shooting-449870>.



policy. Despite this theoretical separation, politicians and private individuals who criticized wars such as those in Iraq and Afghanistan were often accused of undermining the troops. The mainstream consensus imposed a very rigid framework within which criticism, especially of human rights abuses committed by troops themselves, was difficult to express (Coy, Woehrle, and Maney 2008).

## Conclusion

Jewish Israeli activists challenge the violence perpetrated by their state and in their name. But we see that this very identification with the state, which establishes a footing from which to resist state violence, is in fact the first step down a slippery slope to entanglement and the perpetual reentry of militarism into the politics of dissent. Efforts at subversion, nevertheless, in some ways remain inevitably tied to hegemonic militarist politics. Israeli activists are not ignorant of this tension but experience it and struggle with it, unable to transcend the local political realities and norms. This is not only a question of whether to work within the political system or outside of it. It is also about the inevitable complicity of the fact of citizenship and national belonging. It is about the limitations on individual choice of self-definition and self-authorization in the public sphere. Activism is ultimately about influencing the ethical direction of the community at large, and as such is contingent upon community values, standards, understandings, and conceptual horizons. “Pro-Israel, anti-occupation” gets caught in webs of meaning that often frustrate activists.

This case demonstrates the complications entailed in insider activism. The accommodation to mainstream values and ideologies in an effort to contest Israeli militarism makes this form of activism particularly effective. But at the same time it reinforces existing social hierarchies and exclusions by confirming the hegemonic status of the “insiders.” We can also see that the emphasis on belonging and loyalty activates certain slippages and replicates dominant ideologies in a way that would not be possible through outsider activism. The insights on insider activism developed here are relevant to other contexts in which “insiderness” would be defined differently, but similarly in which members of a dominant group advocate and speak for the oppressed. For example, the processes described here could be very relevant to a consideration of the tensions around white participation in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Activists against militarism in particular run the risk of accusations of unpatriotic behavior and are pressured to demonstrate a stance of national solidarity. Furthermore, in a society that sees the military as a moral good, it is difficult to offer an appealing vision without reference to these shared values. In this, activists face a trade-off between relevance and complicity. Often activists experience this pattern as co-optation. But the unfolding of this process is far from simple. The commonly held ideas about co-optation usually involve power brokers commandeering and redeploying either the message of its critics

or the critics themselves. And sometimes the process of co-optation takes this expected form. Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein (2015) demonstrate that this type of co-optation is a central object in the Israeli propaganda toolbox—as, for example, in the reinterpretation and redeployment of social media videos criticizing Israeli actions. The cynical recruitment of Palestinian citizens of Israel into the military (Kanaaneh 2008) and of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories into collaborative relationships with Israeli intelligence services (Kelly 2010) also qualifies under this category of co-optation. But in its interactions with Jewish anti-militarism activists we see another dynamic that is startling in its banality. Rather than a nefarious process of exploitation, we see slippage from both sides. We can see mutual attraction and even solidarity between the state and the activists based on national allegiance. This entanglement is unique to insider activism because the activists are benefiting from the structures of domination that they seek to challenge. Their unique access and automatic authority based on ethnonational belonging is also the Achilles heel of their activism. Their awareness of this paradox only mitigates its effects to a certain extent.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson for their generosity and support. I owe a great debt to the other participants in the Wenner-Gren symposium on militarism who offered a true sense of intellectual community, exchange, and exploration. I would also like to thank Laurie Obbink for her exceptional attentiveness and guidance in this process. I am grateful to Inna Leykin and Marcy Brink-Danan, who read and offered comments on early drafts of this paper.

## References Cited

- Almog, Oz. 2000. *The Sabra: the creation of the new Jew*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Ben-Eliezer, Uri. 1998. *The making of Israeli militarism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- B'Tselem. 2016. The occupation's fig leaf. [http://www.btselem.org/download/201605\\_occupations\\_fig\\_leaf\\_eng.pdf](http://www.btselem.org/download/201605_occupations_fig_leaf_eng.pdf) (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Cohen, Gili. 2015. Former Shin Bet Chief Yuval Diskin defends breaking the silence. *Haaretz*, December 16. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-former-shin-bet-head-defends-breaking-the-silence-1.5378230> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Coy, Patrick G., Lynne M. Woehrle, and Gregory M. Maney. 2008. Discursive legacies: the US peace movement and “support the Troops.” *Social Problems* 55(2):161–189.
- Dalsheim, Joyce. 2014. *Producing spoilers: peacemaking and the production of enmity in a secular age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DiMaggio, Paul J., and Walter W. Powell. 1983. The iron cage revisited: institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review* 48(2):147–160.
- Ferguson, James. 2005. Seeing like an oil company: space, security, and global capital in neoliberal Africa. *American Anthropologist* 107(3):377–382.
- Fitz-Henry, Erin. 2011. Distant allies, proximate enemies: rethinking the scales of the antibase movement in Ecuador. *American Ethnologist* 38(2):323–337.
- Furman, Mirta. 1999. Army and war: collective narratives of early childhood in contemporary Israel. In *The military and militarism in Israeli society*. Edna Lomsky-Feder and Eyal Ben Ari, eds. Pp. 141–169. Albany: SUNY Press.

- Golan, Dana. 2015. The IDF is not living up to its code of ethics. *Jewish Week*. <http://jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/the-idf-is-not-living-up-to-its-code-of-ethics/> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Hammami, Rema. 2016. Precarious politics: the activism of “bodies that count” (aligning with those that don’t) in Palestine’s colonial frontier. In *Vulnerability in resistance*. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay, eds. Pp. 167–190. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Handelman, Don. 2004. *Nationalism and the Israeli state: bureaucratic logic in public events*. Oxford: Bloomsbury.
- Harel, Amos. 2009. With all legal guns blazing. *Haaretz*, September 17. <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5490295> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Harkov, Lahav. 2016. UN’s ban calls NGO law “deeply troubling.” *Jerusalem Post*. <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/EU-slams-law-increasing-transparency-for-its-donations-to-Israeli-NGOs-460179> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Helman, Sara. 2000. Militarism and the construction of the life-world of Israeli males. In *The military and militarism in Israeli society*. Edna Lomsky-Feder and Eyal Ben Ari, eds. Pp. 191–221. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Herzfeld, Michael. 1992. *The social production of indifference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hochschild, Arlie. 2016. *Strangers in their own land: anger and mourning on the American right*. New York: New Press.
- Jaffee, Daniel. 2012. Weak coffee: certification and co-optation in the fair trade movement. *Social Problems* 59(1):94–116.
- Kanaaneh, Rhoda. 2008. *Surrounded: Palestinian soldiers in the Israeli military*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kelly, Tobias. 2010. In a treacherous state: the fear of collaboration among West Bank Palestinians. In *Traitors: suspicion, intimacy, and the ethics of state-building*. Sharika Thiranagama and Tobias Kelly, eds. Pp. 169–187. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kimmerling, Baruch. 1993. Patterns of militarism in Israel. *European Journal of Sociology* 34(2):196–223.
- . 2005. *The invention and decline of Israeliness: state, society, and the military*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Kuntsman, Adi, and Rebecca Stein. 2015. *Digital militarism: Israel’s occupation in the social media age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Levy, Yagil. 2010. *Who governs the military?* Jerusalem: Magnes. [In Hebrew.]
- . 2011. Israeli NGOs are entrenching the occupation. *Haaretz*, January 11. <https://www.haaretz.com/1.5106492> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Mizrachi, Nissim. 2016. Sociology in the garden: beyond the liberal grammar of contemporary sociology. *Israel Studies Review* 31(1):36–65.
- Mohar, Yariv. 2016. The road to ending occupation is incremental. *+972 Magazine*, April 29. <https://972mag.com/the-road-to-ending-occupation-is-incremental/118901/> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Mosse, George Lachmann. 1975. *The nationalization of the masses: political symbolism and mass movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich*. New York: Fertig.
- Pipes, Daniel. 1979. The strategic rationale for military slavery. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 2(1):34–46.
- Rotem, Noam. 2015. The case for dismantling Israel’s human rights organizations. *+972 Magazine*, July 18. <https://972mag.com/the-case-for-dismantling-israels-human-rights-organizations/109019/> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Salaime, Samah. 2016. What Palestinians need from our Jewish allies. *+972 Magazine*, December 21. <https://972mag.com/this-is-what-palestinians-need-from-their-jewish-allies/123807/> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Sales, Ben. 2015. Breaking the silence comes under withering attack for questioning Israel’s military. *Forward*. <https://forward.com/news/breaking-news/327534/breaking-the-silence-comes-under-withering-attack-for-questioning-israels-m/> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Sasson-Levy, Orna. 2002. Constructing identities at the margins: masculinities and citizenship in the Israeli Army. *Sociological Quarterly* 43(3):357–383.
- . 2003. Feminism and military gender practices: Israeli women soldiers in “masculine” roles. *Sociological Inquiry* 73(3):440–465.
- Schatz, Achiya. 2016. Breaking the silence: toward a moral Army and a moral country. *Jerusalem Post Opinion*. <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Breaking-the-Silence-toward-a-moral-army-and-a-moral-country-444488> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Song, Hoon. 2011. *Pigeon trouble: bestiary biopolitics in a deindustrialized America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Tilly, Charles. 1985. War making and state making as organized crime. In *Bringing the state back in*. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds. Pp. 169–191. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weiss, Erica. 2014a. *Conscientious objectors in Israel: citizenship, sacrifice, trials of fealty*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 2014b. Sacrifice as social capital among Israeli conscientious objectors. *Ethnos* 79(3):388–405.
- Yanai, Ron. 2015. Amiram Levin: the IDF needs the criticism. *Jerusalem Online*, December 15. <http://www.jerusalemonline.com/news/politics-and-military/military/amiram-levin-the-idf-needs-the-criticism-17889> (accessed January 12, 2018).
- Zerubavel, Yael. 1995. *Recovered roots: collective memory and the making of Israeli national tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.