

Erez: Of course it's not right. But there's no choice. That's the whole point here. You have no other choice. No other solution's been found.

Roi: I feel I'm a bit different from everyone here. Our attitude toward the Arabs - hate, love, pity - depends on the soldier's mood. If it's a day when I'll be going home and I'm happy and everything's cool, or if it's a day when I don't go home and don't want to be in the army, then that day we'll take it out on them.

Yosef: Although I think justice is on our side, that doesn't mean I stop pitying them for one moment. Maybe I think that the constant closure of Hebron is absolutely justified, but that doesn't mean I don't pity them for being under this closure. I don't hate them for one second.

Roi: By the way, the closure of Hebron is against the people who don't shoot.

Yosef: Right, but it's still justified.

Erez: That's the whole point. It's not right, but still there's no choice.

Yosef: I don't hate the Arabs. I just think there's really no choice.



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No Exit

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The following article is based on an interview with Israeli soldiers (who are identified by pseudonyms) conducted by Israeli journalist Uri Blau and printed in *Kol Ha'Ir*, a Jerusalem weekly, in September 2001. It is translated from the Hebrew by Tal Haran.

Uri Blau: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word "territories"?

Roi [nineteen, paratrooper, serving in Hebron for the past six months]: The first thing that comes to my mind is children throwing Molotov cocktails. Basically, you should shoot them in the legs and you don't.

Tzvi [twenty, serving in the Gaza Strip]: My first memory is of security patrol. You see unbelievable things there: people sitting under the bulldozers, begging us not to demolish their houses. There's a guy who lives in a tent where his house stood once, and now this tent is on ground that has been annexed by the settlement. But there are stories much worse than this. Real pogroms. Angry settlers coming out with sticks and pitchforks and burning down houses. Just like that.

Roi: In Hebron there's basically a settlers' mafia. No supervision. They can do anything they want. The police are terrified of them. When you go to arrest settlers in Hebron who've made a little pogrom, it's much more complicated than arresting an Arab fugitive. Little children throwing rocks at old Arab ladies, that's a common sight, and diapers - they throw their shit out the windows.

Erez [twenty, serving in the Nahal brigade]: My first memory is when all the riots started and we were ordered to some hilltop. Around us were Arabs, and there were five trailers there, and we were a whole company on that hill. The settlers took it for granted that we were there, a whole company, defending a few trailers.

Tzvi: They wrap the whole world around their little finger in order to serve their ideology.

Blau: As soldiers trained to fight an army, how do you see your confrontation with a civilian population?

Roi: Naturally we'd prefer fighting against an army, but this is how things stand. Whether the gun is held by a twenty-year-old civilian or a soldier, they'd both shoot you, so it doesn't really matter.

Yaron [twenty-one, serving in the Givati infantry brigade in the Gaza Strip]: Army against army is preferable. When you're being briefed, you've got the Tanzim [the armed wing of the Fatah] and the Palestinian police that are also considered potential enemies. On the other hand, you don't know whether they're your enemy or not. That's the biggest problem - that you don't know who you're up against, who's with you and who isn't. You can't trust anyone; there are no clear rules.

Erez: I prefer to deal with civilians. I know what war against an army means only from the movies.

Blau: Weren't you in Lebanon?

Erez: Yeah, but that's guerrilla warfare. According to what I've seen on television, there are lots more casualties. It's much harder. It's shit.

Yosef [twenty-one, paratrooper from a yeshiva, served in Hebron and Ramallah, returned to the yeshiva three months ago]: I would prefer to confront an army. It's simpler psychologically. Naturally I don't want to have MiGs in my face. But it's easier to decide to kill a Syrian soldier when I'm in total war.

Blau: Do you feel that something has changed in you while serving in the territories? When you go back home, do you see things differently?

Tzvi: The only thing I think I understood in this whole situation is that everyone's a shit. Until I got there I used to think we're the bad guys and they're miserable, but now I realize that everyone's a shit in this game. There are no good guys and

dent.

Yosef: I don't see myself blowing up civilians and babies, even if I were on their side. I don't see myself shooting a little girl either.

Tzvi: Perhaps you'd join a resistance movement, not to shoot little girls but to shoot soldiers.

Yosef: I'd probably prefer to live my life quietly and let it all blow over my head. They're really going through shit now. It's really tough. I understand their frustration. Especially the non-terrorists, the common Arabs who live there. But even if I were on their side, I don't think I'd join a terrorist organization.

Ariel [twenty-one, paratrooper, yeshiva student, served in Hebron and Ramallah and returned to the yeshiva three months ago]: This is a religious matter, and I'm religious. For them, it's not just the fact that their life is fucked up now; they have religion, these guys. My religion, like theirs, is something that leads me. I follow, and I would do anything it tells me to do. If it's to go to war, then there are no borders and you shoot everyone. If I feel that for myself and for this life, and in the name of my religion, I have to do it, then I do it. But by the same token, just as I'd refuse an order if my company commander told me to shoot a seven-year-old girl, if I were in the Tanzim and I was told to shoot a soldier who wasn't doing anything, just standing there eating pizza, I'd refuse no matter what. But if my religion said that I had to shoot for the sake of my people and my religion, I'd do it. That's the problem here.

Ran [twenty, serving in a special armor-corps unit in Samaria]: I can't - no matter how hard I try - I can't picture myself in their place. But I think that if I were in their shoes I might have joined one of their factions. Look, all those people who do join them are really in distress.

Blau: Do you ever pity them?

Ran: Sure. There are situations where you say to yourself, "Really, just as you want to live, so does he."

Erez: Seems to me everyone understands why the Arabs do what they do. I understand them. But I also understand our side. Not that I wouldn't shoot some Arab in the market who's sitting there getting ready - I'll be glad to shoot him. I also understand our situation, and there's nothing we can do about that.

Blau: It seems that, unlike in previous wars, this time the IDF soldiers don't feel that absolute justice is on their side.

ly sane and correct. As hard as it is to shoot a person, even if that person holds a gun and opens fire at you, I have no doubt that it is absolutely justified.

Roi: There was this case where Nahal guys shot an old man who didn't stop when they tried to arrest him. There was no reason to shoot him. Looking back on it now, when you're not in the army you say it's impossible. But when I think of that soldier, it seems fine. There's nothing you can do about it. In my first months in Hebron, I wouldn't shoot even rubber-coated bullets at kids. I was so much against it I often went to see the unit shrink. I had to open live fire on someone at the beginning, and I missed on purpose.

Blau: Are you proud to be combat soldiers in the IDF?

Dubi: Obviously it's shit to be a combat soldier, but what can you do? I mean, you go back home, see all your desk-job buddies who have no idea what's going on in this country - they just go home every day, fuck their girlfriends, and see you around. And you, you get fucked even more.

Tzvi: I'm proud to serve my country, even if there are things I do contrary to my beliefs. Even if this country doesn't act exactly the way I think it should, it's still my country. I try to do what I have to do.

Roi: I hate it. Especially the paratroopers. It's the most disgusting unit.

Dubi: Why did you choose a combat unit?

Roi: I was so close to getting out of the army as psychologically unsuitable, but in the end I stayed out of some feeling of commitment. I don't feel any obligation toward the state or anyone - I don't give a shit. The only reason is that my parents live here, and when I was a kid in third grade someone else defended me, so now it's my turn to do this. No other reason, nothing political or Zionist. Just that others defended me in the past, and now it's my turn.

Erez: I'm not at all proud either. I don't know, I don't feel any commitment to this country. I didn't even want to enlist, it was a mistake. But I stayed because of the guys on my crew. I was in a good crew, had a good time, and now I'm stuck.

Blau: Whether you like it or not, you've given quite a lot of yourselves. Had you been born on the other side, where would you be now?

Tzvi: I have no doubt that if I were on the other side I'd join one of the factions, just as I'd have joined one of the underground organizations if I'd lived here fifty-five years ago, because that's how it is. And I believe that eventually everyone did sign up to defend their country and didn't end up in a combat unit by acci-

bad guys. Maybe they're a little more oppressed, but everyone's a shit.

Blau: And you?

Tzvi: I'm a shit.

Blau: Have you turned into one, or were you like this before?

Tzvi: I don't know whether I've turned into a mean person, because I'm serving a cause that I ultimately believe in.

Dubi [twenty-one, Golani infantry brigade, served in Samaria, about to finish his tour of duty]: You get to a point where you're just sick of it all. They fire at us, we get there, fire on whoever fired on us, hope it'll be over. You don't even know who supports whom, who collaborates and who doesn't. So you have to stand at that checkpoint and stop them all and make them wait for hours.

Yaron: One thing I learned in the army is that no matter how funny it sounds, it's a game. As an IDF soldier, you have to represent this country. You also have to look as good as you can. If you look like a jerk and do your job like a jerk, the Palestinians on the other side will see that, and people who're out to hurt you eventually will. When you stand at that checkpoint, you have to be mean, even if you feel shitty about it. You have to show them who's in charge. You can't afford to look soft. I've become an actor. I can go to the Habimah National Theater and show them my resume.

Blau: How does being on checkpoint duty change your outlook on life?

Erez: These checkpoints, and the fact that you can treat people this way, all of this makes a guy more confident. I mean in general, not me personally. I really didn't like treating them that way, taking part in that game, as Yaron put it.

Yaron: You think that way because no one close to you has been hurt. You'll have that experience, and then you'll believe me.

Erez: I understand this attitude, but personally I have a really hard time with it. I'm in a calm area; they're actually good people, and most of them are stoned. They don't care. People want to work, to bring home some money. They don't want trouble. When there's a closure they go crazy. They have nothing. They can't work anywhere. When I'm on checkpoint duty, I almost always bring the Border Police. Those guys start screwing them up, slapping them around, etc.

Dubi: They have to be afraid of us, otherwise tomorrow they'll eat us up.

Roi: In the territories the borders are so unclear that the only chance you have to remain sane is to stop feeling afraid. The only way is to develop this crazy apathy. You just can't go on being afraid all the time, so you no longer care about anything. It does affect me as a human being. The only thing the army has given me is emotional trouble. It makes you indifferent. I come home and clam up, because three hours earlier I emptied a whole ammo crate, and now I'm suddenly home with my friends who live in a bubble world and don't even watch television.

Blau: Did any of you ever shoot someone?

Roi: When I first got to Hebron I wouldn't open fire on little children. And I was sure that if I ever killed or hurt anyone, I'd go so crazy that I'd leave the army. But finally I did shoot someone, and nothing happened to me. In Hebron I shot the legs off of two kids, and I was sure I wouldn't be able to sleep anymore at night, but nothing happened. Two weeks ago I hurt a Palestinian policeman, and that didn't affect me either. You become so apathetic you don't care at all. Shooting is the IDF soldier's way of meditating. It's like shooting is your way of letting go of all your anger when you're in the army. In Hebron there's this order they call "punitive shooting": just open fire on whatever you like. I opened fire not on any sources of fire but on windows where there was just wash hanging to dry. I knew that there were people who would be hit. But at that moment it was just shoot, shoot, shoot.

Erez: What do you mean "punitive shooting"? A reaction to something?

Roi: Reaction to their shooting. In Hebron there's punitive fire. Shoot at everything you see. Cars, things, anything that moves. It's like taking out your anger on everything. Shooting relaxes you, like meditation.

Tzvi: I find what Roi said a bit sick, that shooting people is therapy.

Roi: Don't you release stress when you shoot?

Tzvi: No, not at all. I don't even have the energy for that anymore. I'm totally apathetic. I've had occasion - I believe everyone here has - to shoot people.

Roi: We had a five-day operation in the territories on firing grounds, and basically Bedouins are not allowed to be there. The officer stops the vehicle and asks,

"Who's ready?" I step out, another guy steps out, and then about 300 yards from us we see a poor Bedouin shepherd walking out on the grass at the firing ground. The officer says, "Okay, go ahead." We lie down, one bullet to the left of the herd, one bullet to the right of the herd . . .

Blau: Why?

Roi: Because shooting live ammo has become so fluid, so trivial.

Tzvi: You can live with having shot at an old man grazing his sheep? Just like that? If my officer were to tell me to open fire on a shepherd who's obviously not endangering anyone, I would beat my officer up.

Roi: Officially you don't open fire just like that. On the ground our guys would do it for the hell of it, as though they were returning fire. For them, shooting in Hebron is simply a video game.

Erez: If anyone were to tell me, "You have to open fire on a seven-year-old girl," I'd shoot without hesitation.

Blau: Really?

Erez: Yes. Because that's what you have to do. If that's what I'm ordered to do.

Blau: Don't you use your own judgment?

Erez: I'll make my own judgment later. It is a crime, but listen, it depends on the actual case, all right? Seven-year-old girls are not shot at just like that. I don't believe that whoever shot a seven-year-old girl did it just like that.

Blau: In the Givati brigade someone shot a fourteen-year-old boy just like that.

Erez: I have to explain this business with the seven-year-old girl, since I'm a sniper. If there were a large number of terrorists next to a seven-year-old girl or an eighty-year-old woman, I'd have to shoot. I wouldn't hesitate to shoot. Nothing can be done about it. I'd feel shitty about it, but that's what should be done.

Blau: Does anyone here feel differently?

Yosef: Most of the orders I've ever received have made sense and were absolute-

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- 20-year-old Israeli soldier*