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Israeli Soldiers' Suicides: The Untold Story

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Statistics released by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) show that in the last 10 years, 237 soldiers killed themselves. That number represents an average of 24 soldiers taking their own lives every year. The release of the IDF statistics was prompted by information about suicides published anonymously by a blogger known as “Eishton”, a combination of Hebrew words for “man” and “newspaper”.

After he released information about suicides in the military, Eishton was investigated by Israel and the Military Police. What makes those suicides troubling is not only the number of deaths, but what prompted these young soldiers to take their own lives. Because the blogger found a significant disparity between the official death statistics published by the security forces and the number of “remembrance” pages on the official commemoration website “Yizkor”, he believed that the number of suicides was much higher than the one shown in official statistics.

One reason for the discrepancy may be the way in which a death is described. It is known that families of those dead soldiers don't want them categorized as suicides. That may be the reason, according to IDF sources, why the Israeli army refuses to publish the exact numbers, including the circumstances of each soldier's death.

One psychiatrist quoted in a *Haaretz* article states that there is a significant difference in the profile of an army suicide as opposed to other suicide victims. According to him, while most suicides in the general population are committed by individuals who are clinically depressed, most soldiers who commit suicide are people who are physically and mentally healthy but go through an acute life crisis.

Eishton says that the rate of suicides among soldiers is higher than the rate among army-age citizens who are not serving in the military. He is requesting that the army release the name of each soldier with the real cause of death and says, “It's not only suicides that are the problem; it's the problem that they [the army] want us to think that every fallen soldier died in the service of his country.”

What explains soldiers' suicides? One explanation may be that they are obliged to carry out actions that go against their own moral principles and beliefs. Breaking the Silence, an organization founded in 2004, published in 2009 a book of controversial testimonies on Operation Cast Lead, the three week invasion of the Gaza Strip that prompted Israel's Foreign Ministry to call Spain, the Netherlands and other foreign governments to cut off funding for the organization.

This organization has now a book of soldiers' testimonies called *Our Harsh Logic: Israeli Soldiers' Testimonies From the Occupied Territories, 2000-2010* that contains 145 interviews gathered by the Israeli NGO. These testimonies offer clues about how soldiers feel about the occupation and the tactics used to quell Palestinians' opposition to it.

One testimony, by a staff sergeant from the Nahal Brigade in Hebron, describes how they dealt with two school children throwing firecrackers on their way home after school. When asked if he had seen the kids throwing firecrackers and how old they were he answered,

“No, no, no. We didn't see them throwing. We just saw them passing by. They may have been running. I don't remember, but I do remember we stopped them to search them. One of them was really small...May be four or five years old. A really little kid, with his brother...Perhaps even in kindergarten or first grade...And you are giving him a body search. Him and his brother, who's just a bit older.

“Naturally you don’t point your gun at him so as not to frighten him, but this is another tough issue for me, another confrontation with Hebron. You’re suddenly searching a little kid. Incredible. I did the search, and I was shocked. I felt so, I can tell you, I felt so immoral at the time, I felt so inhuman. Okay, so the weapon wasn’t pointed at him, and you’re not threatening him, you’re not yelling at him. You are just searching him...Is this something that you can put an end to? I don’t know. It hurts. As I said earlier, I’m an education person. I’ve worked with youth, with children. I’ve been with first graders in my pre-army service. Suddenly you imagine doing this to a kid you worked with in class, you tutored in arithmetic. Just such a little kid, the same height, the same age, and you are searching him. It is not human.”