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## Israeli attacks on a dissident soldiers' group could backfire

*Analysis: Breaking the Silence, under attack, welcomes the opportunity to remind Israelis about the occupation*

by Noam Sheizaf

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Yehuda Shaul was an infantryman in the Israeli army in Hebron during the second intifada. But in recent weeks, he and his group of veterans have been vilified by right-wing organizations and mainstream politicians in a public campaign against Israeli groups critical of their country's occupation of Palestinian territories.

Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon forbade serving Israeli military personnel from cooperating or meeting with representatives of Shaul's group, Breaking the Silence (BTS). Education Minister Naftali Bennet issued a similar order to all public schools. And right-wing advocacy group Im Tirzu published a report accusing most Israeli human rights groups of being "foreign agents" because of the funding they receive from friendly states. That report was accompanied by a video and an advertising campaign accusing specific human rights activists of "defending terrorists" and "representing foreign interests." Those named all received death threats after the ads.

A poll conducted by Channel 10 this weekend found that 53 percent of Jewish Israelis surveyed said they support outlawing BTS, with only 22 opposing such a move. Politicians of the right are not the only ones calling for action against Israeli human rights organizations. On Sunday, former Finance Minister Yair Lapid, the leader of the centrist opposition party Yesh Atid, dedicated an entire press conference to attacking BTS, which he said has "crossed the line between [legitimate] criticism and subversion against the state of Israel."

And in a heated debate in the Israeli legislature, in which various laws curbing local human rights groups are being discussed, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lashed out against BTS.

The silence that BTS has set out to break, according to Shaul, is Israeli society's lack of awareness of the actions taken in its name by conscript soldiers serving in the West Bank and Gaza. The group has attempted to change that by collecting and disseminating firsthand accounts from soldiers about the actions taken by their units in the occupation.



### **The lonely path of Israel's military dissenters**

Those who refuse to serve in Gaza war face brief jail sentences, but they believe their small number will slowly grow

“What bothered me the most,” said Shaul of his service in the West Bank, “is the way we established a sense of control over Palestinian civilian populations. That was achieved by entering homes, by banging on store doors with our guns, by throwing sound bombs. This is the way occupation works. But at the same time, the occupation disappeared from the Israeli public sphere.”

While still in uniform, Shaul began talking to friends about a project to reinvigorate Israeli public discussion about the occupation. Six months after completing their mandatory service, they staged an exhibition with photos and testimony from their tours of duty in the West Bank and Gaza and later founded BTS.

So why has Israel's political leadership suddenly mounted a campaign to silence BTS and kindred groups? Bennet accused it of “harming IDF [Israel Defense Forces] soldiers,” and Ya'alon said the group “muddies our soldiers' names abroad.” Lapid echoed this complaint that BTS' work exposes Israel to international criticism, accusing it of “eroding the foundations of the state.”

Israel's Foreign Ministry has worked to disrupt BTS' activities abroad. Israel's embassy in Germany managed to force cancellation of a scheduled exhibition by the group in Cologne; Israel failed to prevent a similar event in Switzerland.

Human rights groups have been attacked when evidence they marshaled has been used by foreign critics of Israel, such as the Goldstone United Nations report into Israel's actions during the 2008 military campaign in Gaza.

But BTS has always been careful to avoid risking its position in Israel. It never names individual perpetrators of human rights violations, so the testimonies it publishes cannot be used to press charges against field soldiers and officers. It is also careful not to call for refusal to serve in the IDF, as some anti-occupation activists have.

BTS follows a long-standing tradition, dating back to the aftermath of Israel's war of independence and the Palestinian Nakba, of Israeli military personnel publicizing accounts of their actions in uniform that have challenged official narratives. That testimony has always produced backlash, but an across-the-board attempt to silence them would traditionally have been deemed contrary to Israel's democratic traditions.

While Israel's Palestinian citizens have long complained of being relegated to second-class status — and millions of other Palestinians have lived for almost half a century under Israeli military occupation in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem — Israel has traditionally functioned as Western democracy, with all the attendant rights and freedoms for its Jewish majority. But its freedom of dissent, particularly for those opposing the occupation, has lately come into question.

Some of the pressure is from right-wing groups, with police not necessarily going out of their way to provide protection. A bar in Beersheba that planned to host a BTS event last month received a threat, resulting in police canceling the event, ostensibly in the interest of public safety. BTS recently reported a number of similar experiences, prompting the organization to see them as instances of the occupation's distorting Israeli democracy. "The fight is over the nature of the regime in Israel and not just in the West Bank and Gaza," said Shaul.

The current campaign against human rights organizations should be understood in the context of the Israeli public's outrage over ongoing stabbing attacks against Israelis. Those attacks, which have been taking place almost daily, have dented the sense of normality that Israelis enjoyed in recent years (save during the military operations in Gaza) despite the occupation. Netanyahu's entire political appeal is grounded in his promise and ability to deliver normality without ending the occupation status quo.

The cost of the occupation, however, is once again slowly rising — not only in the form of the stabbings but also in growing diplomatic isolation by the international community. The European Union recently published guidelines declaring Israeli entities beyond its 1967 borders ineligible to participate in joint projects with the EU and requiring that Israeli goods produced in the occupied territories be labeled as such, rather than as made in Israel, to allow consumers to avoid them. Israeli officials, who previously tended to dismiss the prospect of international pressure, have begun sounding the alarm and prioritizing publicity efforts to counter the movement for sanctions against Israel. And it's in that fight that Israeli human rights groups are cast as a fifth column.

It speaks to a broader political crisis: While Netanyahu's right-wing coalition is stable, it lacks a policy for resolving the conflict with the Palestinians, having successfully laid to rest the Oslo

peace process, which was once an important source of international legitimacy. The government has increased security measures but has presented no political solution to the causes of the ongoing violence, which leaves it little leverage to reverse the trend of isolation by an international community that has made clear that it won't accept Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories.

It's in that context that the home-grown challenges to Israel's official narrative are deemed more dangerous — and have prompted a repressive response.

BTS has hired guards to protect its Tel Aviv office, and other human rights organizations are considering doing the same. Yet Shaul remains hopeful. The attacks on his organization, he said, have forced many Israelis to pick sides. Hundreds went online and published their own accounts from their service. A well-known major general published an ad supporting the organization and its work. Most important, the debate on the occupation was once again front-page news.

"This is a battle, and it will not end in a single day," Shaul said. "For me, this week was our real inception."