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Breaking The Silence Draws Massive Fire

Israeli society is fiercely divided on the group that publishes IDF veterans' testimonies.

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Helen Chernikoff / Web Director



Soldiers serving in Hebron took this photo, part of Breaking the Silence's first exhibit. Courtesy of Breaking the Silence

During his army service, Avner Gvaryahu could have served as a poster child for the Israel Defense Forces. How, then, did he come to be reviled last week as a "foreign agent?"

He entered the IDF as a paratrooper in a special operations unit in 2004, and served his three years in the West Bank wearing the kipa sruga, or knitted yarmulke, of Israel's religious Zionist class.

But over the years, he captured many Palestinian houses to be used as Israeli bases, so many that he started to wonder why a yeshiva kid like him could lock his elders into one room of their home, especially since the army picked those houses precisely because the people living in them posed no threat.

Gvaryahu's rabbis taught him to think critically, he said, and that question was one of many he took home after the army.

Soon after, he joined Breaking the Silence, an organization that publishes the testimony of soldiers who served in areas captured during the Six-Day War, to help inform Israelis of what the former IDF members believe are the moral compromises military control of a civilian population requires.

"I see myself as a Zionist, as an Israeli patriot," said Gvaryahu, who is pursuing a master's degree in human rights studies at Columbia University in New York this

year while working for Breaking the Silence. “I see myself in Israel. That’s where my family is. That’s where my future is.”

Some call Breaking the Silence members heroes; some call them traitors. The organization has become a national Rorschach test, revealing the schism in Israel between those who support or tolerate the country’s military control over the West Bank, and those who say it must end.

Today, Gvaryahu is one of Breaking the Silence’s leaders, and Breaking the Silence is “the most hated group in Israel,” according to Haaretz, Israel’s left-wing daily newspaper.

A group of soldiers who served in Hebron started Breaking the Silence with a 2004 photo exhibit; before that, other groups did similar documentation and publication of soldier accounts. Critics have always accused these groups of weakening military morale and hurting Israel’s image. But not until now has anyone moved to constrain Breaking the Silence’s operations, or used such inflammatory rhetoric, said **Yehuda Ben Meir**, a lawyer, psychologist and research fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies.

Gvaryahu became known as a “mole” last week, along with three other activists, when an Israeli group called Im Tirtzu –- a reference to founding Zionist Theodor Herzl’s words “If you will it, it is no dream” — released an online video about them.

“Before the next terrorist stabs you,” the announcer says, as a spookily-shadowed photograph of Gvaryahu’s face and a brown “Tinker, Tailor”-type dossier loom in the background, “he already knows that Avner Gvaryahu, a planted agent belonging to Germany, will call the soldier who tries to prevent the attack a ‘war criminal.’”

The catalyst of this most recent collective condemnation of the group, said Yagil Levy, a professor of sociology at the Open University specializing in the Israeli military, was Israeli President Reuven Rivlin’s participation in a New York conference hosted by Haaretz and the New Israel Fund at which members of Breaking the Silence also spoke. (The New Israel Fund supports Breaking the Silence.)

Rivlin criticized the group during his keynote speech. But according to Levy, Rivlin’s appearance on the same agenda as Breaking the Silence amounted to tacit support for it, and some on the right responded by moving against the group more forcefully.

The organization has taken testimony from more than 1,000 veterans who have participated in Israel’s military control of territory captured during war: the West Bank and east Jerusalem today, and Gaza before Israel’s withdrawal in 2005.

They say they check each account with either witnesses or other organizations performing a similar watchdog function, such as the human rights group B’Tselem, or both. Most soldiers choose to remain anonymous for fear of retribution from the army or its supporters. An IDF censor approves everything the group publishes. Breaking the Silence also actively disseminates the information: in books, videos, tours in Israel and exhibits and lectures in Israel, Europe and the United States.

“‘It’s something I’m ashamed of. I’m ashamed. I don’t know. It’s, my God, a totally different world there with different rules,’” said one soldier who served in Ramallah in 2008 and 2009, and whose story appears in “Our Harsh Logic,” a book of Breaking the Silence testimonies from the West Bank and Gaza covering the period 2000-2010 and published in 2012 (Henry Holt and Company). The soldier told the story of how he and his comrades blindfolded, handcuffed and put in a corner a Palestinian who repeatedly tried to cross a checkpoint without a permit.

According to the testimony, the army had to put up the checkpoint because in Elkana, an Israeli settlement in the West Bank, they made a mistake in putting up the fence between Jewish and Palestinian houses, leaving one Palestinian house on the Jewish side.

“‘In this world, that story is unacceptable, at least for me … there it’s so natural,’” the soldier said. “‘The rules are so different. No one understands this unless they’ve been there.’”

Words like these touch a delicate nerve in Israel, said Levy.

Breaking the Silence members “are the best people of the IDF, so their voice is considered a grave threat to the Israeli consensus,” he said.

What Breaking the Silence does is dangerous, said Douglas Altabef of Im Tirtzu. By casting Israel’s military in a negative light both at home and abroad, they make diaspora Jews into targets for foreigners who hate Israel, and they inhibit soldiers serving now, clouding their judgment and complicating their decisions.

“Israel and Jews have such an enormous cloud over us internationally, and the assumption is that we’re doing horrible things, so it’s like throwing red meat to a hungry crowd,” Altabef said.

Im Tirtzu uses highly provocative rhetoric; its video prompted scolding even from critics of Breaking the Silence, like NGO Monitor, which also condemns the group’s foreign ties. In 2014, donations from European government bodies made up 61 percent of Breaking the Silence’s budget, NGO Monitor said in a report published on Dec. 20.

Gvaryahu said the number is more like 40 percent, citing the quarterly reports that the government requires Breaking the Silence to file, and that the group posts on its website.

But of the 10,000 meetings, talks or tours the group gives or participates in every year, 85 percent of them happen in Israel, he said.

Following directly on the Haaretz-New Israel Fund conference, Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon announced that he was forbidding the group from speaking to soldiers. On Dec. 15, Education Minister Naftali Bennett said he was banning the group from schools.

In response, Gvaryahu said that Breaking the Silence isn't interested in working with the active-duty army, and Bennett can't actually prevent its members from entering schools, but the politicians made their points.

Also looming is the bill proposed by Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked requiring Israeli NGOs that receive more than 50 percent of their budgets from foreign governments or parties to declare that fact.

Shaked's bill is actually moderate compared to similar pieces of legislation that also aim to defend Israel from undue foreign influence, but still probably won't pass, because Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thinks it will look bad to other countries, said Ben Meir of the Institute for National Security Studies.

The bill is also vulnerable to charges that it sets up a double standard that penalizes left-wing NGOs like Breaking the Silence that receive support from foreign governments, said Levy of the Open University. Right-wing groups also depend on foreign money, albeit from individuals, he noted.

Indeed, there are likely limits to the drubbing Breaking the Silence will take. A backlash to the backlash against them is already emerging, said Ben Meir.

On Dec. 22, former Shin Bet security services chief Ami Ayalon and Alik Ron, a retired major general of the Israel Police, published an advertisement in the Haaretz Hebrew edition in which they proclaimed "I too am breaking the silence," and said Breaking the Silence strengthens the IDF.

"The guidelines meant to silence the group are what damages and weakens the army," wrote Ayalon and Ron. Aviram Levin, a former commander of an elite IDF unit, and Yuval Diskin, former head of the Shin Bet, also came to the public defense of Breaking the Silence, Haaretz reported.

Breaking the Silence and the military have long cooperated.

"What is interesting is that the military itself is not so bothered by Breaking the Silence," Levy said. "On the contrary, there are some channels of cooperation between this organization and the military. It brings information to the military to better control its forces and rectify problems. The military understands very well that it should act in a legal way."

But ultimately, the IDF and Breaking the Silence are at odds.

The group is not trying to reform the army; it is trying to help end Israel's military control over the West Bank. Soldiers behaving badly is a symptom of the larger problem, Gvaryahu said.

Breaking the Silence overreaches, says Ben Meir, and in this way undermines the impact it could have.

"They've tried to show that every action the army does in Judea and Samara is negative, because their very presence is negative," he said. "It's not for a soldier to

complain whether the IDF should be in the territories or not. This is political. They should not be political."

Breaking the Silence sees its role differently.

"The problem is not how a soldier acted at a checkpoint, the problem is that there are checkpoints," Gvaryahu said. "It's not about how you treat Palestinians in a house, it's the fact that I could enter any house."

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