



IN FOCUS

VETERAN IDENTITY

In experiencing, enacting and utilizing their identities as former soldiers, veterans engage with a range of complex issues, including their interpretations of military conflict, morality, nationalism and citizenship. The state very publicly engages with these same issues in asserting and fulfilling its obligations to returning and deceased soldiers. The articles below examine these negotiations of identity as soldiers return home from the front and, along with their governments, try to make sense of war-time experiences.

Blood in the Same Mud?

Palestinian Veterans of the Israeli Military

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Ishmael is a veteran of the Israeli military, Border Guard and police force. He regularly tours university campuses in the US to lecture about his love of Israel. When I heard him speak at American University in Washington DC he boasted of his frontline service and his grandmother's command of Yiddish. Ishmael Khaldi, however, is a Muslim and an Arab. He is the Israeli government's model for a category of identity it has long worked to create: the "good Arab."

"When you say Israel, the first thing that comes to mind is Jews fighting Arabs. It's unfortunately mostly true. But I'm not Jewish," Khaldi began. "I'm of the third generation of Bedouins whose fate is tied to the community who came to establish Israel." He described a history of Bedouin loyalty to the state and assistance to it from its very beginnings. His grandmother learned Yiddish from early Jewish pioneers. He was particularly proud of his efforts to be even more loyal to the state than many Jews. When a group of Jewish pilots became refuseniks and would not serve in the West Bank and Gaza, Khaldi said that he volunteered to serve extra weeks of reserve duty to compensate.

The sympathetic audience of mostly Jewish American students did not seem entirely convinced.

of Israel be loyal to a state that defines itself as being of and for the Jewish people?

Controversial Service

Though most international attention is focused on Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, Israel's so-called "Palestinian problem" includes 1.4 million people who live inside its borders and are citizens. Only a few thousand of these Arabs volunteer to serve in the Israeli military (in addition to the Druze who are conscripted). The choice to volunteer is unpopular and soldiers are considered traitors by the majority of their fellow Palestinian citizens of Israel. Although the percentage of Palestinian veterans is small, their experiences, how they negotiate their positions, and the ways in which they are accepted, integrated and marginalized form a powerful vantage point from which to understand citizenship, identity, ethnic conflict, class and gender in Israel.

Seen from a wider geographic and historical perspective, the behavior of Palestinian veterans is neither rare nor exceptional. There is a wide array of situations that defy common nationalist understandings of why soldiers join militaries and fight wars, from Kurds in the Turkish military fighting Kurdish rebels to Algerians fighting with the French against Algerian inde-

It is no coincidence that it is to the military that this small group turns in order to push the boundaries of their citizenship. Military service has enormous symbolic and material significance in Israel. Years of "universal" (read: Jewish) conscription have made the ritual of security a crucial rite of passage to full Israeli citizenship. Israeli anthropologists describe a holy quartet of Jewishness, military service, masculinity and collective membership at the heart of Israeli society. The ideal of universal conscription of Israeli Jews, though, goes hand in hand with the exemption of Palestinian citizens, creating an exclusive community of Jewish warriors. Many key benefits of Israeli citizenship are contingent on military service, effectively excluding most Arab citizens. The small group of Arab men (and a few women) who volunteer to serve in the Israeli military hope for full inclusion in the Israeli collective. They put Israel to a critical test: will these "good Arabs" who perform military duties like Israeli Jews be allowed into the fold?

Limited Engagement

The Israeli government has historically exempted most Arab citizens from military service because of fears that their recruitment would breach security. Senior military and Ministry of Defense officials agreed that Muslim and Christian citizens could not be trusted and their suspicion of Arab soldiers led to the initial creation of separate "minorities" units under Jewish command. Although most military units were declared open to Arabs in the 1990s, some 80% of Arab soldiers continue to be tracked into the minorities units, which are widely perceived as either dead ends or dangerous. The air force and intelligence service, in particular, continue to be largely sealed off to Arab soldiers in Israel. In 2006 a well-publicized appeal from an 18-year-old Arab commercial pilot to join the Israeli air force was rejected despite his high qualifications. According to his father,

a senior official at the Personnel Directorate explained that "the course is closed to the Arab sector for the moment." The young man was directed to the paratroopers unit instead. His Jewish mentor admitted that the young man "is bound to face the question of where his loyalties lie"—not because of anything he did, but because of his parentage.

Today only Arab volunteers must submit letters of recommendation from members of the military who can vouch for their trustworthiness, and undergo rigorous security checks. The 75 former and current soldiers and police officers I interviewed between 2000 and 2005 expressed a wide range of opinions of the state, the military and Arab citizens, but almost all of them saw a low glass ceiling for Arabs in the security service. It is hard to ignore the concentration of Arabs in the lower ranks of the military and police, yet these volunteers persist in their hopes for inclusion—often driven by economic need, the lack of other opportunities, and the promise of meritocracy. Like many marginalized people around the world, they place their bets on military service improving their lot and use the argument that "we shed blood in the same mud."

Exclusion

Although these soldiers differ significantly from the majority of their fellow Palestinian citizens of Israel, they are also similar to them in that they all largely play by the rules and laws set by the state despite the inequities they hold. Palestinian rapper Tamer Nafar chants "I broke the law? No no, the law broke me." Druze Sgt Timor Abdullah was so eager to prove his loyalty to the Jewish collective that he refused to take part in the evacuation of Jewish settlers from Gaza in 2005 and a prison sentence was imposed on him. At a meeting of Jewish settler activists, Abdullah's father was thanked with a standing ovation from the crowd and presented with a framed

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They asked: "How do you self-identify? Are you Bedouin first or Israeli?" "Does it bother you that your passport says 'Arab'?" and "Do you identify with the Palestinian cause or state?" They prodded Khaldi to repeat his allegiance to the Jewish state again and again. His talk was bedeviled by an underlying contradiction: how can a Muslim Arab citizen

pendence. The experiences of veterans in these and many other cases are key to a more complex understanding of ethnic conflict as a *product* rather than simply a precursor of militarization and war. In Israel, military service lies at the extreme of a continuum of Palestinian strategies to cope with their minority status in the Jewish state.

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“Righteous Gentile” certificate for his son. As praiseworthy as terms like “righteous gentile” or “good Arab” may seem to be, the lingering implication is that they apply to outsiders of the Jewish state.

As long as subjugated soldiers are institutionally identified by their difference, equality with dominant soldiers before death does not always go far beyond the trenches. And it is often rigid state policies that insist on distinguishing minority soldiers from majority ones, not soldiers’ behavior or sense of loyalty. In the Israeli case, the Jewish definition of the state produces policies that aim to Judaize Arab lands—by, for example, pressuring Arabs living in villages the state refuses to recognize to move to more concentrated locations. Such policies target Arabs—whatever their loyalties or records of military service. In a documentary aired on Israeli TV, Bassam complains about the demolition of his family’s home in an area unrecognized by the state, while emphasizing that he is a disabled veteran from Israel’s war in Lebanon in the 1980s. At a memorial for fallen Bedouin soldiers built by the Israeli military, Bassam confronts a state official who was one of the signatories to the demolition orders. The official responds: “I am for protecting the law. If I don’t enforce the law, then I would be neglecting my job.”

Some Arabs in Israel, such as Bassam and Ishmael Khaldi, go to great lengths to conform to the state’s requirements of its “good Arabs.” As non-Jews, however, they are structurally haunted by their Arabness. Seeing Arab soldiers and veterans as potentially both victims and victimizers, I advocate a methodology that questions the standard solidarity assumptions of anthropology and presents a complex understanding of the dynamics of empathy, trust, disclosure and critique between the anthropologist and her subjects.

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The Deployment of Moral Authority

Veteran Activism in Israel

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The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have produced a new generation of veterans in the United States. We are slowly becoming aware of the consequences of this fact, including the personal and social struggles that many soldiers bring back with them to their hometowns and families. Israeli society, with near universal conscription and a history of ongoing military conflict, represents a very different case, and an opportunity to examine the ways military combat experience can be mobilized and transformed into social activism, drawing from the moral authority to critique war that veterans gain through military experience. Here I examine how Israeli veterans redefine their social roles and utilize their identities as former soldiers for political, anti-war and anti-occupation activism.

In Israel, veterans (especially combat veterans) are highly respected, credited both historically and in current memory with the security and continued existence of the Israeli state (see Ben Ari, Lomsky-Feder and Dominguez). For most of the country’s history, this respect for veterans has inhibited criticism of the military, and kept anti-occupation activism relatively marginal. Those who wanted to escape military service would most often try to do so quietly, or risk public denouncement. However, in 2002 Israel witnessed a series of high-profile refusals to participate in military service for reasons of conscience by elite combat reserve soldiers (including pilots and commandos) who were fighting in Operation Defensive Shield, a reprisal against Palestinians for suicide bombings during the al-Aqsa Intifada. The veterans formed a support group called Courage to Refuse, and participated in anti-occupation and anti-war activism. They embraced their public image as war heroes, seeking to use their moral authority to bolster the effectiveness of their activist message.

Authority through Experience
Courage to Refuse has since dissolved, and many of its members

have united to create Combatants for Peace (CFP), a joint organization of Israeli military veteran refusers and Palestinian former fighters. They hold public meetings to share personal stories of transformation, as well as teach-ins for Israeli youth. At these gatherings, they invoke both their social authority as combat veterans and the experiential authority of

through weapon sights, we have decided to put down our guns, and to fight for peace.

Of course, many Israelis still condemn the veterans’ actions, and have tried to discredit the claim that their activism is a case of conscience. However, as honored veterans, they have been able to take a signif-

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having seen military conflict firsthand. That this “fact of experience” is transformative is familiar in the US context as well. Direct personal experience is often associated with authenticity, especially with negative experiences. Often, only those who have themselves gone through a powerful experience, and have come through it transformed, are considered sufficiently authoritative to discuss that experience.

The improbable full reversal that these veterans went through—from elite combat soldiers to conscientious objectors—rhetorically signals sincerity. These elite soldiers are unlike those who refuse to join the military, whom many Israelis assume have been “manipulated” by unwholesome ideologies. The authenticity and sincerity of their revelations concerning Israeli military policy are much more trusted than the comments of those who have not served. These veterans are aware of the rhetorical power of this position and in their public talks they narrate their story accordingly, starting with their belief and good faith in the Israeli military, followed by their disillusionment, and then their act of conscience as a return to good faith. That experience is the basis for their actions is echoed everywhere, including on their organizational website (www.combatantsforpeace.org):

The “Combatants for Peace” movement was started jointly by Palestinians and Israelis, who have taken an active part in the cycle of violence; Israelis as soldiers in the Israeli army (IDF) and Palestinians as part of the violent struggle for Palestinian freedom. After brandishing weapons for so many years, and having seen one another only

important step toward mainstreaming the anti-occupation movement. Many people who had previously condemned those who did not serve have begun to reconsider the validity of objections to military service based on conscience.

Authority and Exclusion

In the Israeli context, the link between combat military service and political authority has historically been strong, though not usually employed for purposes of dissent. The military has had tremendous influence on Israeli government policy, and reciprocally prestigious military service was, and often is, a prerequisite to a political career. CFP veterans have used the authority of their position to fold this connection in on itself. They have succeeded in extending the imagined heroic act beyond fighting to include going to jail for one’s beliefs. Their successful involvement in politics as veterans has carved out a niche for conscientious objection to certain government actions associated with military engagement. Although not universally condoned, their activism has generally been accepted as sincere and authoritative in part because it has made use of existing social and political hierarchies to present a different political interpretation of the conflict. However, as shown in accounts of human rights activism, this method of using existing cultural norms to enhance the effectiveness of an argument or campaign is not without drawbacks (Merry 2006).

One unintended effect of deploying the authority granted to veterans by their combat military activities is the exclusion of people who do not have this experience from claiming the same authority in their conscientious objection to Israeli military efforts.