

Rela Mazali, Writer, Researcher, Activist, “Weapons and the Militarization of Israeli Society”

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Introduction

Hello everyone. Welcome to *Eyes on Gaza*. Our daily gathering, which is a combination of protest and learning. This week we had to shift the lectures a bit and I am very grateful to Rela Mazali, an independent scholar and writer, a left-wing activist and feminist, for agreeing to come speak with us on short notice. As said, Rela has been active for many years, especially on the militarization of Israeli society. She was among the founders of *New Profile* and also an activist and founder of the campaign to reduce weapons in public space, a project called “A Gun on the Kitchen Table.” Rela will speak to us here about these two issues, about weapons and about militarization, whose danger is rising and growing as a consequence, and as a byproduct of the extermination attack in Gaza. Again, thank you Rela. I remind you that you will speak for eight minutes and afterward we will leave a short time for discussion. I remind those who wish to ask a question, feel free to write it in the chat and I will read it to Rela after the presentation. Thank you very much, Rela, for joining us today.

Talk

Thank you for hosting me. In view of the genocide that the State of Israel is committing I am on hunger strike. But here I will present two other initiatives of which I am part; they are very intertwined with one another. The first, “New Profile,” is a feminist anti-militarist movement that has been operating since 1998 to undermine the deep militarism that dictates the order of priorities in Israel. Our network accompanies people who have decided not to serve or to stop serving in the Israeli army, informs them of their rights, and accompanies them in exercising those rights. The second initiative, “A Gun on the Kitchen Table – 20 Civil Society Organizations in Coalition,” which has operated from *Isha le-Isha* (“Woman to Woman” organization) since 2010 for the dismantling of the civilian space of firearms, and the tightening of weapons oversight.

Most of Jewish society here thinks and feels in militaristic terms. It is mistaken to see warfare as a necessity forced upon it in order to survive, and not as a political choice of leaders. It is mistaken to think that personal human security – Human Security – derives from what is called national security. Militarization is a social, economic, cultural, political process that feeds and preserves such perceptions. This process is fueled in an accelerating cycle by political decisions, budgetary priority-setting, media, education and collaborating culture. It strengthens generations of mass recruitment and the fairly broad compliance of parents, teachers, recruits, soldiers, officer corps.

The “hardware” that is used for the daily implementation of militarization, its most common hardware, is firearms. These are enforcers of threat, control, oppression and killing both within families, within public spaces, and within entire populations. Within a militarist culture, most Jews in Israel see them as routine, normal means of defense, especially in the hands of the army. But on October seventh in the south there was no army. A resident of Sderot said of this not long ago: “We live within a rupture. I cannot and will not ignore or whitewash.” Seventy-three people were killed in the Hamas attack on Sderot including passengers on a tour group of elderly people. The absence of the army in Sderot was part of a trend, a toxic combination of militarization and neo-liberal privatization. The emergency squad was not trained for two years. The shelters were filled with garbage and excrement. The “smart door” of one of them remained locked and could not be used. A lawsuit against Sderot municipality and the operating company Motorola Solutions alleged gross negligence, shirking of responsibility and concealment of evidence. But the shifting of responsibility is, of course, a clear goal of privatization, alongside financial savings — in this case, at the expense of lives.

The terror that the state's abandonment of the Hamas attack left is already being exploited for two years to promote a public relations campaign of mass civilian armament. Yuval Livnat from Adva Center wrote that this an abdication of one of the most essential public services of a well-functioning state – the policing and military protection of the individual. This is a privatization process carried out at full speed: the individual will not receive services from the state nor even purchase them. He will carry them out himself, on his own expense. Against the backdrop of a normalization of militaristic municipal instruments many Israeli Jews see this as a solution. The number of private arms holders doubled between summer 2022 and summer 2024. The threshold of licensing conditions has been lowered again, and again. Meanwhile the state has reiterated that it does not maintain any oversight of private weapons. Tens of thousands more are armed with weapons provided by their workplaces or places of residence. And through a new, highly permissive arming initiative, more than a thousand emergency squads have been established in a fast-track process.

To understand where this leads, it is urgent to recognize the daily reality experienced by Palestinian citizens of the state: in the fear of the seizure of public space, in the dismantling of the social fabric, and of course in the severe harm to the lives of people and families. Yesterday, *Abraham Initiatives* which is an organization in our “A Gun on the Kitchen Table” coalition, announced 177 people killed this year, victims of violent crime in Palestinian society in Israel. This is an increase of 15 percent compared with last September. 85 percent of them were shot to death. Jews seem to think this does not concern them, but the separation is illusory. Criminal elements cooperate well, and much licensed weaponry is stolen, traded and transferred, all the time. Discriminatory police enforcement knowingly strengthened criminal elements in Palestinian society, and enabled a large accumulation of weapons.

Widespread weaponry shapes consciousness. It deepens fear and increases suspicion and vengeance. Combined with entrenched militarism and the emphasis of Palestinian citizens as a threatening enemy. It is no coincidence that Sderot municipality, which was declared an “armed city,” now provides legal accompaniment for every weapons issue. It backs the state's license to shoot a person to death, and to claim in your defense that “I felt a threat to my life.” Such shooting is permitted primarily against Palestinian citizens of Israel, like Jumaa Al-Danfiri, aged 18, who was shot in the back by a member of the emergency squad in kibbutz Retamim. The licensing and the mass arming turn the firearms inward, into the country, and threaten to expand genocide to Israel. These weapons have already also been used to threaten demonstrators and activists, and they are very likely to feed a civil war here. Armament is a language. The state's choice to adopt it promotes destruction.