“Reflections on Israeli Silence”, Prof. Amalia Sa‘ar, University of Haifa, 2.7.25, English

Description

The lecture explores the cultural mechanisms behind many Jewish Israelis’ silence regarding Israeli military violence in Gaza. The lecture identifies a powerful cultural taboo and focuses on the centrality of the social-family context of Israeli soldiers as a cardinal factor of this taboo. It creates an atmosphere in which criticism of the army is equated with betrayal. Soldiers are seen as vulnerable “children of us all,” rendering their actions unspoken. This familial and emotional logic, reinforced by state narratives, normalizes ongoing violence and silences moral reckoning, making the taboo both enforced and internalized.

Introduction

We are pleased to welcome today to our daily “Eyes on Gaza” program Professor Amalia Sa‘ar, a colleague from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Haifa. Amalia is a prolific anthropologist whose work has spanned diverse fields—from gender issues within Palestinian society in Israel, to urban anthropology, citizenship in the neoliberal era, and beyond. Above all, she is an anthropologist by nature, capable of deep analytical insight even in the midst of unfolding events. Today, she offers us a critical lens through which to understand why the vast majority of Israelis remain silent in the face of atrocities committed in their name.

Lecture

One of the reasons Israelis remain silent about Israel’s crimes in Gaza, in my view, is the presence of a cultural taboo—a ban—on naming and speaking about the full scope of Israel’s ongoing military violence. This taboo is fueled by several sources, all of which are rooted in the construction of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a zero-sum game—a framing that has become increasingly blunt polarized since the onset of the current war. I’ll outline three primary sources that sustain this cultural prohibition against speaking critically about the occupation and the war. The first is the ethos of eternal victimhood, paired with its familiar counterpart: “Never Again” – “The Holocaust will never happen again.” Tragically, Israel’s powerful military does not soothe Israel’s sense of victimhood, but only intensifies it, creating a norm according to which no level of Israeli violence is too much. The second is the emotional saturation of political discourse, which prioritizes feelings over reasoned argument and blocks critical engagement—because, unlike opinions, emotions are considered immune to debate. The most striking example is the invocation of national trauma: those experiencing trauma are assumed to need only endless support—not accountability. Another manifestation of this emotional regime is the love-hate binary: within the framework of a zero-sum struggle, any emotional identification with Palestinians is immediately cast as love for “the enemy,” and thus, by definition, hatred for one’s own people. Sympathy for Palestinian suffering, by this logic, necessarily denies Israeli suffering. The third and perhaps most central factor is the primacy of family ties in Israeli society. Let me begin there.

My claim is this: the vast majority of Jewish Israelis—excluding the ultra-Orthodox—are in close social proximity to soldiers who actively take part in the occupation, the war, or other

aspects of Israel's military operations. Israeli society is profoundly familial. Most households consist of more than one person. Israelis generally maintain strong, active relationships with extended family and participate in mutual aid networks. This includes an emotional and caregiving commitment to family members serving in the military. Within this familial logic, the norm is clear: relatives of soldiers—meaning, in one way or another, nearly all of us—must care for them and avoid criticizing or embarrassing them over their military actions. "They are already going through so much," the logic goes. "They're risking their lives for us—how can we stick a pin in their balloon? We're terrified something might happen to them—so now we're going to criticize the army?" According to this cultural mechanism, the role of citizens—whether actual or potential relatives of soldiers—is singular: to worry for them, support them, and express gratitude. To criticize the army is to betray one's loved ones.

Around this core mechanism, other metaphorical but equally powerful familial norms emerge. Most prominent is the notion that "soldiers are our children, children of us all." In frontline towns, local residents care for stationed soldiers—cooking for them, inviting them to shower, helping in other ways. Media stories abound about volunteers preparing meals for hundreds of soldiers or families "adopting" lone soldiers. This symbolic framing—soldiers as "our children," "our siblings," "our nephews or partners," "the children of us all"—places the emphasis on their vulnerability and blocks any reference to the violence they carry out as part of direct or indirect military operations. Of course, both sides of the coin are true. Soldiers are deeply vulnerable. They are physically at the heart of violent conflict. They can be killed or seriously injured—something that has occurred in devastating numbers in this war. But beyond their physical risk, they are also psychologically and morally vulnerable, including those further from the frontlines—combat support or remote operators of military systems. Yes, they face Palestinian gunfire, ambushes, roadside bombs. But they are also the ones breaking into homes at night, terrifying families, protecting settlers as they rampage and commit pogroms, blocking farmers from working their land, manning checkpoints where they abuse civilians. They may end up shoving elderly men who resemble their grandfathers or pointing rifles at terrified children on their way to school. Often, they witness comrades commit sexual violence and say nothing—due to fear, complicity, or group pressure. They may fire on civilians queuing for food, or on convoys of displaced families forced to move across a devastated landscape.

In the early months of the Gaza war, before buildings were destroyed, soldiers lived in homes from which families had been expelled—eating their food, witnessing (or participating in) theft. These same beloved sons—"our children"—are the snipers, artillery gunners, and pilots who carry out deadly operations. They sit in front of targeting screens and have three seconds to decide whether someone is a legitimate target or just a passerby. They are also the ones who, on October 7, were abandoned in frontline bases despite warnings—or sent into combat with no backup.

All of this unfolds in a tangle of fear, hatred, superiority, desire, revulsion, and despair. Sometimes out of boredom or toxic competition. Many male soldiers embrace a hyper-masculine culture, adding layers of vulnerability and oppression. And yes—some enjoy all of this: the sense of power, patriotic euphoria, extra pay (combat soldiers earn more now than ever), or popularity with women. All of the above are true. But when it comes to families, a voluntary code of silence prevails. Soldiers don't talk about what they've done or seen, and families don't ask. In many homes, there is generalized talk about "the Arabs" and "how much they hate us." A general consensus that Palestinians "deserve what's coming to

them"—because, as October proved, "they'd do terrible things to us if they could." But the specific scenes of violence are rarely discussed.

Instead, Israelis speak of "meaningful service"—a euphemism that emphasizes participation in the country's most revered institution. The IDF remains the ultimate melting pot, the fast-track to social mobility, the pillar of national security—the oxygen of our existence. The terms "meaningful service" and "contribution" [as part of the military service] are deliberately vague. They don't include images of beating old men at checkpoints, demolishing homes, looting, or standing idly during pogroms. The focus is on the soldier's personal risk, and on unit cohesion—the bond with comrades, fellow-soldiers. Often, it's this bond that brings them back to fight again and again. Soldiers fight for the country, but immediately and intimately, they fight for their friends. That loyalty—"for the team"—is so powerful that many would die for it. This is the second relational structure that blocks critical discourse about occupation and war. In this context of deep intimacy, the moral hierarchy for most soldiers—and civilians around them—is intuitive and self-evident. Within the dominant Israeli logic, a "sane person" does not sacrifice a friend to save a terrorist. Even when the power imbalance is extreme, soldiers remain at risk—of snipers, booby-trapped houses, ambushes. Though statistically, Israeli casualties are extremely law compared to Palestinian ones, for the soldier and their family, any loss is total. A soldier killed in combat represents a whole world destroyed. A severely injured soldier may need years of care and rehabilitation. One returning home emotionally shattered may drag their family into a lifetime of suffering.

In that view, the Palestinian side is erased from the equation. And so, to ensure the safety of "our children," Israeli military violence is continuously justified—even normalized. Even before the current war of annihilation—which has perhaps begun to crack this taboo—even in more "banal" moments of violence, concern for soldiers' safety (deeply personal, parental concern for X, Y or Z) has served, and still serves, as an effective barrier against criticism. As a relative once told me when I voiced criticism of the occupation—long before I knew her son suffered from PTSD:
"They hate us, you know. They hate us with all their hearts." As if to say: "Your criticism of the occupation is tantamount to loving Arabs—which makes no sense, because the Arabs hate us."

To conclude, I've tried to sketch out the contours of a cultural taboo—still in early form. But that doesn't mean there isn't also a massive political silencing effort that prevents many Israelis from speaking about Gaza or taking moral responsibility for what happens there. Of course, there's also the silencing of Palestinian citizens (and perhaps the organizers should dedicate a session to that too). But today, I focused on Jewish Israelis. And I still believe that much of this silencing derives from the way politicians, state media, and well-funded campaigns strategically target the pre-existing taboo—which produces silence that is not only enforced, but voluntary and intuitive.