

Introduction

Hello everyone, and welcome to *Eyes on Gaza*, our daily gathering that combines protest and learning. Today is both the first and the last day of the 14th week of *Eyes on Gaza*. In the coming three weeks, we will also operate in a reduced format, holding two weekly meetings. This will allow us to turn our gaze inward, for reflection during the Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*), and also to turn it toward Gaza — toward the reckoning for what we are doing there. To begin, we are hosting today Professor Yagil Levy, a sociologist and head of the Open University’s Institute for the Study of Society and the Military. Just this morning, he published an article in *Haaretz*, in which he wrote, among other things: “Our vision of turning into Sparta is not a bitter pill that we were suddenly asked to swallow. Athens, according to our self-image, is the one responsible for the killing of thousands of women, children, and civilians, for the destruction of Gaza’s civilian infrastructure, for the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, and for the shortening of their future lifespan. It is Athens in whose name our pilots and soldiers have committed serial war crimes from the very first day of the war — war crimes around which international, and gradually also internal, consensus is tightening, recognizing them as acts of genocide.” Professor Levy will try to address today a related, yet different question: whether the Israeli army is disintegrating. He will speak for about eight minutes, after which we will leave time for a short discussion. Anyone who wishes to ask a question is invited to write it in the chat, and I will read it aloud. Thank you very much, Yagil, for joining us — the floor is yours.

Paper

Thank you very much, Ayelet, and thank you all. Thanks also to some of the people I know — I won’t mention names now, but it’s nice to see you. In a very famous statement in July 2016, then-Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot appeared before the Knesset’s Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee. Those were the days of the Elor Azaria affair (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Killing_of_Abdel_Fattah_al-Sharif). He asked a question — perhaps rhetorical, perhaps not: “If someone wants a gang ethos, let them say so!” A “gang,” according to the conventional terminology, is a violent group bound by close, often familial or otherwise intimate ties. It operates autonomously, certainly not subject to any clear chain of command — sometimes under external authority. Eisenkot’s question was meant to support his efforts to prosecute Azaria, an issue that was then highly controversial. Apparently, Eisenkot did not go much further than that prosecution, and in the years since that affair, signs of gang-like behavior — or of a slide into a form of militia behavior (*militianization*)— began to appear in the army, particularly in the ground forces. This trend has become even more evident in the current war.

Indeed, in this war we see a series of highly irregular phenomena: deviations from the rules of engagement; the introduction of civilians into combat zones; and an unprecedented phenomenon — perhaps even globally — of soldiers filming themselves and posting on social media, sometimes expressing defiance or holding signs of protest against senior military command, and at times even against the elected government, such as the demand to return to “Gush Katif” – the Israeli colonies in the Gaza Strip. We see acts of looting that soldiers display — even boast about. We see soldiers taking pride in the destruction and burning of buildings, and other irregular acts. We saw the “Messiah Patch” (Hebrew *Tag Mashiach*) episode, in which soldiers deviated from the official dress code affixing a special patch to their uniforms that deviates military standards. This is also a form of defiance. And we often see difficulties in enforcing discipline when politicians interfere. The classic, and again unprecedented, example is the storming of the Sde Teiman military detention base — when a routine Military Police investigation prompted the soldiers there to summon politicians, who, including a government minister, then forced their way into the base.

The obvious question, of course, is why this is happening. One explanation, perhaps the most intuitive, is fatigue: the army has been fighting for a very long time; soldiers are exhausted. This was precisely the explanation given by a committee headed by a general appointed by the army itself to investigate the matter. But this explanation is too convenient — especially since many of these phenomena emerged in the first months of the war, when the army was less fatigued.

Another explanation, relevant precisely to those early months, is a collapse of state order — and therefore also of military order — within this war, which indeed began from a kind of collapse. For example, we saw the opening of the army's gates to civilian players, including private actors supplying some of the army's needs, and other civilian-military entanglements. Another explanation is the erosion of trust in command. This is evident in research conducted within the army itself, and also in the political echelon's attitude toward the military — an erosion that clearly affects the enforcement of discipline.

Yet another explanation lies in the relatively strong bargaining power of soldiers. We know that in situations where a heavy burden falls on the shoulders of relatively few — as in this war, almost from the outset, for both regular and reserve soldiers serving in life-threatening roles — they tend to see themselves as exceptional, entitled to demand from the state and the army extra protection and privileges, including the right to act in ways that will not lead to legal or disciplinary sanctions. But there is another, very important explanation: identity struggles. Since the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, the army has been caught, in my understanding, in a series of identity conflicts. Two main groups have challenged the codes originally shaped by the secular middle-class circles that historically defined the army. One is the national-religious-hardline Orthodox camp (Hebrew *Hardali*), deeply rooted in a dense network of *hesder* yeshivas and pre-military rabbinic academies, and led by rabbis. Its political expression is the Religious Zionism Party. The second group I once described as “blue-collar warriors” — a lower middle-class and working-class group, with strong traditional Mizrahi presence. The most prominent manifestation of the blue-collar warriors' revolt was the Elor Azaria affair in 2016 — but it was not the only one.

To some extent, what is happening in Gaza can be seen as an expression of these identity struggles, in which soldiers incorporate identity codes into their conduct, thereby challenging the army's culture and its systems of authority. The “Messiah Patch” for example, is not merely about a patch on a uniform, but a challenge to the army's secular character and its secular authority. A particularly striking expression is the return of the discourse about revenge — a discourse once deemed illegitimate, both in Israeli political culture and in the army's internal culture. It is now a revenge code unashamed of violence, drawing on religious law — the figure of Amalek and its renewed invocation in this war. It is important to understand that this revenge discourse is not just rhetoric — it manifests in daily acts and in their justification, acts that have led us, not coincidentally, to where we are now. The call to return to “Gush Katif” too, expresses a key code within the hardline religious worldview — and the hardline orthodox-nationalist *Hardal* motivation to reshape the army so that it will no longer evacuate settlements.

Another explanation is the politicization that weakens the army's enforcement power — a development also tied to these identity struggles, with politicians, mostly from the right, trying to support them. Finally, we cannot avoid asking: are we witnessing an accident, a malfunction — or something deliberate? Could this be a form of delegated authority — the army's intentional loosening of its codes and rules, tolerating or even encouraging unruly behavior as part of the combat spirit deemed necessary in this era? It may be that the militia spirit, against which Gadi Eisenkot once warned, has now become something that fuels the army's fighting spirit — and that, in this view, the erosion of discipline or claims of the army's disintegration actually mark the emergence of a new form of military governance.

Thank you very much.