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# Militarizing the Enemy's home, Israel/ Palestine: a Photo Essay

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"After a while you forget it's a house where someone lives, it becomes your outpost. When you stand guard at the window ... there isn't any furniture in the house ... So, it's not a home anymore."  
- Israeli combat soldier

As part of the current Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Israeli soldiers frequently invade Palestinian cities and villages, turning Palestinian homes into their battlefields. Soldiers search houses, arrest suspects in the middle of the night, and often convert strategically located Palestinian houses into military outposts known as 'straw widows'<sup>1</sup>.

This photo essay, consisting of photos taken by professional photographers during and after military operations and by soldiers on duty, tells the story of the militarization of domestic space. The photographs soldiers take of themselves inside Palestinian houses give us unique insight into this militarization of the "enemy's" home. They show us the ways that soldiers normalize their military presence in private Palestinian homes and establish power and ownership over the "battleground." The destruction, garbage, graffiti and discarded military items soldiers leave behind transform a domestic environment into a military one. By removing its domestic character, a home becomes a combat zone suitable for men in uniform, where they feel comfortable and in control.

The most common reason for an Israeli soldier to enter a Palestinian house is to arrest a suspect. After intelligence information is received about a wanted individual, one or more teams of soldiers are dispatched to perform the arrest. In general, arrests take place at night and begin with a knock on the door. When the family opens the door, women and children are separated from the men and the suspect is identified. He (almost never she) is then taken to the Israeli General Security Service for questioning. Soldiers often search the suspect's house for any hidden weaponry or other forbidden goods that can be used against the soldiers.

From the shelter of "straw widows," soldiers can observe a specific area for a longer time period and, for example, gather information on terrorist activity. For days, weeks or months on end, military units stay in such houses that have been partly converted into military posts. The Palestinian inhabitants (often an extended family) are usually relegated to one floor or even one room in the house, guarded closely at all times by a soldier. Consequently, the family's movement within and outside of the house is severely restricted.

As evidenced by the following photos, the behavior of soldiers while performing these tasks goes much further than simply “doing one’s job” militarily. By occupying and militarizing private, domestic Palestinian space, Israeli soldiers normalize their behavior within it. Destroying, abusing, and dirtying the property of the “enemy,” in this case the Palestinian inhabitants, can be interpreted as a show of power, and the ease with which civilian life can be disrupted illustrates the superiority of the Israeli military over the Palestinians. This power can furthermore be interpreted as a mark of ownership. The soldiers essentially make these houses their own by sitting on the sofas, watching television, and feeling comfortable while the real inhabitants become strangers in their own homes. By mocking, abusing, and destroying Palestinian houses, soldiers create a space where they feel “at home.” The home, reconstructed into a battlefield, leaves no room for the innocent civilian—only the soldier and the enemy.



Figure 1: Israeli border policeman in front of a recently occupied Palestinian home in the village of Nabi Saleh. Notice the barred windows, dry plants, and abandoned child’s car. The soldier, although a trespasser, stands off guard, knowing he doesn’t have to answer to the owners for his trespassing. Palestinian land and house ownership has no power over the Israeli military. Photo by Anne Paq, courtesy of Activestills.



Figure 2: An Israeli military unit in full combat gear posing for a comrade in a Palestinian home. The soldiers' faces are serious. They are not using the space in a traditional way (sitting on couches or at the table), but invading the space with their bodies and ignoring its architecture. It seems that they could just as easily be in a military barracks or a trench. The house becomes "their" place. Photo by courtesy of Breaking the Silence.



Figure 3: A military unit poses in the living room of a Palestinian family. Clearly the pride of the family, the room is carefully furnished and decorated with blue and white ornaments. In the background we can see family photographs. The soldiers have covered the windows with striped sheets in order to remain unseen by passersby. Unlike the previous photograph, these soldiers are smiling, sitting on the sofa, and relaxed, as if they are attending a party at a friend's house. They adhere to the architecture of the living room, utilizing the furniture in a more normal way. Their relaxed posture indicates a lack of concern for the fact that their hosts are, in fact, hostages. Photo courtesy of Breaking the Silence.



Figure 4: A soldier poses for a photo inside a Palestinian home. He and his friends are “relaxing” during a military operation, taking the opportunity to watch the Football World Cup on the television set belonging to the Palestinian family still residing in the house. As in Figure 3, the soldier’s smiling face and his friend’s relaxed position show no awareness of being uninvited trespassers or even soldiers on duty, and the situation is completely normalized. Photo courtesy of Breaking the Silence.



Figure 5: Israeli soldier seated at the dining room table of an occupied Palestinian house. On the table we see sandbags for protection and communication devices, and the window on the right is covered with a camouflage net. The dirty and neglected kitchen has been turned into a military post, negating its original use as a meeting place for family dinners and discussion. Photo courtesy of Breaking the Silence.



Figure 6: Israeli soldier posing for the camera during a search of a Palestinian house. In the cupboard we can still see food left behind by the residents. The soldier's confident and extremely intrusive pose indicates his power. His rifle is penetrating the intimate home space of the cupboard, while the soldier poses, smiling, for the camera. Photo courtesy of Breaking the Silence.



Figure 7: Soldiers invading a house in the Palestinian village of Jayyous. Such invasions often occur in the middle of the night, and whole families are woken up and brought together into one area of the house. In this photo we can see the residents of a house invaded by the military. The women don't appear scared, but simply angry and exhausted. The soldier in this picture is looking down, avoiding the gaze of the inhabitants of the home. He is not posing happily in front of the camera, and seems uncomfortable with his situation. Photo by courtesy of Keren Manor/ActiveStills.

Right: Figure 8: Soldier standing above the body of a dead Palestinian, his eyes still blindfolded, in the living room of a Palestinian home. In the background, satin curtains hint at the former function of the room. This allusion to domesticity is at odds with the bandages and other medical supplies strewn on the pillows. For the soldier, posing as if in the middle of battle, the living room does not exist as a domestic space. Photo courtesy of Breaking the Silence.



Top left: Figure 9: A Palestinian house in the village Bil'in taken over by Israeli soldiers. At the right we see the residents in the courtyard, while the soldiers have taken up position on the roof. The scene implies banality, with no sense of immediate danger. However, this only serves to expose the routine of such military invasions. Photo by Keren Manor, courtesy of ActiveStills.



Left: Figure 10: "Breakfast in Ni'ilin." Live ammunition left by soldiers after a military operation litters the olive groves of the Palestinian village of Ni'ilin, showing how quickly the scene can change from an idyllic agricultural setting into a war zone. Photo courtesy of ActiveStills.

## About the Author

Erella Grassiani is an anthropologist at the University of Amsterdam working on military and issues of morality. Her book *Soldiering under Occupation: Processes of Moral Numbing among Israeli conscripts during the Al-Aqsa Intifada* will be published next year. She is also the co-founder of gate48, a platform for critical Israelis in the Netherlands, an NGO that organizes critical political events surrounding the situation in Israel/Palestine. She has worked with both Breaking the Silence and ActiveStills on several projects.

Breaking the Silence is an organization of veteran combatants who have served in the Israeli military since the start of the Second Intifada and have taken it upon themselves to expose the Israeli public to the reality of everyday life in the Occupied Territories. They endeavor to stimulate public debate about the price paid for a reality in which young soldiers face a civilian population on a daily basis, and are engaged in the control of that population's everyday life. <http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il>

The ActiveStills collective was established by a group of Israeli and international documentary photographers out of a strong conviction that photography is a vehicle for social change. They believe in the power of images to shape public attitudes and to raise awareness on issues that are generally absent from the Israeli public discourse. <http://www.activestills.org>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This term refers to a house occupied by the military for a period of time for strategic reasons. The term comes from the word for a wife who is left behind by her husband. 'The origin of this expression comes from the unmarried mother of the 16th century. A child created out of wedlock was assumed to have resulted from a couple's adventures on a bed of grass and not the proper marital bed, hence, grass widow'. From <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2004/20040417/windows/roots.htm> as accessed on 06-06-05-2012.

## Lead Photograph

Soldier standing at the ruins of a Palestinian building in the city of Hebron. Credits: Breaking the Silence