The Latest "Breaking the Silence" Report Isn't Journalism. It's Propaganda.

May 14, 2015

By [Matti Friedman](http://mosaicmagazine.com/author/matti-friedman/)

Mosaic

<http://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/2015/05/the-latest-breaking-the-silence-report-isnt-journalism-its-propaganda/>

The Israeli NGO won international attention last week for claiming to expose IDF malfeasance in Gaza. It exposed something else.

Last week, a report by an Israeli group called Breaking the Silence made headlines in the U.S., Britain, and most of Europe, becoming one of the week’s biggest international stories. The subject was the Gaza war of 2014. The headline in the Washington Post was representative:

**New report details how Israeli soldiers killed civilians in Gaza: “There were no rules.”**

This report is worth dwelling on because there will be more rounds of fighting in Gaza, and more reports like this one, and more reporting of this kind—and because, for all observers of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, it is important to understand the sources of information that shape our thinking.

Let’s look first at the report itself. Breaking the Silence, usually identified as an organization of Israeli veterans, says its goal is to “expose the Israeli public to the reality of everyday life in the Occupied Territories.” In recent years, expanding that mandate to Israeli warfare in general, it has released numerous reports. For this one, which was published in both Hebrew and English, the group’s staff interviewed “over 60” soldiers. There are no dates or names. In most cases we are given a rank and the section of the army (“infantry,” “armored corps”) to which the soldier belongs; in a few cases there is no identification at all.

The soldiers’ accounts, presented in short excerpts, are interesting, offering a gritty, personal, and frequently awful look at the kind of combat that has become common in this century, and at its toll on combatants and civilians. A reader of the English report notices that in some places the translators and editors could have been more knowledgeable or careful: there is confusion between mortars and artillery (in the Israeli military, these are considered different classes of weapons and are employed by different units), and between a platoon and a division, and one editor believes that an M16 rifle is a weapon mounted on a tank.

More seriously, having promised to reveal the secret of the civilian death toll in Gaza in the form of systematic Israeli misdeeds, and having selected, with that purpose in mind, the most incriminating segments from much longer interviews, the report fails to deliver. Perhaps that is why, instead of letting readers examine the interviews and decide for themselves, the activist-editors of Breaking the Silence felt compelled to add a heated introduction announcing that their report “exposes” the true face of the Gaza operation—namely, its “disturbing” and “unprecedented” violence directed at civilians by the Israeli military. This is probably also why each testimony opens with a headline like “If you shoot someone in Gaza it’s cool, no big deal,” or “Those guys were trigger-happy, totally crazy.”

The editors seem to want readers to believe there were “no rules” in Gaza, and that the IDF acted without taking civilian life into consideration. In fact the interviews themselves show the army taking numerous steps to avoid harm to civilians. The soldiers regularly mention warning leaflets, “roof-knocking” rockets, phone calls, warning shells, warning shots, lists of protected sites like UN facilities, and drones vetting targets for civilians before an airstrike. All of the action we encounter in the report is happening in areas where the army had already warned Gazan civilians (and, of course, Hamas guerrillas) that soldiers were about to arrive. Indeed, what is truly striking is that the soldiers simply take all of these steps for granted, as if they were obviously part of warfare, when in fact many are unique to Israeli military practice.

We encounter good behavior, ugly behavior, and two or three instances that would warrant prosecution. One, in which a soldier describes firing with his tank at civilian vehicles and a bicyclist for no reason at all, should result in a lengthy jail term. If it’s true, that is, and this incident strikes me as less credible than any of the others—not because I doubt a teenage soldier’s capacity for thoughtless cruelty but because it’s unlikely that a tank gunner could fire multiple shells and machine-gun bursts at easy targets and miss every time, as he claims. But even here no one is reported killed. In fact, nowhere in the entire report are there rapes, massacres, or anything similar, or a single incident in which a civilian is shot in circumstances that could not be defended as either warranted or as a legitimate error on a battlefield where even a grandmother could have been (and, in 2006, was) a suicide bomber.

The activists from Breaking the Silence aren’t journalists, and their report is intended not to explain but to shock. It’s propaganda. That’s fine if you understand what you’re reading, but I suspect most people don’t. Equally important, at least to me, is the question of whether the soldiers who cooperated with Breaking the Silence understood what kind of use would be made of their stories abroad. I can’t ask them because none of them is identified. But as someone who knows many combat soldiers, who was a combat soldier himself and still serves as one in the reserves, and who has both heard and expressed criticism of the army as a civilian and as a soldier, I am willing to guess that in many or most cases the answer is no: these soldiers did not fully understand whom they were talking to, or what they were participating in.

If I believed the activists from Breaking the Silence were merely trying to complete or correct the picture presented to the Israeli public about service in the Palestinian conflict, I would be supportive of their efforts, and have been in the past. Like any corporation or government agency, the army is fully capable of lying in its public statements, at least by omission, and much information goes unreported.

But there is, to borrow a phrase from the group’s own report, a “yawning gap” between what Breaking the Silence says it is and what it actually is. For a group ostensibly trying to influence Hebrew-speaking Israelis, why invest so much to produce, at considerable expense, an English translation of all 237 pages of this report? We learn from the news item filed by the Washington Post’s Jerusalem correspondent that Breaking the Silence arranged a meeting for him with one of the soldiers. Are Israeli ex-pats the people Breaking the Silence is trying to influence in Washington, D.C.?

The [list](http://www.breakingthesilence.org.il/about/transparency) of the group’s current donors includes the Danish Lutheran organization Dan Church Aid, the French Catholic group CCFD-Terre Solidaire, the governments of Norway and Switzerland, and many others along similar lines, none of them Israeli. This, too, raises questions. Do Norwegian taxpayers fund an organization that encourages, say, British soldiers to reveal British army wrongdoing to the international press? Does Switzerland try to get Hamas soldiers to open up about things they’ve done?

Funding is not a technical detail. Were the Israeli army to adopt what Breaking the Silence appears to recommend—that is, to act with less force and expose soldiers to greater risk—Hamas would have an easier time fighting Israel and more Israelis would die. Let’s say the Israeli death toll was doubled, and the Hamas death toll halved. Israelis of nearly all political persuasions would agree that this is a negative outcome. But is it a negative outcome for Dan Church Aid? What about the Norwegian government?

Breaking the Silence’s money is foreign, not Israeli, and the primary customers for its product are foreign, not Israeli. At its extensive English website, Jewish soldiers are presented for international consumption as a spectacle of moral failure, a spectacle paid for by Norwegians, French Catholics, and Germans. This being so, it is completely reasonable for Israelis to wonder what exactly this group is and which side it is on.

In analyzing trends in the press I have found it most helpful to keep an eye on the mainstream and avoid extreme cases. So let’s look again at the Washington Post, a good U.S. paper, to see how a report of this kind becomes major international news.

The Post receives a document about Israel’s conduct in the 2014 Gaza war that has been produced in English by a group of Israelis funded by European organizations and governments. The paper’s correspondent, recently arrived in Jerusalem from a posting in Mexico, takes at face value that this is an “Israeli” organization and also an organization of “veterans,” perhaps not grasping that, because Israel has a mandatory draft, the term is quite meaningless; most people can plausibly claim to be “veterans.”

The correspondent then selects some of the most egregious examples in the report, summarizes them, and presents them as representative not only of the report but of the entire Gaza operation. He takes the words of people whose identity is not known to him, who have been interviewed by people whose identity is similarly not known to him, the interviews edited and redacted in a process not known to him, and pastes them into his article. As a reporter, you wouldn’t be able to get away with publishing purely anonymous testimony that you have collected, but it is one of the peculiarities of Israel-related journalism that you are allowed to use anonymous material if it has been pre-packaged for you by a political NGO.

To set up the story, the reporter suggests that Israel’s rules of engagement in Gaza were “permissive,” without comparing them with those of any other army, and also that civilian casualties were “high,” without comparing them with any other conflict. He duly notes that the information in the report is “impossible to independently verify.” And then, the gods of ethical journalism having been placated, he writes not [one](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israeli-veterans-say-permissive-rules-of-engagement-fueled-gaza-carnage/2015/05/04/ab698d16-f020-11e4-8050-839e9234b303_story.html) but [two](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2015/05/04/israeli-soldiers-reveal-this-is-how-we-fought-in-gaza/) articles in which he treats the whole thing as completely true.

The idea that there has been “silence” about Israel’s actions in its conflict with the Palestinians cannot be taken seriously; over the past two decades, probably no international story has been covered more than this one. But there are important silences at work, and the frenzy surrounding this latest Breaking the Silence report offers a good opportunity to point them out.

For years prior to last summer’s war, Hamas was busy building an impressive network of tunnels under residential areas in Gaza, some of them leading under the border into Israel; stockpiling rockets; and raising and training a large fighting force, including a naval commando unit. That meant thousands of people, mostly Gazans, were about to die. The local contingent of the international press, one of the world’s largest, was silent about this.

As presented openly in its charter, Hamas’s ideology holds that Jews control the United Nations and the world media, were responsible for both world wars as well as the French and Russian revolutions, and “sabotage” societies through the Freemasons and the Rotary Club. It also asserts that God wants Jews to be murdered. The unwritten rule of the press corps requires silence about this. For a good example, take a look at the [charter](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/hamas.asp) and then at this “[summary](http://articles.dailypress.com/2006-01-29/news/0601290187_1_hamas-leaders-hamas-official-ismail-haniyeh/2) ” of it once published by the Associated Press.

The vast media coverage devoted over the past week to this little piece of agit-prop from a little country—its claims parroted without proof, shorn of context and comparison, and presented as journalism to people around the world—must lead us to ask what, exactly, is going on. What is motivating all of this? No one observing our planet of violence and injustice in 2015 can claim any longer that Israel is covered the same way other countries are covered; that the coverage is proportional to the scale of events; or that the tone of moral condemnation—growing in its hysteria, and crawling from the fringes deeper and deeper into the mainstream press—is in the realm of reasonable reportage.

In all the talk purporting to be about the Gaza war, many are beginning to see more clearly the outlines of another war entirely. What is the nature of this war? That is where the real silence lies.