

MICHAEL BUHOLZER / AFP

A trouble

Allegations by the Breaking the Silence group of misdeeds by IDF soldiers have clearly struck a nerve
By Hunter Stuart

SANDWICHED BETWEEN a highway and a strip club in an industrial part of Tel Aviv sit the offices of Breaking the Silence, perhaps Israel's most hated NGO.

Breaking the Silence (BtS) is a group of IDF veterans who publish testimonies of breaches of military ethics they say they witnessed while serving in the West Bank and Gaza. The group's short-term goal is to show Israeli society the dark underbelly of the Palestinian occupation. In the long-term, BtS wants to end the occupation completely.

The office is unmarked; there's no sign advertising its presence. One must walk through a pair of unwashed glass doors, up four flights of dusty stairs and pass the mus-

ter of an armed security guard stationed outside the front door, who stands warily beside a pack of Marlboros and a cup of instant coffee.

Inside, the atmosphere is much livelier. The group's spokesman, Achiya Schatz, greets *The Jerusalem Report* with a handshake and a broad smile. A documentary crew is positioned around him, filming our interaction. "They're making a film about us, and everything that's been going on lately," explains Schatz, who is 30 and looks like he hasn't shaved in a week.

Inside the office, seven or eight activists sit at communal tables, working on laptops and talking animatedly. Next to a set of shelves lined with glossy black-and-white

ling mirror

books containing hundreds of war testimonies is Yehuda Shaul, one of the group's founders, asleep on a beanbag chair.

If Breaking the Silence is a little tired these days, it's no wonder. In the past couple of months the group has been through a whirlwind. They've been excoriated by the prime minister and a number of other politicians, banned from schools and army bases, targeted by right-wing campaigns, and infiltrated by moles wearing secret video cameras and microphones. Most recently, a coalition of lawmakers introduced a bill to the Knesset to have the group outlawed entirely.

BtS's detractors say it's slandering Israeli soldiers abroad in order to undermine

government policy. Its supporters say it's merely exercising its right to free speech. Either way, the fight over BtS has grown into something much bigger – a fight over the character of the state.

The controversy began in earnest in early December when BtS participated in a conference in New York, where President Reuven Rivlin also spoke. Israel's right-wing Channel 20 accused Rivlin of "spitting in the faces" of IDF soldiers by appearing at the event. Not long after, Im Tirtzu, an NGO that states its goal is to strengthen and promote "Zionist values," released a video saying that BtS was staffed by foreign agents.

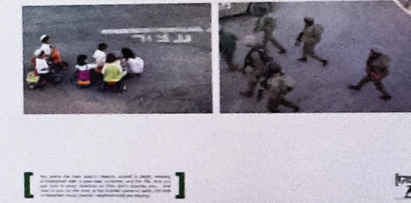
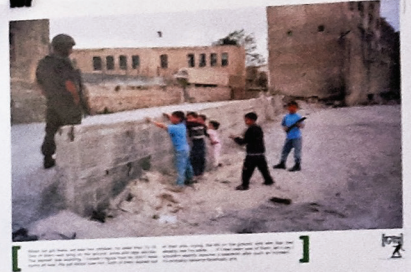
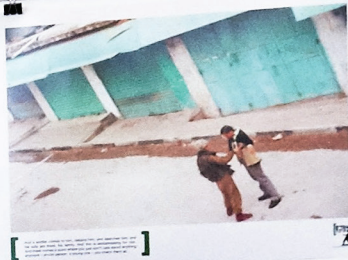
The rhetoric against the group only went

Alon Sahar hangs a photograph at a BtS exhibition at the Kulturhaus Helferei in Zurich, June 3

downhill from there.

The next day on the Knesset floor, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused BtS of "trying to tie Israel's hands in its attempts to defend itself." A few weeks later, when a mother of six was slain in a terrorist attack in the West Bank, Eli Yishai, a former interior minister, asserted that BtS was responsible for the murder.

Schatz says that over the past two months, he and his colleagues have been getting



near-daily death threats. Hence, the armed guard, who was hired in December. The group's members have received Facebook messages, phone calls and letters all warning of violence. One read "Rabin was only the beginning, you're next." The Israel Police are now involved in an effort to protect staff.

BtS has clearly struck a nerve. After all, the things the group is saying about the way Israeli soldiers treat Palestinians are shocking. They paint Israel as an inept and cruel occupier.

One story, for example, that Shaul has told the media on several occasions, describes how he and other IDF soldiers on patrol in 2002 locked an innocent Palestinian family in the basement of their own home so the soldiers could watch a World Cup match.

OTHER TESTIMONIES – which are almost always made anonymously – have claimed soldiers smoke drugs before going on patrols in occupied territory, or have burst in on Palestinian families in the middle of the night with no other purpose than to intimidate them or "make their presence felt."

After Israel's 2014 war with Hamas, BtS published a 240-page report containing detailed testimonies from about 60 soldiers and officers who had served in the operation. Those testimonies, available on the Internet, say the IDF's guiding military principle during the battles, known as Operation Protective Edge, was one of "minimum risk to our forces, even at the cost of harming innocent civilians." The report also alleged that the IDF recklessly shelled civilian neighborhoods, causing "massive and unprecedented" harm to homes and infrastructure.

The chief complaint many Israelis have against BtS is that it chooses to ignore the official systems in place in Israel for IDF whistleblowers to lodge complaints, choosing instead to take their case directly to foreign countries for support.

"Israel, as a functioning democracy, has established channels to prosecute such infractions" by IDF soldiers serving in the territories, wrote former Soviet prisoner Natan Sharansky in a recent column in the Haaretz daily. Those channels are something that persecuted dissidents in the USSR "could only dream about," wrote Sharansky, who is now head of the Jewish Agency.

In mid-February, IDF Chief of Staff Gadi

Eisenkot said at an academic conference near Tel Aviv that he welcomed communication with BtS and that he had instructed the IDF's legal department to follow up on some of the claims the group had made. BtS says it wrote to Eisenkot asking for a meeting about six weeks before it published its report on Operation Protective Edge. But Eisenkot's office never responded, says Schatz.

For those of us who love Israel and believe the only way Israel can be a democracy is by ending the occupation, we feel this is our duty

On February 24, a senior military source revealed that the IDF was conducting three investigations into alleged illegal acts committed during Operation Protective Edge, based on testimonies provided by BtS.

So, is BtS looking forward to more communication with the army? Not really. "We have no problem meeting with the army and letting them know what's going on and how we see stuff," says Schatz. "But we don't think they should be the one dealing with the consequences of what's going on in the West Bank. The one who needs to deal with it is us – it's the state, it's society, but not the army. The army is just the operational hand of the government."

This is the same reason Schatz gives when asked why BtS chooses to avoid official channels for registering complaints about immoral or illegal incidents in the IDF.

"You say official channels, but to do what? To say, 'I want to change reality in the West Bank?'" Schatz says. "The thing is, it's not about one or two incidents [where something bad happened]. It's about the whole mindset [of the occupation]."

Though BtS is unenthusiastic about starting a dialogue with the IDF, it may soon have no choice. The NRG news site reported in early February that the IDF had asked the State Prosecutor's Office to force BtS to turn over testimonies that relate to alleged war crimes and other illegal conduct. The

State Prosecutor then petitioned a Magistrates' Court to force BtS to give up the testimonies, the NRG report said.

BtS has no intention of doing this. "Our policy is clear. We're happy to help where we can, but we're not going to jeopardize any soldiers. We're not going to expose them if they don't want to be exposed," says Schatz.

The other reason BtS rankles Israelis is that it does a lot of its publicity and fundraising abroad – mostly in Europe. The group received roughly 3.5 million shekels (\$895,000) in donations in 2014, according to its own financial records, which are publicly posted online. About 60 percent of the donations it receives each year come from foreign sources, either from European charities and development groups – many affiliated with Christian or Catholic churches – but also directly from foreign governments in Scandinavia and Western Europe, and from the European Union itself.

"The problem with Breaking the Silence is that they say they care about the moral values of the IDF, but if that's the case, why do they take the conversation outside of Israel?" says Itai Reuveni, a senior researcher with NGO Monitor, a Jerusalem-based group that investigates NGO activity in Israel.

Many Israelis object to the fact that European governments are giving substantial sums to effectively weaken the policies of the elected government. "I can't imagine Israel trying to give money to interfere with the dispute over something like abortions in the United States," said Yair Lapid, the leader of the centrist party Yesh Atid at a Jerusalem press conference in late January.

MONEY ASIDE, many Israelis also find it offensive that BtS is using their country's most sensitive moral dilemmas and exporting them to Europe to support a political agenda.

"They explain things [about war] that are clear to Israelis because they serve in the army and they know what's going on," says Matan Katzman, an officer in the IDF reserves who co-founded the soldiers' organization "My Truth" over the summer as an antidote to BtS. "But they go to audiences overseas that are very anti-Israel, and that's the problem," he tells The Report.

Continued on page 25



Yehuda Shaul, a founder of Breaking the Silence, talks to members of the European Parliament during a visit to the Palestinian village of Susya, southeast of Hebron, in the West Bank, February 10

BtS says it does not support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which aims to put economic pressure on Israel to end the occupation. But the group occasionally collaborates with pro-BDS organizations. It also receives sizeable donations from European charities that fund pro-BDS groups, some of which are radically anti-Israel. For example, the Irish charity Trócaire – which gave 73,000 shekels (\$18,660) to BtS in 2014 – also funds groups like Zochrot, an Israeli NGO that promotes awareness of the Nakba (catastrophe, the Arab term for Israel’s War of Independence) and speaks about the need to “de-Zionize” Israel.

It is foreign funding of this sort that’s the target of a bill introduced to the Knesset in November by Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked. The proposed law would require any NGO in Israel that receives more than half of its funding from foreign states to say so in its literature. Critics of the so-called transparency bill say it’s a way to stifle

dissent by targeting left-wing groups; supporters say it’s merely a way to know which NGOs are beholden to foreign interests.

Left-wing civil society organizations aren’t the only ones looking for help overseas. Right-wing groups also take their message abroad to garner support for political agendas at home. For example, pro-settler organizations in Israel raise millions of dollars from charities in the US and elsewhere – funds that are used to buttress controversial settlement projects in the West Bank.

So, if right-wing groups can raise support for the occupation overseas, BtS has every right to fundraise abroad, as well, Yuli Novak, the group’s 33-year-old executive director, tells *The Report*. And it’s all for a noble cause, she says. “For those of us who love Israel and believe the only way Israel can be a democracy is by ending the occupation, we feel this is our duty.”

Support for BtS is low among the Israeli public, but some high-ranking former officials from army, police and intelligence agencies have spoken in favor of the group’s right to exist.

“Breaking the Silence protects IDF sol-

diers in the impossible situation in which politicians have abandoned them,” read one recent ad in *Haaretz*, which was published by former Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet) chief and former commander of the Israel Navy Ami Ayalon, together with former Israel Police Maj. Gen. Alik Ron.

“I see them as a group of warriors, none of whom decided to disobey any orders, none of whom decided not to join the service, and most of whom served in the best units in our army, which is how they came to see what they saw,” Ayalon, who is now a researcher at the Israel Democracy Institute, tells *The Report* during a recent phone interview.

Ayalon stresses that he doesn’t support BtS – he only supports its right to operate, which is different. “I hate what they do,” he said. “But they are the mirror that shows us who we are.”

BtS and its supporters are right when they say that a functioning democracy needs institutions that question and criticize the status quo. But if those institutions alienate the same people they claim to be helping, they may find their job just got a lot harder. ■

Continued from page 24