

The Paradox of Breaking the Silence

A quick, perhaps superficial mapping of the Jewish-Israeli political map will reveal among those who call themselves 'leftist' groups, very few that could actually be referred to as belonging to the anti-colonial camp or struggle. Anti-Zionist resistance includes all those loosely defined groups and individuals who are committed anti-colonial activists with a firm and uncompromising approach in their understanding of Zionism as a settler colonial movement with all of the associated implications, including, first and foremost, the understanding that only decolonization (and here perhaps there are differences in the understanding of the meaning of which) of the Israeli state structure and society will bring an end to the injustices from which the Palestinians are suffering. Before proceeding, it is important to mention that in Israeli political discourse, 'left' and 'right' pertain more to the position around the extent of colonization than to internal issues of redistribution. Most of those in what is considered in the common political (and popular) discourse as the 'liberal left' are in fact supporters of harsh neoliberal policies (for that, see recent example of [Haaretz's editorial](#) supporting Netanyahu's new policies to limit unions' ability to call on strikes). Additionally, we should be careful when thinking of the anti-Zionist resistance as some organized form of struggle or some kind of united movement. On the contrary, while it is a very small and marginalized group, internal divisions and disagreements over tactics are prevalent. However, in the political spectrum of groups/organizations that in contemporary Israel are considered by the hegemonic right-center as 'leftist', the camp is broad and ranges all the way from fighters for the defence of the Jewish-democracy and human rights advocates to anti-colonial/anti-Zionist radicals. Interestingly, those who are actually on the right side of the 'left' are those who attract the most fire.

Here, I would like to shed light on perhaps the most prominent group that has recently been vilified in the mainstream Israeli press and political discourse: Breaking the Silence (BtS). Interestingly, it has also been severely criticised by some of the anti-Zionist camp, which has not made it to the mainstream news but has taken place on social media and in private conversations amongst activists. BtS was founded in March 2004 by a group of soldiers who served in the Palestinian city of Hebron. It is an organisation composed of veteran combatants who have served in the Israeli military since the start of the Second Intifada in 2000 and [have taken it upon](#)

[themselves to](#) “expose the Israeli public to the reality of everyday life in the Occupied Territories”. According to their mission statement, BtS aims 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. Importantly, their work aims to bring an end to the occupation. In short, all they do is to tell the Israeli public what they did in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, through testimonies collected from soldiers, all of which were approved by the IDF Censor before being published. While most of the information they reveal is not new, but rather a re-affirmation of testimonies by Palestinian and international human rights organizations that report on the same abuses, the testimonies they publish gain interest and features on many international media outlets such as [The Guardian](#), [The Times](#), [Russia Today](#), [CBS](#) and [The New York Times](#).

Over the past [year](#), BtS has found itself at the center of a public and political campaign that includes prominent politicians and journalists from the centre-right. There have even been [calls to outlaw](#) the organisation entirely. In December 2015, Naftali Bennet, Israeli Minister of Education, [declared](#) “our children are sent to school to educate them toward mutual responsibility, and not to insult IDF soldiers”. He added, “the activities of BtS have slandered Israel abroad, and they have made it their goal to hurt their brothers who defend us”. On another occasion, Moshe Ya’alon, [then the](#) Israeli Minister of Defence, said that BtS was [committing treason](#) regardless of whether the confidential information it gathers through questioning former Israeli soldiers was being made public or whether it was only being stored in the group’s records. Lair Yapid, the head of the Yesh Atid centrist party went even further, and [declared](#) that BtS had “crossed the red line between criticism and subversion”. He continued by claiming that BtS is funded by “BDS organisations that have the Hamas behind them, and try to endanger the core existence of the state of Israel”. Outside of the parliamentary-political sphere, [Im Tirzu](#), an organisation dedicated to ‘strengthening and advancing the values of Zionism in Israel’, launched a public campaign that aims to ‘[expose the foreign agents](#)’, who according to it, get support from foreign governments in an attempt to defame and weaken the Israeli state and military. These ‘foreign agents’ organisations include BtS as well as three others. In the campaign, a direct link was made between Palestinian attacks on Israelis and the work [of](#) these organisations.

This public and political uproar could be considered a bit surprising if we think about what this organisation is not. Indeed, one could easily [criticise BtS from the left side of the political map](#). Very firstly, they do not belong to the anti-colonial camp, hence, they focus their critique on the 1967 occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and overlook the colonial nature of the Zionist movement itself. Secondly, and contrary to accusations made by several political figures, they do not support the Palestinian call for Boycott Divestment and Sanctions. Third, and crucially, they are not asking to put Israeli army officers on trial for war crimes, even when the testimonies they deliver are addressing acts that amount to war crimes according to international law (such as indiscriminate shooting, and the use of specific weapons in densely populated areas, to name just a couple). On the contrary, they believe that it is the political system that must be held accountable for the occupation and not the army. Moreover, BtS is protecting the identities of those soldiers who committed war crimes, as most of their testimonies are anonymous. Forth, BtS do not justify, support, or even understand Palestinian violence as a legitimate act of resistance against the occupation. Fifth, they do not support or encourage refusal to serve in the army and many of the activists are still doing reserve duty every year. Indeed, one BtS activist, Achia Shatz, in an interview with the news outlet [Walla!News](#), expressed his fear that he would be pulled out of the reserve service because of his activities in BtS. Sixth, the framework within which BtS exists and functions is militaristic as is the discourse it promotes. The paradigm for BtS is ‘we have the right to speak out because we are serving’. Moreover, and a point that was heavily criticised by the radical activists, is that the rhetoric that the organisation’s heads are mobilising in order to justify themselves amidst the campaign against them is militaristic: Yuli Novak, the director of BtS, in an [article written for the liberal newspaper Haaretz](#), ‘enlisted’ her grandparents and their military background in her defence, and against the incitement from which the organisation suffers. Novak outlined their background as immigrants to the newly established State of Israel, with one grandfather who was a member of the Irgun (the infamous pre-state Jewish underground terrorist organisation) and later, as part of the newly established army in the Harel Brigade.

How can we situate this organization in the greater scheme of anti-Zionist resistance? BtS is in between being accused of treason by the Zionist right-center and being understood as the perpetrators by the radical anti-Zionists. Another way to think about this question would be: how can an act that on the one hand is effective

internationally and on the other hand is politically compromised be dealt with? In order to answer this question, we must think about the function of the *whistleblower*: the one that exposes the injustices that exist within the system from the inside. If we think of Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, and most recently the leakers of the ‘Panama Papers’ – they are not figures of the radical left. They all seem to come from a [liberal political outlook rather than radical or anarchist](#), and made their exposures in the name of transparency and protection of the right of the people to know. Accordingly, in the early days, Snowden claimed that he was [not trying to bring down the NSA but rather to improve it](#). Indeed, whistleblowing is based on democratic premises: [“if people know enough, they can "speak truth to power," and this speech itself will somehow catalyze change. Of course, this presumes a political system based in dialogue.”](#) However, this is a naïve premise, and this logic must be challenged altogether. At the same time, there is no doubt that their exposure poses some of the biggest challenges to western hegemony from inside the west; while they are not suspected of anti-regime radicalism, their mode of action opens up a model of resistance that can be, and is indeed mobilised by the left. Whistleblowing should be understood as just a tactic in the larger struggle, and one that more direct form of action must be built upon.

In our context, what the anti-Zionist activists do is to build upon and mobilise BtS exposures for the struggle. Indeed, BtS’ testimonies are assisting the BDS campaign, and serve to fuel the struggle against Zionism internationally. Moreover, the orchestrated campaign against them assists the radicals, as it erodes the liberal-democratic image of Israel both locally and internationally. While on a personal level some of the anti-Zionist activists are in solidarity with members of BtS as they are subjected to ‘street fascism’, they are careful not to be dragged into this discussion, which revolves around the freedom of speech of the already privileged Israelis.

In sum, BtS embodies the structural paradox: the whistleblowers, those that expose from the inside are also the perpetrators, those who take an active part in performing the acts they expose. While it can be determined that it is the criminal that is best positioned to expose the crime, the task of the anti-Zionist left is to build on the information revealed and take advantage of the cracks and contradictions within the system in order to build platforms, construct an alternative, and maintain the struggle. Resistance must be understood as a multi-faceted activity. It is simultaneously inside and outside state institutions; it is legal and illegal, constructive

and disruptive and engaged in building and dismantling. It therefore always has to move between the fissures and openings that exist within the hegemonic system: when one avenue of action is blocked, another opens. And in order to be most effective resistance must act simultaneously both inside and outside the system, constructing and disrupting, building and dismantling. This mode of action proves to be the most strategically effective in countering structures of power, exposing their weaknesses and internal contradictions and forcing hegemony to reveal its oppressive nature, thereby losing its legitimacy both internally and internationally. In the case of Israel, it is the tendency of the state to suspend its democratic structures and institutions in favor of the defense of its Jewish character, thus revealing its oppressive undemocratic nature.

Tags:

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Author's bio:

Elian Weizman is the deputy director and research fellow at the CBRL Kenyon Institute in Occupied East Jerusalem. Her research focuses on anti-Zionist resistance practices of Jewish Israelis as well as on the interrelations between law and resistance. Her article “Cause Lawyering and Resistance in Israel: The Legal Strategies of Adalah” has been published in *Social and Legal Studies* and her most recent article “Decolonising Isreali Society? Resistance to Zionism as an Educative Practice” was just published online in *Ethnicities*. She is also working on a book manuscript based on her PhD thesis *Hegemony, Law, Resistance: Struggles against Zionism in the State of Israel*.