

Israeli snipers in the Al-Aqsa intifada: killing, humanity and lived experience

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ABSTRACT *This article is an analysis of Israeli military snipers who served during the Al-Aqsa intifada. It takes issue with the scholarly consensus that, for such acts to take place, perpetrators have to somehow dehumanise their enemies. Based on interviews with 30 individuals, it shows that snipers do not always need to dehumanise their targets and that they experience killing in conflicting ways, both as pleasurable and as disturbing. The snipers simultaneously deploy distancing mechanisms aimed at dehumanising enemies and constantly recognise their basic humanity. The article ends on a cautionary note: violence should not be seen as only belonging to the realm of the pathological. Rather we must be aware of rules of legitimate violence, the culturally specific ideology of violence at work in specific cases. This kind of ideology may ‘humanse’ enemies but still classify them as opponents against which violence may be legitimately used.*

What is it like to kill another human being? This paper presents an analysis of Israeli snipers who served in the Israeli military during the current Al-Aqsa intifada. We use this case in order to explore the complex of factors—cognitive, emotional, social, moral and organisational—that centre on the lived experience of these soldiers. Our starting point is a challenge provided by the data we gathered. Zizek has argued that “‘enemy recognition’ is always a performative procedure which brings to light/constructs the enemy’s ‘true face’”. . . [I]n order to recognize the enemy, one has to “schematise” the logical figure of the Enemy, providing it with the concrete features which will make it into an appropriate target of hate and struggle.’ Indeed, the consensus among scholars who have written about killing is that, for such acts to take place, perpetrators have to somehow dehumanise—either demonise or objectify—their enemies.¹

In our interviews with Israeli snipers who have served in the current conflict, however, we found that they actually held several contradictory views concurrently. Palestinian enemies were curiously portrayed both as an ‘other’ and as ‘like us’. In our discussions with these soldiers it was not only

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'terrorist', 'Arab' or 'armed person' that were the common terms used to refer to the Palestinians they had killed. Rather the designation 'human being' (*ben-adam*, literally 'son of Adam') was one no less frequently used. In addition, while terms such as 'neutralize', 'take down' or 'hit' that blur the act of killing were sometimes employed, the simple, naked phrase 'I have killed a human being' was one that appeared in many cases, even if the act was not easy for the killer. Accordingly, the question that stands at the base of our analysis is all the more poignant: what is it like to take the life of another being whose basic humanity is recognised by the killer?

The background to our project centres on the recognition that, however personally and politically problematic the issue, in order to understand the dynamics of any violent conflict one needs to study the perpetrators of violence as well as its victims. Yet when one looks at studies of killing by soldiers one encounters a certain gap. Scholarly writings about combat often concentrate on such issues as courage and discipline, leadership and motivation, the camaraderie of battle, or stress and the terror of impending death. Similarly, scholars have shown how exposure to the death of friends and the guilt of the survivors may precipitate emotional damage.² But the act of killing, the ultimate act of war, is often absent from scholarly discussion. Even in Israel, a society marked by decades of armed conflict, scholars have analysed issues such as the personal meanings of service, control of emotions in combat, or soldiering and manhood, but not the taking of life. As Bourke sardonically comments, sometimes one gets the impression that soldiers are there to die and not to inflict death and destruction on others. Given that the military is the organisation most strongly identified with the legitimate use of violence and that soldiers are trained in wielding weapons and wreaking destruction, this lack of scholarly attention is surprising.³

In his important book *On Killing* Grossman argues that the experience of killing another person is a private, intimate occurrence of tremendous intensity. For this reason humans have an intense, biologically based resistance to killing other humans. Our common humanity and this biological mechanism make killing a difficult task that inevitably leads to feelings of guilt and pain. Similarly, other scholars have argued that internal prohibitions on killing have pathogenic potential to bring about a range of psychological and behavioural problems. Another, more anthropologically oriented strand of research contends that violence forms a problematic phenomenon because it threatens the very basis of social order and questions the basic humanity of members of any social group. And yet, despite this intense internal resistance and social depreciation, under the appropriate circumstances soldiers regularly take the lives of other human beings.⁴

Why snipers? In contrast to the previous intifada which was characterised by mass beatings and arrests, a major feature of this conflict has been the policy of targeted killings through the use of helicopters, planes and elite units.⁵ Snipers—who selectively shoot from a distance—play a major role in this 'precision warfare' and have been used extensively over the past few years. However, there are also theoretical reasons for analysing snipers. Most cases of killing in modern wars are impersonal. Only extremely small minorities of

soldiers actually shoot their guns at enemy individuals and kill them. In the majority of cases the act of killing is blurred by distance. Snipers function at a distance from which the average infantry soldier can see the enemy but cannot kill him without special weaponry. Snipers, however, are unlike aircraft pilots, tank gunners or artillery troops in that they are able to see the effects of their shooting. They are also unlike regular infantry soldiers for whom killing involves physical exertion, danger to life and limb and uncertain reality of combat. For snipers, killing and wounding are thus not hidden behind some 'fog of combat' or technical distance. Rather, they present a case in which distance from the enemy is closely combined with a heightened awareness of the effects of their actions. There is a paradoxical kind of killing: shooting takes place from a distance of hundreds of meters but is, at the same time, closer than many other kinds of killing. Moreover, most snipers do not act out of the passions of combat but shoot when composed and determined. It is this combination of personal mark, intense emotional concentration and heightened awareness that interests us. It is the certainty of killing involved in the work of snipers that forms the focus of our analysis.

Between 2000 and 2003 we interviewed 31 soldiers. Twenty-three of these soldiers served as snipers (in various infantry units), five were sniper instructors (three of these were female), and the final three were more senior (and older) officers serving as commanders of the snipers' school. The majority of the interviews were held within the framework of the military (in various camps and bases) and a few in people's homes. In all the interviews we made it clear that we were studying the ongoing violent conflict with the Palestinians and that we wanted to understand what a sniper's life is like.

Methodologically, one could well question the ways in which our social standing influenced soldiers' responses to our questions. Both of us are civilians, middle-class and clearly belong to the academic world. However, Bar served as an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) officer for four years and Ben-Ari served in the military reserves for over two decades.⁶ In truth, some interviewees did try to give us the 'party line' and were at times suspicious of our intentions during the first parts of interviews. Given the sheer variety of difficulties and qualms they talked about—fears, violence perpetrated against Palestinians, and social pressures within small units—we think that they were honest with us, as the excerpts in the article show. Another methodological problem centres on the extent to which we focus on what may be termed 'the' sniper experience. As will be evident from the excerpts we cite in the text, our data are based on all the interviews we carried out with the snipers (and to a more limited extent with their officers and instructors). The variation in voice and tone that we heard from the troops is very much one that is based on personal inclination and reflection. Thus we did not find any significant differences in outlook between snipers from different units, holding different political views or with shorter or longer experience in the military. This does not mean that there is some kind of homogeneous sniper experience but it does imply that the standard sociological variables do not 'explain' divergent positions. We use the masculine form of denotation for snipers since there are no female snipers in the IDF.

Positioning ourselves

The Al-Aqsa intifada has been going on for more than four years and the end of the bloody conflict between Israelis and Palestinians seems to recede farther into the future everyday. The heavy price of this conflict, in terms of human lives, continues to grow. Some of the Palestinian victims are the outcome of the actions of the snipers we have studied. For both of us who had been studying the military for some years, listening to, and then trying to make sense of, the actual acts of death and killing was a rather harrowing experience. We are fully aware that our article could be read by different groups as either condoning the killing of Palestinians or as an anti-Israeli tract. Rather than leading our analysis in an explicitly political direction, we purposely take a distanced view (perhaps the only one possible for us as Israeli anthropologists) to understand the intense, often horrendous, act of killing another human being. Thus we strive to listen very carefully, to analyse the wider context, and to explain the lived experience of the Israeli snipers.

In order to foreshadow our argument about the contradictions and complexities of their experience we begin with the voices of the soldiers talking about the problematics of killing. We then go on to talk about the 'enjoyment' of killing and the mechanisms of dehumanisation that accompany such actions. It is against this background (which takes off from much of contemporary social scientific scholarship) that we turn to the last sections of the article, in which we demonstrate how soldiers liken Palestinian enemies to themselves and see them as human beings. In the conclusion we offer an analysis of some of the wider issues raised by our argument.

The problematics of killing

The operational guidelines provided to snipers by the IDF have changed over the course of the current conflict. At the beginning of the conflict soldiers were instructed to shoot only armed Palestinians who were actively engaged in armed aggression against soldiers or Israeli citizens. Later the rules were changed to include any armed Palestinians or those coming near various IDF outposts and positions. Within these rules snipers have had to obtain explicit permission from commanders at the company or battalion levels to shoot their weapons. It is on the basis of reports from the snipers themselves, intelligence data provided to the commanders and the latter's assessment of a specific situation that orders to kill or wound someone have been given. The criteria for ordering snipers to shoot have been immediate threat to IDF soldiers and Israeli citizens or the belief that targeted Palestinians belong to one of the armed Palestinian groups. Any drift from these orders is considered a violation from the rules of engagement and has usually been dealt with informally inside military units and much more rarely through formal disciplinary measures.

Turning to snipers, because such violent acts are so visceral and palpable, their actions deeply concern them. Take the words of a paratroop sniper:

It does not become simple, but you, you understand, the [sniper] squad, it killed a person only once and then I was in shock for two days. I can tell you that apart from that we did not have a chance to kill. . . I thought that in the field I would be more excited, I would shoot who I have to shoot. . . Afterwards you have all the time to think. Suddenly you realise that you have killed someone.

Another soldier who was very satisfied with his successful hits (wounding rather than killing armed Palestinians) was nevertheless surprised at the reaction of a fellow sniper who had killed a man by mistake:

For a full day, X felt really bad because after all he did not want to kill the man who threw rocks, he was not about to kill anyone. So he. . . was really depressed. He had a talk with the company commander, with the guys, and in the end we calmed him down. . . But me, I don't know how I would feel. I thought about it and told myself that I don't think that I would feel terrible. . . but you never know because here X suddenly feels bad like that.

Another combatant went to prison because he fired his rifle without permission and killed someone by mistake. He initially told us that he too did not have a bad conscience about what happened. Then, after a short break in his words, he added 'not very much' and immediately went on to talk about his experiences in prison. Later in the interview he went back to the killing and the influence this had on him.

I began to read. Not that I became crazy or anything, I just began to read all sorts of things about spiritual awakening; all sorts of things like that. . . Not really important. . . I really changed after that thing, very much. . . I became a better person: more helping, more considerate, much less angry. . .

Yet another soldier who also told us that he does not regret his action nevertheless went on to say that afterwards he had thought about 'many things'.

I may sound stuck-up, maybe, mainly his family, his friends, all sorts of things. I thought a lot about how he is beginning his process of decay. That thing sat really hard in my head. . . But he had it coming, he was a Hamasnik, belongs to the Hamas organisation and walking around with a weapon. He wasn't a guy who just came there to play games.

Among the psychological syndromes most identified with warriors in general, and Vietnam veterans in particular, is that of post-traumatic stress disorder; research has found that it was higher among those who had killed than among those who had not killed other people.⁷ In our case, the chances of finding real trauma were low, since we did not interview any snipers who had been defined as psychologically damaged.

At the same time, however, the 'little' traumas—if they can be so labelled—came up time and again. One sniper (an immigrant from the former Soviet Union) who had hunted animals since he was 10 said decidedly that 'every person that a sniper kills, he sees him sometime'. 'When, under what circumstances?' one of us asked, and he answered, 'In dreams, when you

don't sleep well'. Female sniper instructors could easily remember soldiers who had proudly said that they had 'taken someone down'. Although it was more difficult to remember those who had problems grappling with the results of killing, one instructor recalled:

They do really important work, really hard, and it's a fact that many snipers after the first time when they kill someone then they come to tell us and that it was not easy for them when they see the man dead, because they see it in a magnified way. . . After that you have those that have nightmares about it, they dream about it at night. There are all sorts and then when they continue, it sort of goes away somewhere.

Another sniper in an elite unit talked about a 'tweak' that was caused when he heard the wife and friends of the person he killed mourn him. His slight vacillation says much more than the words themselves:

At the basic level we understand that here is a man with a weapon and that he is about to go and carry out the attack, to kill innocent civilians and then we are not sorry about it. Even when you feel this tweak afterwards when his buddies and his wife, they beg. . . sort of sho. . . shouted, they shouted and cried. So it causes a tw. . . a tweak, because here is someone whose friends love him, and I am sure that he is a good person because he does this out of ideology, but we from our side have prevented the killing of innocents so that we are not sorry about it.

Thus even in cases where soldiers see a clear justification for killing or wounding, there are persistent thoughts and emotions that bring them back to the moment of violence. What is significant is the recurrent recognition of the humanity of enemies. One man, a shy soldier with a smile, killed six people. During the interview, he used few words and did not make an effort to explain his inconsistencies. In the following passages one can sense, at one and the same time, the great difficulties of being a sniper and his readiness—even his desire—to continue killing:

I hit him in the head. At the beginning, the first time you shoot and hit a person in the head, its not so nice [smiles] all the. . . All the brain.

Q: The whole brain was smashed?

Yes exactly. Or it flew out the other side. A bullet hits, for example, when a bullet hits the head, where it hits is only a small hole and on the other side half the head is missing. The first time it is hard. Hard, so hard. . . I don't know, hard to look at it, hard to see a man fall like that, and his brain explodes.

Every person that you kill it is not such a happy thing because he is also a human being. But you have to do it because it's either that he, as a terrorist, kills our women and children and explodes in the middle of the country, or we take him down and he can't do that. It's simple: less of our citizens are going to get killed. That is why we do this work. . . It's very hard to kill people, but you have to do it, someone has to do it.

Q: What do you like about your work?

Let's say that I like it and I don't like it. I like teaching people. To give something new, to find something new, new techniques. . .[of] shooting, aiming, that are comfortable for you. To become a professional.

Q: And what don't you like?

Don't like bringing people down. At this stage, I have not had the chance for more. If it works out [to shoot more people] then it works out.

Q: But you prefer not to?

Me? No, why? I do prefer to do it.

Q: You do prefer it?

Less terrorists in the territories.

Q: Despite the fact that you said that you don't like doing it.

[Nods in approval].

This kind of ambivalence comes out directly or indirectly in other interviews. One soldier paints a horrible picture: after the shooting, night falls, and then the mothers and the children of those killed arrive. In the dark, only the sounds of the crying are heard by the sniper. This situation is emotionally moving enough to sow doubts in his mind about the act of killing. But soon he remembers the terror attacks that are being waged on the urban centres of Israel and his doubts recede.

After we finished shooting, we went back to our positions, and you begin to think. . .We stayed there and then they came to carry off the bodies at night. And the mothers there cried next to the bodies and started to cry. . .OK, when you think about it. . .like these mothers who are crying now for the two terrorists, when you hear their crying, everything is dark, and you hear the mothers crying and the mosque in the background, and it's, you don't really understand what is happening. You begin to think suddenly, why? And after all he was with a weapon. After that you say, they shoot at people, you think about the security situation in the country and that the mothers cry for their children here in Israel in the same way. There are terror attacks on buses and we here killed two and there 16 are killed in one day. So in general you say 'If another one will come out now you take him down'.

The hesitancy, doubts and often moving emotional reactions to killing another human being form the basis of how snipers talk about their military work. But there are other dimensions that must be taken into account.

The enjoyment of killing

It is disturbing to acknowledge that killing may be a source of pleasure. A strong social stigma prevents soldiers from admitting that they enjoy such actions and scholars from being open and receptive to such revelations. The argument that killing is characterised by joy, satisfaction and spiritual elevation does not preclude the distress, difficulty and guilt associated with it. Conflicting

human emotions can exist side by side. The problem is that scholars have almost always proceeded from the assumption that the enjoyment of killing is abnormal and that trauma is the reasonable reaction. A more open approach would seek to integrate the dimensions of pleasure into the analysis. In this respect, we emphasise that the enjoyment of killing is not identical with the joy of battle or the desire for action that many soldiers feel upon embarking on war. Nor is it identical with what Americans call being 'trigger happy', the feeling of satisfaction and liberation that the shooter may feel from pulling the trigger and the flow of bullets from the barrel.⁸ We are talking about the enjoyment or satisfaction derived from killing another human being.

What is the source of such enjoyment? One proposition is that, because combat is fraught with mental and physical stresses, shooting is the only available means for soldiers to feel that they are still alive within a scene of horror. Shooting at enemies may combine release, relief and the masking of fear and thus make it easier for soldiers, especially if they are shooting as part of teams. Yet this contention evades the issue of killing, since it focuses on the situation within which it takes place rather than on the act itself. According to Grossman, people who enjoy killing belong to the 2% of sociopaths found in any population: those clinically defined as having an anti-social personality and who do not feel normal resistance to killing or the guilt that accompanies it. This view, linking the enjoyment of killing to pathology, is reinforced by Lieblich, who contends that two of her interviewees who talked about enjoying killing were angry men who already had a tendency to violent outbursts before their military service. If the former explanation dismisses the evidence for enjoyment of killing through arguing about the situation which engenders it, the latter explanation distances the experience from the realm of 'normal' people.⁹ Both explanations do not clarify the enjoyment that ordinary people may find in slaying and the possibility that death and killing are fascinating for the human race. After all, during some eras and among certain groups, humans (most often the ones in power) did possess a common habit of enjoying the sight of blood-letting in gladiator tournaments, bull fights, wrestling and boxing, or the slaughter of animals.¹⁰

One explanation for the fascination with killing is its appealing aesthetics. Hollywood cinema (like film makers in India, Hong Kong and Japan), for example, uses the beauty of death—in scenes of slaughter, images of running blood, or large-scale shootings—to attract crowds to theatres. Violence is very photogenic and it seems that death has a seductive allure. In the wake of such imagery, soldiers often grow up on childhood heroes like Rambo or Luke Skywalker and then develop romantic images of war and of themselves as warriors. As Bourke suggests, part of the enjoyment of killing may derive from an imagined similarity between reality and magical screen images.¹¹ Yet, as she notes, not all soldiers imagine themselves to be film heroes, not everyone finds beauty in death, and many do not feel that they are in a movie in the midst of a firefight.

There is another image that soldiers use: they imagine themselves to be god. Control over life and death, according to this view, is given to higher powers—god or the state—and not to ordinary humans. In the battlefield,

however, soldiers sometimes suddenly have the terrible right to influence the fate of other humans. The higher authorities award soldiers the right to break the highest moral code without being accountable for their actions. It is not surprising, then, that soldiers derive much gratification from this awful power.¹² One soldier elaborated:

There is a saying that the head of the snipers' course taught us, that the sniper is like god in that he decides who will live and who will die on the battlefield. It's really a bold statement but in reality it's quite right.

And another man said:

Many times, the weapon's role is like god's role. You look through the sights and you can see the man and know that these are going to be his last moments and he doesn't even know that you are there.

To be sure, given the strict command and control of snipers, their perception of themselves as 'god' may seem to be an illusion, since shooting is dependent on strict authorisation and they are very rarely able to fire freely. Nevertheless at the phenomenological level of their experience, the feeling of being 'god' is very strong.

A related theme comes up in Krin's research on Israeli soldiers who served in the first intifada.¹³ She found that most of her interviewees enjoyed inflicting violence during their service. The soldiers did not necessarily kill, but they beat Palestinians, shot rubber-coated steel bullets, threw hand grenades and used live-fire against the local population. While the enjoyment that comes out in their stories is often told in a relatively mild manner, Krin's interviewees did express intense pleasure derived from the combination of danger and power in violent situations.

A further related attribute that provides pleasure is the fact that the sniper works as an individual and that success is attributed to his personal talent. Accordingly, the enjoyment of shooting is related to receiving positive feedback, actualising professional capabilities or craving for 'action'. An infantry sniper:

If I have my 'personal mark', that I know that only I was the one that shot and that I hit [him] without a doubt. Then I think that the feeling is good...If everyone is waiting for the result of your work and in the end it succeeds, then everything is great.

How can we explain the existence of emotions that have a strong potential to contradict each other? Snipers, it seems, are aware of the humanity of their enemies, of the import of their actions and the sorrow they are causing. And yet they inflict pain and sometimes kill without hesitation. The killing that they carry out seems neither banal nor traumatic and at times enjoyable. It is not easy, but is not unbearable and is sometimes pleasant. The problematic aspect of killing is seen by the snipers as natural and reasonable but as something that passes. Whereas during a specific act of shooting snipers do not get confused and rarely have doubts, it is in their thoughts and dreams that the people they have killed and injured appear.

Distancing, emotions and the enemy

What kind of process underlies the ability of the snipers to kill? As Grossman suggests, distancing between soldiers and enemies is crucial in order to be able to kill adversaries.¹⁴ In the scholarly literature there appear to be two ways to construct such distancing: dehumanisation, implying the negation of enemies' humanity, and demonisation, entailing the attribution of evil characteristics to their image. Despite certain confusion between the two, each distancing mechanism is accompanied by different emotions and implies different ways of behaving.

Dehumanisation

The enemy's human-ness is negated by various technological means or by the sheer physical distance between the killer and the killed. Thus, for example, range is important: pilots and artilleryists belong to the maximal distance (where victims cannot be seen without mechanical aides), tank crews are at a reach where the average soldier can see his enemy but cannot kill him without special weaponry, infantry soldiers using rifles are at the medium range and finally soldiers who kill with a spear or knife are closest. In our case, de-personalisation of the enemy is facilitated for the sniper by the use of telescopes or field glasses that make the shooting appear as though on television screens or computer games. One sniper observed:

When you look out a window, everything appears less human. Also when you ride a car and look outside it looks less human...That's what makes a difference between riding in a car or on a motorcycle. . .It is much, much harder to shoot a man, and the fact that I look at him through a [rifle] sight it is like looking at something on television more or less. Of course, you know to differentiate between them because this is real, but to look through the sight makes things less human.

Hence, in a poignant manner, the consequence of telescopes (whose aim is to make shooting more effective in a technical sense) is the de-humanisation of antagonists. Without this depersonalisation, killing, it seems, would become unbearable. As Holmes puts it:

a soldier who constantly reflected upon the knee-smashing, widow-making characteristics of his weapon, or who always thought of the enemy as a man exactly like himself, doing much the same task and subjected to exactly the same stresses and strains, would find it difficult to operate effectively in battle.¹⁵

In the Israeli army, as in many other armed forces, soldiers use an array of metaphors taken from the world of machines to describe killing: for instance, to 'neutralize' or 'clean up'. These terms hint at a perception of the enemy as an object that has to be handled in a rational and unemotional manner.¹⁶ Indeed, the Al-Aqsa intifada has spawned its own sanitising language,

especially around the metaphor of 'surgical' action. Terms used by the IDF include 'focused prevention', 'focused assassination' or 'pinpoint assassinations'. While part of the conventional military parlance emphasising precision, the use of such expressions appears to blur the fact that on the 'other' side are humans, and turns killing into simple technical actions. One sniper seemed to be surprisingly aware of this process:

From my view, I have a target, an object that is now carrying out certain actions that threatens the force that I am working with. And the object is the enemy. And I neutralised [him]. . . Sometimes when I say 'neutralised' it's like Freud, it's a sort of repression. Listen, I know what I am doing and believe in what I am doing. . . But try to disengage from the fact that this is a human being and it becomes an object that is shooting and threatening the situation. I neutralised him and he no longer does what he does and won't do it in the future.

A closely related mechanism is the process of turning the enemy into a collection of body parts. This point is evident in the next passage:

I aimed at the thigh, from the hips down. We usually shoot from the knees down but the guy was sitting in such a manner that if I would have aimed at his knees it would have endangered him because the bullet would have penetrated his stomach or heart. The thigh was the most salient part. As I let off the bullet I immediately recharged the rifle. . . Then, it's something you don't forget, I identified the hit. The man just grabbed his leg, bent backwards from the force of the bullet.

Snipers often divide the bodies of enemies into parts. There are body areas that one aims at according to the kind of damage to be inflicted: in order to kill from a distance the sniper will aim at the centre of the body's mass, the chest and stomach. To kill with one bullet from a short distance he will aim at the head, and to neutralise the leader of a demonstration he will aim at the knees and lower. The division of the body into areas and parts is not unique to snipers. Indeed, many surgeons turn the bodies of patients into an anatomical map.¹⁷ In such cases, as in sniping, the body is 'reduced' under the examining eye to body parts without thinking of the human behind the parts. And, in both cases, those of surgeons and snipers, de-humanisation appears to allow the avoidance of possible feelings of guilt or emotional turmoil.

What prevents soldiers from becoming uninhibited killers when the taboo against taking the lives of others has been lifted? In his research on the IDF, Ben-Ari found that de-humanisation is usually not accompanied by demonisation of the other side. The objectification is there, but enemies are not perceived as evil and so emotions of hate and disgust are not usually created. This argument fits with Shalit's findings about the relatively low rates of reported hate for the enemy among Israeli combat soldiers as opposed to support forces. This kind of attitude allows, Ben-Ari suggests, a rational handling of the enemy with relatively little space for emotional outbursts.¹⁸

Demonisation

By contrast, the ascription of evil or demonic attributes to enemies, or their portrayal as forces with unnatural powers, contributes to the emergence of fear and hate and to the use of uncontrolled violence in such acts as atrocities.¹⁹ In other words, portraying the enemy as malicious and repulsive creates feelings that make killing easier. In this regard the Israeli situation stands in contrast to that of the US forces, which were characterised for long historical periods by an almost obligatory demonisation of enemies and their portrayal as the foes of civilisation. Fussel, Cameron, Dower, Eisenhart and Shatan all contend that enemies were demonised by the US military during World War II, Korea and the Vietnam War. Kennett suggests that, while the German soldier inspired no strong detestation, the strong animosity to Japanese soldiers was based on a combination of racism and religious legitimation. Twenty years later, as Shay remarks, the Vietnamese ‘were thought of as monkeys, insects, vermin, childlike, unfeeling automata, puny. . .inscrutable, uniquely treacherous, deranged, physiologically inferior, primitive, barbaric and devoted to fanatical suicide charges’. Against this background, it is perhaps not surprising that American soldiers had the (unofficial) ‘mere gook rule’ which declared that killing a Vietnamese civilian did not really count.²⁰

There were relatively few instances of comparing enemies to animals in our data, but they do appear. Notice the slippages in the following sniper’s words:

We simply had a talk. . .and it was said that it is now spring and when it warms up a bit they will come out of their eggs because in the rain it’s not very nice to be walking around outside. They, not we. So they came of their houses and that is what you see.

The use of the word ‘eggs’ instead of ‘houses’ and the process of emergence when it becomes ‘warm’ raise associations of dangerous reptiles. Another form of demonisation is found in the words of a soldier talking about an ‘inciter’ he shot during a demonstration in Hebron:

I really caught the guy from the beginning; the minute I saw him I said to myself this is a troublemaker because he seemed like that, dressed in black, with jewellery (gormette), he looked like a Hamas operative, really a Hamas operative.

Q: Did he wear a mask?

No he looked regular, hair and gel and so, and you see that he is bad like. . .Saturday noontime. . .again that guy is in the same place at the centre of things. This time I didn’t wait too long and said that I identify that guy from yesterday. I gave him the name ‘the man in black’. He seemed to be the centre of the incident. I asked, ‘Can I shoot? I would like permission to shoot.’

It appears that precisely because the person’s humanity was evident through the telescope there was a need to ‘blacken’ his face. Yet, because of the

relatively rarity of demonisation in the IDF, these characterisations of enemies still allow rational and highly regulated reactions and do not lead to uncontrolled infliction of violence.

The snipers and wider understandings

Here one could ask as to the extent to which such understandings reverberate with the perceptions that occur at broader societal and group levels. Snipers' attitudes and understandings may be compared with three other levels. First, the snipers we interviewed showed remarkably similar attitudes to other combat troops of the IDF. Indeed, in a project Ben-Ari has been carrying out on Israeli ground forces in the current conflict, he found a similar diversity of means of labelling and naming armed Palestinians. Where snipers do diverge, however, is in the actual experience of killing, as we have been showing here. Second, in regard to Israeli society in general, public opinion polls and newspaper reports have consistently shown that, on the whole, the Jewish–Israeli public has been much more extreme in its views of Palestinians and armed Palestinians. Thus, as Harel and Isacharoff contend, before Operation Defensive Shield, when Israel reconquered the urban centres of the West Bank, the majority of Jewish Israelis saw the Palestinians as having a 'murderous desire and will to take control of the territories within [Israel proper]'.²¹ Finally, there is probably a difference between the ways in which the snipers perceive themselves and the ways in which they appear in media accounts. While an examination of this issue is beyond the limits of this paper, it would seem that the difference centres on the minority of rather sympathetic reports that see their work as part of Israel's policy of restraint and the majority of accounts that see their work as part of the Israeli state's ruthless policies against Palestinians.²²

Enemies and likenesses

Up to this point our discussion has developed a perspective that centres on the need for soldiers to see their enemy as the 'opposite' of themselves. But is this perspective always correct? As we argued in the introduction to this article, in many cases enemies do not necessarily become distanced objects or epitomes of evil but may actually be mirror images of soldiers. The likeness between soldiers and enemies is expressed on three levels.

The first is a process that may be termed 'reverse dehumanisation'. Dehumanisation aimed at the self is related to intra-psychic processes by which people protect themselves from emotionally loaded and threatening situations. Rieber and Kelly suggest that in stress-prone situations (such as medicine or law enforcement) dehumanisation involves two kindred but distinct processes. In the self-directed dehumanisation, individuals protect themselves, while dehumanisation of the other involves the process whereby individuals depersonalise others. These processes are intensified in situations of combat. In his ethnography of an infantry unit during the first intifada, Ben-Ari found that machine metaphors were often used in regard both to

members of Israeli units and their enemies. During the same period members of another unit studied by Krin dehumanised both themselves and their enemies through the use of metaphors centred on animals.²³

Second, the categorisation of enemy soldiers forms the basis for a scale of prestige or stature. Accordingly, in previous times, participation in battles in war was more prestigious than participating in engagements during 'peace-time'. And both activities used to be considered more impressive than border patrols where 'nothing happens'. In the present conflict the status of the sniper increases directly in relation to the threat posed by the enemy he shoots. Take the distinction one man drew between ordinary soldiers who shoot imprecise rubber-coated steel bullets and himself, up against an adversary with the binoculars.

In the midst of a protest demonstration I observed a man...who was constantly observing our force. We had a force that was going into the village in a concealed way, three or four soldiers that took great risks. They went deep inside and shot rubber bullets from a short distance that unfortunately were not precise and then went back out. Now this man with the binoculars was constantly observing us...I didn't like it and reported it...At the beginning I did not get permission [to shoot] and continued to report and I tell them all of the time, 'Listen the man is obstructing the work of our team'.

Then, he receives permission to shoot:

In short, I am at 380 meters and sitting on him and waiting... I don't want to shoot because all of the time there are people next to him. Till suddenly, he decides to get out and sit, like with his legs open wide; sits and looks...The man threatened the lives of the soldiers, threw a Molotov cocktail. How dare he do things like that to the IDF?

Indeed, grappling with an equal enemy (and projecting one's capabilities on him), rather than the humiliating struggle with civilians, increases the importance of the sniper. Accordingly, one interviewee told us:

Sniper against sniper? Look, a sniper is the most frightening. OK, I'll tell you straight, if I know that opposite me is a sniper I will hide under a boulder, I will jump from one place to the next as quickly as possible, I will be as professional as possible.

In this respect, we see that the snipers' recognition of enemies as human beings and thus as fellow warriors owed respect may lead them to identify with them. Indeed, in those few cases where snipers recognised that they had killed someone who was not defined as a threat to Israeli civilians and troops, they experienced the killing or wounding as less professional and prestigious.

The third way in which the similarity between soldier and enemy is expressed centres on training, because the same practices of dehumanisation found in training camps are often used later in regard to enemies. In the US military during certain historical periods, 'hate training' was rampant. Accordingly, during Vietnam, rage at superiors fostered during training was transformed and channelled into fury at the enemy. The 'logic' of such

practices was an attempt to demean and debase troops in a manner that could later be directed towards antagonists in Southeast Asia. Verrips, more generally, suggests looking at how, in order to earn self-respect and to enter the military group, the newly mobilised civilian has to adopt new standards. After he has survived basic training, he enters the ‘in-group’ and then uses the same practices used against him towards others. It is thus reasonable to assume that trainees learn on their very bodies how those who do not belong should be treated and then remember—consciously or unconsciously—that they too were once non-members.²⁴

The Israeli army, in general, refrains from extreme forms of humiliation as part of training. Moreover, the five-week course for snipers is characterised by strict professionalism and there are no hazing and degradations because the course begins a full year after soldiers have entered service and a good few months after basic training (where soldiers are ‘broken’ and then ‘built anew’). Indeed, by far the major part of the course is devoted to drills on shooting ranges where the snipers concentrate heavily on learning the proper body techniques and control that will enable them to shoot accurately. Sniper training is thus very different from the instruction given to regular infantry soldiers. Snipers not only learn to control their bodies but to be very reflective about this control. Moreover, within the snipers’ course, the emphasis is very much on realistic, concrete instruction. The instructors quoted in Gilbert, for example, argue that it is critical to train snipers realistically since, if this is not done, during ‘real’ time they may be surprised by the sight of men, by their humanity. In fact, realistic training—for example, where spring figures are included—tends to increase the rate and percentage of fire of weaponry.²⁵ In the IDF camp where snipers train such targets are used as well as standard ones made of cardboard figures (that have the shape of soldiers with helmets aiming their guns). Thus, it is not surprising that, while later in the field snipers do not face helmeted individuals, they have been habituated to human forms and thus can shoot humans with cool precision and careful consideration. Thus, although there may be a contrast between the helmeted soldiers presented in training, and the types of situations and targets that the snipers face in the territories, the governing idea for the snipers is that they are shooting at threatening human beings.

This point is also important because of the sniper’s ability to kill from a distance under cover: there is a high probability that he can kill the enemy, but a very low probability that the enemy can kill him. This is a very different situation than that faced by the infantry soldier going into battle—or by soldiers armed with rubber bullets deployed against street protestors. Along these lines, because snipers wage war with relatively impunity, their acts raise questions about the morality of what they are doing. At its most basic, it may be argued, they appear to be engaged in a fight that is not ‘fair’. As we have shown, the reasoning of the snipers centres on the wider understanding that they only kill selected individuals who are particularly defined as threatening to IDF soldiers or Israeli civilians. In this sense their ability to kill with impunity is not an issue, just as their social control by commanders is not something that they deliberate upon. All the snipers we interviewed drew

upon the justification of a conflict between two peoples as a basis for perpetrating violence.

The enemy as ‘human being’

As we explained in the introduction to this article, ‘human being’ is the most common term found in our interviews when snipers refer to their enemies:

From afar, I identified a man that was climbing the fence with a ladder and when I got there I simply shot him. . . And then I was worried a bit about the fact that I had killed a man at that moment and then the inquests began.

In view of the repeated use of the word ‘human being’, one can hypothesise that the snipers do not completely deny or repress the humanity of the people they shoot. This argument is sustained by such passages as the one from the sniper who saw the body of the man he had killed lying in the street. These sights (and sounds) do not escape the vigilant snipers, and it seems that they are not wholly concealed through the use of the rich array of metaphors and images that dehumanise their victims. In addition, the snipers do not convey emotions of anger or hate, but rather deep persuasion in the justice of the act. The ‘situation’ of conflict against concrete threats justifies soldiers’ actions and thus questions of conscience are unnecessary. As one of our interviewees stated:

What’s this whole matter with conscience? The situation is terrible and you hear all of the time about civilians being killed [by terror attacks] so really you don’t have the strength to think about this poor guy. . .

The assumption that soldiers have to be distanced from their enemies, seen by scholars as being indispensable for killing, is not wholly vindicated in our case. Not only are identical terms used to describe soldiers and enemies, but much of the terminology does not dehumanise or demonise the two sides. In fact, some snipers are aware of this situation and one put it thus:

If you don’t see the enemy as a human being, you really become a war machine. You lose your humanity if you don’t think about him as human.

The following two passages echo such sentiments:

G: There’s no hate, I don’t feel that I hate people. . . Look, someone that is arrested because he is going to commit suicide, then you. . . you see a human being that is going to commit suicide. Then when you later see him in handcuffs, you say ‘Wow, a regular human being’. He doesn’t look bad or something. . . You hear of other units that hit them. I don’t. We never did such things and. . . You don’t feel any hatred towards them, even while you know that they are suicide bombers.

H. I don’t know what to tell you, every human being is a human being. I see many Arabs here and I don’t hate any one of them. Each one has his own truth. I also don’t want to kill anyone of them. But the minute I see anyone go out to a terror attack, someone with a weapon comes to our area, I will shoot him without any guilt because that is the situation here in the country.

It may thus be possible to recognise the humanity of an enemy and concurrently be deeply persuaded about the justice of your cause so that you can kill time and again. Perhaps it is possible to recognise the similarity between you and the enemy and still explain the taking of life based on a clear logic of justifiable conflict.

Conclusion

The question that guided our analysis centred on the lived experience of killing other people. Our argument was twofold: snipers do not always need to dehumanise their targets and they experience killing in conflicting ways, both as pleasurable and as disturbing. This argument challenges dominant explanations of how human beings deal with slaying other human beings. Thus we have underscored the simultaneous use of distancing mechanisms: dehumanising enemies and a constant recognition of their basic humanity. In this sense we accept previous scholarship which has emphasised the ways in which enemies are turned into ‘others’ so that violence may be perpetrated against them, but continue on to argue that the reality within which soldiers—and in our case snipers—operate is much more complex.

Indeed, by focusing on the level of lived experience, we can comprehend the ways in which feelings of guilt, recurring dreams, sudden flashes of pictures and persistent doubts exist side by side with feelings of satisfaction, achievement, enjoyment and joy. Indeed, these conflicting emotions are part of the way in which snipers continued to perform their military role. We have not heard of cases where snipers have refused to continue serving in their capacity, nor have we found cases of completely unjustified berserk behaviour. Snipers continue to do their work in a cool and calm manner out of a full belief in the justice of their cause. Indeed, the belief that they are preventing the next terror attack or suicide bomber is a key motivator for them.

As we showed when describing their victims/targets, snipers often associate Palestinian individuals with the label ‘terrorists’. Yet this assignation does not imply the mandatory dehumanisation of Palestinians. Indeed, our argument is not a simplistic one based on the dehumanisation of others through the use of various appellations: one can be a terrorist and human. For snipers the Palestinians they shoot are threatening human beings, threatening to them, to their fellow soldiers and (potentially) to Israeli civilians. Thus the assignation of ‘terrorist’ should not be understood as necessarily contradictory to their being humans. Terrorists, for the snipers, as for the majority of Israeli combat troops, do not belong to some category of evil non-human beings but are human beings who are perceived to be dangerous.

It is within this dynamic that the perception of enemies as humans should be understood. To be sure, the snipers talk about enemies as ‘them’ versus ‘us’ soldiers. They also dehumanise enemies by objectifying them and (at times) demonising them. But they also understand them to be human beings. What is interesting is that this understanding does not hinder their ability to

kill and wound those people whom they perceive to be their enemies. Thus the killing is at times banal and not traumatic; it is not too easy, nor too hard to bear. Within the context of contemporary Israel, marked as it is by a widespread consensus about the threat armed Palestinians pose, the killing is understood as normal, justified, clear and unquestionable. In fact, one could argue that, because the IDF is very widely understood as necessary and trusted by Israeli Jews, the snipers are less traumatised.

To be sure, the process of ‘naming’ or labelling is akin to the process that Žižek (quoted in our introduction) terms part of the ‘schematisation’ of enemies so as to make them into appropriate target of hate and struggle. But as our work shows this is not a linear process but one based on tension and contradiction. Our work thus questions the unidirectional argument found in much scholarly literature about the necessity for a totally negative construction of enemies in order to carry out violence against them. Based on our case study (and its limitations), we offer a cautionary message. Sometimes one does not have to turn enemies or foes into lawless beings, unordered entities or evil life forms in order to intervene violently. Rather, enemies may be labelled as humans and as ‘like us’ but violence is still perpetrated against them. In other words, we argue that strict dichotomies of us/them, inside/outside, or human/non-human are much more complex than most of the scholarly literature brings out.

Take the label ‘human being’ as it was used by our informants. This label forms part of a classificatory system that is intimately connected to the justification for killing. The snipers’ reasoning is closely linked to a Zionist text in the sense of connecting their personal understanding to the grand narrative of the IDF protecting the very survival of the Israeli nation-state. In this manner their actions during the Al-Aqsa uprising are subordinated to the *a priori* Zionist text.²⁶ In this respect the discursive act of aggregation by which the snipers ‘name’ all offensive actors—whether participating in rallies, directing protests or as armed aggressors—as ‘terrorists’ should be seen as part of that wider Zionist myth. Let us be very clear: our argument is not that by characterising Palestinians as ‘humans’ the snipers somehow depoliticise their acts. In fact, quite the opposite: we argue that this very classification is based in a wider model of political conflict and opposing forces using violent means against each other. It is not so much a process of dehumanising which is of significance here but rather the rules of legitimate violence, the culturally specific ideology of violence at work in this case. Israel has been the site of confrontations for so long—and the Palestinians have been a key opponent in these conflicts—that there is now a rather widespread legitimacy for such killings and woundings as carried out by our interviewees. Our point is thus that snipers classify, make a choice and act, and that their actions are fateful.

Finally, we do not argue that killing by snipers is somehow emblematic of all violence. We do contend, however, that, as scholars, we must be wary of an automatic attachment of negative value to violence. With all the moral difficulty involved in making this point, it is important to understand how people may perpetrate violence through indifference or sometimes enjoyment. Violence does not only belong to the realm of the pathological but is

woven into the very fabric of normal everyday life. Thus we do not see violence as something that is inherently pathological or traumatic.²⁷ One needs to proceed with a careful phenomenological account of violence from the perspective of its agents. Thus there are soldiers who may not feel anything during an act of killing but may feel intensely guilty afterwards; and it is possible to kill easily out of deep personal conviction, to enjoy it and to feel guilty at the very same time. All these facts shed light on one of the most hidden arenas of modern war, but which is in fact a common one among soldiers.

Notes

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