

## Photo exhibition « Breaking the Silence »

December 1-17, 13h - 18h, 1030 Bxl, Les Halles (Rue Royale Sainte-Marie 22)

### Decembre 9, 2011 : after visiting the exhibition, we met Amira Hass, an Israeli journaliste

*Breaking the Silence* has broken the silence but also the conventional methods of industrial information. *Breaking the Silence's* method of collecting information finally verifies what the « respectable » media have never stopped denying : Palestinian information.

After living in Gaza, the journalist and writer **Amira Hass** came to live in the West Bank, where she writes for the Israeli daily newspaper **Haaretz** about life under the Israeli occupation. She is the only Israeli Jewish journalist who has been living for 17 years in the Occupied Territories among Palestinians and who lived there during the Second Intifada.

She has written two books based on her successive experiences : *Drinking the Sea at Gaza: Days and Nights in a Land under Siege* ([Owl Books](#), 2000) [ISBN 0-8050-5740-4](#), and (with [Rachel Leah Jones](#)) *Reporting from Ramallah: An Israeli Journalist in an Occupied Land* ([Semiotext\(e\)](#), 2003) [ISBN 1-58435-019-9](#)

For years, she has been focussing on describing the policy of demographic separation and of closure that has been going on since 1991 - which has resulted in draconian restrictions on the Palestinians' freedom of movement.

Amira is going to tell us about how she sees the important work done by « *Breaking the Silence* ». She says she knew about it even before it found its name: a group of soldiers collecting information in Hebron. She met the founder. He had served as an 18-19-20- year-old soldier.

*Breaking the Silence* has its seat in Hebron, i.e. an occupied place where the Israeli army was very engaged and busy. In the old city, some 100 settlers epitomize the contradiction there is in the situation. A pretence of morality: orthodox Jewish Israelis impose a reality on 300.000 Palestinians, most of whom have been forced out. This contradiction is a major time bomb, Amira Hass says. (To remember: there are 2, 5 million Palestinians in the West Bank.)

She says she hasn't read all the testimonies that have been collected during the time of the *Second intifada*. It is painful for her to read them 6 years after the events. She was there when things happened, in real time. At that time, it was difficult to pass them in the newspapers. People wouldn't believe her. Yet, a number of years later, there were other journalists' testimonies and other people living there who saw like her how the soldiers put fuel to the fire deliberately. She repeats that yes, it is painful for her to read about the intifada years later: the soldiers of *Breaking the Silence* verify so many things the Palestinians have said. *Breaking the Silence* has proved how truthful, how accurate the Palestinians' testimonies about their everyday life. Today we know the Palestinians have told the truth. But it doesn't make the situation better. On the contrary: now the Israelis know but they don't care.

*Breaking the Silence's* reports are about the banality of evil: the soldiers choose not to speak about the most atrocious things they have faced. Most of the reports are based on testimonies of soldiers after their service. Soldiers who have realised that this banality of evil is not normal. The testimonies are about the ordinary daily, moment by moment repression, spying, emotional mutilation committed by the army. They are about what has become a second nature of the Israeli situation. The ease with which those new reports have been taken gives an idea of the indifference of the public.

During *Cast Lead* in 2008-2009 in Gaza, *Breaking the Silence* activists made everything possible to reach soldiers in real time, while it was happening or just after it happened. What is interesting to notice is that when *Breaking the Silence* launched their reports, the Israeli military had their most vicious attack ever against the organization: « They are lying, smearing us »

But Amira Hass was in Gaza during the onslaught and collected testimonies during the attack and she knew that the soldiers of *Breaking the Silence* were reporting small things about the onslaught that were very important. Most (if not all) of them were reserve soldiers, i.e. aged 26 to 30. (The young 18-year-old ones were not sent to Gaza). Many were ex religious from orthodox families. They all participated in the ground attack, in other words, they had a chance to see Palestinians eye to eye, not like the pilots or the video-game experts seeing Palestinians as vague figures running on the screen and just pressing buttons.

After four months, during which she talked and read reports by human right organizations about Gaza, she knew that the 40 testimonies *Breaking the Silence* collected about *Cast Lead* (most of which leaked through the press, not through BS) were about casualties that happened very close to the soldiers. Soldiers who shot at people they saw, not on a screen, which makes it all look like science fiction, but face to face.

The number of Palestinians killed « face to face » represents only a minority of all the casualties. There is still a dispute about how many of them were civilians (about 700) and how many were armed. Most of the Palestinians killed were at home or walking on the street. According to human right organizations, less than 100 were killed on the ground by soldiers who saw their victims. All the rest were killed by video games: drones, huge bombs, tanks with computerized techniques.

The question is: why would the Israeli army be so raucously against these 40 testimonies?

Amira Hass tries to explain that through the messages she got from the soldiers of *Breaking the Silence*. One strong conclusion soldiers came to is that this *Cast Lead* operation was a huge exercise of the army, with armed ammunition, as they do in the Neguev, to improve coordination between air and ground forces. Yet this time with real people. This confirmed her own personal first impression: that it was a huge game. Indeed there was hardly any resistance on the part of the Palestinians. Yet the soldiers had been told that many of them wouldn't come back alive. The strength of the Palestinian military had been exaggerated. The soldiers saw this didn't fit reality.

About the importance of the drones (pilotless planes), one of the soldiers says that he had the impression it was all about human hunt: this had nothing to do with what he had learnt about warfare.

These conclusions, Amira Hass says, are not about individual behaviours of soldiers who passed the line. They are about two important things: first, the role of the Israeli army in the Israeli society and second, the place of Israel as a military power, its place in the security industry of the world.

- The testimonies make it clear that there is a military social caste in Israel, which owns its respectability and its place in the society. It is prestigious to have been to the army and difficult to say you didn't serve. Being in the army is important for matters of jobs and promotion. It is an opportunity for new immigrants and for those who are low on the social scale (people from Ethiopia, Russia...). The army is the melting pot for the « Israeliness » of the people. It is also the place to show their machism. It affords some people their career, paves the road to regular jobs. You are immediately accepted, given the red carpet in politics and business. Many people become, on different levels, mercenaries or experts for different armies. This caste is not big in number but very influential. Their words are taken for the « objective truth »: « Gaza has to be bombed. War, warfare is needed ». Israeli people and the system believe in them.

- The second thing Amira Hass could understand in between the lines of the testimonies is that the Oslo Peace Process has turned Israel into a low intensity warfare state. It has become part of an international policy of security. When thinking about the place of Israel in the industrial world of warfare, Amira Hass can't help making a parallel between the fights Afghanistan/ NATO and the fight Israel/Palestinians, or between the wall in Israel and the wall built in South America. There is a close cooperation between Israel and the USA's domestic security (cf. for example what happened with the *Occupy Wall Street* movement) : « Joined exercise allows us to learn from Israel's warfare », « We support Israel because it in our interest to do so ». That's what you can hear. And here is the explanation for the poisonous attack on *Breaking the Silence*, Amira Hass concludes: this organization might disrupt this joined exercise.

*Breaking the Silence* also has a patriotic role, Amira Hass says: supporting Israel is opposing the occupation. It is true that Israeli military are profitable for other people. But it is true too that Israel profits from the occupation, which Europe subsidy by their donations. Yet, this situation is not sustainable, *Breaking the Silence* say. As Simone Süsskind told Amira Hass, Israel is suicidal. How can the Israelis think they can continue to have an existence in a region where they prove everyday they are alien and belligerant?

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### **Answers to some of the questions from the public.**

- About the « banality of evil », Hannah Arendt's words in the process of Eichman.

A. Hass uses the terms but she says she doesn't make the comparison with Nazism. Some people say it is like Nazism. It is not. But we can't always be hostages of words that were used in other times.

If we start to compare: first thing, it is not a genocide because Palestinians have multiplied in Gaza. But she doesn't want that kind of quantitative measurement. There is something about Israel's repression and oppression which has nothing to do with getting people killed. It is wrong to understand this regime of oppression under this criteria. Israel is doggedly disintegrating Palestinian society and territory. Doing things and covering them with other words and explanations is what is really vicious: Israel has created bantoustans and it promotes the

separate development of the people, just like in South Africa. And this is done in a very banal evil way. For example, the outposts are all built on agricultural lands taken from the Palestinians (because of the intifada, the Palestinians couldn't reach or were not allowed to go and work on their lands. « Abandoned lands » become « state lands » after a while, an Israeli law says). But now, there is a process to legitimize this. If the Palestinians own agricultural land, they can't build on it (or else their houses are destroyed) because agricultural land is not destined to become urban. But Israelis can and do so. In the same way in Jerusalem, where districts are strangulated as they can't expand when their population grows. This is an example of the hypocrisy that always serves the Jews' interest. The « banality of evil ».

- About this right-wing internet website on which pictures of killed Palestinians were displayed and 1000 people clicked on « like ».

Amira Hass says she was shocked when she heard about that. This is a clear indication as to what she calls the « brutalization » of the Israeli society. Anonymity of course allows Israelis to be brutal. Brutality and indifference: concerning the « loyalty bill » (anyone who gets official documents - ID, driving license..., should declare loyalty to the state), hardly anybody wrote about this bill or asked for the reason of it. Why? Because it mostly targeted the Palestinians. Indifference. Because it is profitable: the Israeli society profits as a whole from occupation. A very short-sighted profit. Just think of water: aquifer in the West Bank is in the total control of Israel. 80% of the West Bank water goes to Israel. Israelis have been used to this: living as if they had water like in Switzerland. If there is an agreement, the whole concept of water, the idea of being equal in front of it, of sharing it equally, is simply intolerable for the Israelis.

Technical things help this indifference and make that less and less Israelis get involved. One of the successes of the Oslo process is the real demographic separation. This was not the case in the years of direct occupation of Palestinian cities. Before 1990, the Palestinians had freedom of movement, could get on a bus, go to Jerusalem, or work in Israel. Then, Palestinians and Israelis met and knew each other, even if in a distorted way (occupiers versus occupied). There was some kind of relation. Even the army had some. This has changed: Israelis are not allowed to get to the West Bank and few Palestinians manage to get to Israel to work \* They don't exist. And Amira Hass says that for 20-year-old Israelis, it is simply inconceivable that she should live among Palestinians.

- About the summer movement in Israel.

Amira Hass says it was exhilarating, really lovely, amazing when we think of all its similarities with the movement in Cairo (cf the slogans about social justice). Revolution is a living thing. It has its wisdom, its intuition, its creativity. She felt support and respect and admiration in Israel for the Arab Spring. People were inspired because it all looked so civilized! But they consciously resisted linking it to occupation. The fact is that thanks to occupation, there are half a million of people who, because they live in colonies, can improve their social level, and this compensates in a way for the fact that there is no social welfare anymore in the country. Contractors, doctors, teachers are involved in the settlements, in other words, they are an important part of everybody's life...

- About the role of Israeli media.

Israeli media is not separated from the entire society. In this matter (occupation), it is usually very servile, adoring of the military. This is especially true for the electronic media.

In the past 20 years, one of the main cases was that of a rape by different kibbutzin minors. The judges found them not guilty. If there is one thing that can never be criticized, it is the ruling of judges. But demonstrations broke against this ruling, which resulted in a re-trial in which everything was made public. Since then, there has been a change as far as brutality against women is concerned: in the media, sexist language can't be used anymore, for example. But if there are women in the media who can keep an eye on that, nobody in the media is a representant of the people who are victims of occupation... You can't change the structure of occupation, not even *Haaretz* : how many people read it in Israel ? And Amira Hass concludes: We, as journalists, exercise our right of expression, of information but the public doesn't have the duty to know the information. You cannot force the readers to know.

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**10 décembre 2011 : Meeting « Breaking the Silence ! The Israeli army in question »**, with Simone Bitton, Amira Hass, Avi Mograbi, Nurit Peled-Elhanan and Yehuda Shaul.

Israel's occupation of Palestine by its army affects its society as it affects its heart, the heart of this society : its army made up of young men and women who can't escape the compulsory military service unless they become « refuzniks ».

After looking at the pictures, watching the films, listening to the sound recordings, we give now room to words so they can throw light on « a reality in which the deterioration of the moral principles found a way of expression, in the form of orders and engagement rules, and which is justified in the name of the security of Israel », *Breaking the Silence* say.