

Apologists for Rape: The Sde Teiman Protests

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In 2007, the writer Tal Nitsán [isolated](#) instances where Israeli male combatants systematically used sexual violence against Palestinian women to the war of 1948. In essentially marking off such conduct from more contemporary practices, she relied on media accounts, archival sources, the reports of human rights organisations and the testimony of 25 Israeli reserve male soldiers.

Seven years later, the American feminist legal scholar Catharine MacKinnon, following a lecture in Israel in 2014, [had this to say](#):

“I spoke to Palestinian women, and they testified that there are no attacks of rape by Israeli soldiers. And that, again, is an interesting question we should address: Why do men not rape in conflicts or war? And if it doesn’t happen, why doesn’t it happen.”

A revision of such questions is long overdue and should include the current treatment by Israeli forces of Palestinian males held in custody, not to mention their strident defenders. On the night of July 29, hundreds of right-wing Israeli activists [gathered](#) outside the Beit Lid army base. Notably present was a group of oppressively masked soldiers, identifiable by the insignia of a snake in the Star of David, usually sported by Force 100. Force 100 was created in the aftermath of the First Intifada, an IDF unit tasked with the express role of keeping Palestinian detainees in check and suppressing revolt in military prisons.

The unit was also involved in a violent disruption at the Sde Teiman military base in the Negev desert, where detained Palestinians from the Gaza Strip had been subjected to various forms of torture and maltreatment. The detention facility at the base had been created in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks to accommodate some 120 Hamas militants, members of the Nukhba military wing and various Palestinian civilians. Over time, the numbers from the Gaza Strip swelled by over 4,500 people.

It did not take long for grim [accounts](#), available in both Israeli and foreign press outlets, noting instances of starvation, beatings and torture. The field hospital established near the site also featured [allegations](#) of brutality against patients. In June, it was revealed that the IDF was investigating the deaths of 36 detainees, vaguely attributing them to ongoing hostilities.

A number of Israeli non-government organisations filed an appeal with Israel’s Supreme Court seeking closure of the Sde Teiman facility, with the Association for Civil Rights in Israel [arguing](#) that the “egregious violations at Sde Teiman make depriving these people of liberty blatantly unconstitutional”. With matters rapidly getting out of hand for IDF officials, hundreds of prisoners [were transferred](#) to the Ofer Prison located in the West Bank, and Ktzi’ot, in the Negev, with the Israeli state [announcing](#) that the camp would return to its

original role “as a facility of interrogation and classification only.”

On August 16, *Haaretz* [published](#) eight anonymous testimonies in chronological order, featuring reservists and physicians. They resemble the accounts of many a torture camp in history: routine brutality, systematic dehumanisation and abundant justification from various officials. In the words of one reservist, “there was a female officer who gave us a briefing on the day we arrived. She said, ‘It will be hard for you. You’ll want to pity them, but it’s forbidden. Remember that they are not people.’”

On July 29, some 10 Israeli reservists held at Sde Teiman were arrested after collectively using various ghoulish methods against a Palestinian detainee, including anal penetration with iron bars. The account was captured on a video and leaked.

Such alleged methods did not concern the protesters. The Beit Lid contingent proved noisy in demanding the release of their comrades. In doing so, there was plenty by way of venomous accusation directed at the official authorities. In holding such personnel in detention to face charges – not that these would necessarily amount to much – the smell of treason had begun to waft. “The Military Advocate General [Yifar Tomer-Yerushalmi] loves Nukhba,” [bellowed one sign](#) located outside Beit Lid, a pointed reference to an alleged sympathy by Israel’s own MAG for the Hamas unit.

Members of the Israeli parliament found appearing at the protest irresistible.

“I came to Sde Teiman to tell our fighters that we are with you, we will protect you,” [trumpeted](#) Knesset member Limor Son Har-Melech. “We will never allow the criminal Military Advocate General to hurt you. She cares about the Nukhba terrorists and cares about their rights, instead of caring for our fighters, she is weakening our fighters. History will judge her and we will judge her too.”

In a broader sense, the idea of holding Israeli soldiers to account for their brutality through standard legal processes has been a matter of performance. That the military court at Beit Lid even went so far as to hold a hearing for the soldiers – of which two were released on July 30 – was impressive if only for show. But the show was suitably enraging for protesters adamant that such figures could ever be held liable for committing crimes against enemies long bleached of their humanity, let alone political worth.

Outside the court, a spouse of one of the soldiers, whose name was not provided due to a gag order regarding the suspects, [offered a cold dismissal](#) of rape charges.

“This is a testimony of a despicable Nukhba fighter with blood on his hands, who dared to complain, and all the country is raging because of it. We shouldn’t forget who our real enemy is. We are facing monsters, a terrorist organization, and I say we will defeat them.”

The sentiments of rage could also be found among various members of the Israeli cabinet. **Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich** [had no issue](#) with the conduct recorded on the video less than the fact that it had been leaked. Nothing less than an “immediate criminal investigation to locate the leakers of this trending video” was required, given its “tremendous damage to Israel in the world”. **National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir** called the arrests “shameful”. Such individuals were “our best heroes”.

In the Knesset, a grotesque debate ensued. Arab MP, **Ahmad Tibi**, queried whether it was a legitimate practice “to insert a stick into a person’s rectum”. **Hanoch Milwidsky** of the ruling Likud party was unequivocal [in reply](#):

“If he is a Nukhba, everything is legitimate to do! Everything!”

The notion of Israeli forces being the exceptional standard bearers of civilised conduct, reluctantly engaged in violence they would otherwise wish to avoid, has vanished before the colonial settler’s violent logic so commonly found in the West Bank. Be it illegal settlements or orchestrated gang rape, all is fair in hate and war against the Palestinians.

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