

“Breaking the Silence:” Testimonies of Israeli Soldiers

By [Stephen Lendman](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

“Breaking the Silence is an organization of veteran Israeli soldiers that collects anonymous testimonies of soldiers who served in the Occupied Territories during the Second Intifada.” They recount experiences that deeply affected them, including abusing Palestinians, looting, destroying property, and other practices “excused as military necessities, or explained as extreme and unique cases.”

They believe otherwise in describing “the depth of corruption which is spreading in the Israeli military” to which Israeli society and most Western observers turn a blind eye. “Breaking the Silence” was established to force an uncomfortable reality into the open to “demand accountability regarding Israel’s military actions in the Occupied Territories perpetrated by us in our name.”

Its new booklet features 54 damning testimonies from 30 Israeli soldiers on their experiences in Operation Cast Lead. They recount what official media and government sources suppressed with comments like:

“You feel like an infantile little kid with a magnifying glass looking at ants, burning them.”

Another referred to “not much said about the issue of innocent civilians.” Anyone and anything were fair game, and laws of war went out the window.

They explained wanton destruction, crops uprooted, human slaughter, women and children killed in cold blood, illegal weapons used, free-fire orders to shoot to kill anywhere at anything that moved, and using civilians as human shields.

Israeli commanders refuted their accounts as groundless, but B’Tselem reported that the military “refused to open serious, impartial investigations,” even when provided with detailed information, including victims’ names, exact dates, and precise locations of incidents.

On its own, B’Tselem collected testimonies from Gaza residents in which 70 Palestinian civilians were killed, over half of them children. Israeli military sources were unresponsive, except to acknowledge receipt of some information, nothing more or that a serious investigation would be conducted. It never was.

Anonymous Testimonies to Protect Soldiers from Recriminations – First From Earlier Operations

A Nachal unit first sergeant recounted Israeli tanks entering a West Bank village and

crushing a car beneath the treads. "Yes, I saw it from the APC we were in. I peeped out. Suddenly we heard a car being crushed....I can't understand why a tank should run over a car when the road's open." It wasn't an isolated incident. It happens often, wanton destruction for its own sake.

He also said that "When we got back from that operation, we had loot so to speak. There were IDs confiscated, uniforms, Kalachnikovs. For army intelligence."

A Nachal elite unit first sergeant said missions were explicitly intended to harass people. Homes were entered, arrests made. "At various points while closing in on a house there are varying open-fire instructions. When the whole house is surrounded, crews placed all around it, the guy who runs out of the house is considered an 'escaper' and must be stopped. If he exits running in a suspect manner (he) must be shot (and) kill(ed). Shot to be stopped: in other words, shoot to kill."

When entering villages, armed Palestinian policemen "at certain points in time....were considered enemy troops (so) we had to shoot to kill if we saw any." Orders were to shoot when in doubt. In describing the atmosphere and command orders, they were "Kill, kill, kill, kill. We want to see bodies."

He explained his anti-terrorism training saying: "Terrorist in sight, that's what it's called, when you run into them. It's some sort of code. It used to be 'hostages.' So you reach the terrorist, you confirm the kill. You don't confirm the kill, you confirm the guy has been 'neutralized,' no chance of his getting back to you because he's been shot in the head. That's confirming he's neutralized."

A 401 Armor unit staff sergeant described the freedom he had to fire a lot - "automatic fire, directed at the whole city, at houses and at doors, was something that everybody did, not just me. I do not know why I did it. I (had) a gun. I did not think. In the army I never thought. I did what I was told to do. And besides, everybody did it. That was the custom - officers and such, everybody knew."

A Battalion 55 Artillery corp first sergeant said when his unit "return(ed) from operations we would throw stun and smoke grenades into the bakeries that opened between 4:00 and 5:00 am because people in the village threw stones....Once I fired over 1500 rounds from a machine gun at the houses in the city." Nobody cared, it was just at Palestinians.

An Armoured Corps first sergeant recounted earlier Gaza and West Bank operations for the "main purpose (of) either demolish(ing) terrorists' houses or places where they manufacture mortars, and other such stuff, or...You would come in and ruin everything you see." At times, "open-fire orders (were to kill) every person you see on the street....kill him....shoot to kill. Don't mind whether he has or has no gun on him."

Operation Cast Lead Testimonies

One soldier said:

"....In training you learn that white phosphorus is not used, and you're taught that it's not humane. You watch films and see what it does to people who are hit, and you say, 'There, we're doing it too.' That's not what I expected to see. Until that moment I had thought that I belonged to the most humane army in the world."

Other testimonies describe white phosphorous used in densely populated neighborhoods, wanton killing and destruction “unrelated to any direct threat to Israeli forces, and permissive rules of engagement that led to the killing of innocents.”

More comments reflected the “moral deterioration” of the army and Israeli society, even affecting the rabbinate that blessed mass slaughter and destruction prior to engagements.

Soldier testimonies bear witness to disturbing Israeli values “on a systemic level.” Operation Cast Lead’s reign of terror was “a direct result of IDF policy, and especially (its) rules of engagement (that sanction) shoot (first) and (don’t) ask questions.”

Breaking the Silence participants offered their testimonies as “an urgent call to Israeli society and its leaders to sober up and investigate anew the results of our actions....(a disturbing) slide together down the moral slippery slope” that affects them and all Jews globally.

Testimony 1 - Human Shield

People are called “Johnnie. They’re Palestinian civilians” in Gaza neighborhoods. In checking out houses, “we send the neighbor in, the ‘Johnnie,’ and if there are armed men inside, we (use) ‘pressure cooker’ procedures....to get them out alive....to catch the armed men.” When necessary, combat helicopters are called in to fire anti-tank missiles at civilian homes. Then send a “Johnnie” in to check for dead and wounded.

In one home, two were dead and another alive, so supersized Caterpillar D-9 bulldozers start “demolishing the house over him until the neighbor went in” and got him out.

Human shields were also used to check for booby-traps and perform other services. “Sometimes the force would enter while placing rifle barrels on a civilian’s shoulder, advancing into the house and using him as a human shield. Commanders said these were the instructions and we had to do it.”

Testimony 2 - House Demolitions

Residential buildings at strategic points were taken over by force. Neighborhoods were described with “lots of destroyed houses....ruins....more and more ruins, and even the houses still standing, most of them kept getting shelled....” Other houses were blasted....blown “up in the air” with explosives.

“Operational necessity” sometimes meant a whole neighborhood was destroyed so as “not to jeopardize Israeli soldiers (and with) the day after” in mind, meaning to disrupt Gaza life to the maximum and leave it that way after forces pulled out.

Testimony 3 - Rules of Engagement

Descriptions included “enter(ing) a yard and out of sheer fear the family was waiting in an exposed spot - a father, grandfather, young mother and babies. As we were coming in, the commander was firing a volley, and mistakenly killed an innocent. We got to the house....he goes in with live fire....the family was hiding from the bombings....he happened to kill an elderly guy....it really seems insane....if I look at it from the (other) side, there are people who deserve to go to jail.”

Testimony 4 - Rules of Engagement & Home Occupation

Tactics taught are “dry” and “wet” entries. In Gaza, there was “no such thing as a dry entry. All entries were wet,” meaning free-firing with missiles, tank shells, machine guns, grenades, everything. On the ground, wet entry orders were to “shoot as we enter a (house or) room (so) no one there could fire at us.”

Testimony 5 - Atmosphere

What “bothered me? Many things....all that destruction. All that fire at innocents. This shock of realizing with whom I’m in this together....the hatred, and the joy of killing....I killed a terrorist....blew his head off....There’s nothing to hold you back.” They’re just Arabs.

Testimony 6 - Bombardment

The new 120mm Mortar was used in Gaza with “95 - 100%” accuracy. When it hits, it scatters shrapnel all around. It was used against neighborhoods. Innocents were hit, and “our artillery fire there was insane....”

“Most of the time firing was for softening resistance I think....We simply received orders. If we hit terrorists, then I guess that was the purpose.”

Testimony 7 - Rules of Engagement

The commander stressed using “fire power” from the air and on the ground. “You see something and you’re not quite sure? You shoot....Fire power was insane. We went in and the booms were just mad. The minute we got to our starting line, we simply began to fire at suspect places....a house, a window....In urban warfare, anyone is your enemy. No innocents.” Houses were taken over with soldiers positioned inside “according to plan.”

Testimony 8 - Rules of Engagement & Use of White Phosphorous

Some of the younger soldiers “think it’s cool to wield such power with no one wanting to rein them in. They (were given) permission to open fire” even at most people who “definitely (are) not terrorists.” Free fire used all weapons against “everything (including) houses,” whether or not they looked suspect. “I know (that some) crews....even fired white phosphorous. Our battalion mortars (and tanks) were also using phosphorous.”

Sometimes an order was given: “Permitted, phosphorous in the air.” At times, it was used “because it’s fun. Cool. I don’t understand what it’s used for.”

Testimony 9 - Rules of Engagement & House Demolitions

“From the onset....the brigade commander and other officers made it very clear to us that any movement must entail gunfire” with or without being shot at. Alerts were given about a suicide bomber or sniper in the area, but “none of (these) materialized as far as our company was concerned.”

“Houses were demolished everywhere.” They were fired at “with tremendous power. We didn’t see a single house that remained intact....The entire infrastructure, tracks, fields, roads (were) in total ruin.” D-9 bulldozers demolished everything “in our designated area. It

looked awful, like in those World War II films where nothing remained. A totally destroyed city.”

Testimony 10 – Briefings

Formal briefings covered “going off to war (and in war) no consideration of civilians was to be taken. Shoot anyone you see....this pretty much disgusted me. There was a clear feeling, and this was repeated whenever others spoke to us, that no humanitarian consideration played any role in the army at present.”

Language used in one briefing was something like: “Don’t let morality become an issue. That will come up later. Leave the nightmares and horrors that will come up for later, now just shoot.”

Testimony 11 – Use of White Phosphorous & Rules of Engagement

“We walked (with another battalion) and saw all the white phosphorous bombs....we saw glazing on the sand (resulting) from white phosphorous (use), and it was upsetting.” Houses were targeted and many around them were destroyed with people inside them.

Testimony 12 – Rules of Engagement

Moving into an area, orders were to “hold the junction, control it.” Vehicle movement wasn’t allowed and those advancing were fired on. Whole areas were abandoned. In entering houses, strict procedure is followed, including “setting red lines. It means that whoever crosses this line is shot, no questions asked.” Orders always were shoot to kill, including women and children.

Testimonies 13 and 14 – Rules of Engagement

Houses were entered with gunfire and taken over. Some civilians were killed. Anyone out at night was called a terrorist even if it was clear he had no weapons.

Testimonies 15 and 16 – Rabbinic Unit

Promoting “Jewish Awareness,” rabbis talked with soldiers and gave out materials, the Book of Psalms and some brochures. War got a religious tone against “four enemies:” Hamas, Iran, the Palestinian Authority even though it doesn’t control Gaza, and Arab citizens of Israel. Rabbinic briefings said “they (all) undermine us.”

Also that Israel was fighting a “war of choice, (a) holy war (with) differing rules.” The message “aimed at inspiring the men with courage, cruelty, aggressiveness (and feeling) no pity, God protects you, everything you do is sanctified....Palestinians are the enemy....everyone.”

Soldiers were told to be “crusaders,” to have a “proper fighting spirit,” and show no mercy. Distributed pamphlets said: “Palestinians are like the Philistines of old, newcomers who do not belong in the land, aliens planted on our soil which should clearly return to us.”

One man introduced as Rabbi Chen presented his talk in points, also covered in pamphlets. First was “the sanctity of the People of Israel. He put it this way: he said while going in there, we should know there is no accounting for sins in this case.” In other words,

“whatever we do is fine.”

Another point referred to the “sons of light” waging war against the “sons of darkness” to turn the IDF into a messianic force in a battle of good versus evil.

Testimony 17 - House Demolitions & Rules of Engagement

“Pressure cooker” tactics were used. D-9 bulldozers “worked nonstop to raze orchards and take down houses suspected of containing tunnels” or stopping sniper fire. “The feeling is it’s all sand dunes, all the streets were destroyed and there were shell pits from the bombings before the ground offensive.” After a week, “our officer decided he’d hold a grenade-launching practice....So we went into a house next door, took an inner room, and each person came along and threw a grenade inside. The house was totally devastated.”

Testimony 18 - Briefings & Rules of Engagement

Before the operation began, the battalion commander “said we were going to exercise insane fire power with artillery and air force....There were no clear red lines. In urban areas it’s very much at the commanders’ own discretion....we were told to enter every house (using) live fire....a grenade or two, shooting, and only then we enter.”

Testimony 19 - Bombardment

It was designed “to gain control of the area....The whole cover thing starts, massive fire, auxiliary fire, and then my company goes it....In the first phase, we open fire in every zone.” Every house in a designated area is entered....At the end of the day the platoons are set up in the houses. Each house becomes a small army outpost with positions....” Then other houses are occupied and searched. Families inside were assembled in one room, then told to leave and walk into the city. In some houses, the men were gathered together and shackled.

Testimony 20 - Rules of Engagement

“Our objective was to split the Gaza Strip, fragment it,” take total control.

Testimony 21 - Briefings & Rules of Engagement

The commander said don’t “feel bad about destruction because it is all done for the safety of our own soldiers.” If someone is suspect, “we should not give him the benefit of the doubt. Eventually this could be an enemy, even if it’s some old woman approaching the house. It could be an old woman carrying an explosive charge.”

We had constant reports about suspect women or pairs, stuff like that, but never ran into any.

“There are two phases: there’s the primary phase of taking objectives....whatever is suspect is targeted for fire.” Youngsters in the ranks “are out for action and most of them have pretty racist views....some of them say (they) don’t want wars, but what can (they) do, this is how things are and we’ll never have peace with the Arabs.” Those with more moderate views are in the minority. For most soldiers, “there are two possibilities: either you’re terribly scared or terribly gung-ho. Better gung-ho than frightened, for this way you can do a better job of it.”

Testimony 22 - Bombardment

One home "was known as a Hamas activist's house. This automatically gets acted upon...the house was bombed while these guys were inside. A woman came out, holding a child, and escaped southward." Reports were that people inside were unarmed. "But that's not the point. The point is that four men standing outside the house conferring look suspect."

Testimony 23 - Rules of Engagement & Home Searches

"In routine work there are outposts, windows, observation posts and stairs....you go out, take the house, spend (enough time) inside, then go back to the same house or to another one....You're also told to wreck floor tiles to check for tunnels. Television sets, closets (everything). Many explosive charges were found, they also blew up, no one was hurt."

Before going in you shoot....we didn't really need to shoot after the tank had wrecked the house....Physically the houses were ruined." In some, drawings were made on walls, even with lipstick, and "the closets were all trashed. It sounded retarded....you go into a house and turn it all inside out."

Testimony 24 - Briefings & House Demolitions

Initial briefings by commanders never mentioned "the lives of civilians (or) showing consideration to civilians." Here it wasn't mentioned. "Just the brutality, go in there brutally....In case of any doubt, take down houses. You don't need confirmation for anything...."

D-9 operators "cannot show consideration. If he's ordered to demolish a house, he" does it...."houses and agricultural areas as well, orchards and hothouses." At the end of the operation, the commander said "We demolished 900 houses....a really huge number. We demolished a lot."

Testimony 25 - Briefings & Rules of Engagement

"The battalion commander said there would be lots and lots of terrorists and we should really watch out but don't worry, everyone will have taken plenty of people down (because) insane fire power (gives us an) advantage over them."

Testimony 26 - Briefings & Rules of Engagement

Before going in, "the battalion commander....defined the operation goals: 2000 dead terrorists, not just stopping the missiles launched at (Israeli) communities around the Gaza Strip. He claimed this would bring Hamas down to its knees....No one said 'kill innocents.' " But orders were for the army to kill everyone thought to be suspect.

"The issue of civilians became irrelevant as soon as you'd enter combat - the rules change. You shoot. It's war. In war no questions are asked."

Testimony 27 - House Demolitions

Suspect houses were targeted with white phosphorous shells "to serve as an igniter, simply make it all go up in flames," and in the process destroy weapons and tunnels.

Testimony 28 - Rules of Engagement

Neighborhoods were cleaned out, areas “where infantry had not yet entered.” After going in, “terrorists” were identified and killed. “We kept working with snipers, infantry ‘straw widows,’ where they identify targets for you and you fire shells....You shoot even if (targets not) identified.”

Testimony 29 - House Demolitions & Bombardment

In controlled areas, orders were “to raze as much as possible....Such razing is a euphemism for intentional, systematic destruction, enabling total visibility....so no one could hide anything from us” and operational objectives could be accomplished - destroying suspected booby-trapped houses and tunnels. Also leaving behind minimal infrastructure after the operation was concluded.

The destruction in Gaza “was on a totally different scale (than anything) I had previously known....the ground was....constantly shaking. I mean, there were blasts all the time. Explosions were heard all day long, the night was filled with flashes, an intensity we had never experienced before. Several D-9 bulldozers were operating around the clock, constantly busy....What is a suspect spot? It means you decided it was suspect and could take out all your rage at it.”

Testimony 30 - House Demolitions & Bombardment

Most “mosques were demolished. (Our) brigade commander (said) we should not hesitate to target mosques. Nothing is immune, nothing and no area. He explicitly mentioned mosques....If you see sand bags, you shoot without the shadow of a doubt....You run into a curve in the road and know there’s an angle from which you cannot monitor a certain area, first you shoot, see if anything happens, then you proceed....If you don’t know what’s in a building, you fire at it. Such were the general instructions....”

Testimony 31 - Rules of Engagement

“We weren’t told outright to shoot anything we saw moving but that was the implication. I asked, ‘What if I see a girl outside?’ She has no business being outside. ‘So what do I do?’ Check if she’s armed - then shoot her.” For anyone engaged at short range, it’s “understood from (our) briefing that it’s better to shoot first and ask questions later.”

Testimony 32 - Briefings

“There was less talk of values, more of professionalism, not a moral issue.” The atmosphere placed little value on Palestinian lives. Jewish ones were another matter.

Testimony 33 - Rules of Engagement

“We fired rounds at houses in front of us (in) which we didn’t see movement....But these were houses that we identified as looking out over us. We fired into windows, before the ceasefire....everyone started shooting. I heard this happened in other areas as well.”

Testimony 34 - Rules of Engagement

Even though Israeli forces faced no resistance on entering Gaza, orders were that everyone

is suspect. "There is no such thing as suspect arrest procedure. If I detect a (possible threatening) suspect - I shoot (to kill)."

Commander briefings stressed "aggressive action," protecting soldier lives, and having no regard for civilians. They're all suspects.

Testimony 35 - Vandalism

Soldiers "took out notebooks and text books and ripped them. One guy smashed cupboards for kicks, out of boredom....The deputy company commander's staff wrote 'Death to Arabs' on their walls." Lip service only was paid to looting. Don't ask, don't tell was how it was.

Testimony 36 - Rabbinate Unit

They gave pep talks and handed out booklets about "the importance of serving the People of Israel who have been persecuted all these years and (are) now back in (their) homeland and need to fight for it." The usual hot button issues were mentioned - the Holocaust, defending God, and the rights of Israeli Jews. Arab ones don't matter.

Testimony 37 - House Demolitions & Vandalism

Houses were entered with live gunfire, grenades, and other destructive force. Extensive damage was done. Soldiers inside did much more. They had no regard for "even the simplest most basic sanitary stuff like going to the toilet, basic hygiene. I mean you could see they had defecated anywhere and left the stuff lying around." No one cared.

Testimony 38 - Rules of Engagement & House Demolitions

"The amount of destruction was incredible....Not one stone left standing over another. You see plenty of fields, hothouses, orchards, everything devastated. Totally ruined. It's terrible. It's surreal....in my own company there were plenty of people who fired just for the hell of it, at houses, water tanks. They love targeting water tanks." D-9 operators also...."love to demolish, and when the commander sends them off, 'Go take down that house,' they're happy."

Testimony 39 - Vandalism

Doors inside houses were blasted open. Contents were smashed, television and computer screens. Things of value were looted. "The guys would simply break stuff. Some were out to destroy and trash the whole time. They drew a disgusting drawing on the wall. They threw out sofas. They took down (pictures) just to shatter (them)." They did what they wanted. Who'd stop them? The assumption was "everyone is a terrorist (so) it's legitimate to do just anything we please."

Testimony 40 - Bombardment

Targeted houses were bombed, destroying others nearby. Indiscriminate bombing was commonplace.

Testimony 41 - Bombardment

Helicopters and UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) were directed against suspect houses.

"I'm not certain what is considered suspect and what proper rules of engagement are. We responded to anything that seemed suspect to us." In one area, all houses were fired on. "There was massive fire."

Testimony 42 - Home Demolitions & Use of White Phosphorous

Shells were fired at a house suspected of being booby-trapped. "Then some order arrived to ignite it. The way to do that was to actually fire phosphorous shells from above. (It) ignites the whole house."

Testimony 43 - Rules of Engagement

"One guy said he just couldn't finish this operation without killing someone. So he killed someone...." It was war.

Testimony 44 - Vandalism

Houses were cleared with live fire and people inside taken away. There was no control. Soldiers did what they wanted. At times, they "went crazy." They did "unnecessary damage to property, smashing stuff, looting. Commanders didn't care.

Testimony 45 - House Demolitions & Vandalism

More demolitions. Another neighborhood ruined. "Some of the houses had been demolished because they sheltered armed combatants, other(s) suspected of having tunnels underneath, yet others blocked our line of vision....they were taken down, whole orchards were razed."

Testimony 46 - Vandalism

"In primary searches for weapons, we go in and then suddenly a guy opens a cupboard, sees china and begins to throw it all on the floor (to) show it to the Arabs." Stuff was thrown out windows and walls written on also.

Testimony 47 - House Demolitions

"It was amazing." So many were destroyed that "At first you go in and see lots of houses. A week later, after the razing, you see the horizon further away, almost to the sea. They simply took down all the houses around so the terrorists would have nowhere else to hide." All around you see rubble.

Testimony 48 - Briefings

Briefing stressed "going in there and getting things back in order," that, of course, meant terrorizing Gazans into submission. "An army that does these things, that takes apart houses because there was sporadic shooting nearby, is an unprofessional army."

Testimony 49 - Bombardment

Soldiers were forbidden to go up on rooftops because helicopters, planes, and UAVs fired on persons detected there. "Whoever climbed to the roof was doomed."

Testimony 50 - Rules of Engagement

All Palestinians were suspects, so even ones waving white flags were shot. “The soldiers were made to understand that their lives (mattered), and that there was no way (they’d risk being killed) for the sake of leaving civilians the benefit of the doubt. We were allowed to fire in order to spare our lives.” Orders were to shoot at everyone, “even an old woman – take them down.”

Testimony 51 – Human Shields

Some soldiers were worried about moral issues like using people as human shields. “Personally I’m unhappy about it....I certainly don’t intend to serve in the Occupied Territories any longer....I’m not feeling good....having been there and taken part in (operations making him) very uneasy....You always have another option.”

Testimony 52 – House Demolitions

“....most of the destruction that went on....was not necessary....the battalion commander said that as far as we were concerned this was war.”

Testimony 53 – Rules of Engagement

“....”at a certain time soldiers (use) a machine gun, rifle and grenade launcher (to) take a house....and target it for a blast of deterrent fire. The idea is to sow confusion, keep shifting the direction of warfare.”

Testimony 54 – Atmosphere

“Going in, the atmosphere was ‘gung-ho’ and the whole country was behind us. While inside, all of that disappeared....Listen, coming out of there I did not feel any heroic elation or sacrifice, just that it was sickening and unglamorous and boring and stupid. People suffered....human beings become nothing....It is impossible to conceive of such an extent of suffering as that which we inflicted on Gaza....that is what I take with me in particular, how people can be indifferent to suffering or see it as trivial.”

Final Comments

Defense minister Ehud Barak claims Israel has “the most moral army in the world.” The above testimonies say otherwise. They show:

- deep moral degradation;
- insensitivity to human lives and suffering;
- clear evidence of indiscriminate slaughter and destruction for its own sake;
- civilians targeted like combatants;
- women and children treated no differently than men;
- the elderly, the very young, it didn’t matter;
- being Palestinian makes them terrorists;
- rules of engagement were “shoot first and ask questions later” if at all.

For over six decades, Israel defiled international law by committing the most egregious crimes of war and against humanity against Palestinian civilians and neighboring Arab states. The world community hardly blinks.

Stephen Lendman is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization. He lives in Chicago and can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net.

Also visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com and listen to The Global Research News Hour on Republic Broadcasting.org Monday - Friday at 10AM US Central time for cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on world and national issues. All programs are archived for easy listening.

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About the author:

Stephen Lendman lives in Chicago. He can be reached at lendmanstephen@sbcglobal.net. His new book as editor and contributor is titled "Flashpoint in Ukraine: US Drive for Hegemony Risks WW III." <http://www.claritypress.com/LendmanIII.html> Visit his blog site at sjlendman.blogspot.com. Listen to cutting-edge discussions with distinguished guests on the Progressive Radio News Hour on the Progressive Radio Network. It airs three times weekly: live on Sundays at 1PM Central time plus two prerecorded archived programs.

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