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Speaking of Guns

LAUNCHING GUN CONTROL DISCOURSE AND DISARMING SECURITY GUARDS IN A MILITARIZED SOCIETY

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DISARMING 2014

There was a rifle in my cupboard. Every third or fourth weekend, over several years. None of us liked having it there so we joked, trivialized and eventually stopped seeing it. By wearing down our initial unease and the slight but tangible excitement, we made it unremarkable. The gun was army property, entrusted to one of my children serving a mandatory term of duty. I have no memory of whether the cupboard was kept locked and the key stored elsewhere, as required by army regulations. I suspect not.

This bit of minutiae, part of my first-hand experience, is just one of the many ways that guns can become integrated into family routine in Israel. It was so thoroughly "normal" or normalized that I had forgotten it altogether. This experience re-surfaced in the context of a project I co-founded with another feminist activist, Smadar Ben Natan, in 2010 called Gun Free Kitchen Tables (GFKT). GFKT is a feminist initiative tackling a concrete manifestation of Israel's militarization: that is, the normalization of firearms and their proliferation throughout civilian space. As a significant entry point, the project has challenged the over-armament of the private security guard industry, its contribution to the de-regulation and proliferation of firearms and its role in the operation of Israel's security state. GFKT campaigns to save (predominantly female) lives by advocating the enforcement of a mostly unenforced Israeli law: Clause 10c of the Firearms Act. This law prohibits (most) private security guards from taking their weapons off-site and/or to their homes. With at least 40,000 private security guards in Israel and the occupied territories, the (partial) enforcement of this law in 2013 due to GFKT advocacy achieved the disarmament of tens of thousands of guards

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and homes. A reversal of this process began in October 2015, following a series of government decisions purporting to respond to attacks by Palestinians, but which in effect resulted in more small arms on the streets, loosened regulations and increased gun violence (Salem 2015).

Despite the backslide, GFKT works to reverse small arms proliferation across the board (including the guns of the military, police and Jewish West Bank settlers) by bringing feminist perspectives into Israel's security discourse. Furthermore, GFKT promotes gun control and advocates strict oversight on an armed private industry that has (further) eroded accountability and transparency in the security sector. After just four years of action, our entry point proved surprisingly effective. The awareness that GFKT created continues to galvanize critical and better-informed discussion of gun control, gender, firearms and security. These discussions were virtually non-existent in Israel before GFKT started its campaign. In the process, shifting public perceptions about small arms begin to destabilize the masculinized militarization that permeates government policies in Israel and underpins the occupation of territories conquered in 1967.

The year 2014 was the first year without a single murder committed with a weapon taken off-site by a security guard since documentation of such murders began in 2002. For the first time in twelve years, not one company gun became a murder weapon in a security guard's home sphere. These figures are particularly striking in contrast to the twelve months leading up to July 2013, when *eight* victims were murdered with guns taken home by guards. Between 2002 and August 2013, before publication and enforcement of new gun storage directives by Israel's Minister of Public Security, the number of murders committed with the weapons of off-duty security guards reached at least thirty-three (GFKT 2014b, 2015b). However, given the absence of official data on gun crime in Israel, there are almost certainly additional cases.

The year 2014 was the first year in which the GFKT campaign realized the motto heading all of its documents: "We don't know who she is, but we know we can save her life." In a rare case of official acknowledgment, the Israeli State Comptroller's report for 2012–2013 (2014, 396–397) directly credited GFKT's advocacy, alongside this tragic series of murders, for the new ministerial directives. These directives resulted in a 100 percent rise in the number of guards deployed without arms, and in workplace storage of after-duty arms by 85 percent of those guards who remained armed. Overall, small arms were removed from tens of thousands of homes (GFKT 2014a). In July 2015, GFKT marked *two whole years* without any recorded killings.

BEGINNINGS

In 2002, two years into the second *intifada*, the Palestinian popular uprising against Israel's military occupation, I was already a long-time feminist,

anti-militarist activist opposing Israel's colonization and occupation of territories, including those conquered in 1967.[1] As the fast-domesticated army rifle in my own cupboard indicates, though, my patterns of perception were (and are) no less militarized than those of most Jewish-born Israelis. As Cynthia Enloe points out, "governments cannot militarize their policies and operations without making most women complicit" (2012, 553). By 2002, though, I had become experienced in the "unfinishable" work of demilitarizing my senses and thinking. Consequently, among my multiple responses to Israel's suppression of the uprising, I was very troubled by the guns proliferating at thousands of public entrances across Israel. Unlike most around me, I *saw* them. Supported and enabled by Vanessa Farr and the co-editors of *Sexed Pistols* (Farr et al. 2009), a collection in which my findings were eventually published, I began a study of the parties responsible for these suddenly growing numbers of small arms: Israel's burgeoning domestic security guard industry.

Research soon acquainted me with worldwide evidence for the specific effects of guns *in the home*: higher odds of homicide and suicide, exposing women in particular to "significantly higher odds of homicide victimization than men" (Anglemyer et al. 2014, 105). Indeed, in Israel, eighteen of the thirty-three known victims of private security guards' off-duty arms have been female (GFKT 2015b). Even this small majority demonstrates women's over-representation, given that men form the vast majority of gun violence victims in all other spheres. Firearms in the home are more likely to threaten and injure than protect family members, and attacks with guns are known to end in death more frequently than attacks by other means (Cukier and Cairns 2009, 22; Hemenway 2011, 502). In this context, keeping guns out of homes has emerged as a directly preventive measure capable of saving predominantly women's, but also men's, lives. This understanding was apparent in the recommendation of a 2005 ministerial committee in Israel (Committee for the Review of the System of Arms Licensing for Guards 2005, 16) to store security guards' off-duty firearms at their work sites. That recommendation was reinforced in 2008 by the addition of Clause 10c to the 1949 Firearms Act, advanced by feminist parliamentarians (Marciano 2005).

However, Clause 10c remained largely unenforced, conforming to a distinct trend toward a lack of gun control in Israel, where militarization has normalized guns and cast them as "Jewish weapons" and benign protectors of the ruling (Jewish) majority (Azaryahu 1999, 93). In this vein, in 2005, court authorities failed to notify arms licensing officials of almost half (46 percent) of the current restraining orders against violent intimates, presumably leaving numerous firearms in the hands of dangerous spouses (Sachs et al. 2005). A significant number of women interviewed in 2015 in Israeli shelters for women reported firearms in the possession of their abusive spouses (Kashti 2015). A friend of mine, subjected to violence in her home, recounted the chilling threat repeated by her security guard husband: "Just one bullet."

Since starting my study of small arms and light weapons in 2002, I have known that the next murder with a guard's off-duty gun was just a matter of

time. I have been sickened by the awareness that these were largely preventable. Where stemming the broader problem of militarized violence against women requires sophisticated, uncertain and often long-term means, this was a case in which killings could be addressed and prevented with a simple technical step. All that was necessary was *enforcement* of an existing law. GFKT's motto emphasizes this preventability through structural means. We do not and cannot know the individual women whose lives are affected by an omnipresent, lethal threat in the home or even by the work we do to remove that threat. The women we know of are the women shot. After the fact. After the shots. Her absence, her death, proclaims her name. It was, we know, preventable. No gun, no shooting. Simple. "It's not that many," we're told repeatedly. How to measure "many" in lives? In savable lives? Our mission, our passion, our motto. We don't know who she is. We do know we can save her life.

BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN

Given its goal of initiating a discourse that would be new to the ruling majority in Israel, GFKT was conceived as a collaborative effort. The campaign was designed to engage a spectrum of feminist and civil society organizations, reaching out through their respective activities to decision-makers, media and the public. When we set out to create GFKT in 2010, Smadar and I turned to one of Israel's most established and innovative feminist organizations, Isha L'Isha Feminist Center in Haifa, which became our organizational home. Drawing on networks of common activism and friendship, we invited other organizations to join our new campaign. At our first campaign meeting, with around ten members, we discussed priorities and practical plans for public advocacy. While GFKT members may disagree on aspects of feminism, the focused goals proposed for the campaign were easily approved. Participants volunteered for work on key tasks such as writing slogans and producing a video. Today, this fully fledged, multi-organizational campaign comprises thirteen feminist, civil society and human rights organizations.[2]

Smadar and I saw the security guard industry as an effective entry point for broaching gun control in Israel and opposing the social-political processes underlying the industry. Our call for selective disarmament had the legitimizing seal of already-existing legislation and government recommendations: we would simply need to call for actual enforcement.[3] The victims of guards' off-duty arms were also, for the most part, women (and men) from the community perceived by Israel's ruling majority as "us" – that is, the Jewish hegemony. This was therefore a case in which the over-armament fed by militarization could be shown to kill, endanger and damage people *from the very group it claimed to protect*. Besides directly saving lives, we believed this recognition could destabilize entrenched perceptions of security and security forces, while also spotlighting some of the parties making material profits from the armed security state.

The security guard industry in Israel has been characterized by years of "invisibilization"[4] of both guards and the victims of their guns. The industry has been disproportionately staffed by workers from relatively marginalized, immigrant communities from Russian-speaking or Ethiopian backgrounds. Invisibilization has meant that both the security guards and those murdered with their off-duty guns were overlooked by the general public. For the women whose homes stored (and still store many) security guards' guns, access to support services is also seriously constrained. Poverty restricts their mobility and, as migrants, they frequently lack the proficiency in local language to access social services without translation and outreach (Hobart 2002; Nesher 2012). Disproportionately poor and plagued with unemployment, they are thus subject to heightened risk for murder by partners and family members (Mazali 2009, 274–275).

GFKT set out to counteract the *invisibilization* of the women (and men) whose accumulating deaths revealed the existence of a phenomenon. Previously, victims had been fast forgotten and/or chalked up to the ethnicized cultures of violence often ascribed to immigrant communities, enabling blindness on the part of the public and the media to the recurring pattern identified by our continuing research. Moreover, the phenomenon of murder with guards' off-duty guns was facilitated by the illegal storage of company guns in homes. While striving to save lives, our efforts with GFKT also problematized the "us" (as opposed to "them") that is vital to national security discourse. Exposing the victims' prolonged invisibilization and their neglect by law enforcement revealed a systemic, gender-based and ethnicized discrimination that belied the imagined "us."

As a private industry based largely on unskilled labor, the private security industry is not sacralized in the same manner as the military in Israel. While we have been critical of the ethnicized and class bases for this lack of prestige, the activists of GFKT also thought that this status might enhance public receptiveness to demands for the industry's partial disarmament. In addition, focusing on a relatively simple *preventive* measure seemed potentially powerful. The non-enforcement of a law specifically designed to prevent a recurring pattern of violence seemed sufficiently outrageous to galvanize public opposition. If enforcement actually lowered the incidence of such killings, we could use that opportunity to pursue similar measures in analogous contexts.

MORE THAN ONE KIND OF NON-ENFORCEMENT

In one telling case, GFKT's focused entry point raised objections, as feminist Palestinian citizens of Israel deplored the failure of our approach to speak for Palestinian women. This, however, was no coincidence: Palestinian citizens of Israel (comprising 20 percent of Israel's population) are segregated from the hegemonic Jewish community through a complex array of legal, cultural, economic, linguistic and other measures. Both communities are, in turn,

forcibly segregated from the Palestinian non-citizens living in the West Bank and Gaza, controlled by Israel since 1967 under direct or indirect military occupation. Women's circumstances in each community – Jewish and Palestinian, within and beyond the 1967 borders – differ greatly in relation to the proliferation and threat of small arms. Palestinian women, not to mention the entire Palestinian community both within and outside Israel's borders, are experiencing very different problems related to militarization and the abuse of small arms and light weapons.

Within Israel, Palestinian scholars have documented a systematic policy of non-enforcement in their communities, allowing local state-supported leaders a broad abuse of power (Anbusi 2014). Manar Hasan (1999, 293–297) has noted that the Israeli government collaborates with Palestinians' patriarchal clan structures in pursuit of its own goals, bolstering the power of acquiescent clan leaders by preserving the inferior status of Palestinian women, using it as currency with which the state pays dignitaries. Among other things, these policies have led to the stockpiling of unlicensed small arms. Entire communities of Palestinian citizens are terrorized by gun violence on a daily basis. In 2012, Palestinian feminist activist Aida Touma-Sliman told a parliamentary investigative committee that police had collected 6,000 illegal firearms in a single day in the town of Lod (or *al-Lydd* in Arabic), which has a population of nearly 72,000, about one-quarter of whom are Palestinian Arabs. Knesset Member Ahmad Tibi stated, "Arab towns have become a backyard arms cache" (Parliamentary Investigative Committee on Employing Arab Workers in the Public Service 2012). In a 2011 interview by GFKT, one Palestinian woman also strongly criticized the celebratory shooting common at Palestinian weddings, describing a local initiative opposing it. The salience of such initiatives was shown again in 2014 and 2015 during discussions between GFKT and activists from the Palestinian town of Tayibe, in central Israel, following protests against the gun culture that had enabled the murder of a Tayibe high school principal (Shaalan 2014). It is against this backdrop that Palestinian women in Israel are over-represented among murder victims by intimates (No To Violence Against Women 2011). They also receive poorer welfare services in Palestinian municipalities (Kashti 2015), while class and cultural discrimination obstruct access to the limited services that are offered (Margaret Hobart quoted in Mazali 2009, 273; Adalah 2011, 3).

In the West Bank and East Jerusalem, widespread gun violence reveals a related but nonetheless separate policy of non-enforcement, granting both the military and Jewish settlers the sweeping use and abuse of power. Soldiers and settlers enjoy almost full impunity in their use of firearms against Palestinian civilians (B'Tselem 2012; OCHA 2012; Yesh Din 2014, 7). Violence against women in Palestinian communities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip has reportedly risen over the past few years alongside continuing Israeli aggression, bearing out numerous claims that gender-based violence tends to increase in conflict situations (Barr and Masters 2011, 10). A report published by the Palestinian organization Miftah describes the existence of "an integrated system of

violence against women" in the occupied Palestinian territories, exacerbated by "military measures by Israeli forces intersecting with a conservative, patriarchal Palestinian society" (Peltz 2006, 8). Such gender-specific implications reaffirm the emphasis of UN Security Council Resolution 2117 (2013, 2) on the disproportionate impact of accumulating small arms on women and girls.

Given this context, our choice to begin from a demand to disarm security guards amounted to a de facto choice to forgo collaborative work with most Palestinian feminists in Israel or in the West Bank. Inside Israel, our Palestinian counterparts seek to challenge proliferating *illegal* firearms in their communities by highlighting the murders facilitated by these arms, and to oppose the ubiquitous and intimidating presence of guns held by both soldiers and settlers. In the West Bank, their concern is with the armed violence and with the impunity of the military and of Jewish settlers. Though we planned to take on these issues over time, Palestinian feminists understandably viewed the focus of GFKT on the arms held by security guards as an excessively limited entry point.

In light of this strategic decision, GFKT took part in the formulation of a National Action Plan (NAP) to implement UN Resolution 1325 in Israel, despite the secession of Palestinian women's groups and the plan's very minimal mention of Palestinian women under Israel's occupation. While remaining vocally critical of these problems, GFKT has nonetheless used the NAP process to introduce gun control into feminist discourse in Israel.

NON-ENFORCEMENT PRIVATIZED – AND CHALLENGED

The pattern of non-enforcement, evidenced by a growing list of victims of security guards' off-duty guns, remained unnoticed prior to GFKT's advocacy. Until 2013, the homes of tens of thousands of members of Israel's Jewish majority served as a cost-free arms cache. Arguably facilitated by the marginalized, immigrant background of most of the victims, gun storage in guards' homes remained uncontested. As of 2008, Clause 10c remained quietly non-enforced while privatized policing maximized profits for both firm owners and government, the industry's largest employer (Levy 2005, 5). Driven (or even enabled) by the second *intifada* and the perceived need for ubiquitous guards, Israel saw its militarized culture come together with galloping neo-liberalization, leading to deregulation of both gun licensing and labor (Mazali 2009). As an added organ of the security state, private security has been pivotal in barring free access to public spaces, restricting freedom of movement and denying freedom of protest. It also further corrupted the already very limited transparency and accountability of Israel's regime of surveillance and control (Suciu 2013, 13–31; Hasson 2014; Havkin 2014).

The discriminatory hiring policies of security firms also further skewed an already gendered job market by validating stereotypes of men as protectors and bearers of guns, and largely excluding women, who comprise only around 15 percent of the industry workforce (Levy 2005, 3). Capitalizing on

what Paul Higate (2012, 459) describes as, "the emasculated and marginal status of racialized men's gender orders," and on the constrained employment options of many immigrants, companies regularly exploit workers with relative impunity. This is underpinned by the vested interest of government in cheap outsourcing via "loss tenders," thus heightening job insecurity and dependence on employers (Beinish and Tzarfati 2008, 93). The frustrated anger and humiliation that such working conditions engender can, as argued by Chris Dolan, feed a sense of "thwarted" manhood prone to promoting violence – both domestic and collective – as a channel for achieving self-esteem (2003, 65).

In 2013, after GFKT's work led to new gun storage directives, we carried out civilian oversight through an independent survey assessing whether firms had implemented the directives.[5] We found pronounced changes in firearms handling: 85 percent of armed guards reported a recent shift to storing guns at work. Overall armament levels also dropped dramatically, as the number of *unarmed* security guards nearly doubled in the months before the survey (Cohen 2014; GFKT 2014a, 1–2), suggesting that thousands of private security guards had previously been armed unnecessarily. Then, in November 2014, the Minister of Public Security re-authorized security guards to take guns home in a publicity move anticipating newly declared elections in March 2015. This reversal also spoke to a militarized populism that was fanned by Israel's 2014 attack on Gaza and the West Bank. Somewhat surprisingly, however, public recognition of the dangers of small arms seemed stubbornly persistent: media items questioned the reversal of gun storage rules and some even challenged the habitual equation of arms and security. Security firms actually opposed the policy change and many guards continued storing guns at work after duty (GFKT 2014b).

Complementing these efforts, GFKT has also pushed for greater sensitivity to gender issues while the Israeli government drafts two new laws poised to shape a new reality of gun control in Israel and the Occupied Territories for years to come. These laws include the proposed Security Services Law and a new, totally overhauled Firearms Act (GFKT 2015a, 8–9). Meanwhile, GFKT is conducting research for the first-ever report entitled *Small Arms in Israel*, having identified a data vacuum on gun crime and gun control in Israel which prevents accurate civil society monitoring and government oversight. The report will build on GFKT's achievements thus far, raising questions about the proliferation and control of military arms, the armament of Jewish civilians in the West Bank, police guns and all types of illegal arms – extending our work for the first time well beyond the private sector.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the time of writing, in November 2015, Israel and Palestine are once again seeing intensified violence. Israel's security forces and Jewish West Bank settlers are carrying out widespread attacks against Palestinians, while Palestinians carry out attacks against civilians, settlers and soldiers. The Israeli

government has responded by accelerating the armament of private citizens and loosening controls on small arms. GFKT is struggling to find means that can stem this process.

Militarization is what keeps Israel's ruling hegemony both fearful and persistently combative, permeating every aspect of society. This ongoing process depends on the othering of *women* on the one hand and of *the enemy* on the other, devaluing the lives and voices of both. Nevertheless, and somewhat surprisingly, a feminist campaign to save women's lives by disarming security guards at their posts and, on a larger scale, in their homes has largely been accepted into mainstream discourse. This acceptance has allowed GFKT to achieve notable results.

Moreover, our campaign has forged a previously non-existent discourse of arms control in Israel's civil society, problematizing what had been the mainstay of militarization and combative masculinity. The initial receptiveness we have seen among decision-makers and the public can be ascribed to several converging factors including the functions and public perceptions of private security firms, the marginalization of their workforce and the identification of victims of guards' off-duty guns as members of the Jewish hegemony. How far we will be able to go in our work with GFKT remains to be seen, though we have already enabled life-saving changes while providing an opportunity to unravel the equation of arms with security – and to question and estrange "the gun."

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Notes

1 I was one of the founders of the New Profile Movement for the Demilitarization of Israeli Society (http://newprofile.org/english), which grew out of my work with independent study groups on women in Israel's militarized society.

2 The GFKT campaign members are the Association for Civil Rights in Israel, the Coalition of Women for Peace, Hollaback! Israel, Itach-Maaki – Women Lawyers for Social Justice, Isha L'Isha Feminist Center, Israel Women's Network, New Profile, Noga – The Israeli Center for Rights of Crime Victims, No2Violence Against Women, Physicians for Human Rights – Israel, Psychoactive, Tmura – The Antidiscrimination Legal Center and Women and Their Bodies. We also benefit from participation in a consultancy capacity from Agenda – Israeli Center for Strategic Communications.

3 Initially, we knew of the 2005 government decision. It was Smadar Ben Natan's legal research which unearthed Clause 10c of the Firearms Act, enacted in 2008 but virtually unknown.
4 A term I have gratefully borrowed from Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2010).
5 GFKT extends gratitude to Urgent Action Fund (USA) for enabling this swift survey and Kvinna till Kvinna (Sweden), a steady supporter, for assisting media outreach after the survey.

Notes on Contributor

Rela Mazali works at creating knowledge, prose, action, stories, thought, relationships and life arrangements in the spirit of Simone de Beauvoir's expression, "one life, one work." Among other things, she is an author, an independent scholar, a feminist anti-militarist activist and co-coordinator of Gun Free Kitchen Tables.

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