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## CHAPTER 9

## Women and Militarization in Israel

### Forgotten Letters in the Midst of Conflict

ISIS NUSAIR

## INTRODUCTION

I started writing this paper in the spring of 1995. At the time, I was taking a class on Women and Militarization with Cynthia Enloe at Clark University, and one of the course requirements was to conduct an interview with a woman in which we analyze the militarization processes in her life. My friend Hilla happened to be visiting, and she agreed to work with me on this project throughout her one-week stay. We started working in traditional and nontraditional settings: in the office, around a meal, during a walk. Many times, while discussing other issues or through a sudden remembrance of a forgotten detail about militarization, a whole new chapter of our project evolved. Despite our long friendship, Hilla and I recognize our different ethnic, cultural and national backgrounds, she being a Jewish Israeli and I a Palestinian from Israel.<sup>1</sup> This realization enriched our debate on the subject of militarization of individuals and institutions in Israeli society, and could provide the reader with a comparative analysis of the nature of militarization in our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Hilla could not participate in drafting this paper because of lack of time, and because of our separate locations, her living in Israel and me studying in the United States. The paper provides a vertical and horizontal reading of our correspondence and of the footnotes. These two levels of narrative, vertical/personal and horizontal/academic are subsequently real/fictional.<sup>3</sup> They interweave continuously to form a certain meaning/presentation.

Dear Hilla

I was very glad to receive your letter and hear about the recent peace developments at home. Who could have believed that the 'historic' handshake between Rabin and Arafat on the lawn of the White House could have ever taken place?<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite the national and international peace euphoria, I could hear/read between the lines of your letter a lot of fear and suspicion. Maybe this is embedded in being a member of the Israeli society or maybe we have gone through a similar scenario before. I still remember General Ariel Sharon's invasion of Lebanon, named by the Israeli government as the Peace of Galilee Operation.<sup>5</sup> What peace were they talking about, who defines it, and whom does it serve? Could occupation of other countries ever bring peace? I guess it is about time we start naming things with their real names.

\* \* \*

Dear Hilla,

Where to start and how to proceed in discussing the militarization processes of our lives? How can I move beyond the initial stage of asking the following questions? How is the construction of the Israeli collective identity created and maintained, and what role does the education system play? How do daily war practices shape and how are they shaped by rituals, symbols, values, tradition, and culture? What are the connections between the military and civil society? Who defines hi/story, who is left out, and how are past/present/future 'realities' constantly re/constructed? How do constructions of patriarchy, masculinity and femininity, and public/private spheres shape the nature of political discourse in Israel?

\* \* \*

Dear Isis,

I think it is hard and quite impossible to differentiate between the state, society, and the military in Israel.<sup>6</sup> They are one for me. The army is like the Eighth Passenger, that science fiction story about a monster that grows inside you and threatens to control and kill everything. I decided not to go to the army because of the horror stories I used to hear

from my scouts councilor, who, after finishing her service in the army, became a religious orthodox Jew. Maybe that is what she needed in order to remain sane. I became a vegetarian just like her. I wanted to avoid the control and humiliation of the military officers, maintain my independence, and not become an object like the others. Maybe I was not politically aware at the time, yet I strongly felt that the military institution is very patriarchal and not a place for me.

\* \* \*

Dear Hilla,

I realize that my life is militarized, but I insist on surrounding the word 'militarization' with quotation marks. I, the alien creature who comes from 'nowhere' and could hardly feel any belonging or even be considered to belong to anything in this state,<sup>7</sup> stand in between the television shows, the daily newspapers, the education curriculum, the racist/sexist/egocentric/nationalist discourses which define a 'certain' relation towards me and witness/formulate my marginalization and consequently my 'militarization'.<sup>8</sup> Do you think that because of your 'pure Israelianness' you tend to see yourself as totally militarized, while I prefer the quotation marks around the word 'militarization' as around everything else in my life?

\* \* \*

Dear Isis,

I remember my second grade participation in Memorial Day celebrations. It was 1972 and I was eight at the time. We came to school with white shirts, and read the names of the soldiers who fell in the wars of Israel. We glorified their heroism and sacrifice. We had a chance to meet the parents of the soldiers who died in these wars. I was surprised to discover, when attending Memorial Day celebrations at my son's school last year, that these celebrations are still the same. I came to realize that the militarization process is continuous, persistent, starts from an early age, and is defined by constructions/interpretations of daily and national events. From the moment you are born, they start feeding you the education about the need to love and protect your country. Many of the songs we learnt at school revolved around themes

of friendship, bonding, religion, love of the land, and love mixed with blood. Now that I am reflecting back on my childhood days, I recall this song:

Not because the color of the eyes is sky blue, I fell in love with him  
He is simply a combat soldier, no more and no less, and he is my soldier

The process of militarized education takes place not only at school, but at the scouts, in the street, and on the radio and television. It is a learning/construction of meanings about the national security and the protection of the homeland.<sup>9</sup> Yet, what happens when these meanings are militarized? Do our relations to them become militarized too? I remember how jumpy my previous partner became before he was called to the military draft. He could hardly control himself, and once he came out of control and attacked me. I know that his violence has a lot to do with the army, and me being his partner at the time involves me in this process, whether I want it or not. I realize that many people could isolate these incidents and see no connection between them and the military.<sup>10</sup>

\* \* \*

Dear Hilla,

Could one isolate themselves from the process of militarization? Is it possible for a fish to live without water? I consider my life to be 'militarized' and this militarization is part of my memory and identity. I was born in 1967, the year of The Occupation. As a child, I could never understand why members of my community associate my birth with war. At age ten, I started envying children of the world for having a flag and a national anthem, and at age fifteen the Israeli army invaded Lebanon. That war shaped my political consciousness and made me realize the intensity of the intrusive nature of the Israeli military in my life. They were present in every little detail. They were in our house, on the radio, in the newspaper, and on the television screen boasting of their macho power and military elitism. My memory was bombarded with war images of occupying soldiers and slaughtered bodies scattered all over the place. I wrote in my journal about the war; I wrote short stories and

essays, too. I could not participate in the public demonstrations against the war and against the Sabra and Shatila massacres in my hometown Nazareth. I could only peek through the window to witness it all.<sup>11</sup> A year after, my classmate and I prepared a lecture at school in memory of the Sabra and Shatila massacres. Our history teacher interrupted our presentation, and criticized our naiveté and lack of experience. He warned us against anything that will cause the security service authorities to put our names on their 'black lists'. I could not do anything then but cry secretly in my heart.

The following years brought more wars. War becomes part of the daily ritual of living. The war is here, unbearably heavy and disturbingly present, like a cloud sitting in my heart.

\* \* \*

Dear Isis,

You wondered in your previous letter about whether I see an embedded contradiction in living a militarized life and in resisting the military service. Well, I believe that what gets to be defined by me and what gets to be defined by society is highly intractable. I remember aspects in my childhood which helped me resist serving in the army. My parents always emphasized the humanistic aspects of life. They also made me feel that, as a girl, I am worthy of something, and that I can do what I want. Now I realize that there were lots of double messages in their bringing me up, even though they never directly stated that they hated Arabs. My father was very angry when he heard that I was not going to the army. He himself has, since the 1973 war, managed to avoid the military draft. I do not know if his anger stemmed from not wanting me to be stigmatized. I perceived myself as having an 'antisocial' personality. I hung out with people who considered themselves and were considered by society as 'antisocial'. They looked, dressed, acted, talked, and thought differently.<sup>12</sup> When I wanted to enter a state institution, attend university, I had to redefine my relation to society. Suddenly, I became aware of what it means to serve in the army; it is an integral part of your life and curriculum. I was afraid that people would stigmatize me as being mentally ill for refusing to serve in the army.

Many of the skills that I learnt while studying social work have helped me find some kind of an equilibrium between my life and society.

It takes a while, and it is still hard. I need to negotiate it all continuously, especially when it involves people that are close to me, like my mother, partner, father, friends, husbands of friends, and children.<sup>13</sup> I realize now that there are things that I cannot change, and I am learning to live with them. I do not know, though, what price I am paying, yet I know that this equilibrium keeps me going.

\* \* \*

Dear Hilla,

Throughout our correspondence we have been talking and writing in Hebrew, and I have been thinking in Arabic and translating our conversations into English. I wonder about the reasons behind the state's law obliging me to learn Arabic, Hebrew, and English since elementary school. By the time I graduated from high school, I was fluent not only in those three languages but also in the history, literature, and religion of the Jewish people in the diaspora and since the creation of the state of Israel.

In high school, I started designing my own parallel curriculum to that imposed by the Israeli Ministry of Education. They insisted on wiping out anything that has to do with the history and literature of the Palestinian people. I felt that they were wiping out my identity and existence. My self-designed extra-curriculum helped me understand the politics of learning in Israeli society. I learned how to bridge the gaps between my knowledge and life, and I learned the limits of the Israeli collective identity and my position in it as an outsider from the inside.

Making sense of the private/public resistance to the militarization processes in Israeli society

How could we make sense of the public and private resistance to militarization processes in our lives, and does this process differ among men and women, Jews and Palestinians? How does belonging to the state and constructions of our collective identities inform our resistance? Would our resistance be the same if we had served in the army, and what does it mean to resist a militarized mentality of occupation in a country drunk on victory and omnipotence?

\* \* \*

Dear Isis,

I feel belonging and responsibility to the state. I get angry and do not agree with what is happening, but I feel I have an influence though. I know I am very weird. I like the country, the earth, the stones, but not the people. I see the average Israeli as a rude person, and that makes me sick. It is as if I have a garden and they would walk over my plants and would not even say "sorry." This is my relation towards the men, with women it is more complicated.

I see a way out of this situation. I think that our generation will grow and things will be all right. It will take time and lots of work, especially from women who participate in making the politics of the state. Then, things will start changing! You can already see some change. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement in 1993, the Arab character in educational textbooks is changing to the better and Islamic civilization is being introduced at Jewish schools.<sup>14</sup> I believe that there is a difference between my generation and my parents' generation. I was born and grew up in Israel, and that makes a difference. The state is already established, it is there. Feminist resistance is not easy in Israeli society.<sup>15</sup> It is to oppose something that the whole society is structured around. It is to harm the social morale. There is always a need to discuss thoughts and tender things. Resistance! Oh, well! Many times I feel not ready or do not want to resist. At times, I have political arguments with people and I can say what I want, and at other times I find it not useful to 'fight' back.

\* \* \*

Dear Hilla,

I see resistance as a condition for living, a necessary act to negotiate my existence and define my identity. Early on, I understood that resistance is not a privilege, it is a state of living. It is a process of redefining the meaning and practice of politics in Israel. You do not look like an Arab, many of my Jewish classmates in the university always said. What should an Arab look like, I always answered. I do not always want to have a politicized life. It tires me, rips me apart, and steals the best moments of my life. Yet I know that there is no way around it. I have to live and resist simultaneously on different fronts. Growing up

feeling and realizing my location on the margin of Israeli collectivity opens more space for me to resist. As an outsider/insider, I question my 'non-existence' by questioning back the prevailing notions of Israeli collective identity.

\* \* \*

Dear Hilla,

Are you tired and hesitant because of the constant need to negotiate the contradictions of militarization? Are you tired because you have to fight on various fronts, or is it because you are 'alone' in your struggle? Can I, on the other hand, allow myself to be tired? I think that we need to collectively challenge and change the dominant hegemonic discourses about Israeli national security and its definitions of war and peace. It scares me, though, to think of anything in collective terms. Realizing commonalities and differences and providing a chance for equal representation of the usually underrepresented puts the boundaries of collectivity into question. Learning about the experiences of resistance of men and women in militarized societies in other countries provides a space for comparison and exchange. I hope that we can pool our resistance to support and strengthen each other. So that when you are tired of 'fighting', you can get strength from other resisting women.<sup>16</sup> I hope you have been sleeping well lately and your nightmares are fading away.<sup>17</sup>

## EPILOGUE

I wonder why I find myself resisting ending this paper. Many of the questions raised in it are still open, and the vulnerability and pain of dealing with the embedded violence in militarization is not dealt with yet. Both Hilla and I have avoided speaking directly about the connections between militarization and public and private violence in our lives. Hilla's description of the average Israeli as walking over your garden without apologizing, of 'them' taking away your creativity and oppressing your development, and of the eighth passenger growing inside you until it controls everything suggest a strong sense of rape. When I told Hilla of this observation she said nothing but wondered about the meanings and ramifications of the intrusive and controlling nature of the private and public violence in militarized societies.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

1. Hilla considers her being Jewish as problematic, for the state of Israel uses the term simultaneously to mean religion and nationality. Hilla does not define/identify herself as a Zionist. I, on the other hand, will refer to myself as a Palestinian from Israel and not as an Israeli Arab or an Israeli Palestinian. In my view, the notion of Israeliness holds a definition by the state of what is Israel and who is an Israeli.

2. According to Cynthia Enloe, militarism is a package of ideas about the army, while the military is the institution itself. Militarization is the process in which individuals or political systems either become increasingly dependent upon, controlled and affected by the military, or a process by which individuals and political systems adopt militaristic values, beliefs, and presumptions about human hi/story that enhances military ones. For more elaboration, see Enloe's *Does Khaki Become You? The Militarization of Women's Lives* (chs. 1, 8) and *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War* (chs. 8, 9). See also Sharoni's *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* (chs. 3, 6).

3. What is real and what is fictional depends on the way the reading of this paper develops. Hilla and I did work on analyzing the militarization processes of our lives. I choose to present this project as a fictional correspondence between Hilla and myself. The letters written by Hilla are an exact transcription of my interviews with her. The real/fictional split could challenge notions about the personal/academic split, and definitions of "truth".

4. See Simona Sharoni's *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Accord: Feminist Approaches to International Politics* for an analysis of the gendered nature of peace and war in Israel.

5. General Sharon's invasion of Lebanon presumed canceling the existence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Lebanon in seventy-two hours. Israel occupies until today a fifteen-mile security zone in Southern Lebanon.

6. Errella Shadmi argues in *Women, Palestinians, Zionism: A Personal View*, that the main mechanism employed to achieve "national unity" is "compulsory Zionism," an uncompromising demand, enforced by means of a wide range of methods, to adopt the values, attitudes, and behaviors prescribed by Zionist ideology. Each and every Israeli, adds Shadmi, is expected to follow the socially approved and sanctioned norms and to be committed and loyal to the collective will. Pluralism, she argues, is possible only in so far as it does not threaten Zionist ideology, where the particular aspirations of the different and the deviant are ignored, and hence the voices of Palestinians, homosexuals, Sephardic Jews, and women are silenced. According to Shadmi, new ideological boundaries were

established after the creation of Israel in 1948, based upon their common denominator, which revolved around three principles: God, Family, and Homeland. Thus the Zionist ethos, concludes Shadmi, was dramatically transformed: fundamentalism, nationalism, militarism, and phallocentricism became its key features towards the end of the 1970s and 1980s. For further elaboration on the subject see Mayer, *Women and the Israeli Occupation: The Context*; Chazan and Marfi, *What Has Occupation Done to Palestinian and Israeli Women*; Sharoni, *Homefront as Battlefield: Gender, Military, Occupation and Violence against Women*; Meyer, *Israel Now: Portrait of a Troubled Land*; Shapiro, *Land and Power: The Zionist Resort to Force, 1881-1948*, and Horowitz and Lisak, *Trouble in Utopia: the Overburdened Polity of Israel*.

7. The state of Israel was created in 1948 on the Zionist premise of land without people for people without land. According to Deborah Gerner, *One Land, Two Peoples: The Conflict Over Palestine*, many early Zionists operated under a set of illusions about Palestine that blinded them to the true situation: the illusion that Palestine was an almost empty land that could easily accommodate their dreams and aspirations, the illusion that the people already in Palestine would welcome Zionist colonization, and especially the illusion that any resistance to Zionism could be blamed on Arab politicians rather than on broad-based sentiment against the European immigration.

8. The Israeli media ignores/marginalizes Palestinians from Israel from its rhetoric (since they stand on the margins of the Israeli national/Zionist collective identity), and, if presented, the image is that of backward people. The education curriculum for Palestinians in Israel is determined by the Ministry of Education and completely ignores the history and literature of the Palestinian people. See Majed El-Haj, *Education for Democracy in Arab Schools: Problems and Missions* and Sammy Smooha, *Arabs and Jews in Israel: Conflicted and Shared Attitudes in a Divided Society*. Palestinian women in Israel are marginalized on the basis of being women in a patriarchal Palestinian society and on the basis of being Palestinians in a Jewish state. See Nabila Espanioty *Palestinian Women in Israel: Identity in Light of the Occupation*.

9. According to Kathy Ferguson, the agents of unification of the state of Israel are the state, the media, the schools, and the relentless unifying drone of the discourse of "national security". On this level, the centralizing forces work at corraling the diversity within Israeli life, and, thus, at reinforcing reigning claims to meanings. The dominant self-understanding is a particularly strident masculinity, a gendered underwriting of the central order. The dominant culture forces are threatened by the manyness of things, the differences, which put constant pressure on prevailing truth claims and self-understandings. The agents of unification attempt to tame the fractious dialogues, to marshal the selective re-

sources of history, geography, and culture around a single understanding of what it means to be an Israeli.

10. In Simona Sharoni's *Homefront as Battlefield: Gender, Military, Occupation and Violence Against Women*, the story of Gilad Sheman is presented. Gilad, a twenty-three-year-old Israeli Jewish man, doing his military service in Gaza, shot and killed in April 1989 a seventeen-year-old Palestinian woman, Amal Muhammed Hasin, as she was reading a book on her front porch. The regional Military Court convicted Shemen of carelessness in causing Hasin's death, but he was released after an appeal. Two years later, on 30 June 1991 Gilad Shemen shot and killed his former girlfriend, nineteen-year-old Einav Rogel. Sharoni sees this story as underscoring the complex relationship between sexism, militarism, and violence against women as interrelated in the private and public spheres of the Israeli life.

12. According to Tikva Honig-Parnass, in *Jewish Fundamentalism and Oppression of Women as Inherent in the Jewish-Zionist State*, in the course of the Zionist Movement's efforts to build the new secular national collectivity, it did not completely break away from Jewish Orthodoxy, but preserved religious myths and symbols among central symbols of Zionism—including the cardinal "commandment" of Zionism, immigration to Israel. The biblical connection to the land and the connection between the bible and present day life in the old-new land were strongly emphasized. Despite their attempts to invest the Bible with historical, philosophical, and mythological meaning, it has remained primarily a religious document and, as such, has had an impact on the nature of the political aspirations of the state. Even the most important holidays, which were and are celebrated in the state of Israel, are religious. Thus, the nucleus of the state symbols remain today Jewish-religious. The rest is but a thin veneer of what only appears to be secularism. For further information see Jehuda Reinhartz, *The Transition from Yishuv to State: Social and Ideological Changes*; Dina Porat, "Attitudes of the Young State toward the Holocaust and Its Survivors: A Debate over Identity and Values"; Myron Aronoff, *Myths, Symbols, and Rituals of the Emerging State*; Yael Zerubavel, *New Beginnings, Old Past: The Collective Memory of Pioneering in Israeli Culture*; Anton Shamma, *At Half-Mast: Myths, Symbols, and Rituals of the Emerging State: A Personal Testimony of an "Israeli Arab."*

13. Hilla's mother works in a civil company that sells its products to the army. Hilla's partner, according to her, suffers from a post-traumatic syndrome after serving in the army during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The husband of Hilla's best friend is an officer in a special army unit and Hilla's sons are obliged to serve in the Israeli army for three years by the age of eighteen.

14. For an evaluation of the Israeli government's education policies in regard to the representation of the "Arab" in educational textbooks, see Esther

Shiela and Deborah Koubobi, *The Contribution of Literature to Education for Democracy and Arab/Jewish Coexistence*.

15. According to Tikva Honig-Parnass, *Feminism and the Peace Struggle in Israel*, the feminist movement in Israel whose members are central activists in Women and Peace is characterized by an avoidance of coming to terms with the question of connection between the Jewish-Zionist nature of the state and the oppression of women in Israel. Thus, in their struggles on specific issues of women's oppression—whether in the legal/legislation sphere or that of culture and symbols—the feminists have avoided asking questions regarding the fact that this oppression is an inherent part of the structure of this society and of the Jewish-Zionist state in which they live. By means of its conceptualization of the oppression of women in Israel, it was possible to dissent from the 'national consensus' as women and to fight for the general feminist goal of a society where there is gender equality, without leaving the nationalist Zionist consensus. This created a paradox whereby the targets of the feminist struggle remained overly general and vague on the one hand, and on the other hand could be very concrete—when they involved questions like the abortion law, rape, and violence within the family. Specific targets such as these were attacked without acknowledging the connection between them and the structure and ideology of the state, which are the real factors responsible for the oppression of women in these spheres. See also Yvonne Deutsch, *Israeli Women against the Occupation: Political Growth and the Persistence of Ideology*.

16. Sharoni's *Gender and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Women's Resistance* concludes that there is a need to move beyond simply speaking about women's perspectives on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and their struggles for a just and lasting peace in the region to include the complementary project of making men visible as men and exposing the discourse of militarized masculinity underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and conventional writing about it.

17. Hilla recounted, throughout the work on this project, three nightmares. The first is about the Nazis controlling the world; the second about the Arabs controlling Tel Aviv, where Hilla is left alone with her mother and aunt; and the third about Netanyahu and Sharon (right wing Likud party leaders) controlling Israel's media and politics. It is worth mentioning that Hilla recounted her nightmares in 1995, a year before the rise of Netanyahu into power in Israel.

18. According to Errella Shadmi in *Occupation, Violence, and Women in Israeli Society*, violence is well-rooted in the Israeli society: Israel was founded on and continues to exist by virtue of armed force. Power and militarism, argues Shadmi, have become the lifeblood of Israeli culture, in which the history of the occupation has been deliberately concealed under cover of myths and alleged security considerations, in which the army is the place where political careers are

made, in which the soldier is the culture hero, and war stories the key literature, and in which coercion of various types—religious, ethnic, gender—has become the acceptable norm in political negotiations.

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