Israeli snipers on the Gaza border. Credit: Eliyahu Hershkovitz

'42 Knees in One Day': Israeli Snipers Open Up About Shooting Gaza Protesters

Over 200 Palestinians were killed and nearly 8,000 were injured during almost two years of weekly protests at the Israel-Gaza border. Israeli army snipers tell their stories

By Hilo Glazer | Mar 06, 2020

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I know exactly how many knees I've hit, says Eden, who completed his service in the Israel Defense Forces as a sniper in its Golani infantry brigade six months ago. For much of the time, he was stationed along the border with the Gaza Strip. His assignment: to repel Palestinian demonstrators who approached the fence.

"I kept the casing of every round I fired," he says. "I have them in my room. So I don't have to make an estimate – I know: 52 definite hits."

But there are also "non-definite" hits, right?

"There were incidents when the bullet didn't stop and also hit the knee of someone behind [the one I aimed at]. Those are mistakes that happen."

Is 52 a lot?

"I haven't really thought about it. It's not hundreds of liquidations like in the movie 'American Sniper': We're talking about knees. I'm not making light of it, I shot a human being, but still ..."

Where do you stand in comparison to others who served in your battalion?

"From the point of view of hits, I have the most. In my battalion they would say: 'Look, here comes the killer.' When I came back from the field, they would ask, 'Well, how many today?' You have to understand that before we showed up, knees were the hardest thing to rack up. There was a story about one sniper who had 11 knees all told, and people thought no one could outdo him. And then I brought in seven-eight knees in one day. Within a few hours, I almost broke his record."

Israeli snipers on the Gaza border. UPI / Alamy

Seeing is believing

The mass demonstrations on Israel's border with the Strip began on Land Day, in March 2018, and continued on a weekly basis until this past January. These ongoing confrontations, in protest of Israel's siege of Gaza, exacted the lives of 215 demonstrators, while 7,996 were wounded by live ammunition, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Despite the large number of casualties, the grim protests and responses along the fence continued unabated for nearly two years, until it was decided to reduce the frequency to once a month. Yet even in real time, the violent Friday afternoon ritual provoked little public interest in Israel. Similarly, the international condemnations – from allegations of the use of disproportionate force to accusations that Israel was perpetrating massacres – faded like so much froth on the waves.

Shedding light on this very recent slice of history entails talking to snipers: After all, they were the dominant and most significant force in suppressing the demonstrations at the fence. Their targets ranged from young Palestinians who were trying to infiltrate into Israel or who threw Molotov cocktails at soldiers, to prominent, unarmed protesters who were considered to be major inciters. Both categories drew the same response: Live ammunition fired at the legs.

Of the dozens of snipers that we approached, six (all of them discharged from the IDF) agreed to be interviewed and to describe what reality looks like through their gun sights. Five are from infantry brigades – two each from Golani and Givati, one from Kfir – plus one from the Duvdevan counter-terrorism unit. The names of all of them have been changed. They are not out to "break the silence" or to atone for their deeds, only to relate what happened from their point of view. In Eden's case, even the fact that he also killed a protester by mistake doesn't rattle him. "I believe I was on the right side and that I did the right thing," he insists, "because if not for us, the terrorists would try to cross the fence. It's obvious to you that there is a reason that you're there."

Eden says he broke the "knee record" in the demonstration that took place on the day the new U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem was inaugurated, on May 14, 2018. He did it jointly: Snipers usually work in pairs – together with a locator, who is also a sniper by training, and whose task is to give his partner precise data (distance from the target, wind direction, etc.).

Eden: "On that day, our pair had the largest number of hits, 42 in all. My locator wasn't supposed to shoot, but I gave him a break, because we were getting close to the end of our stint, and he didn't have knees. In the end you want to leave with the feeling that you did something, that you weren't a sniper during exercises only. So, after I had a few hits, I suggested to him that we switch. He got around 28 knees there, I'd say."

Eden clearly recalls his first knee. His target was a demonstrator standing on coils of concertina wire about 20 meters away. "In that period [early during the protests], you were allowed to shoot a major inciter only if he was standing still," he says. "That means, even if he was walking around calmly, shooting was prohibited, so we wouldn't miss and waste ammunition. In any event, that inciter is on the barbed wire, I'm with the weapon right at the fence, and there's still no authorization to open fire. At one stage he stands opposite me, looks at me, provokes me, gives me a look of 'Let's see you try.' Then the authorization comes. Standing above me is the battalion commander, to my left is his deputy, to the right the company commander – soldiers all around me, the whole world and their wife are watching me in my first go. Very stressful. I remember the view of the knee in the crosshairs, bursting open."

Palestinian amputee who lost his leg when he was shot by Israeli troops during a protest on the border, Gaza Strip, October 2, 2019. Adel Hana,AP

"Roy," who served as a sniper in the Givati Brigade until his discharge a year and a half ago, says the hit he remembers most vividly is the one that drew the largest audience. "There was pressure, because the battalion commander had showed up, and everyone was on our case. There was a Palestinian who looked like he was about 20, who didn't stop moving around. Pink shirt, gray pants. What they do is run-run-run, and then end up in the concertina wire. He was really good at it. In that situation you can finish him off or hit someone behind him. I clearly remember being worried about missing his leg – and then feeling relief that I made a precise hit."

Relief is also how Itay, a former Haredi who was a sniper in the Netzah Yehuda Battalion (the ultra-Orthodox equivalent of the Nahal brigade). "I saw a guy who was about to light a Molotov cocktail. In a case like that you don't do calculations. I got on the radio, described the target and got an 'authorized.' The pressure is insane. Everything you learned and trained for is distilled into that moment. You get yourself together, remind yourself to breathe and then, boom. I shot at the knee and he fell. I made sure everything was all right – that I hit the right place."

Is that sort of confirmation part of the protocol?

Itay: "The directive is to keep watching after shooting to see whether the goal was achieved. You only report a hit after an additional look. To look afterward is the easy part, or more correctly, it's the part that brings relief. Because in this specific case, the terrorist was less than 100 meters from my buddies, and it could have ended badly."

And after you look a second time and you see the actual wound, is it still easy?

"You are not meant to see massive bleeding, because in the region of the knee and bones there aren't a lot of capillaries. If you see blood, that's not a good sign, because you probably hit too high. The regular scenario is supposed to be that you hit, break a bone – in the best case, break the kneecap – within a minute an ambulance comes to evacuate him, and after a week he gets a disability pension."

But Shlomi, a sniper from Duvdevan, says hitting the kneecap is also not desirable: "The objective is to cause the inciter minimal damage, so he will stop doing what he's doing. So I, at least, would try to aim at a fattier place, in the muscle region."

Can you be that precise?

Shomi: "Yes, because the Ruger [a type of rifle used mainly at demonstrations] is intended for use at 100, 150 meters. From that distance, you see the leg even with the eye, and with a telescopic lens that enlarges to the power of 10, you can actually see the tendons."

Palestinain medic Razan al-Najjar before she was shot dead at the Gaza Strip border, April 1, 2018. IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/ REUTERS

Guys with megaphones

Who is considered a major inciter at these demonstrations? The criteria are quite vague. "A major inciter is a major inciter," Amir asserts simply. The commander of a Golani sniper squad who saw action during the first wave of disturbances along the fence, he explains that "it's not so complicated to figure out who's organizing and firing up [the other protesters]. You identify him, for example, by the fact that he has his back to you and is facing the crowd. In many cases, he's also holding a megaphone."

Itay's impression is that "major inciters are, for example, people who stand around in the back, arranging things. They are not necessarily a target, but to let them know that we see what they're doing, I would shoot in the air around them. You know, the one who arms others is not a concrete threat to me, at least not directly, but he makes things happen. So to hit him is a problem, but also not to hit him is a problem. That's why the moment he gets tired of activating others and starts to take an active part in the chaos, he'll be the first one we hit, because he's the most important in terms of the group around him. He's the key to stopping the flare-up."

He adds, "You don't hit those who whip up the crowd because of what they're doing. It doesn't come from an emotional place of 'He's the one who's causing the uprising, so let's take him down.' This isn't a war, it's a Friday afternoon D.O. [disruption of order]. The goal is not to take down as many as possible, but to make this thing stop as quickly as possible."

According to IDF protocol, a minor is not to be classified as a major inciter. According to Eden, "There are borderline ages, and so you don't go there."

Eliyahu Hershkovitz

Is it really possible to tell the difference between a lean man and a well-built teenager, in the heat of a demonstration? “You try to understand according to their body language,” Amir says. “The way he holds the stone, whether it looks like he’s been dragged into the situation or is leading it. These demonstrations are a little like a youth movement, from their point of view. Even if you don’t know their precise ‘ranks,’ you can tell by the charisma who the group leader is.”

Roy maintains that, “in 99.9 percent of the cases, the identification is precise. There are a lot of images of the target, and a lot of crosshairs focused on it. A drone above, lookouts, the sniper, his commanders. It’s not just one, two or even three people who are watching him, so there will be no doubt.”

Shlomi is a little less certain: “Sometimes it really is hard to tell the difference [between minors and adults]. You look at facial features, height, body mass. Clothing is also a certain index. The younger ones are usually wearing T-shirts. But listen, a 16-year-old can cause you harm, too. If he presents a threat, the age parameter is not necessarily relevant.”

Itay agrees: “The goal is not to hit minors, but a Molotov cocktail is a Molotov cocktail, and the bottle doesn’t know whether the person holding it is a man of 20, a teenager of 14 or a kid of 8.”

Amir recalls experiencing a similar dilemma. “For example, there was a boy whose behavior justified a hit, but we estimated that he was 12 and we deliberately didn’t hit him – not only because of how it would look in the media, but because of our own substantive considerations. We decided we would really scare him and we hit the person next to him. It was not urgent for us. He’ll be here the next week, too.”

Palestinian demonstrators run away from Israeli fire and tear gas during a protest at the border fence in the southern Gaza Strip, February 15, 2019. Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/Reuters

No 'shooting and crying'

It's been 53 years since publication of "The Seventh Day," a collection of testimonies from soldiers who came from kibbutzim that gave expression to their emotional distress after seeing combat in the Six-Day War. It is a seminal text in the way it depicts Israel as a society of people who "shoot and cry." More than half a century later, the lament of soldiers returning from the battlefield is still being heard, but at least according to the voices quoted here, their ideological and moral foundations have turned inside out. The soul-searching over the cost in blood has been replaced by criticism of the army's weakness and the feeling that it is shackling its fighters.

"I've seen inciters who got across the fence and I couldn't do a thing," Roy says. "They would jump over it and provoke us, and then go back. Of course, you don't get authorization to shoot them. Why? Because, once they are within Israel proper, they're not considered hostile if they're not holding a knife or a rifle. The restraints on us are shameful. You have to understand: Even if there's a 20-year-old across from me who's inciting others and setting tires on fire, I only have a second to hit him, otherwise he'll disappear. But the moment he's in my sights, I must first inform the company commander, who informs the battalion commander, who speaks to the brigade commander, who speaks with the division commander. There were some ridiculous cases. During that time, the target has already moved or gone into hiding."

Amir depicts the chain of command in this way: "For every sniper there was a commander at a junior level [a non-com], like me, and also a senior commander – a company commander or a deputy company commander. The superior officer would request authorization to fire from the sector's brigade commander. He would get on the radio to him and ask: 'Can I add another knee for this afternoon?'"

The impression gleaned by Daniel, a lone soldier who immigrated from the United States and served in the Givati Brigade, is that the procedures were more flexible than that. "Like everything in the IDF, it wasn't completely clear, at least not in my time. But in general, you had to request authorization for shooting from your superior officer and he requested authorization from the company commander or the battalion commander. If it worked like it's supposed to, it could take less than 10 seconds. The commanders were not particularly stingy with shooting authorizations. They would trust you when you said you had identified a justifiable target."

According to Eden, the threads of the command chain have loosened over time. "If you look back at the first demonstrations, four or five years ago, before the wave of the past two years, you'll find that it was very hard to get authorization. Back then they said that every knee was a really big deal. In the period when the protests really heated up, it became easier to get a green light. In my time it came from the level of battalion commander or company commander, depending on the situation."

Did the requirement to get authorization for every sniper shot from the brigade commander have an impact on the number of Palestinian casualties? The data indicate that the number of those killed fell sharply only after the transition to the Ruger, about a year after the weekly disturbances erupted. The Ruger is considered less lethal than other rifles. Eden, a veteran of the Gaza sector, says he used M24 and Barak (HTR-2000) rifles: "With the Barak, if you shoot someone in the knee, you don't incapacitate him – you detach his leg. He could die from loss of blood."

Last July, after 16 months of confrontations at the Gaza fence, the IDF revised its guidelines for snipers in an attempt to reduce the number of fatalities. One senior officer explained the changes in a report by the Kan Broadcasting Corporation's military correspondent, Carmela Menashe: "At first we told them to shoot at the leg. We saw that you could be killed like that, so we told them to shoot below the knee. Afterward, we made the order more precise and instructed them to shoot at the ankle."

Eden confirms this. "There was a stage when the order really was to aim at the ankle," he notes. "I didn't like that change. Believe in your snipers. To me it felt like they were trying to make our life harder for no reason."

Israeli snipers on the Gaza border, April 13, 2018. Eliyahu Hershkovitz

How so?

Eden: "Because it's clear that the surface of the body between the knee and the sole of the foot is much larger than that of the ankle and the sole. It's the difference between grabbing 40 centimeters [16 inches] and grabbing 10 centimeters."

Roy, who completed his service before the instructions were updated, says he usually aimed lower in any case. "During my time you were allowed to shoot anywhere from the knee down, but I aimed at the ankle, so as not to hit higher, God forbid, or all hell would break loose. I preferred it that way. I didn't have pity on the inciters, but that I knew I wouldn't be backed up by the army. I didn't want to be a second Elor Azaria [the so-called Hebron shooter, who served a jail term after being convicted of killing an incapacitated Palestinian assailant]. I gave less thought to the target and more to myself and my family, so they wouldn't have to go through the same thing Elor's family did."

Amir adds: "If you mistakenly hit the main artery of the thigh instead of the ankle, then either you intended to make a mistake or you shouldn't be a sniper. There are snipers, not many, who 'choose' to make mistakes [and aim higher]. Still, the numbers aren't high. [In comparison,] there are days when you collect 40 knees in the whole sector. Those are the proportions."

A Palestinian amputee walks on crutches with another holding a Palestinian flag as they head toward a demonstration near the border with Israel, east of Gaza City, March 30, 2019. Anas Baba/AFP

In Amir's view, the discussion over where to shoot – thigh, knee or ankle – misses the point. "Let me tell you a story. One day there was a big to-do, real chaos. A soldier of mine wanted to take down a major inciter who met all the criteria. He requested authorization, but the company commander refused, because the guy was too close to an ambulance. The slightest deviation, even if he had just hit the headlight, and there would have been a media report that the IDF shot at an ambulance. My soldier heard the refusal, but fired anyway. He hit the ankle, like you're supposed to, a precision shot, surgical. So on the one hand he violated an order, but on the other hand he fulfilled his mission." (The soldier was later disciplined and assigned to menial labor.)

And you understand his thinking?

Amir: "Obviously. For a soldier like that, that shot is his purpose, his self-definition. These are kids of 18, mostly from a pretty poor socioeconomic background. The fact that you put them through a sniper's course doesn't mean you turned them into mature, sensible people. On the contrary, you turned them into a machine, you made them think small, you reduced their possibilities of choice, diminished their humanity and their personality. The moment you turn someone into a sniper – that is his essence. So now you want to take that away from him, too? This might sound radical, because I'm a commander, but there's a place inside me that says, 'Hey, you disappointed me, true, but you came out a man, you proved that the function [of sniper] works.'"

Amir, who majored in theater in high school and calls himself a "boy scout from the north," describes another case of deviating from the rules that occurred in his company.

"Even when there is no demonstration and everything seems calm, they rush you to the fence with the patrol when shepherds approach it. You have to understand, these are not innocent shepherds, they work for Hamas and Islamic Jihad in order to drive you crazy. They cross the line to get a response from you. Will you take a vehicle and go threaten him? By the time you get there he's gone. Will you shoot into the air? He couldn't care less. And because of that nonsense you don't sleep and a whole company becomes the shepherd's puppets," Amir says.

"One day, one of the noncoms said to me, 'Enough, we can't go on like this, let's take down one of his sheep, it's worth a few thousand.' Think about what leads a soldier, a musician from a good high school, the last kind of guy you'd say is out for blood, to get on the radio with the lookout and say, 'Do you see a sheep, to the north? You're going to see it fall.' After that, the shepherd didn't return. What's the conclusion? The deterrence worked."

Amir says that those two incidents must be understood in light of the nature of his battalion's activity on the Gaza border. "Even before the demonstrations started, we were in an ambush that lasted two months straight," he relates. "We observed a squad that managed to improvise a bomb and stick it on the fence. There was some sort of defect with it, the device didn't explode, and we had intelligence that they were coming to pick it up. But it went on and on. Every day they approach it, and even when the squad leader was standing right above the bomb, we didn't have authorization to shoot. Why? Only because of the media sensitivity. As long as he wasn't actually holding the device, it was impossible to prove beyond a doubt that he had anything to do with it – so then go figure what kind of narrative Hamas will build around that. Think how frustrating that is for the soldiers. We lay there in the rain for two months and did nothing."

And the frustration justifies rebelling under other circumstances?

Amir: "No, but that case illustrates the paradox of the rules of engagement. A terrorist who deserves to die is standing opposite me, but because we have to justify ourselves to Haaretz or to the BBC, he gets out of it without a scratch. Cowardice is created that trickles down. So instead you go and take out knees in demonstrations. Not only does that not have an effect, these people also don't deserve to lose their knees. I really identify with what [former IDF Chief of Staff] Ehud Barak once said – that if he were a Palestinian he would have become a terrorist. It only resonated for me when I was in the territories. You look at small kids crying when you pummel their father, and you say to yourself: Hey, I wouldn't expect anything else from them."

Palestinian protesters, climb over the border fence during a protest on the beach at the border with Israel, October 15, 2018. Khalil Hamra,AP

Sports connection

Are there snipers who have found it difficult to get on with their life after their discharge? Tuly Flint, a mental health officer in the reserves and a clinical social worker who specializes in trauma, has treated snipers who took part in curbing demonstrations in Gaza during the past two years. Snipers, he says, manifest singular characteristics when it comes to post-traumatic stress.

"If I am one of 30 soldiers who is in the area and fires a volley, I don't necessarily know that I did the killing," he says, whereas the sniper knows when he's hit his target. "The second trait derives from the fact that the sniper is required not to turn his gaze. Through the telescopic lens, he sees the person he's shooting and the impact of the hit, and that can fixate the picture in his memory."

Flint describes a sniper from an elite unit who aimed at a demonstrator's knee but hit too high, and the demonstrator died from loss of blood. "That soldier, a sniper who was very dedicated to his mission, describes watching the demonstrator bleed to death. He can't forget the man's screaming not to be left alone. He also remembers vividly the evacuation [of the body], and the women who wept over him. From then on, that's all he thinks about and all he dreams about. He says, 'I wasn't sent to defend the state, I was sent to murder.' Thoughts of the girlfriend of the person he killed also continue haunting him. The result is that he breaks up with his own girlfriend of two years. 'I don't deserve to have one,' he says."

Daniel has sharp memories of his buddies after they made an exact hit. "People look sick or shocked. The meaning of it doesn't hit home at that instant. A second ago I shot someone, and a minute later, I'm eating matza with chocolate? What the hell is going on here?"

He adds: "There are awful, dreadful stories about soldiers who aimed at a demonstrator and hit someone else. I know someone who took aim at one of the leaders of a demonstration, who was standing on a box and urging the people to keep marching ahead. The soldier aimed at his leg, but at the last moment the man moved and the bullet missed him. Instead, he hit a little girl, who was killed on the spot. That soldier is a wreck today. He is being watched 24/7, so he won't commit suicide."

Snipers burdened with experiences like that are the minority. For his part, Amir says the kind of feelings most snipers have are completely different, reminiscent of the world of sports. "The arena of the disturbances is like a sports arena, a situation you can sell tickets for," he says. "Group versus group, with a line down the middle and an audience of fans on both sides. You can totally tell a story of a sports encounter here."

On the front line, he continues, "are the inciters: They mark the starting line from which people burst out in sprints, alone or in groups. Everything is coordinated and planned in advance. There are these pits in the terrain [for hiding], and this lets them play with us. They can run 100 meters without my being able to take off their foot. They are also skilled at zigzagging. Two of them pop up, they hide, one throws a stone so the other one can move forward. They use diversionary tactics on you. It's a kind of game, you know."

Ilan Assayag

What is the purpose of the game?

Amir: "To get points. If they succeeded in putting the flag on the fence, that's worth a point. A booby-trapped flag is a point. Throwing back a smoke grenade is a point. Even just touching the wall, I mean the fence, is a point. There's a battle going on here, but it's not certain when it will be decided, no one has a clue how you win the cup, but in the meantime both sides continue to play the game."

A game for the record. The forces aren't exactly equally matched.

"True. And we're not even using a quarter of the force we could wield."

In other words, we could beat them by a knockout, but we prefer to win on points?

"We're not even winning on points. After some time there, in a debriefing, I said: 'Let me just once take down a kid of 16, even 14, but not with a bullet in the leg – let me blow his head open in front of his whole family and his whole village. Let him spurt blood. And then maybe for a month I won't have to take off another 20 knees.' That is shocking mathematics on the brink of the unimaginable – but when you don't use your capabilities it's not clear what you're trying to do there. You ask me what my mission was? Walla, it's hard for me answer you. What was considered a success from my point of view? Even the number of knees I took out wasn't dependent on me, it derived from the number of 'ducks' that chose to cross the line."

But to kill a kid at random? Do you really think that's the solution?

"Obviously, we shouldn't liquidate kids. I was saying that to make a point: that if you kill one you might be sparing 20 others. If you were to take me back to that two-month stakeout and let me act, I would have taken down that son of a bitch who was standing above the bomb, even if it meant that he would come to me in my dreams afterward. The reality today, that there are five to 10 people who will be invalids their entire lives, to whom my name is connected somehow, is also shit. And not only in the sense that it is or is not weighing on my heart. Think about it: There's a whole generation of children there who won't be able to play soccer."

Palestinian amputees compete in a local run racing in the Gaza Strip, December 5, 2019. IBRAHEEM ABU MUSTAFA/ REUTERS

Just teenagers

It seems that the presence of children at demonstrations stirs the most powerful emotional response among the snipers.

"One day there was a girl, I think she was probably 7, who was holding a Hamas flag and she just ran toward us," Shlomi from Duvdevan says. "I made sure through the lens that there was nothing suspicious on her, that her blouse wasn't sticking out, that there was no sign of wires or bombs, and we shouted to deter her. Fortunately, she got scared and ran away. It was clear to me that I wouldn't shoot even if she had crossed the line, but I remember thinking: I really hope she doesn't keep going."

Daniel: "From the guard post, you observe a Hamasnik, his face is opposite you, and you think to yourself: I really hope he does something, so I can shoot him. But with demonstrators, the picture gets complicated, because lots of them are only teenagers. They're thin, they're small, you don't feel threatened by them. You need to remind yourself that what they're doing is dangerous."

Like some of the other interviewees, Daniel emphasizes the soldiers' anger at the parents. "A mother who brings her child to a demonstration like that is a terrible mother," he says.

Amir says he can understand the children: "They make a living from it, and I don't have to tell you how bad the economic situation is in Gaza. But their parents I don't understand. What are you dragging him there for? Send them to sneak [into Israel] secretly and work in construction, topple the Hamas government, whatever, just not this."

Roy, who identifies himself as right-wing, agrees that "it's not them we need to be fighting, but Hamas, the terrorists, the ones who organize the buses to bring people and toss them a few dollars so they'll burn tires. I pity them [the children], they really are unfortunate. They remind me of the kids in the neighborhood who play with firecrackers. I was like those kids, too, so in that sense I identify with them."

But while expressing objections to wholesale shooting, Itay, from Netzah Yehudah, still thinks that the number of Palestinians wounded by live fire at the border over almost two years actually demonstrates that the soldiers were not trigger-happy. "Every Friday there are thousands of demonstrators," he notes, "and if you multiply that number by 52 and then double it, you'll get to hundreds of thousands of people. Out of them, 8,000 is a tiny fraction."

He adds, however, that "the power you have when someone comes into your sights, the knowledge that it depends on you whether he will be able to walk or not, is frightening. From my perspective, it is not intoxicating power. I don't like it, but it's impossible to ignore it. It's there all the time. After my discharge, I realized that it's something I didn't want to feel anymore. So I went right into university straight off and not into some security job that I could have landed because of my combat background."

View of a March of Return protest in Gaza and Israeli snipers in the foreground, March 30, 2018. Ilan Assayag

'It's your destiny'

Not everyone succeeds in restraining his feeling of intoxication. A video clip that circulated in 2018 showed a Palestinian approaching the fence and being shot by a sniper, as the soldiers celebrated the direct hit with shouts of "Right on!" and "What a fab clip!" Roy says the soldiers' response there attests to a lack of professionalism and too much enthusiasm, although he saw nothing similar in his squad.

"On the other hand, I think it's human," he says. "When you have a certain goal, even if you are shooting arrows at a target, obviously there's joy at the hit. The soldiers' mistake was in their behavior. Let them laugh somewhere in the back, but don't make a clip of it. There's such a thing as appearances, too."

Amir, too, distinguishes between personal satisfaction and public manifestations that don't look good on film. "The snipers in the squad we replaced were legends. They were IDF champions and they had two or three super-cool Xs [on their rifles] from manning the line in Gaza. We heard the story about the Xs, and we wanted them, too. It's your profession, your destiny, the essence of your being from the moment you get up until you go to sleep. Obviously you want to display your capabilities."

Do you have to celebrate? Isn't there some other way?

Amir: "No. Take the most baboonish guy you know – and that's what the IDF does, transforms kids into baboons – and try to stop him from telling about his first time. It's chaos there, everyone is shooting, making hits – you expect that he won't open a bottle of champagne? He has fulfilled himself just now, it's a rare moment. Actually, the more he does it, the more indifferent he'll become. He will no longer be especially happy, or sad. He'll just be."

The army comments

The IDF Spokesman's Office provided this statement to Haaretz: "The operational response to the violent disturbances and the hostile terrorist activity with which the IDF has been coping since March 2018, is adapted appropriately to the threat posed by these incidents, amid an effort to reduce as far as possible the injury to those causing the disorder, as well as the use of live ammunition. For the past two years, the operational response has been influenced by the intensity of the events, by changes in the violence of those disrupting the order, by the smoke they have spread and so on.

"In light of the change that has occurred in the nature of the disturbances, it was decided to equip the forces also with the Ruger bullet, which causes less damage. As to the use of M24 rifles, we note that this is a standard sniper's rifle. In general, within the framework of the events in question, use was not made of the Barak sniper's rifle. We have been made aware of exceptional, specific use of the latter, which was reported and investigated. The findings were conveyed to the military advocate general's unit for further examination.

"The statements attributed to a senior officer concerning the rules of engagement do not reflect IDF operational policy. The officer intended to explain that when there were reports of unintentional shooting injuries that were not below the knee, the sector commanders decided to toughen the rules of engagement in certain circumstances, and to instruct the snipers to aim for the ankle.

"As to the case in which a fighter fired at a major disrupter, even though he did not receive authorization from his superior officer, the shooting was done in accordance with the rules of engagement with the exception of this deviation. The case was dealt with at the command level and was not passed on to the military advocate general's unit for handling.

"Similarly, in the case where improper shooting at a sheep took place, that incident was dealt with at the command level and was not sent to the military advocate general's unit for handling. The company's deputy commander was tried for breaching military discipline and sentenced to seven days' detention."

Hilo Glazer

Haaretz Contributor