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Israeli Government Fears Palestinian Cameras

Recently the Israeli Knessett passed the first draft of a bill that would criminalize the filming of Israeli soldiers in Palestine, with a proposed five year jail sentence for offenders. The bill specifically focuses on the shame and discrediting that results from such footage and also mentions those who film with the intention to break “soldiers’ spirits,” and “undermine the morale of IDF troops and residents of Israel.”

The bill is aimed at Palestinian human rights defenders and their allies, who document soldiers’ abuse to expose it before the world’s eyes, and who also film as a form of nonviolent protection against the soldiers, who tend to be more discreet when a camera is running. Palestinian children and their parents head this movement of denouncing the abusive behavior of the Occupation, and Palestinian groups like the Human Rights Defenders in Hebron have filmed countless videos to expose the reality of living under a brutal colonial Occupation.

These films have succeeded in breaking through the media blockade of Palestinian reality in an environment of lawlessness and indescribable brutality. Badee Dweik of Human Rights Defenders states: “This is a racist law that attempts to silence ordinary Palestinians and activists like us who choose to resist the occupation and attempt to liberate our people nonviolently. If we do not do this work, how will the international community know about what goes on here?” Fellow volunteer Aaref Jaber added: “They have their guns which they say they use to protect their people. But we have our cameras, which we use to protect our people.” Former Israeli spokesman Nachman Shai said that because of cameras, “the army operates today under the assumption that it is no longer possible to

cover up things and maintain secrecy. Everything that happens today is out there in the open and reported on in real time.”

What was once done with impunity and out of sight now carries the weight of moral shame. And this is starting to weigh heavy in Israel. This is profound sign.

One thing that most of the world may not know about Israel is that the young soldiers are conscripted. Everyone must join the army after graduation. There are those who refuse and are jailed, and who then find themselves shamed by their society and have a difficult time finding employment. There are those who, after their term is over, go on to expose the brutality they were forced to participate in.

But the reality is that the people whose “spirits” the Israeli government is supposedly worried about, the people whose “morale” they do not want to be undermined, are young people, nearly children, who are forced to join the army and to carry out its dictates blindly against other children and their parents, and whose own mental and moral development is certainly in peril as a result. An Israeli police officer was filmed explaining the role of the soldiers, saying “they have to be stupid and with force, not with mind. ...If they will be smart they will be weak. So they have to be stupid.” He went on to say their role is “not to think, to act without thinking, the same as your [U.S.] soldiers abroad” and described them as a “fist in the head of a corpse.” Does such behavior demonstrate the care of a government for its people? The Israeli parents of the young soldiers are likely the “residents of Israel” that the government is worried about seeing these films.

When this discomfort and shame, this questioning of the brutality starts to arise in the people of the world, and in Israel, the solution is not to block it, to criminalize or ban it. Shame is a way of seeing. It is defined as “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior.” Though uncomfortable, it is the road to transformation, to evolution. While the cameras act as protection and empowerment for Palestinians, they serve another purpose in Israel: as that of a mirror. And it is this mirror that holds the key to growth, and it is this mirror that the Israeli government seeks to criminalize. As such, the Israeli government is not only seeking to disempower Palestinians and leftist Israelis, but to disempower the society of Israel from the consciousness it fears arising within them.

Though the government states it is seeking this ban for the well-being of the soldiers and residents of Israel, it is clear that the government just wants to return to a comfortable status quo: a brutal Occupation hidden from the eyes of the world, yet flooding the lives of

Palestinians. It does not want the Israeli people to question what they have allowed themselves to become at the hands of their leaders; does not them to see their children routinely brutalizing defenseless children. These are painful images that carry with them a deep weight of grief, and the potent potential for the soldiers and their parents – a society – to make a moral choice based on what they see in that mirror; to do this great growth before the eyes of the world.

This growth is what all the people of the world are faced with in this age of countless crises: a mirror and choice. Many – like the Israeli government and United States president are repeatedly demonstrating – balk when the idea of taking personal responsibility arises, when the option of making a difficult journey to transform oneself presents itself. Yet, the mirror is still there, and we can either become uglier and uglier in front of it, or grow to act in a way that is much more beautiful.

It is the right of any person to tell their story, to tell it as they live it day by day. Palestinian volunteers who tell these stories do a service for the world's people, who struggle to find the truth of what is happening in Palestine anywhere else due to a media blackout. These heroes daily confront immense brutality and unconsciousness and are a profound part of the human story of this age – a story of striving for humanization, justice, and peace in the face of corruption, military and government abuse, and war. They offer to the world a mirror in which we are all reflected.