

IDF Accused of War Crimes, Looting

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) officers and soldiers were accused again of war crimes, and for the first time, of looting—always a sign of military demoralization—during the invasions and partial destruction of Palestinian refugee camps and cities in March.

Speaking on March 19 to French parliamentarians visiting Palestine, Rene Kosirnik, the head of the Red Cross in Israel and the Palestinian Authority, said the IDF had committed war crimes on a large scale, and “wantonly and crudely trampled” the Fourth Geneva Convention which forbids such crimes. Kosirnik judges that in his 25 years in the field, he has not seen anything like it. In the recent period, four doctors, as well as medics and Palestinian ambulance drivers, have been seriously wounded, while others have been “murdered,” he said. “I was shocked and deeply hurt. I expected much more of the IDF. Nothing justifies such behavior.” Kosirnik said he has yet to see any evidence to back up the IDF’s charges that ambulances are used to aid Palestinian fighters to carry out their attacks.

The IDF command has, in the past, come down hard on the most despicable of war crimes: looting, rape, and massacres. But even this is starting to change. *Ha’aretz*

correspondent Amira Hass reports that in the latest military operations, Israeli soldiers engaged in widespread vandalism and looting. In one particularly serious case, the cardiology department at the Ramallah Hospital was vandalized extensively by the Israeli soldiers who occupied it during the attacks on the city. Files were strewn all over the offices, valuable and irreplaceable medical equipment was destroyed, and computer disk drives were stolen.

In addition, according to reports, during the occupations of the Palestinian cities and camps, there was widespread theft, including of computers, video cameras, and other valuables—even, in some cases, a few shekels found in the houses of refugees when they were being searched for “terrorists.”

Hass writes, “The Palestinians have concluded that the IDF has gone through a major change. Human rights activists and ordinary people say they never encountered soldiers who stole out of homes during the first Intifada [in 1987]. In recent days, as residents paid condolence calls on families with relatives killed during the incursion, the topic of the day was, what kind of army allows its soldiers to commit vandalism. After all, a tank bumping into an electric pole . . . is not the same as a soldier deliberately smashing a television owned by a family with four children. . . . People do notice the soldiers who behave humanely . . . but draw the conclusion that those soldiers and officers have no influence over those who find the opportunity . . . to destroy, vandalize, and even steal.”

formed in the 1990s by mothers who demanded that Israel withdraw from southern Lebanon, a goal that was eventually attained. The Seventh Day movement calls for unilateral withdrawal from the territories occupied since the June 1967 war.

Just as the reservists are also lawyers, doctors, bus drivers, or farmers, the “Lysistratas” include university professors, professionals, trade unionists, and some women with former professional military and security careers themselves. They can have a profound impact on Israel, especially now that the 18 months of the Intifada, with its unbearable death toll, is having a profound impact on public consciousness.

The failure of the Sharon government to bring about security, and the collapse of the Israeli economy, have led to the crumbling of the “consensus” that brought Sharon to power. A recent survey published in the daily *Ma’ariv*, showed that 60% of the voters support the establishment of a Palestinian state and for Israel to evacuate some of the settlements, while 35% favor a compromise on the status of Jerusalem.

But the Likud-Labor unity government has not collapsed. The Labor Party members, led by Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer, remain

“firmly glued,” commentators say, to their cabinet seats.

In the face of this lack of national leadership, grassroots groups have taken shape, the most significant being those of the soldiers and women, because they are openly challenging the norms of Israeli politics and society. Nonetheless, the failure of a powerful national leadership to emerge, and the fact that the Bush Administration continues to support Sharon, make the situation ever more dangerous. For Sharon, the real danger is not Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat, but this growing movement in Israel which threatens the nightmares Sharon holds in store for the Middle East.

Commentator Yuli Tamir warned in *Ha’aretz* on March 24 that “the suspicion will grow that the defined aim of the Israeli government—‘mopping up the territory’ followed by ‘readiness for painful concessions’—is meant to soften public opposition to a series of military actions that will have the purpose of foiling a future political move. If this suspicion turns out to be correct, it will be . . . an act that is liable to lead to Israel’s destruction as a Jewish democratic state.”

Sensing this danger, the women of Israel hope for the same success as those in Aristophanes’ play, who brought peace to all of Greece.