

GUN FREE KITCHEN TABLES: AN INTERVIEW WITH RELA MAZALI ON MILITARISM, AUTHORITARIANISM AND COVID-19

Interviewed by Özlem Aslan and Zeynep Kutluata

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COVID-19 has been a part of our lives for over a year. In this period, those of us living in highly militarized countries witnessed the various ways government representatives instrumentalized COVID-19 prevention measures to increase the pressure on social opposition, turning the process into a “power grab”. The line between the pandemic protection and covert authoritarianism was blurred most of the time. For this issue of *Feminist Approaches*, we met with anti-militarist feminist activist Rela Mazali to discuss their activism in Israel during the pandemic, specifically to talk about their project called Gun Free Kitchen Tables. We met via the Internet, from our homes. Rela Mazali joined from Tel Aviv, Ayça Günaydın from London, Özlem Aslan from Kocaeli, Ayten Sönmez, Öykü Tümer and Zeynep Kutluata from İstanbul. Rela Mazali, previously wrote an article for the 25th issue (February 2015) of *Feminist Approaches* about Gun Free Kitchen Tables where she introduced us with this anti-militarist feminist project for the first time. In the conversation below moderated by Zeynep Kutluata and Özlem Aslan, Rela Mazali told us how the project has progressed since 2015, as well as how the pandemic has affected feminist activism in Israel. The following is an edited version of a long and insightful conversation between *Feminist Approaches* members and Rela Mazali. During the last weeks of our publishing process, the attacks of Israel targeting Palestinians escalated and resulted in loss of lives, including children, due to bombardments lasting for days. You may find the “Afterword” written by Rela Mazali at the end of the interview where she shares her views of this last wave of violence in Israel.

Özlem Aslan: In 2015 you wrote an article for the *Feminist Approaches* about the feminist project titled Gun Free Kitchen Tables that you co-founded in Israel.¹ The world in general, including the Middle East, has been getting more and more militarized since 2015. Especially with the pandemic some states are using health measures opportunistically in order to implement more authoritarian and militarized policies. There is also resistance to these policies especially on the part of feminists and LGBTQ+ activists. Gun Free Kitchen Tables, with a long history, is one of those campaigns against militarist policies in Israel. Could you please tell us about the history and current activities of the campaign?

Rela Mazali: The project grew out of a study that I conducted in the early 2000's during the Second Palestinian Intifada. There was a rise in civilians carrying guns in civil space. Actually, they

weren't exactly civilians, most of them were security guards. These were guys with almost civilian clothing. They wore kind-of-uniforms, but a very fuzzy kind of uniforms. They suddenly started appearing all over the place. The arms they carried hadn't been there before to this extent. In fact, what was happening was a privatization of policing. That's the more in-depth analysis of what was going on. The Second Intifada gave a good excuse for privatizing policing. It gave the state means to cut back on state policing and to employ security guards at very low wages, in exploitative private companies. They are not usually permanent employees, for the most part they are not unionized, they do not have social rights... etc. So, the Second Intifada, to a large extent was an excuse for this; it was exploited by the state in order to carry out something that they were doing anyway, but on a very large and rapid scale.

When I saw these new guns in the streets, I started thinking about the process, following it and collecting news clippings. A woman I did not know at the time, who later became a very dear friend of mine, approached me. Vanessa (Vee) Farr, was just starting to (co)edit a book for the UN on small arms proliferation from a feminist standpoint. She asked me if I would write a chapter on small arms in Israel and I chose the aspect of Israel's fast-growing private security industry. I initially told Vee that I didn't have the means to do a few months of concentrated research, since I'm not an academic, I wasn't working within a university and I wouldn't be making any income while I did this (at the time, I was making an income mostly from translating). Vee understood immediately and set out to find funding for the study, which she did. This study was just one chapter in a collection which took a long time to complete, but it was finally published in 2009. It has a great title, *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons*.² By the time it was published, Vee was working here in Palestine. She was Senior Gender Advisor for the United Nations Development Programme. So we held a book launch in East Jerusalem. One of my friends, Smadar Ben Natan, a lawyer who specialized in international law, human rights and women's rights, attended the launch and told me afterwards, "Look, this is a basis for an action project. Let's do it." I answered, "But I'm already doing so much activism, I can't do any more without making it into a paying job." So in 2009, we decided to try and find funding for a small arms disarmament and gun control project in Israel. It took us a year to find seed funding. And that's how we started, that's what we started out with.

At first, we focused on private security firms, because that was the solid basis that the study provided. Also, there was a law in place that private security guards should not be taking their guns home. But they were taking their guns home, the law was not being enforced.

What my study had found, among other things, was that there was a consistent phenomenon of murders with these guns, in guards' homes and families, after duty. At first, in the study, I was looking only at women's murders. But in fact, there were also a lot of men who were murdered. The women's murders are disproportionate, of course; still, there were a lot of men who were murdered as well. It was an average of three a year. You know, some years there was "only" one, other years more. But there were almost no years without any victims of security guards' guns taken home after duty. We're not even talking about what happened when they were on duty, when these guns were mostly used for shooting Palestinians.

When we started with this issue there was no concept in Israel, no concept at all of gun control, or of small arms disarmament. The guards' arms were (and still are) so normal and natural to the Jewish majority that they even seem good. So, this was our starting point because the ban on guards' taking guns home after duty was instated in law, which gave us a lot to base our advocacy on. Also, we began with this because we knew that it would have been much more difficult to challenge soldiers' guns. Soldiers and the army are holy cows and very hard to problematize. Even though their guns, which are all over civil space, are the basis of guns' normalization in Israel.

Due to the way that security guards are employed, they're usually disproportionately from recently immigrated groups, or elderly men; they're from relatively marginalized groups. So, building on this (clearly problematic) social perception, we knew it would be less shocking to the public to start looking critically at the guns of security guards. As a result, our first years were dedicated to working on the guns of private security firms. But we knew all along that we wanted to look at guns in general, guns in the civil sphere. Very surprisingly, we had a really interesting, although brief period of success with guards' guns. For two or three years between 2013 and 2015 the law was enforced. During this time, there were no murders with security guards' guns after duty. Soon after, though, the law was undermined and enforcement stopped again. When the guns started going back home, these murders – this phenomenon – resumed. Yesterday night, an elderly man entered the hospital where his wife was ill and hospitalized, he shot her and then shot himself. This is called murder suicide; committed with an off-duty security guard's gun.³ This is the fifth murder with a security guard's off-duty gun in the last two years. We have a small population, the numbers may seem small relative to Turkey, or to another country, but they're not small relative to Israel.

I should mention that GFKT is a coalition of 17 feminist and civil society organizations that have agreed on a focused, joint agenda, regarding small arms, as part of their broader organizational agendas. Our coalition work is real, not just "on paper," although not all the groups participate in

it actively. The core staff of GFKT, leading the coalition, is part of the Isha L'Isha Feminist Center⁴ based in Haifa, one of the oldest and most important feminist organizations in Israel.

In 2017, we put out a comprehensive report counting all the guns in Israel's civil sphere⁵. We expressly explained that we're not interested in what the army has in its stockpiles, we're talking about the guns circulating in civilian areas. In Israel, there is, in fact no strong distinction between where the army is and where civilians are, because army bases are all over the place. Some of them are small, some of them large, but they're everywhere. It's a small territory. There is no clear civil sphere. So one of the things that should distinguish the civil sphere from military areas is armament, but there are guns all over civil space. We counted. We tried to take account of the guns of civilians, of privately owned organizations like security firms, of police, of the soldiers circulating in civil sphere. We aimed to give an overall picture of how many guns are there, circulating throughout the civil sphere, and to take a critical look at the control that's exercised over them, which is weak.

In addition, we looked at what's going on in Palestinian society inside Israel, which was already then —but now even more— inundated with huge amounts of unlicensed arms. Most of the unlicensed arms circulating in Israel are held by Palestinian citizens of Israel and the community is suffering from severe levels of gun crime and organized armed crime; not without government complicity for sure, the government is complicit in this. It's complicit through turning a blind eye, through non-enforcement. And it's complicit because it gains particular things from this situation. It allows criminals, “strong men” to build up their power and terrorize the community, creating mistrust, unrest, chaos, so that people cannot function as a political community. It's a process of depoliticization. And it really weakens the Palestinian community. So, from the time we issued the report in 2017 we started working in very close coordination with Palestinian feminists, both with women from organizations and independent activists from inside Israel.

There's almost no way we can work across the "green line" at present. So when I say 'Palestinian,' I'm referring to Palestinian citizens of Israel, not referring to the Palestinians in the West Bank, or in Gaza. It's complicated to work with them, and very few Israeli organizations do these days. The blockade on Gaza started in 2006. We're now kind of experiencing lockdown — but it's nothing like the blockade on Gaza, which is ongoing, it's terrible. And the wall, through the West Bank, and all of the checkpoints, they have effectively cut off a good deal of the capacity to do joint work. Maybe more important, many Palestinian groups reject and resist the misleading look of symmetry that joint work creates if it doesn't pose a political challenge to the severe inequalities between the people involved. So, we're working with Palestinian feminists from inside Israel. What we decided — together — in 2017 was that we needed to study this issue of what's going on in the

Palestinian society inside Israel in terms of gun violence and proliferation before we could start planning or taking any action on that.

We formed a study group which by now has completed three years of independent study, where each year there was a different steering committee of the group. And each year, we planned a series of study meetings. Before “the days of the zoom,” this study group held video conversations with small arms disarmament activists from overseas, with women who were doing this in various places in the world; we talked to them and interviewed them and listened to their experiences. We collected knowledge through all kinds of channels on the situation here, with a focus on Palestinian community. After two years of doing that, the group kind of officially re-formed itself as a study-action group, although there had already been lots of different, concrete actions that came out of it along the way. It formed as a study-action group specifically aiming to address this issue of gun crime in Palestinian society in Israel.

In a very systematic and focused way, we wrote a position paper collectively, listing the practical steps that needed to be taken in order to deal with this issue. That paper now has the support of 30 civil society and feminist organizations. And my Palestinian friends, who were part of this process, are now in fact forming a Palestinian feminist led initiative that is going to work on that specifically, with some of us as part of their counseling committee or steering committee. But this is going to be a different initiative from Gun Free Kitchen Tables, addressing the urgent and particularized issue of arms in Palestinian society. It is already and will be led by Palestinian feminists, working in Arabic and Hebrew. So this is extremely exciting. This work did not exist before. They're doing it and we're now starting to look for funds for them to have a coordinator who can really work on this as a job. I hope we'll find some.

In the process, as part of its facilitation of the study, GFKT started translating a lot of its materials into Arabic. Our work consistently builds new knowledge on guns in our society and we're trying to make this resource easily accessible to Palestinian feminists and activists.

Zeynep Kutluata: Authoritarian governments are on the rise in many parts of the world. Most of these governments are also using COVID-19 measures as an excuse to implement more authoritarian policies and to increase the level of militarization. Israel also seems to be one of those countries making use of pandemic to implement more authoritarian and militarized policies. Would you agree with this comment?

Rela: Yes, I definitely agree that Israel's government has been using the "opportunity" of the pandemic to deepen militarization and increase authoritarian policies. But I should note that Israeli governments have been practicing this type of opportunism since the earliest days of the

state. Authoritarianism and militarism have been around for a long time here. Occupation, dispossession and militarized oppression have been around since 1948 and expanded since 1967. Militarization is very, very deep and very present. It's not new. Authoritarianism has different forms. In recent years here, it has become more overt, with less of a facade of democracy and less of a facade of human rights. But it was there all along. None of this is new.

In recent years, for instance, there was this fairly brief outbreak when Palestinian individuals were trying to stab Israelis. It started at the end of 2014, but mostly took place in the last three months of 2015. That outbreak was used as an excuse for a major backlash in terms of small arms proliferation. The minister in charge (Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan) who was already invested in accelerating small arms proliferation, wanted more and more small arms on the streets. He incrementally changed the rules in many ways to allow more and more people to get gun licenses. In addition, he allowed private security firms to return to sending their guns home with guards after duty, rather than collecting and depositing them at work sites. And the biggest change was in August 2018, when the minister decided to add a total of 500,000 people to those eligible for private gun licenses. It doesn't mean that everybody wants a gun, but there are now half a million more people who are eligible than there were before.

Zeynep: Are there Arab people among those 500,000 people?

Rela: Theoretically, there can be, because if you've gone through military service, then you're eligible. There are some Druze that go to the military and there are some Muslims, not many, but there are some. Also some of them are border police, who are kind of equivalent to the military. If you've done any of these trainings, you're eligible to get a gun. So, there are Palestinian citizens with licensed guns. There are also Palestinian private security guards with licensed guns and there are Palestinian prison guards. They carry guns.

In fact, we're working in a town where there are many both licensed and unlicensed guns. It's in the Galilee. It's a Palestinian town. And it's a town where nearby there is a large prison. So there are a lot of ex-soldiers there in the prison services and also police with licensed guns in this town. There are also a lot of unlicensed guns. We're working with the municipality at the moment and with a women's group there, from the organization Mahapach-Taghir⁶ to try to first of all monitor and find out what's going on there on a daily basis, but also to possibly change some things.

But to get back to the question of opportunism towards increasing authoritarianism, in the context of this supposed threat in 2015, which was not at all large scale, state authorities started actively and aggressively encouraging small arms proliferation.

It also depends on the particular identity of the minister in charge. The current Minister of Public Security (Amir Ohana), who is responsible here for gun control, is very much in favor of arming civilians and has kept pushing this. It is part of his agenda and he has promoted it steadily for some years now, with the participation and support of big businesses. To expand on this point a little: The minister, though, is ex *Shabak* (the Israel General Security Service). *Shabak* interrogates prisoners, Palestinians. They do surveillance both of citizens and non-citizens. They carry out the torture (almost always of Palestinians) which is standard practice in Israeli prisons. In a recent interview, he was asked about small arms and he said: “What can I say? I just connect to them. You know, I feel a connection.”

At the end of 2018, the GFKT Coalition filed a petition to the High Court of Justice⁷ against Israel’s small arms policy. Our opposition to the policy and our claim that it is illegal and unjust include three main points. I won't go into all of them, but one of them is about the fact that the minister on his own can decide who is eligible for a private gun license including civilians, security guards and employees of other civilian organizations. So we said that this cannot be a decision made by the minister alone, that is undemocratic. It must be a decision that is taken in the parliament, at least by a parliament committee, through regulations instated in law. In this case, we know that, for instance, the Health Ministry is opposed to expanding eligibility for licenses because they know for a fact that if there are more guns, there will be more suicides. Welfare authorities, though they're less outspoken than the Health Ministry, are also opposed to this. If this were subject to debate in a parliamentary committee, which is open to all, there would be visible criticism of it and at the very least the public would be able to hear something about it. This was one of our points in the petition. In this sense our court petition challenges authoritarianism directly. It says that the public, women, feminists and experts should all have a say as to who and how many people are eligible for gun licenses.

Following our petition, the Attorney General of Israel (Avichai Mandelblit) decided that this question should, indeed, be resolved through a parliamentary process. But the current Minister of Public Security has refused to accept his opinion. Now, the Minister and the Attorney General are opposing each other.

Zeynep: There are many reports from various parts of the world that violence against women increased during the pandemic. Did you observe a similar pattern in Israel? How did the pandemic influence your project?

Rela: The moment it started, we knew that violence against women would rise, which has indeed happened all over the world and here as well. And we knew that getting guns out of homes was a

preventive measure that was important, even though it doesn't ensure that women don't get killed. Because we do know that there are more women killed in homes with guns than in homes without guns and that guns do make a difference. It's one of the very basic preventive measures that can be taken. You take the gun out and it reduces the number of murders. Other preventive measures are much more complicated and long term. So we started working right away on trying to appeal in many directions to reduce the number of guns in homes. In some instances, we were actually successful. For instance, the government actually issued a directive telling security guards who were on leave, who were temporarily unemployed, that the companies should collect their guns, that they should not be taking guns to their homes. This is a result of the work we've been doing on this particular issue over the years. That was a small thing, but a good thing.

We also objected to the soldiers who joined policing of the lockdown. We objected to them being armed. There were other parties who objected to them being armed, even inside the military. We added our voice to that call.

We were doing a lot of different calls to municipalities, calls to the government to try to reduce the number of arms circulating as much as possible. We know that there have been more women shot this year than in many years. We don't even know the final number because the police does not issue statistics on that. So we're now fighting the police for data, for clear data.⁸ A meaningful percentage of the victims were killed with licensed guns, most of them Jewish, and majority of the women shot dead are Palestinian citizens of Israel. Almost 100 Palestinian citizens have been killed this year (that is, both men and women), most of them with guns. So there's no doubt that COVID-19 has exacerbated violence and also authoritarianism in a very local sense and not only at state level. Because this violence is also about who is in control, about armed organizations that are fighting each other for territory. COVID-19 has made things worse.

Özlem: We also want to talk about the politics of disarmament in terms of the relation between Palestinians and Israelis. The Gun Free Kitchen Tables project also includes the disarmament of Palestinian society. What kind of precautions do you develop so that it doesn't become another opportunity for the Israeli state to intervene in the Palestinian community?

Rela: That's a great question and a very delicate one. And that's one of the reasons why we have been working all along with Palestinian Arab women living in Israel. We don't even call it "in collaboration with," it's more like "in coordination," because it's not symmetrical. The two societies have very different problems and different issues, although they are also interconnected and interdependent. So it's in coordination, close coordination with each other and learning, learning all the time. I've been learning with my friends, but still I don't know a lot, and that's why the

development of this “Women Against Weapons” group is so important, because they need to take the lead on this. We've been very aware of what you've asked and that we've been trying to be respectful of the community, its needs and its problems.

Another part of the answer is about what's going on in Palestinian society. The government is very much responsible for allowing the flow of unregistered weapons into Palestinian society here. A lot of these weapons come from the army, come from the police, come from the border police. They come from legal registered stockpiles. So we want to call our government to account on that part of it. That's a very important aspect of what our role is in this complex initiative. I don't exactly know how we'll do this, but we're thinking, for instance, of dedicating our next year's study to looking at sources, trying to find out more about the specifics of how the arms flow works, what's going on there that enables it to happen. This information exists in the official sources. So that's our responsibility and our part of the whole picture: Finding out how it works and reminding the government and the parliament.

Another thing I want to say is that this violence is tearing Palestinian society apart, it's devastating. I mean, it's not us stepping in, to save anybody. We can't do that and we won't do that. It's not our role. But acting together in coordination to stop this. It is about the security and integrity of that community, it's not about imposing more colonial measures upon them. Although the government is trying to do that. It's setting up more police stations in Palestinian communities, putting up more cameras, trying to get them collaborate in exposing criminals when there is no good program for protecting witnesses. Our role is remaining very critical of the government as Jewish activists, remaining aware of that constantly.

Özlem: Feminist anti-militarist activism has a long history in the world and your activism in Israel seems to be a unique and long-lasting example in that history. You are not just organizing certain activities but also analyzing militarism with its connections to other political agendas. Could you elaborate more on your analysis of militarism with its ties to neoliberalism?

Rela: There are (at least) two main ways of challenging militarism. And one of them is more direct: Challenging the draft and the military and its central place in the country. Neoliberalism is also changing that. Neoliberalism is also driving militarization with arms sales and arms exports, with all of those new so-called "peace" deals that all involve arms sales. Countries that were never at war with Israel now are making "peace" with Israel. There are also huge arms deals with the U.S. It's all about the US arms industry. Aid from the US is almost entirely military aid. In fact, what the US is doing is subsidizing its own arms industry. And in the process, it is maintaining Israel as a major military outpost. Israel is prioritizing armament on a big scale because of, or with

the support of, U.S. aid. It's a cyclic process. As critical researcher Shlomo Swirski⁹ described it years ago, Israel made a choice in this context to be the regional superpower. It could have made a different kind of choice to be a small country, which is, living within its own borders, trying to protect them to some extent. But striving to this superpower or regional superpower status means disproportionate armament and a lot of military spending. This is like a cycle that keeps Israel militarized. U.S. aid is a big part of this. Now it's also going to go to the United Emirates and all of these arms deals are spreading through the channel of "peace" with Israel. "Peace" is bringing in all of these new arms to the region.

Feminist activism is against that and there are many levels of it. It's first of all, it's knowledge. It's understanding the processes as much as we can and exposing them as much as we can to the public. It is about changing public outlooks, minds and changing basic assumptions that are never questioned. In Israel, the basic assumption is that we have no choice. Of course, we have a choice. There's this strong assumption that we're fighting for our survival and have to protect ourselves while in fact we're way beyond that (if it was ever the case), but emotionally people are still there. That emotional work is something that actually feminists may be equipped to do better than anyone else. But it's hard work and it's slow work. The numbers of young people not enlisting are rising all the time. Slowly but surely, and that means something to the decision makers and it means something about the public. So that's one level that needs to go on as much as we can continue it. That is work that is done by New Profile, a feminist, anti-militarist movement that I was involved with founding over 20 years ago. It is still active and vibrant with a young, passionate leadership.

Guns, on the other hand, are the daily "hardware" of militarization. Guns support and keep militarization in place on a day to day basis, both in homes and in the streets. So that's a different angle of working on militarization. People are somewhat more open to criticism of proliferating guns because of the obvious damages they cause, where it's harder for most to swallow a general critique of militarization and where Israel has placed itself in the region.

Addressing the public is hugely important but it's not enough. Achieving structural change needs both the public and the authorities. And as I mentioned, in recent years we've been faced with a particularly gun-toting, gun-pushing government. So, for one thing, we went to court. The courts here are completely a part of the militarized system, but given the dead end we encountered in regular democratic channels, we decided to take small arms policy to court. The court case is still ongoing but filing it, arguing it in court and publicizing it widely, have already achieved some meaningful gains.

In addition, we decided, about a year ago, to work on municipal levels and try to change some things through municipalities, through local government. That is still very much in its early stages, but we've already made some headway there and there have been some – mostly symbolic – successes but we're trying to turn them into practical, meaningful ones. While municipal government in Israel is also militarized in many ways, almost all of this work is being done with feminist allies in city and town councils, with feminist council women that we know and we can turn to. We're teaching them about small arms reality in Israel, we give them information and along with them we develop a series of kind of targeted steps that they can take in order to work on this issue. And it's happening. We started a year ago, and we already have principled decisions on this issue in Tel Aviv and in Haifa, which are two major cities. These women are changing minds, which is quite exciting and meaningful. Think of a council woman standing up at a council meeting, in a town, a city, and talking knowledgeably about guns. This is not done and women's viewpoints on "security" issues are usually dismissed and disregarded. Women are not supposed to know about gun policies or public or national security. These women are standing up and they have grounded knowledge, it's not just slogans. They have statistics, they have data and they have focused suggestions, proposals that they're making. This is quite meaningful.

Meanwhile and throughout this process, we're also working on movement building. If the government cannot be addressed, then we're addressing the people. We're building up this movement of feminist women, more and more feminist women. Gun control was not on the feminist agenda in Israel before we started work. Feminists in many countries realize that this is and must be a part of their agenda. But here, because of the normalization of guns among the ruling majority and the perception of them as an extension of the military kind of protective security, national security, nobody was bothered by them, nobody was looking at them. Now, it is on the feminist agenda in almost all feminist groups in Israel. Also, the fact that a group of Palestinian feminists are going to do focused work on that, is even more groundbreaking, because the taboo against Palestinian women dealing with this is even stronger. And in fact breaking that taboo is truly frightening because they are really exposing themselves and their families to potential reactions of the criminal organizations their actions are challenging. So for them to start focused work on that is very courageous and very important.

It's deeply collective work. There's a lot of awareness of the fact that we won't be able to do any of this as individuals. We need to work as a group, which is part of what will support us and protect us. In that sense, it's very feminist. We're, of course, not only looking at what happens to women as a result of small arms proliferation. We are looking at the differential results for women and men, which is, again, a feminist outlook. The same perspective is also true for Palestinian citizens

of Israel since they are not equal citizens. So the fact that we're making these differentiations is a feminist analysis of voices and viewpoints that aren't being taken into account.

We're doing a project of collecting personal testimonies about living with guns, mostly women's, but not only women's. Again, I think the approach to this is deeply feminist. The project values experiential knowledge, individual knowledge and tries to put it together in order to create a body that reveals all kinds of patterns, tendencies and phenomena. But it's also going to allow women to sound their voice on our website. On the other hand, it is very secure. We've gone to a lot of trouble to make these testimonies anonymous and untraceable. We are using the model that the websites about sexual harassment use. It's going to allow that type of direct platform for voicing experiences of living with guns. It will include women who say "I never thought about it" or "It's normal" but also accounts from women who are very fearful of guns. They can be both Jewish and Palestinian. In homes where there's violence, a gun is terrifying. Even if it's not used, its presence can be terrifying. So, allowing women to sound their voices anonymously and safely is also something that we see as a feminist channel for addressing these issues.

Özlem: This was a very informative and insightful talk. Thank you very much for sharing your views and experiences with us.

Rela: Thank you so much. It was wonderful for me to see all of you on the screen and to have this meaningful discussion.

AFTERWORD

Rela Mazali

Tel Aviv, June 2021

In light of the extreme militarized violence practiced yet again in Israel/Palestine in the weeks leading up to publication of this issue, perhaps a few more comments are in order. This violence has been practiced in multiple forms and on multiple scales, from the bombing again visited upon Gaza, through Jewish gangs terrorizing Palestinian neighborhoods inside Israel. Bombs and guns, neighborhoods and territories, Israel's small arms policies and its war policies are directly and intricately linked. As a feminist thinker and activist, I see the urgent, vital need to connect and contextualize the personal, at eye-level, with birds-eye views of the military and the political.

Over these weeks, licensed civilian gun bearers (predominantly Jewish men) have been openly encouraged by authorities to shoot-to-kill alleged or perceived Palestinian attackers and to converge on Palestinian neighborhoods in order to "protect" the Jewish neighbors. As tensions rise, the small arms policies of recent years are feeding a sharp spike in license applications¹⁰ for gun licenses. That is occurring after gun licensing authorities issued over 100,000 new civilian licenses in the past five years.

As discussed above, for decades now, Israel's successive governments and police have subjected Palestinian areas inside Israel to a combination of over- and under- policing. This has included disproportionate numbers of often arbitrary arrests while simultaneously enabling the stockpiling of unlicensed firearms. During the last peak of state violence against Palestinians, ongoing dispossession, discrimination and marginalization were compounded by concerted attacks on the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah, desecration of prayers at Al Aqsa Mosque and relentless bombing of Gaza (killing hundreds and maiming thousands). At the same time, Jews in Israel were shaken by air raids and several casualties caused by shelling from Gaza. This toxic combination brought mixed cities such as Lydd, Haifa, Yaffa, Akka, Ramleh to the terrifying brink of local armed showdowns and shoot-outs. In Lydd, Moussa Hassouna¹¹, a Palestinian resident of the town was shot dead by Jewish vigilantes and Palestinians reportedly shot at and injured a Jewish man.¹²

This situation actually seems to be what Israel's leadership envisions and advances. The Hollywood western imaginary of good guys against bad guys, read as "Jews against Arabs," "defenders" against "marauders" are excellent ingredients for further demonizing "the enemy" literally living next door and for deepening militarization. Such perceptions are also highly effective ploys for grabbing attention and sidelining the failing governance of those in power. So protests by Israel's Palestinian citizenry including sporadic violence, have been met with de-facto martial law, virtually revoking their already limited citizenship rights. Lydd is heavily patrolled by militarized Border Police and held under curfew at night; the mayor of Haifa called for more policemen and increased policing; armored vehicles are cruising Yaffa and police have conducted a campaign of mass arrests directed at Palestinian citizens.

These measures display the same basic "algorithm" that has guided and continues to guide Israel's war policies. Zero interest in violence reduction, in preserving lives. Definitely not Palestinian lives but not even Israeli civilian lives or, for that matter, soldiers' lives. Supremacy and expansion and, above that, staying in power, all trump lives and block any possible moves towards negotiated political solutions. The only solutions envisioned are force, bombs and guns. And today, under the

weight of this combination, "Israel proper," as it's called by some – the territory internationally recognized as Israel, is fast unravelling.

¹ Rela Mazali, "Silahlardan Söz Etmışken: Militarize Bir Toplumda Silah Denetimi Söylemini Dolaşıma Sokmak ve Güvenlik Güçlerini Silahsızlandırmak", *Feminist Approaches*, vol:25, February 2015. (<http://www.feministyaklasimlar.org/sayi-25-subat-2015/silahlardan-soz-etmisken-militarize-bir-toplumda-silah-denetimi-soylemini-dolasima-sokmak-ve-guvenlik-guclerini-silahsizlandirmak/>)

² Vanessa Farr, Henri Myrntinen, Albrecht Schnabel (eds.), *Sexed Pistols: The Gendered Impacts of Small Arms and Light Weapons*, United Nations University Press (November 6, 2009).

³ Later reports clarified that the murderer was licensed to carry a gun due to his employment although he was not a security guard.

⁴ For further information: <https://ishazisha.com/english/>

⁵ Please check the website of the project for detailed information: <https://gfkt.org/>

⁶ About Mahapach-Taghir: <https://mahapach-taghir.org/en/home/>

⁷ For the petition, please check: <https://gfkt.org/en/petition-against-the-states-lenient-small-arms-policy/>

⁸ After conducting this conversation, GFKT succeeded in obtaining police statistics. The number of women murdered with guns in Israel in 2020 was 1.5 times the average number of women gun victims over the four preceding years; The number of women murdered with *licensed* guns was 2.5 times the average number of women victims of *licensed* guns over the four preceding years. The women murdered with *unlicensed* guns were all from Israel's Palestinian citizenry, subject to discriminatory enforcement by the Israel Police and subject to systematic under-enforcement of gun law. Twelve women in all were killed with guns, 5 of them with licensed arms, 7 with unlicensed arms. (For the systematic under-enforcement of gun law please check: <https://www.972mag.com/crime-palestinian-citizens-israel/>)

⁹ Sholomo Swirski is an intellectual, researcher and activist in Israel. He is also the co-founder of the Adva Center, an independent research center. For further information: <https://adva.org/en/>

¹⁰ For related news please check: <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/editorial/to-protect-its-citizens-israel-must-say-no-to-arming-civilians-1.9824623>

¹¹ For related news please check: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/16/palestinian-protests-in-israel-showcase-unprecedented-unity>

¹² For related news please check: <https://news.walla.co.il/item/3435493>