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I Was “Part of a Terror Organization,” Says Israeli Pilot Turned Activist

By Ryan Rodrick Beiler
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In-depth Report: PALESTINE

Yonatan Shapira (Ryan Rodrick Beiler)

Yonatan Shapira was born on an Israeli military base the year before his father flew fighter jets in the October War of 1973. Thirty years later, twelve of them spent as an air force pilot himself, Shapira rejected the military. In 2003, he wrote a letter, pledging not to fly over the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Shapira is among the few Israelis to have declared support for the Palestinian-led call for boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel. He has also been attacked by the Israeli military for attempting to sail towards and break the siege of Gaza.

He recently spoke to The Electronic Intifada contributor Ryan Rodrick Beiler.

Ryan Rodrick Beiler: What was it like growing up in a military family?

Yonatan Shapira: The education I got was very much about peace, equality, freedom and a lot of socialist values — caring about the other, caring about the poor — but at the same time with a big wall of negligence of Palestine. The same time I was in class learning these beautiful values, the Israeli army was engaged in occupation, land grabs, settlements, massacres, deportation of Palestinian activists.

But I didn’t know these things. I truly believed that I should defend my country. I wanted to be like my father. I wanted to be a pilot in the air force and it was my dream come true when I was accepted. I became a helicopter pilot and flew rescue missions and commando transport.

RRB: When did you begin to question the military’s actions?

YS: I realized something was rotten when the Israeli government started what was called the “assassination policy” in 2001-2003. Palestinian resistance failed to bring liberation and more extreme attitudes took place, such as suicide bombings and other [forms of] armed struggle. The government thought to assassinate everyone that has to do with armed resistance.

Pilots would be sent with missiles to shoot the car of this person. In the beginning, this car could be driving outside of town where just the car was hit. Later they would allow shooting suspects when they are closer to the city. Eventually the assassination would be even if he’s in the middle of the market, or in his house at night with all of the family around.

In July 2002, Salah Shehadeh, head of the armed branch of Hamas in Gaza, was bombed in the middle of the night with an F-16 dropping a one-ton bomb on his house where he was sleeping with his children and his wife. The bomb killed fifteen people, most of them children, and about 150 were injured. If I needed some answer for my questions and doubts, that was clear: this is a terror attack. And I'm part of a terror organization.

The commander of the air force said that everything was done perfectly, and the pilots should sleep well at night. That was an additional thing that helped us: when someone says you can sleep well at night, maybe it's time to wake up and start to think. For me and several friends, that was the moment we decided to do something.

RRB: When you and 26 others published "The Pilots' Letter" condemning Israel's attacks on civilians, how did going public change you?

YS: It was like a birth for us. We ended one chapter in our lives and became, in our view, peace activists, human rights activists, freedom activists. In the eyes of many in our society we became traitors.

We were not the first Israeli soldiers to act upon their belief. In 1982 there were many who refused to participate in the war in Lebanon and were sent to jail. Another group in 2002 were willing to go to jail instead of doing reserve duty in the West Bank and Gaza.

More recently, 43 soldiers from the elite intelligence unit called 8200 declared they are not willing to participate in these criminal actions. We have high school seniors who decide they cannot join the Israeli army because it's engaged in terrorism against civilians. We now have some people in jail, spending usually between half a year and a year.

It takes a lot of courage to do something like that when you're eighteen years old. I didn't have this courage. I didn't have this information. I didn't have this realization. It took me twelve years in the air force to realize I'm not fighting for the right side.

RRB: If you were not fighting for the right side, as you say, how did you change that?

YS: It's not enough just to not be part of something you believe is wrong. Now you have to make another step and become part of the solution.

We thought the next step would be to meet with Palestinian ex-fighters and to find common ground. In 2005-2006 we started an organization called Combatants for Peace. It was one of the most significant experiments I ever had in my life. To step into a room with people who before you were fearing to death — they were supposed to kill you and you were supposed to kill them. Suddenly you sit in a room and you talk about your story and about your family and friends. When you leave this room you are a different person. The "we" and "them" that you had before cannot exist anymore. We realized that we are actually much more similar than different.

It was a very important thing for us, for the Palestinians and for the Israelis. But later, nevertheless, I realized that the framework was problematic because it's not a conflict of equal parties. It's not that you have two countries fighting each other. It's a colonial struggle — colonizer and colonized. So there is a conceptual problem when you come to create something that is based on equal power balance, which it's totally not.

RRB: What is your role as an Israeli activist when the two sides aren't equal?

YS: To become a refuser, a conscientious objector, is a big step. This one now is to realize that it's not about you. It's not about me. My life, with all respect, with little problems here and there is beautiful compared to the people who are massacred in Gaza. The next step for me — not for all the people in these organizations, many of them didn't want to make this step — is to realize that we need to actually join the struggle for liberation.

RRB: With the problems you mention, can dialogue still be a force for liberation?

YS: I am trying to not let go of this tool because I feel that it's a production mechanism to create more and more activists. And we need more activists. So even within the problematic framework, I'm trying to continue to do dialogue, but — it's a very big but — we have to make sure that the context will bring to the room the power imbalance and the reality on the ground. I truly think that at this point dialogue could be a legitimate tool in the Israeli-Palestinian context only if there is a subversive radical agenda that is agreed upon by all the facilitators.

If the kids come and play and sing and talk with each other and then the Israeli kids go and join the military and the Palestinian kids go and sit in jail for participating in a demonstration or something, you didn't do anything. You just helped, especially the Israelis, to feel a little bit better, as well as the European or American donors.

Now we're touching on issues of normalization. We are trying to navigate with our Palestinian partners (from within the 1948 borders) how not to become tools for the Israeli mainstream to feel good about the occupation. It's a delicate process, but we have a clear agenda. We don't have to say what we think — it's happening in the room because we try to raise voices to make sure that the hardcore issues of injustice, like the ongoing Nakba, are present, and it has an amazing effect.

RRB: You mention normalization, but some say that any cooperation with Israelis — even activists — is a form of normalization.

YS: Some Palestinians don't want to have any contact with Israelis because everything is normalization, so you cannot struggle together. Okay, I can live with that. And I can see where it comes from. I can see the pain. I can see the anger.

There is also a philosophical basis that I respect. You can read Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon: whites will never understand what blacks are going through and any participation by them in the struggle will be partly to relieve their guilt feelings and will harm more than what it supports.

These are valid concerns. Everything has pros and cons, and I see the pros of joint struggle. I believe it's about injustice and that we have to correct it for all the people involved.

RRB: What's your relationship with the BDS movement?

YS: I'm a member of Boycott from Within — people from Israeli society who support the boycott just like white activists in South Africa supported the boycott against apartheid. It's not a big group but this is the seed of future coexistence. Now the word coexistence makes you feel … not so comfortable. Let's talk about co-resistance. Let's struggle together. Let's resist the policies of apartheid. Let's resist the policy of racism together — and *then* we can

coexist.

I look at the guidelines of the BDS movement, and I feel totally comfortable. They have three major goals: to end apartheid for Palestinians within the 1948 borders; to end the control over Gaza and the West Bank; and to promote the right of return of the millions ofPalestinian refugees around the world.

It's a common agreement with all lefties that the occupation is bad, it should end. You don't have to be a very radical Israeli to support that. It's also common to believe there is no real equality for Palestinians citizens of Israel. But to promote the right of return touches the very notion of a Jewish state. Even to the very progressive lefty Israeli, it's something hard. It's almost like you have to go through an emotional endeavor to battle with some Zionist remains inside you to realize that you can't have peace and freedom with someone worth more than someone else. That's why we're not waiting anymore for people inside Israel.

RRB: You've now spent almost as many years as an activist as you did in the military. What sustains you? Are there any hopeful signs?

YS: Even though I do things like for example, participate in the flotilla to Gaza and pay a little bit by being a few days in jail, it's surprising how many times walking in the street I meet someone I didn't see for years and they come and hug you and say thank you. We represent things that people think even though they are not radicalized to the full extent. So it's not just a little group of lunatic people.

And if you go to campuses today in the US the atmosphere is totally different than it was ten years ago. I toured different times in the States from 2004 on, and every time I see a different attitude and it changed for the good. Many of the activists in the Palestine committees are Jewish students. Their parents were supporting AIPAC and the right-wing Jewish lobbies, but the second generation is with the Palestinians, working together side by side.

In 2005 when I did a lecture tour, Jewish Voice for Peace had seven chapters, Today they have more than forty chapters. They represent the future and the new generation of Jews in the US.

The BDS movement is not waiting for the politicians. Millions of people in Europe, in the US, in the rest of the world support us. Maybe compared to Israeli Jews, I'm still a minority, but overall, in the world, there is growing support. And it's not against Jews and it's not against Israelis. It's for future mutual existence in this piece of land. And for the question of one state or two states — there is already one state. The only question is whether it will remain an apartheid state or if it will to be an equal place for everyone.

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