

The Loaded Discourse of Gun Control in Israel

Written by Una McGahern

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UNA MCGAHERN, AUG 13 2013

Following the massacres at Newtown and Sandy Hook elementary schools last year, calls for stricter gun control laws in the U.S. assumed a new sense of urgency. Reformists, however, were met with acrimonious opposition spearheaded by NRA lobbyists who voiced concerns about preserving America's gun culture and the right to carry weapons in society.

Within this debate, a trend to draw loose analogies with gun control measures in Israel became evident. The "lessons to be learned from Israel" approach, as summed up in a recent article entitled 'Why Israel Has No Newtowns' suggests that there is something distinctive about the Israeli gun "culture" model which US policy-makers should emulate.

Widely circulated images of AK47s slung casually over the shoulders of women on Israel's beaches suggest that a "normal", unproblematic and stable relationship exists between (wo)men and guns in Israel. Alongside this, articles presenting selective statistical data of relatively low levels of private gun ownership and gun-related deaths in Israel have highlighted differences between both countries' legislation of firearms.

The legislative approach is, however, myopic in the extreme as it focuses on only one component of the debate (private gun ownership), and on one sector of society (the Israeli Jewish majority). A full transcript of guns and gun-related violence in Israel must also take into account private and government weapons as well as legal and illegal sources of arms within the Jewish and Palestinian communities on both sides of the green line.

Taking these factors into account requires a closer critical examination of the role of military service in Israel. The performance of military service is, within mainstream perspectives, considered to socialise citizens with a particular ethos and set of skills to defuse, contain and (self-) regulate the lethal potential of carrying weapons in society. Critical perspectives, by contrast, seek to expose the darker destabilising effect of militarism in creating and reproducing patterns of (gender) inequality, exclusion, discrimination and (domestic) violence.

These patterns of instability and inequality are, however, not only manifested attitudinally or relationally but also materially in terms of access to weapons. The Israeli military is the main arms provider in society in terms of access to legal and illegal weapons. Moreover, military service remains an important factor determining the success of gun licence applications as well as a condition of employment for a vast array of jobs deemed "security"-related.

With the exception of the Druze community, Israel's Palestinian Arab minority has historically been exempted from military service. As Israel is deeply-divided along ethno-national lines, selective military service is bound up not only with issues of state security, but also of individual and collective insecurity and vulnerability. Selective mandatory military service, and the asymmetry of both access to, and volume of, arms which results from it reinforces and exacerbates existing power relations, gaps and conflicts in society.

The shootings in Hebron in 1994, Shafa'mr in 2005, or Beer Sheva in May of this year, frequently dismissed as exceptions perpetrated by mentally unbalanced lone gunmen, have shown the lethal potential of permissive and complacent attitudes to the carrying of weapons in civilian areas as well as the consequences of an uneven proliferation of arms in civilian areas.

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Gun-related economic crime and the proliferation of illegal weapons across all sectors of society, but particularly in Arab areas – treated primarily as an “Arab problem” – represents another direct consequence of the officially-mandated proliferation and asymmetry of arms in society, as individuals and groups vie with one another to close gaps, advance interests and claim a greater share of power for themselves.

Equally significant is the impact which an uneven proliferation of arms has upon relations within the Palestinian minority itself. Patterns of violence involving not only military-supplied weapons but also armed and uniformed security personnel in a number of Druze-Christian conflicts in mixed Arab villages has added to the marginality and physical insecurity of Palestinians in Israel.

It is, however, the recent spike in domestic shootings and femicide within mainstream Israeli Jewish society which has captured the most media attention. With reports that 30 people (16 of whom were women) have been killed in the last ten years by security guards using their work weapons, moves to tighten up gun control regulations are at an all-time high.

Suggestions, however, that tougher laws will reverse the existing trend of gun violence by lone gunmen, criminals security guards, soldiers (whether they are active, on leave, or on reserve duty), border police, settlers, community police officers etc., ignores entirely the broader significance and problem of the asymmetric proliferation of weapons in society.

Until the debate shifts to address the deeper structural bases of violence in Israel and the role of military service within it, the myth of a safe proliferation of weapons, and the violence which it enables, will continue.

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