

Dead Palestinian babies and bombed mosques - IDF fashion 2009

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A T-shirt printed at the request of an IDF soldier in the sniper unit reading '1 shot two kills.'

jackets and pants. A young Arab man from Jaffa supervises the workers who imprint the words and pictures, and afterward hands over the finished product.

Dead babies, mothers weeping on their children's graves, a gun aimed at a child and bombed-out mosques - these are a few examples of the images Israel Defense Forces soldiers design these days to print on shirts they order to mark the end of training, or of field duty. The slogans accompanying the drawings are not exactly anemic either: A T-shirt for infantry snipers bears the inscription "Better use Durex," next to a picture of a dead Palestinian baby, with his weeping mother and a teddy bear beside him. A sharpshooter's T-shirt from the Givati Brigade's Shaked battalion shows a pregnant Palestinian woman with a bull's-eye superimposed on her belly, with the slogan, in English, "1 shot, 2 kills." A "graduation" shirt for those who have completed another snipers course depicts a Palestinian baby, who grows into a combative boy and then an armed adult, with the inscription, "No matter how it begins, we'll put an end to it."

There are also plenty of shirts with blatant sexual messages. For example, the Lavi battalion produced a shirt featuring a drawing of a soldier next to a young woman with bruises, and the slogan, "Bet you got raped!" A few of the images underscore actions whose existence the army officially denies - such as "confirming the kill" (shooting a bullet into an enemy victim's head from close range, to ensure he is dead), or harming religious sites, or female or child non-combatants.

In many cases, the content is submitted for approval to one of the unit's commanders. The latter, however, do not always have control over what gets printed, because the artwork is a private initiative of soldiers that they never hear about. Drawings or slogans previously banned in certain units have been approved for distribution elsewhere. For example, shirts declaring, "We won't chill 'til we confirm the kill" were banned in the past (the IDF claims that the practice doesn't exist), yet the Haruv battalion printed some last year.

The slogan "Let every Arab mother know that her son's fate is in my hands!" had previously been banned for use on another infantry unit's shirt. A Givati soldier said this week, however, that at the end of last year, his platoon printed up dozens of shirts, fleece jackets and pants bearing this slogan.

"It has a drawing depicting a soldier as the Angel of Death, next to a gun and an Arab town," he explains. "The text was very powerful. The funniest part was that when our soldier came to get the shirts, the man who printed them was an Arab, and the soldier felt so bad that he told the girl at the counter to bring them to him."

Does the design go to the commanders for approval?

The Givati soldier: "Usually the shirts undergo a selection process by some officer, but in this case, they were approved at the level of platoon sergeant. We ordered shirts for 30 soldiers and they were really into it, and everyone wanted several items and paid NIS 200 on average."



What do you think of the slogan that was printed?

"I didn't like it so much, but most of the soldiers wanted it."

Many controversial shirts have been ordered by graduates of snipers courses, which bring together soldiers from various units. In 2006, soldiers from the "Carmon Team" course for elite-unit marksmen printed a shirt with a drawing of a knife-wielding Palestinian in the crosshairs of a gun sight, and the slogan, "You've got to run fast, run fast, run fast, before it's all over." Below is a drawing of Arab women weeping over a grave and the words: "And afterward they cry, and afterward they cry." [The inscriptions are riffs on a popular song.] Another sniper's shirt also features an Arab man in the crosshairs, and the announcement, "Everything is with the best of intentions."

G., a soldier in an elite unit who has done a snipers course, explained that, "it's a type of bonding process, and also it's well known that anyone who is a sniper is messed up in the head. Our shirts have a lot of double entendres, for example: 'Bad people with good aims.' Every group that finishes a course puts out stuff like that."

When are these shirts worn?

G. "These are shirts for around the house, for jogging, in the army. Not for going out. Sometimes people will ask you what it's about."

Of the shirt depicting a bull's-eye on a pregnant woman, he said: "There are people who think it's not right, and I think so as well, but it doesn't really mean anything. I mean it's not like someone is gonna go and shoot a pregnant woman."

What is the idea behind the shirt from July 2007, which has an image of a child with the slogan "Smaller - harder!"?

"It's a kid, so you've got a little more of a problem, morally, and also the target is smaller."

Do your superiors approve the shirts before printing?

"Yes, although one time they rejected some shirt that was too extreme. I don't remember what was on it."

These shirts also seem pretty extreme. Why draw crosshairs over a child - do you shoot kids?

'We came, we saw'

"As a sniper, you get a lot of extreme situations. You suddenly see a small boy who picks up a weapon and it's up to you to decide whether to shoot. These shirts are half-facetious, bordering on the truth, and they reflect the extreme situations you might encounter. The one who-honest-to-God sees the target with his own eyes - that's the sniper."

Have you encountered a situation like that?

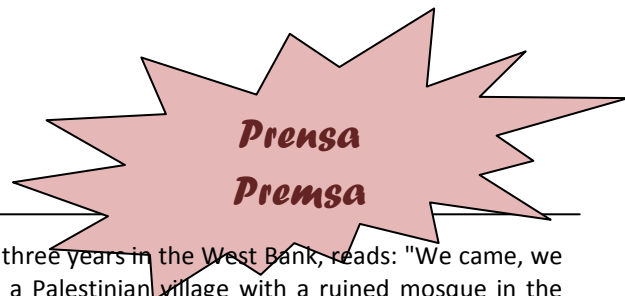
"Fortunately, not involving a kid, but involving a woman - yes. There was someone who wasn't holding a weapon, but she was near a prohibited area and could have posed a threat."

What did you do?

"I didn't take it" (i.e., shoot).

You don't regret that, I imagine.

"No. Whomever I had to shoot, I shot."



A shirt printed up just this week for soldiers of the Lavi battalion, who spent three years in the West Bank, reads: "We came, we saw, we destroyed!" - alongside images of weapons, an angry soldier and a Palestinian village with a ruined mosque in the center.

A shirt printed after Operation Cast Lead in Gaza for Battalion 890 of the Paratroops depicts a King Kong-like soldier in a city under attack. The slogan is unambiguous: "If you believe it can be fixed, then believe it can be destroyed!"

Y., a soldier/yeshiva student, designed the shirt. "You take whoever [in the unit] knows how to draw and then you give it to the commanders before printing," he explained.

What is the soldier holding in his hand?

Y. "A mosque. Before I drew the shirt I had some misgivings, because I wanted it to be like King Kong, but not too monstrous. The one holding the mosque - I wanted him to have a more normal-looking face, so it wouldn't look like an anti-Semitic cartoon. Some of the people who saw it told me, 'Is that what you've got to show for the IDF? That it destroys homes?' I can understand people who look at this from outside and see it that way, but I was in Gaza and they kept emphasizing that the object of the operation was to wreak destruction on the infrastructure, so that the price the Palestinians and the leadership pay will make them realize that it isn't worth it for them to go on shooting. So that's the idea of 'we're coming to destroy' in the drawing."

According to Y., most of these shirts are worn strictly in an army context, not in civilian life. "And within the army people look at it differently," he added. "I don't think I would walk down the street in this shirt, because it would draw fire. Even at my yeshiva I don't think people would like it."

Y. also came up with a design for the shirt his unit printed at the end of basic training. It shows a clenched fist shattering the symbol of the Paratroops Corps.

Where does the fist come from?

"It's reminiscent of [Rabbi Meir] Kahane's symbol. I borrowed it from an emblem for something in Russia, but basically it's supposed to look like Kahane's symbol, the one from 'Kahane Was Right' - it's a sort of joke. Our company commander is kind of gung-ho."

Was the shirt printed?

"Yes. It was a company shirt. We printed about 100 like that."

This past January, the "Night Predators" demolitions platoon from Golani's Battalion 13 ordered a T-shirt showing a Golani devil detonating a charge that destroys a mosque. An inscription above it says, "Only God forgives."

One of the soldiers in the platoon downplays it: "It doesn't mean much, it's just a T-shirt from our platoon. It's not a big deal. A friend of mine drew a picture and we made it into a shirt."

What's the idea behind "Only God forgives"?

The soldier: "It's just a saying."

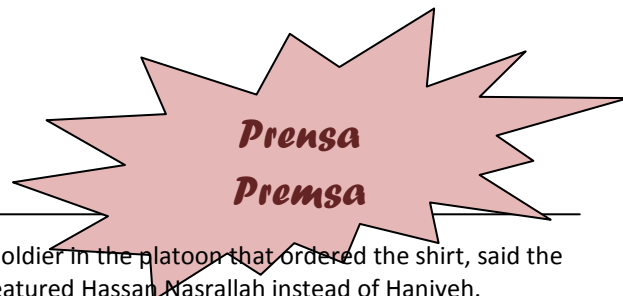
No one had a problem with the fact that a mosque gets blown up in the picture?

"I don't see what you're getting at. I don't like the way you're going with this. Don't take this somewhere you're not supposed to, as though we hate Arabs."

After Operation Cast Lead, soldiers from that battalion printed a T-shirt depicting a vulture sexually penetrating Hamas' prime

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minister, Ismail Haniyeh, accompanied by a particularly graphic slogan. S., a soldier in the platoon that ordered the shirt, said the idea came from a similar shirt, printed after the Second Lebanon War, that featured Hassan Nasrallah instead of Haniyeh.

"They don't okay things like that at the company level. It's a shirt we put out just for the platoon," S. explained.

What's the problem with this shirt?

S.: "It bothers some people to see these things, from a religious standpoint ..."

How did people who saw it respond?

"We don't have that many Orthodox people in the platoon, so it wasn't a problem. It's just something the guys want to put out. It's more for wearing around the house, and not within the companies, because it bothers people. The Orthodox mainly. The officers tell us it's best not to wear shirts like this on the base."

The sketches printed in recent years at the Adiv factory, one of the largest of its kind in the country, are arranged in drawers according to the names of the units placing the orders: Paratroops, Golani, air force, sharpshooters and so on. Each drawer contains hundreds of drawings, filed by year. Many of the prints are cartoons and slogans relating to life in the unit, or inside jokes that outsiders wouldn't get (and might not care to, either), but a handful reflect particular aggressiveness, violence and vulgarity.

Print-shop manager Haim Yisrael, who has worked there since the early 1980s, said Adiv prints around 1,000 different patterns each month, with soldiers accounting for about half. Yisrael recalled that when he started out, there were hardly any orders from the army.

"The first ones to do it were from the Nahal brigade," he said. "Later on other infantry units started printing up shirts, and nowadays any course with 15 participants prints up shirts."

From time to time, officers complain. "Sometimes the soldiers do things that are inside jokes that only they get, and sometimes they do something foolish that they take to an extreme," Yisrael explained. "There have been a few times when commanding officers called and said, 'How can you print things like that for soldiers?' For example, with shirts that trashed the Arabs too much. I told them it's a private company, and I'm not interested in the content. I can print whatever I like. We're neutral. There have always been some more extreme and some less so. It's just that now more people are making shirts."

Race to be unique

Evyatar Ben-Tzedef, a research associate at the International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism and former editor of the IDF publication Maarachot, said the phenomenon of custom-made T-shirts is a product of "the infantry's insane race to be unique. I, for example, had only one shirt that I received after the Yom Kippur War. It said on it, 'The School for Officers,' and that was it. What happened since then is a product of the decision to assign every unit an emblem and a beret. After all, there used to be very few berets: black, red or green. This changed in the 1990s. [The shirts] developed because of the fact that for bonding purposes, each unit created something that was unique to it.

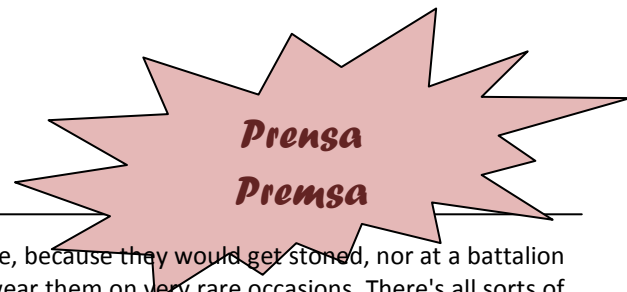
"These days the content on shirts is sometimes deplorable," Ben-Tzedef explained. "It stems from the fact that profanity is very acceptable and normative in Israel, and that there is a lack of respect for human beings and their environment, which includes racism aimed in every direction."

Yossi Kaufman, who moderates the army and defense forum on the Web site Fresh, served in the Armored Corps from 1996 to 1999. "I also drew shirts, and I remember the first one," he said. "It had a small emblem on the front and some inside joke, like, 'When we die, we'll go to heaven, because we've already been through hell.'"

Kaufman has also been exposed to T-shirts of the sort described here. "I know there are shirts like these," he says. "I've heard

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and also seen a little. These are not shirts that soldiers can wear in civilian life, because they would get stoned, nor at a battalion get-together, because the battalion commander would be pissed off. They wear them on very rare occasions. There's all sorts of black humor stuff, mainly from snipers, such as, 'Don't bother running because you'll die tired' - with a drawing of a Palestinian boy, not a terrorist. There's a Golani or Givati shirt of a soldier raping a girl, and underneath it says, 'No virgins, no terror attacks.' I laughed, but it was pretty awful. When I was asked once to draw things like that, I said it wasn't appropriate."

The IDF Spokesman's Office comments on the phenomenon: "Military regulations do not apply to civilian clothing, including shirts produced at the end of basic training and various courses. The designs are printed at the soldiers' private initiative, and on civilian shirts. The examples raised by Haaretz are not in keeping with the values of the IDF spirit, not representative of IDF life, and are in poor taste. Humor of this kind deserves every condemnation and excoriation. The IDF intends to take action for the immediate eradication of this phenomenon. To this end, it is emphasizing to commanding officers that it is appropriate, among other things, to take discretionary and disciplinary measures against those involved in acts of this sort."

Shlomo Tzipori, a lieutenant colonel in the reserves and a lawyer specializing in martial law, said the army does bring soldiers up on charges for offenses that occur outside the base and during their free time. According to Tzipori, slogans that constitute an "insult to the army or to those in uniform" are grounds for court-martial, on charges of "shameful conduct" or "disciplinary infraction," which are general clauses in judicial martial law.

Sociologist Dr. Orna Sasson-Levy, of Bar-Ilan University, author of "Identities in Uniform: Masculinities and Femininities in the Israeli Military," said that the phenomenon is "part of a radicalization process the entire country is undergoing, and the soldiers are at its forefront. I think that ever since the second intifada there has been a continual shift to the right. The pullout from Gaza and its outcome - the calm that never arrived - led to a further shift rightward."

"This tendency is most strikingly evident among soldiers who encounter various situations in the territories on a daily basis. There is less meticulousness than in the past, and increasing callousness. There is a perception that the Palestinian is not a person, a human being entitled to basic rights, and therefore anything may be done to him."

Could the printing of clothing be viewed also as a means of venting aggression?

Sasson-Levy: "No. I think it strengthens and stimulates aggression and legitimizes it. What disturbs me is that a shirt is something that has permanence. The soldiers later wear it in civilian life; their girlfriends wear it afterward. It is not a statement, but rather something physical that remains, that is out there in the world. Beyond that, I think the link made between sexist views and nationalist views, as in the 'Screw Haniyeh' shirt, is interesting. National chauvinism and gender chauvinism combine and strengthen one another. It establishes a masculinity shaped by violent aggression toward women and Arabs; a masculinity that considers it legitimate to speak in a crude and violent manner toward women and Arabs."

Col. (res.) Ron Levy began his military service in the Sayeret Matkal elite commando force before the Six-Day War. He was the IDF's chief psychologist, and headed the army's mental health department in the 1980s.

Levy: "I'm familiar with things of this sort going back 40, 50 years, and each time they take a different form. Psychologically speaking, this is one of the ways in which soldiers project their anger, frustration and violence. It is a certain expression of things, which I call 'below the belt.'"

Do you think this a good way to vent anger?

Levy: "It's safe. But there are also things here that deviate from the norm, and you could say that whoever is creating these things has reached some level of normality. He gives expression to the fact that what is considered abnormal today might no longer be so tomorrow."