By Chris Kaithayil, Council for Arab British Understanding

The recent revelations in Haartez that soldiers in the Israeli armed forces were taking a lackadaisical approach to generally accepted military rules of engagement caused a furore within Israel and across the world. For a country that prides itself on having 'the most moral army in the world ', the idea that soldiers could shoot at unarmed women and children who posed no threat to them is forcing some degree of introspection in a uniquely militaristic Israeli society.

The most powerful aspect of the revelations lay in how they were made. At the Oranim pre-military course soldiers made offhand remarks about the operations in Gaza, describing how a woman and two children were shot when they accidentally turned right (after being told to turn left) upon exiting a house, and how an elderly woman was killed for apparently no reason at all. The transcript of the conversation reveals claims that military orders held everyone who had not fled Gaza City to be a terrorist and therefore fair game. The absurdity of this was explained by the squad commander identified in the transcript as 'Aviv' who said, "On the one hand they don't really have anywhere to flee to, but on the other hand they're telling us they hadn't fled so it's their fault "

The matter of fact nature of these comments (albeit tinged with some discomfort) shows the lack of respect for Palestinian life that suffuses the Israeli military hierarchy and suggests that such information was not new or even newsworthy, it was just what happens. As 'Ram' explained, "The lives of Palestinians, let's say, is (sic) something very, very less important than the lives of our soldiers."

For those who take some interest in the region, the news was hardly novel, with similar reports having been released by numerous organisations to date. One outspoken Israeli organisation, 'Breaking the Silence', consists of a group of veteran Israeli soldiers who hold interviews and take testimony from those in the armed forces. They are currently putting together a publication containing the testimony of solders who acted in Operation Cast Lead and say that the stories published by Haaretz "represent a trend in the behavior of soldiers in Gaza . . . it is clear that the moral failures described are not simply the behavior of individual soldiers, but the workings of military policy and decision-making about the operation in Gaza."

Despite the categorical nature of the allegations, the apologists for the Israeli military have already come out in full force. Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi has reiterated the cliche that the Israeli military is the most moral army in the world and has restated the bromide that fighting in civilian areas leads to unfortunate civilian deaths. At the same time, a mud slinging campaign has been instituted against Danny Zamir, the head of the academy where the soldiers spoke, claiming he is a refusnik and therefore has a political motive.

The power behind the Haaretz revelations lie in the fact they come from ordinary soldiers. There is no hint that the statements were intended to embolden the Palestinian cause or to embarrass the Israeli military. There was no suggestion that this was a pro-Palestinian left wing conspiracy from 'self-hating Jews'. Other than the insinuations against Zamir, there is no sense that there is a political agenda behind the comments. Uncomfortable facts are just plainly stated.

However, the idea that the news will cause a sea-change in Israeli military policy is foolish. The statements emanating from Tel Aviv suggest that the outcome of any investigation by the advocate general has been pre-judged in the military's favour. When many more Palestinians are killed it will be because of some individual moral failures, biased reportage or through military necessity. Zamir's closing words to his charges, to "exercise judgment, be human" are likely to be ignored.