

# Do something

**Hundreds of Israeli soldiers are refusing to serve in the occupied territories, so why is the British government doing so little to rein in Ariel Sharon? Novelist Ahdaf Soueif pens an open letter to Tony Blair**

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**Dear Mr Blair**

It is midnight now and I have spent these last three days of Easter here, in London, moving between TV channels, the internet and the walls of my home as the Israeli army moves into the towns of the West Bank. I feel a tremendous anger and a tremendous frustration. And thousands in Britain, millions in the world, feel the same way. We hate what is happening. We fear what is about to happen.

On Saturday I received an email signed by eight Palestinian and 17 Israeli academics. They say, among other things: "We call for the international community not to wait for massacres on the scale of those in Sabra and Shatila in 1982; the time for action is now."

Now, Mr Blair, now. When you were elected, much was made of your "ethical" foreign policy. Where are the ethics of your foreign policy now, Mr Blair? Women and children are trapped in their homes. Men are blindfolded and shot in the streets. An entire civilian population is being terrorised in the name of rooting out terror - will you do nothing about it?

Two months ago, in a talk at Westminster, the Israeli anti-occupation activist Jeff Halper told us that Israel will never, ever pull out of the West Bank voluntarily. And why should it? After all, this is how Israel first came into being. Bands of settlers taking over land and driving out the original inhabitants. The policy that was adopted in 1905 and which remains unchanged is "talk peace and create facts on the ground". This is what every Israeli government has done so far. The Sharons are simply more upfront about their intentions than the Baraks.

But there are differences between then and now. One is that some young Israelis, born in Israel and loyal to their country, are beginning to think differently. Some of them are the soldiers (now numbering 384) who are bravely refusing to serve in the occupied territories. Here is one, Gil Nemesh, staff sergeant, engineering: "Those terrible things happening in the territories have little to do with the security of Israel and stopping terror. It is all about the settlements.

Choking and starving and humiliating millions of people, to provide safety to the settlements."

Another difference between then and now is the Palestinian people. They have learned the lessons of 1948; have learned what happens to you once you let yourself be terrorised off your land. And so they are staying to the bitter end. Not that the duration has been any less bitter. They have gone the way of negotiations and talks and discussions, and have seen that in 32 years it has led them nowhere. That in the nine years since the Oslo accord the illegal settlements have doubled while the world is lulled by talk of "peace processes" and "stages" and "negotiations". Now their backs are to the wall. Bring the occupation to an end and you will have peace in the time it takes to withdraw the Israeli army and the illegal settlers to within the Green Line. The situation is still retrievable - but only just. The vast majority of Palestinians do not condone suicide attacks - or any attacks - upon civilians. Here is another Israeli soldier: Tal Belo, staff sergeant, armoured corps: "The women of Gaza were the true heroes. While the men were busy tending to the miseries of life and looking for ways to liberate themselves from this or that occupation, the women were busy taking care of the kids, preparing the food and working in the groves... All alone there, they cried for their youth and for their dreams; for the sons who were killed or sent to prison, or for the sons who will be killed or will be sent to prison."

But now young girls - girls who have worked as nurses, pretty girls, teenagers with lives ahead of them - strap explosives to their bodies and blow themselves up. Can you imagine the despair and the anger that would lead a young woman to such an act?

Do you know what happens in the West Bank and Gaza, Mr Blair? What has been happening there for years? Let me tell you - or better still, let another Israeli soldier tell you. You see, Mr Blair, I am quoting heavily from these young men. This is to make up the credibility I may lack as a UK citizen of Egyptian origin and to dispel the prevailing myth that this is a "religious" conflict rather than a political one. So listen to Assaf Oron, Sergeant, first class, Infantry: "... when, as a sergeant, I found myself in charge, something cracked inside me. Without thinking, I turned into the perfect occupation enforcer. I settled accounts with 'upstarts' who didn't show enough respect. I tore up the personal documents of men my father's age. I hit, harassed, served as a bad example... I was no aberration. I was exactly the norm..."

Have you seen the pictures of the Israeli army stationed on the roofs of people's houses? Do you know what that is like, day by day, hour by hour? Listen to Avner Kohavi, sergeant first class, infantry: "First, the external walls of the house were black with coffee leftovers spilled by the soldiers from the roof. The yard was full of shit and toilet papers because it served as the soldiers' latrine. On the roof there were piles of trash and empty cans. The military vehicle bringing every new shift in would shatter the pavement and entrance to the house. When a shift changed at 2am, all the tenants would wake up, and since there was a baby in

the house he would start wailing. I remember the look on the face of the tenants whenever I bumped into them on the stairway: a look of humiliation."

And this was in the good old days, before they started making men strip to their underwear to walk through the checkpoints, before they started digging trenches so that people couldn't get to work, before they placed their tanks at hospital gates so women delivered their babies in the streets, before they started the executions. So tell them, Mr Blair, tell them that this life, with no end in sight, is preferable to blowing themselves up and taking a few of their tormentors with them.

The people who get blown up are often not their specific tormentors. A sad and terrible truth. But still, as Tamir Sorek, sergeant first class, army intelligence, writes: "The deprived [Palestinian] habitants are still desperately demanding their rights. The obvious facts that their uprising includes hideous assaults against innocent privileged [Israeli] people do not subtract from the legitimacy of their claim for freedom from non-elected rule." How is that for straight, moral thinking?

Do something to stop the occupation, Mr Blair. For days presidents and world leaders have been pleading with Sharon not to harm Chairman Arafat. Arafat's life is not worth more than any other and the man is no picture, but filmed by candle light he looked like a Rembrandt on the television screen. That is the image that will fuel the years of anguish that will surely follow if anything happens to him.

The occupation is not negotiable. It is illegal by all accepted international laws. It is immoral, obscene, corrupting. Negotiations about the other issues in question should take place after the occupation is ended. The calls for help are coming not only from the Palestinians but from Israelis too. Listen to them. And tell your friend in the White House that Israel needs to be bound by international law. Tell him that the Arabs' quarrel with America is because of its dishonesty on the Israeli issue; that it cannot pick a fight with Iraq for not heeding international law and at the same time fund the Israeli slaughter of Palestinians with American taxpayers' money. Tell him that if America really played the "honest broker" in the Holy Land, it would not need to shore up corrupt regimes to protect its legitimate interests.

As Sergeant Oron writes: "We are the Chinese young man standing in front of the tank [in Tiananmen Square]. And you? If you are nowhere to be seen, you are probably inside the tank, advising the driver."

**Yours, Ahdaf Soueif**