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Former Israeli soldier seeks to shine a light on Hebron

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Reporting from Hebron, West Bank ? Prepare to be pelted with eggs, the tour guide warns. Or maybe it will be rocks, bricks or spit wads.

The projectiles, guide Yehuda Shaul says, are courtesy of angry Jewish settlers opposed to his group, Breaking the Silence, which brings outsiders to the hotly disputed West Bank city of Hebron every week as part of an effort to expose what it considers military misconduct toward Palestinians.

From the moment the former Israeli soldier-turned-military-whistle-blower arrives, Shaul's movements are tracked.

Sometimes soldiers discreetly whisper "Yehuda" into shoulder-mounted radios as he passes; other times they shout his arrival like a town crier: "Breaking the Silence guy!"

This time it's a 12-year-old Orthodox boy, with cherub cheeks and sprouting side locks, who spots Shaul and raises the neighborhood alarm.

"Trash!" the boy screams, running up to Shaul, pointing and attempting a sort of menacing, in-your-face stance that a little kid can't really pull off against a burly, 6-foot-1 activist. "Traitor! Trash! You will be forgotten!"

Shaul, who served two tours in Hebron during the 2001-03 Palestinian uprising, fixes a smile on his face, ignores the boy and picks up his pace.

"It's best to keep walking before a crowd draws," he says.

Shaul may be the closest thing Hebron's Jewish Quarter has to a Public Enemy No. 1. He's reviled by settlers, discredited by the military and distrusted by many Muslims, who don't know what to make of this cheerful Orthodox Jew who looks like a settler in a full beard and kippah.

"It's like I'm a walking threat," Shaul says with a laugh.

His 6-year-old group is made up of former soldiers who once helped Israel manage the occupation and now accuse the military of deliberately killing civilians, using Palestinians as human shields and looting homes in the West Bank.

Israeli opponents say the group presents a distorted view of the Israel Defense Forces. Supporters call the activists courageous. The group was one of three finalists this month for the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought, which went to Cuban dissident Guillermo Farinas Hernandez.

Over a glass of spiced coffee, Shaul runs quickly through Hebron's recent history. Here in the city that is home to the Tomb of the Patriarchs, a biblical burial place sacred to both Jews and Muslims, the two groups coexisted for centuries. Jews were evacuated after a 1929 massacre in which Arabs killed 67 Jews.

After Israel took control of the city during the 1967 Middle East War, Jewish pilgrims returned a year later to hold a Passover ceremony in a Hebron hotel, and then refused to leave, marking the start of renewed Jewish settlement.

Hebron was split in two in the aftermath of the 1994 massacre by settler Baruch Goldstein, who shot to death 29 praying Palestinians.

Today about 800 Jews live around the city's old quarter, protected by nearly as many soldiers. An additional 7,000 settlers live in Kiryat Arba adjacent to the city. More than 150,000 Palestinians live in Hebron, including thousands in Israeli-controlled sectors.

"This is what they call a sterilized road," Shaul says. That means Palestinians are prohibited from using it, even if they live on it. To keep a security buffer, the military has welded shut metal front doors of Palestinian homes and businesses, leaving a row of abandoned shops in what was once a bustling marketplace.

Most businesses left or closed because of a lack of customers. Those who remain have to leave their homes over the rooftops, use backdoors or cut holes in the interior walls of adjacent empty buildings behind them.

"Every year they take another corner," Shaul says.

He disagrees with what has happened to Palestinians here, he says. But at the same time, as a former soldier who spent months in Hebron as a grenade machine-gun operator, Shaul recalls the violence against Jews that triggered the crackdown. Over there, he motions, a 10-month-old was shot by a sniper. There were regular stabbings and shootings. Soldiers were killed almost weekly.

The problem, according to Shaul, is that Israel's occupation of Hebron goes beyond what is

needed for security. According to testimony and photographs released by his group, soldiers routinely humiliate Palestinians, raid civilian homes as a form of harassment and violate international laws regarding occupied territory. The military rejects the group's allegations.

Motioning to a white building on a distant hill, he points to his old lookout post on the second floor, where he once sprayed grenades into the valley below ? officially aiming at empty buildings to harass the enemy but avoid civilian casualties, but knowing his weapon was imprecise.

From more than half a mile away, he says, he can't know what he might have hit or whom he might have hurt.

"We didn't always agree with what was happening, but when you're a soldier, you have an excuse not to say anything or do anything," he says. "When you get out, how can you justify not taking a stand? I needed to answer to myself: What did I do?"

He says that's what keeps him coming back to Hebron.

Wrapping up another tour, Shaul hops into a car when a soldier, once again, comes rushing over to question him.

But rather than a cold stare, Shaul is greeted with a broad smile. "You leaving?"

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