The Making and Unmaking of a Private Security Trade Union in Occupied East Jerusalem

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The rooftops in and around the Old City of Jerusalem provide for a quiet and inspiring vantage point, far above the commotion of the streets below. Some rooftops are used for praying, others for tourists to take colorful Instagram snaps, and still others play host to highly sophisticated security operations. A few dozen Jewish-only settlement compounds, located in neighborhoods from which Palestinian families were evicted and replaced by ideologically motivated settlers, have guardhouses on their rooftops.

Each guardhouse is staffed by two private security guards, who keep watch over a small area: a single house or a small cluster of houses and their inhabitants. In the guardhouse: chairs and a table, screens displaying security footage from the immediate surroundings, a fan, an ammunition closet, sometimes a sink and an electric kettle. The precariously employed guards, often army veterans who share a sense of military camaraderie, spend their days sitting and chatting, studying their college textbooks, or watching a film on their phones; at other times, they go on patrol or escort the Jewish-Israeli residents around the neighborhood. These guardhouses, with large Israeli flags flying above them, have been a feature of the Jerusalem skyline for decades. Yet it was only in 2011 that, for the first time, the rooftop guards came together to struggle for better pay and better work conditions, embarking on a journey that exposed the political, social, and racial fault lines that run through the contemporary neoliberal Israeli state.
This short essay tells the story of the establishment and development of a combative trade union among Israeli private security guards protecting Jewish-only settlement compounds in occupied East Jerusalem. Private security unions can play an important role in the work lives of security guards, but as is the case with police unions, they have been understudied by social scientists despite their significance in the management, accountability, and community relations dimensions of policing (Walker 2008). I use this example from Jerusalem to reflect on the factors that enable and constrain the unionization of private security guards, thereby contributing to our understanding of the labor of private security and the ideological fault lines found therein.

David, a former security guard with thirteen years of experience in securing Jerusalem’s settlement compounds, recounted in an interview what led him to join the union:

> We worked hard but the outsourcing [of security provision] left little money in the company’s pockets ... so they skipped some of our payments, like our overtime and pension savings. They knew most workers are young and they won’t sue.
The working conditions were also a major concern for David, who recalled:

> Working in a heat wave in a flimsy hut without air conditioning is just impossible ... or without normal toilets, or without basic furniture ... There was no one to speak to, since many of the managers were incapable idiots who got appointed due to their connections up high.

These complaints, further manifested in individual lawsuits, were first directed at the private security company that nominally employed the guards. Ultimately, though, the guards work at the behest of the Israeli government, which finances the protection of settlers that the Israeli police is unable or unwilling to provide. The Israeli police, which is in theory responsible for public security in annexed East Jerusalem, cites a lack of operational capacity, a lack of motivation, and a desire to remain “apolitical” to explain this unusual public-private constellation (Volinz 2019).

Unionization is a highly political process that can bring to the surface existing political, social, racial, or gendered tensions and ruptures (e.g., Wilcke 2018). This is particularly the case when security agents engage in collective labor disputes, as their position in relation to the state or their private client is itself brought into question. In Israel, most security guards are low-level employees hired through outsourcing agencies (Konopinski 2009); a small subset, like those in East Jerusalem, seek to distinguish themselves as “elite” units with a high entrance threshold. Yet even these units encounter precarious and harmful labor practices.

In 2011, the security guards at the East Jerusalem project joined with Koach LaOvdim (Power to the Workers), a combative national trade union led by left-leaning social activists, in a bid to establish their own chapter of the union. This affiliation proved highly contentious for both Koach LaOvdim and the security guards. Within the leftist Koach LaOvdim, the decision to represent and assist in the unionization of security guards protecting settlements in occupied East Jerusalem became a matter of internal debate. Should the union promote the rights of workers, regardless of what the labor of these workers entails? And what of the rights of the working-class Palestinian residents who have been dispossessed by the settlement? Some union members and external antioccupation activists asked Koach LaOvdim’s board to reject the security guards from the national union, accusing their chapter of whitewashing the oppression of the Palestinian residents. Others called for a more nuanced approach, whereby the national union could publicly declare its simultaneous support for the security guards and the Palestinian residents, with a commitment to help the guards find an alternative work placement in the future. After much discussion, Koach LaOvdim rejected the
criticisms and decided to continue unionizing the security guards, underscoring the precedence that the union gives to organized labor above all other political considerations.

By this point, it was not clear that the security guards themselves would agree to the involvement of Koach LaOvdim. After collecting the needed signatures from one-third of the guards, the nascent union asked to enter into formal negotiations with their employer. Few of them expected the struggle that ensued. Oded, one of the guards involved with the union, recalled in an interview:

> The company then started exerting internal pressure against Koach LaOvdim, saying that they’re leftists who want to eliminate the settlements. ... In the guardhouses, they hung posters with leftist quotes from Koach LaOvdim leaders, such as “stop the occupation” ... the arguments about the union started dividing us from within.

The tactics employed by management laid bare some of the divisions among the private security guards. While all the guards were army veterans with advanced weapons training, their ranks included young Jewish men from distinctively different backgrounds. Some, like David and Oded, were recent migrants to Israel; their arrival from the ex-Soviet world or from the United States preceded their enlistment in the Israeli army. Later, working in security allowed them to finance their studies or to save for a deposit to buy a house. While they, like other liberal Israelis, might adhere to the Israeli national narrative of an exclusionary Jewish homeland in Israel/Palestine, they are also secular and not necessarily ideologically committed to the settlement project. At times, they might even show a dislike for the national-religious settlers they protect. David shared his experience:

> In some compounds, the Palestinian neighbors are quality people, for example, lawyers or doctors ... and we can become friends. It’s pretty logical when you think of it. If both me and the Arab are secular, we can bond when talking about cars or music, and the Jewish resident can be a bit crazy and too demanding. The problem is that, in case of a future altercation, you can lose your neutrality and side with the Arab instead of protecting the settler.

This account is in contrast with how many other security guards, particularly those who were religious or Mizrahi Jews (Israelis of Middle Eastern descent), understood their position. The poorer Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem and its environs are where many Mizrahi Jews were settled and still reside. Many Mizrahi Jews were
trapped in peripheral areas on the margins of Israel by the political agenda of Zionist settlement, and were treated by Jewish-Israelis of European descent as both a pool of cheap labor and a static frontier presence against the Palestinian natives (Tzfadia and Yiftachel 2004). Military service and “elite” private security work is considered by many Mizrahi Jews to be a way out of this trap, of climbing the social ladder through their participation in a social formation in which “Mizrahim are disproportionally called upon to implement the most conspicuous forms of violence” (Eastwood 2019: 63). Mizrahi Jews, soldiers and civilians alike, continue to occupy a stratified place within Israel’s “death hierarchy” (Levy 2012), with many Mizrahi serving in low-ranked infantry units and residing in frontier localities. Despite this discrimination, many of the Mizrahi guards identify with the national-religious settlers, who are majority Ashkenazi and who inhabit the settlement compounds primarily out of ideological and religious convictions about the physical and spiritual redemption of Israel.

A rupture among the guards ensured when their nascent union faced the choice of who to target for legal, media, and labor action: their direct employer (the private security company) or the Israeli Ministry of Housing, which coordinates and finances its work. David explained the choice to target the government: “The Ministry and the company are in cahoots, and when the company wouldn’t pay us what’s ours, the Ministry would back them up. ... We quickly understood who our real employer is.” This move, which was accompanied by a media campaign blaming the government for failing their frontier security guards, a parliamentary discussion on abusive labor practices, and a legal petition, was not welcomed by some of the guards, particularly those with a religious or right-wing background. These guards did not wish to cast a negative light on the government’s policies or on the settlement project. Thus the guards, despite their early success in bringing their exploitation to light, were more divided than ever.

The ongoing refusal of the private security company and the Ministry of Housing to negotiate with the nascent union ultimately led a majority of the security guards to leave the left-leaning Koach LaOvdim, instead taking the advice of their employer to join a hastily established chapter of the National Labor Federation, a right-leaning organization associated with the ruling party, Likud. Oded blames the National Labor Federation for conspiring with the private security company to neutralize the Koach LaOvdim–affiliated union and establish a “fake” company union by enticing the guards with piecemeal improvements in their working conditions in lieu of the uphill struggle—and elusive achievements—that a radical union might have brought. The guards have thus achieved the installation of air conditioning in some guardhouses, a fairer
allocation of working shifts, and a professionalized external management team. Their complaints about wage deductions and missing payments persist. 

The story of the making and unmaking of the private security union in Jerusalem illustrates some of the obstacles to unionization and the protection of workers’ rights in contentious political settings. While unionization is enabled by joint experiences and shared anger (see Taksa 2020), it can also be constrained by ideological and racialized difference. With a fervent discussion currently taking place in the United States and beyond about the role of police unions in propping up systematic racism (e.g., Unger 2020), organized labor is slowly grappling with how it can tackle oppression and marginalization while still protecting the rights of public and private security agents. The case of the East Jerusalem security guards further suggests that unionization in the burgeoning industry of private security can bring forth particularly difficult questions as to where pressure should be applied. There may be power in a union, but the road leading to it can be a winding one—even when looking from the vantage point of a rooftop.

Author Bio

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Preview Image

Photo by Chris Henry.

References


