Israel's police force is becoming alarmingly militarized – and its no surprise why - Haaretz - Isra...
The images out of Israel this Sunday looked like they could have been filmed in downtown Baltimore. Young Israelis of Ethiopian descent were being chased down the streets of central Tel Aviv by horse-mounted police officers, dodging stun grenades, fending off tear gas canisters and trying to evade the water cannons headed their way.

The center of Tel Aviv, Israel’s most vibrant, economically powerful
city, looked like an urban battlefield.

The images, while infuriating, were of course disturbingly familiar. They paralleled in certain ways the riots that took place in Baltimore, and echoed the social unrest that has taken over major American cities in recent months. In both cases, black men and women, members of a marginalized ethnic minority that has been systematically neglected and discriminated against, have been facing off against an alarmingly militarized police force. In both cases, demonstrations against police brutality were met with more brutality.

But while there are indeed similarities between the protests in Tel Aviv and those in Baltimore, the scene was also not-so-vaguely reminiscent of another battlefield, one more familiar to Israeli citizens: the West Bank.

The impressive arsenal used by Israels police forces on Sunday and at last weeks Ethiopian Israeli demonstration in Jerusalem – stun grenades, tear gas, water cannons and a skunk, a vehicle that sprays a rancid-smelling liquid at protesters – are all staples of Israels military regime in the occupied territories. They have rarely been used within the borders of Israel, and when they were, it was almost always in the context of the Israel-Arab conflict.

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On Sunday, however, near the square that has hosted some of the biggest demonstrations in Israels history, there they all were: the
skunk, the stun grenades, the water cannons, the tear gas. This time they weren't directed at Palestinians in Qalandiyah in the occupied West Bank. This time, they were used against Jews – in the middle of Tel Aviv.

The brutal response reflected the hugely disadvantageous situation of Ethiopian Israelis and the incredible adversities they face, especially when it comes to law enforcement. Already dealing with constant racism and a disproportionate incarceration rate, Israelis of Ethiopian descent were reminded once again on Sunday that Israeli justice is not impartial: In recent years, Tel Aviv has seen dozens of demonstrations and protests initiated by almost every ethnic and political group in Israel, from middle-class predominantly Ashkenazi Jews protesting the cost of living to African asylum seekers. And while some have met a rather forceful police response, none were treated to the same kind of violence that we saw on Sunday.

But the pandemonium was also part of a wider, growing phenomenon: the militarization of Israelis (already pretty militarized) law enforcement, and the increasing infiltration of methods used to disperse riots in the occupied territories into the other side, the wrong side of the Green Line.

In recent years, Israel has seen more and more examples in which West Bank methods of crowd control and riot dispersal were imported into its borders. Stun grenades have been used against Israeli Arabs on several occasions, most recently during the riots that broke out last summer in Israeli Arab towns following the murder of the Palestinian boy Muhammad Abu Khdeir. In 2009 and again in 2013, stun grenades and tear gas were used to disperse ultra-Orthodox riots in Jerusalem. Tear gas is also no stranger to...
Bedouins in Israels south.

While this phenomenon was limited to non-Jewish minorities and the occasional Ultra-Orthodox riot, far removed from the public eye, the Israeli mainstream paid very little attention. But in July 2012 even Tel Aviv was forced to acknowledge the growing militarization of Israeli law enforcement. During a march against police brutality and Israels high cost of living, the Border Police – a militarized branch of Israels police force that is frequently used for anti-terror activities and riot dispersal – deployed a stalker, a surveillance truck usually used to gather intelligence and monitor the communications of Palestinians in the occupied territories. The truck, commonly referred to in Israel as a Raccoon, appeared again several more times during demonstrations that summer.

The same machine that has been used to keep Palestinians at bay was now being used to prevent Israelis from protesting the prices of housing and cottage cheese.

In many ways, this was to be expected. Israel has been occupying another people for 38 years now, monitoring their communications, policing their every move. It has grown accustomed to war every year or two. One cannot live like that without eventually taking the war back home. And so, weapons that were previously only used against apparent enemies of the state are now being used to control its own citizens.

The militarization of police, of course, is not uniquely Israeli. In fact, the militarization of law enforcement – police forces using military equipment like armored vehicles and assault rifles to aggressively clamp down on civil protests – is a global phenomenon.
What makes the Israeli example unique is that until now, most Israeli Jews thought they were safe. That the rules of the occupation, the daily reality of Palestinians, didn’t apply to them.

But occupation can’t be neatly contained. Violence inevitably seeps in.

The brutal crackdown of the Ethiopian protest this week reflects not only the hardships faced by one of Israel’s most impoverished ethnic groups. It also presents a dangerous escalation, a stark reminder of the limits of democracy when it is forced to coexist alongside a security state. The occupation of the Palestinians, in a way, is becoming the occupation of Israelis: The same tactics used to control Palestinians are increasingly used to silence them.

Many Israelis have been deeply shocked by this week’s events. By the level of force used against protesters. By the sight of stun grenades exploding mere meters away from where Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated. As it turns out, there’s a fine line between occupying and being occupied. And that line has never looked so thin.

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