

Palestine

Israel's rabbis gave war

By Richard Boudreaux

Some Israeli soldiers say military rabbis cast the offensive against Hamas rockets as a fight to expel non-Jews

THE winter assault on the Gaza Strip was officially portrayed in Israel as an attempt to quell rocket fire by militants of Hamas. But some soldiers say they also were lectured about a more ambitious aim: to banish non-Jews from the biblical land of Israel.

"This rabbi comes to us and says the fight is between the children of light and the children of darkness," a reserve sergeant said, recalling a training camp encounter. "His message was clear: 'This is a war against an entire people, not against specific terrorists.' The whole thing was turned into something very religious and messianic." As armies elsewhere use chaplains, the Israeli military inducts rabbis to serve religious soldiers. Their traditional tasks include ensuring that kitchens are kosher and religious services are available. But soldiers now going public with allegations of misconduct in Gaza portray the military rabbinate as a corps of self-appointed holy warriors whose sermons and writings demonised Palestinians.

"The army itself is a battleground of conflicting ideals in Israeli Jewish society," said Avi Sagi, a Bar-Ilan University philosophy professor who in the 1990s was a co-author of the mili-

tary's code of ethics, which obliges soldiers to avoid killing innocents. On one side, he said, are universal values that call for respecting all human life equally and are largely shared by Jews who seek accommodation with the Palestinians. On the other side are more nationalistic passages of the Torah, cited by religious thinkers who liken the Palestinians to Old Testament invaders and place a premium on Jewish life. In the Gaza conflict, the argument has focused on how to fight militants who for years have fired rockets indiscriminately at Israeli communities, causing scores of civilian casualties. Maj. Avital Leibovich, a military spokeswoman, denied that the military rabbinate takes sides. Army rabbis violated a directive to "stay away from politics" in Gaza, she said, but they were few in number and acted on their own.

'Well organised': In testimony reported by Israeli news media and in interviews with *The Times*, Gaza veterans said rabbis advised army units to show the enemy no mercy and called for resettlement of the Palestinian enclave by Jews. "The rabbis were all over, in every unit," said Yehuda Shaul, a retired army officer whose human rights group, Breaking the Silence, has taken testimony from dozens of Gaza veterans. "It was quite well organised."

The army, which conscripts almost every Israeli Jew at 18, has been dominated for most of its history by secular officers. But over the last 15 years, as secular Israelis have soured on

the occupation of Palestinian territory, religious nationalists have taken over senior positions in elite combat brigades. With them have come hundreds of volunteer rabbis, who teach at pre-military academies for religious youths and serve side by side with the troops. The rabbis' role in Gaza came into focus last week along with testimony from soldiers who said that loose rules of war led to unwarranted civilian deaths and property destruction. The testimony reported by two Israeli newspapers was the first such criticism to surface from within the army since the assault ended Jan. 18, leaving an estimated

Soldiers now going public with misconduct in Gaza portray a corps of self-appointed holy warriors whose sermons and writings demonised

1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis dead. Most Palestinian casualties were listed as civilians.

The army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, said Monday that he did not believe soldiers shot Gaza civilians "in cold blood." He added that "isolated cases" of misconduct, if proved, "will be dealt with individually." Responding to newspaper photos, the army also condemned soldiers who wore T-shirts depicting a pregnant woman in a rifle's cross hairs with the slogan "1 Shot 2 Kills." During the

on Gaza religious colour

Gaza offensive, critics contend, rabbinical propaganda was part of a broader effort to legitimise Israel's decision to use overwhelming force.

Legal opinion: Before the assault, the army's legal office issued an opinion saying that Israel was entitled to use artillery against civilian neighbourhoods from which Hamas was launching rockets. And after the 22-day operation, a Tel Aviv University philosophy professor with close ties to the military, Asa Kasher, said the decision to shell Gaza's cities stemmed from an anti-terrorism doctrine he had helped draft a few years ago. It stated that in Gaza, as in other areas the army does

c with allegations of
ray the military rabbinate as
holy warriors whose
nonised Palestinians

not control, there is no justification for endangering soldiers' lives in order to avoid killing civilians in the proximity of targeted militants.

That doctrine appears to be at odds with the military code, which obliges the army to avoid civilian casualties, and it was never formally adopted. However, it was echoed in religious terms in literature distributed in Gaza by military rabbis. "Our ancestors did not always fight with a sword and at times preferred to use a bow and arrow from a distance," one text read.

"Actions must be taken from a distance in order to spare our soldiers' lives." The reserve sergeant, an observant Jew who spoke to The Times on condition of anonymity, said that he and a fellow soldier in his 15-man unit were troubled by the "children of darkness" sermon, but that other troops seemed receptive. In one of several postwar testimonies given at a left-leaning military institute, a squad commander identified only as Ram complained that army rabbis tried to press what he called a "religious mission" on his men.

"The military rabbinate brought in a lot of booklets and articles and their message was very clear: We are the Jewish people, we came to this land by a miracle, God brought us back to this land and now we need to fight to expel the non-Jews who are interfering with our conquest of this holy land," Ram said. As a commander, he said, he tried to explain to his men that "not everyone in Gaza is Hamas [and] wants to vanquish us [and] that this war is not a war for the sanctification of the holy name, but rather one to stop the Kassams" - a type of rocket fired from Gaza. Danny Zamir, director of the institute that elicited the testimonies and leaked them to Israeli papers, was quoted in a transcript as voicing dismay that Israeli nationalists, like their Hamas enemies, are using faith to justify violence.

"If clerics are anointing us with oil and sticking holy books in our hands, and if the soldiers in these units aren't representative of the

whole spectrum of the Jewish people, but rather of certain segments of the population, what can we expect?" he said. Ofer Shelah, military correspondent for the newspaper Maariv, said the rising profile of religious nationalists in the army has helped them in two showdowns with the high command.

After Israel withdrew its settlers and soldiers from Gaza in 2005, graduates of two pre-military academies associated with the settler movement said they would refuse to obey future orders to disband West Bank settlements. The army threatened to cancel its certification of the schools, then backed down. During the Gaza assault, the chief military rabbi, Brig. Gen. Avichai Rontzki, was called in to answer criticism that his department was distributing war propaganda. He denied knowledge of it, and a subordinate was given "a slap on the wrist" by the Defence Ministry, Shelah said.

Rabbi David Hartman, a leading Jewish philosopher who has lectured thousands of officers at his Shalom Hartman Institute, said the religious nationalist belief in holy war is still a minority view in the army. "But it has to be fought with a rational religious ideology that takes into account the living reality of two peoples," he said. Otherwise, he added, "you have these rabbis volunteering in the army, and it's not necessarily the people the army wants. There's a vacuum, and it gets filled by crackpots." COURTESY LOS ANGELES TIMES