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CONTACT:
Puja Sangar
Tel: 650.724.4211
Fax: 650.736.1784
Email: puja.sangar@stanford.edu

Surrounded

Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military

Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh
(Stanford University Press, October 2008)

"This book provides a unique focus on the conflicted situation of Palestinian citizens inside Israel through examining those among them who choose to serve in the army of the Jewish state. A fascinating, engrossing and thought-provoking book."

—Rashid Khalidi, Columbia University, author of *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood*

"In this path-breaking, elegantly written and poignant ethnography, Kanaaneh manages a complex intellectual feat. She critically examines the concepts of citizenship, belonging, and identity by probing the motivations and behavior of a small group of Arabs in Israel, second class citizens at best, that voluntarily joins the military... She astutely probes the consequences of this strategy of playing by the state's rules and its rewards which devolve from military service."

—Julie Peteet, University of Louisville, author of *Landscape of Hope and Despair: Palestinian Refugee Camps*

In early September 2008, Tzipi Livni, Israel's foreign minister, declared victory over Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to become the head of Israel's governing party. As MSNBC describes her, "Livni is Israel's lead negotiator in peace talks with the Palestinians. A new nationwide vote would likely turn into a referendum on the current effort to forge a historic peace deal with the Palestinians."

As leadership changes within Israel we are reminded of the clear and powerful political divide between the State of Israel and the Palestinian people. But we often fail to notice the individuals that straddle this divide – the Palestinian citizens of Israel.

In *Surrounded: Palestinian Soldiers in the Israeli Military*, Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh takes a closer look at the controversial, often ignored, Palestinians serving in the Israeli military. Mostly products of underfunded and badly staffed schools, with limited opportunities because they are Arab, an estimated 3,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel currently volunteer to serve in the Israeli military and fight other Palestinians just miles away in the occupied territories.

These soldiers comprise less than one percent of the Palestinian population. And, they are considered traitors by the majority of Palestinians. But their stories provide a powerful vantage point from which to consider a question faced by all Palestinians in Israel: to what

extent are they, in fact, Israeli? But it is no coincidence that it is to the military that this small group turns in order to push the boundaries of their citizenship.

Surrounded examines the complex reasons these individuals join the army and the wider implications of their decisions in terms of security and citizenship. But to understand their reasons, we must first understand that military service has enormous symbolic and material significance in Israel and has been a key institution in the production both of Jewish belonging and Palestinian marginalization.

But these 3,000 Palestinian soldiers test the foundation of that exclusion. As Kanaaneh puts it: "This small group of men (and a few women) that are the focus of this book offers a unique perspective on citizenship in Israel. They express at some level the hope of inclusion through military service. They put Israel to a critical test: are these 'good Arabs' who will go to almost any length to be Israeli to be allowed into the fold?"

Surrounded is based on over seventy interviews with soldiers, and provides a unique glimpse of their conflicting experiences of acceptance, integration, and marginalization in the Israeli military. One Arab policewoman interviewed by Kanaaneh expresses her choice to join the military in this moving statement: "Some people say 'let me take first, then I'll give.' I don't know if I'm right, but I'm saying I want to give first before I can ask to take. Maybe I'm naïve, but isn't it better to improve our situation in the meantime?"

Concluding with comparisons to similar situations around the world, the book upends nationalist understandings of how wars and those who fight in them work. A key to a more complex understanding of ethnic conflict, this gripping and revealing look at a select group of soldiers will immensely alter ideas about the reasons why people choose to fight, particularly on "the wrong side" of a war.

Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh is a visiting scholar in the Department of Middle East and Islamic Studies at New York University. She is the author of the award-winning book Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel (2002) and co-editor of the anthology Blue ID: Palestinians in Israel Revisited (2009).

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For media inquiries, please contact Puja Sangar at 650.724.4211 or puja.sangar@stanford.edu.

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