Has the "Spider Web" Theory Really Collapsed?
Casualty Sensitivity during Operation Protective Edge

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The public discourse during Operation Protective Edge (2014) reflected a higher degree of willingness to accept military casualties than it had during previous wars or operations, particularly the Second Lebanon War (2006). In this article, I seek to clarify the prevailing argument regarding Israeli society's greater willingness to accept military deaths, and to show that this argument should not be accepted at face value. My argument is that casualty sensitivity exists, but it is more complex than it appears to be and is also affected by changing circumstances. When the military operation is swift, intensive, and perceived as successful – as epitomized by Operation Protective Edge – and the sacrifice made by the more affluent social groups is few and even justified in terms of voluntary choice, military death can be more easily justified and does not arouse substantial opposition.

Keywords: risk transfer, military fatalities, casualty aversion, collective action, casualty sensitivity, bereavement discourse

Introduction

The public discourse during Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014) reflected a higher degree of willingness within Israeli society to tolerate military casualties than it had during previous wars or operations, particularly in relation to the previous round of violence, the Second Lebanon War (2006), during which dozens of soldiers were killed. Operation Protective

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Edge, which lasted fifty days, was Israel's reaction to the escalating rocket and missile fire from the Gaza Strip into Israel, a spiraling escalation over which neither side could control.[1] During the first ten days of the operation, the IDF bombarded the Gaza Strip from the air, ground, and sea; Hamas fired rockets on Israeli communities and made a number of attempts to infiltrate Israel through tunnels that it had dug. Hamas rejected Egypt's proposal for a ceasefire, upon which Israel launched a ground operation tasked with destroying the tunnels. The ground operation lasted about two and a half more weeks, and a ceasefire was achieved only after another three weeks of IDF shelling from the air, ground, and sea.

Sixty-five soldiers were killed during the operation, but their deaths did not arouse public protest or an outcry of opposition to the continuation of the fighting. Against this backdrop was the claim that the "spider web" theory had collapsed – the theory of weak stamina that Hezbollah's Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah had attributed to Israeli society. In this context, Professor Ishay Rosen-Zvi, an expert on Israeli culture, made a particularly keen observation during his lecture at a conference at Tel-Aviv University, saying that, "Soldiers' deaths are no longer creating the same public pressure as in the past. This is a new mechanism that differs from the one that we are familiar with, when coffins evoked feelings of revulsion that triggered criticism and media pressure."[2]

Rosen-Zvi's impression was corroborated by Zipi Israeli and Elisheva Rosman who analyzed the media coverage during Operation Protective Edge. According to their study, the media had indeed covered the casualties throughout the operation, but not in a critical manner as in the past, and even if criticism was levelled at the political echelon about tactical conduct, it did not address the human cost of the fighting. The sacrifice was presented as a necessity, the soldiers who lost their lives were presented as heroes, and the discourse did not return to its former pattern of focusing on mourning.[3] A contrary position was echoed by Breaking the Silence, which documented soldiers' testimonies in this operation. Breaking the Silence concluded that the "guiding military principle of 'minimum risk to our forces, even at the cost of harming innocent civilians,' alongside efforts to deter and intimidate the Palestinians, led to massive and unprecedented harm to the population and the civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip."[4]

We thus observed two different approaches that seemingly are not contradictory. Indeed, the Winograd Commission, which conducted an inquiry into the Second Lebanon War, quotes Meir Dagan, the head of the

Mossad at that time, who said during the war that, "In my mind, the trauma of Lebanon [in which Israel was dragged into a deadly war of attrition in the years 1982-2000] exists more in the politicians' minds than those of the public."[5] With this remark, he succinctly elucidated the conventional hypothesis that, in reality, the public may be more tolerant of casualties than the policymakers and senior military officers. However, the leadership's concerns that the public will not tolerate casualties may result in risk aversion and even mission aversion, or, alternatively, an aggressive fire policy, both mitigating the risk to soldiers.[6] That is to say, the belief that the sight of coffins generates opposition reflects the leadership's concerns more than public opinion to which the leaders should have responded; certainly, this sight will not inevitably generate organized, antiwar collective action. Nevertheless, the contradiction presented above about the extent to which the public tolerates casualties warrants clarification to which it is hoped the present article will contribute.

My argument is that the assumption that the public showed a higher degree of willingness to accept military casualties in this operation should not be accepted at face value. Casualty sensitivity exists, but it is more complex than it appears to be and is affected by changing circumstances. When the military operation is swift, intensive, and perceived as successful, and the sacrifice made by the more affluent social groups is minor and even justified in terms of voluntary choice, the military death is easier to justify and does not arouse substantive opposition.

The first part of this article will present the background to the discussion and its theoretical framework. The second part will present a number of assertions that examine various explanations for the non-development of active opposition to the sacrificing of lives during Operation Protective Edge.

Background and Theory

Sensitivity to military casualties developed in Israeli society primarily after the First Lebanon War (1982), following a similar path in other democracies; the bereavement discourse reflected this change. Up until the First Lebanon War, soldiers' deaths were perceived as inevitable, as part of the "silver platter" upon which the state's independence was served. The hegemonic discourse at the time was characterized by the bereaving families' acceptance of their loss. The state bestowed honor and prestige upon them and transformed the fallen into symbols of national commemoration; in exchange, the families accepted and reconciled themselves to their sacrifices.

Criticism or questioning about the circumstances of their children's deaths was not part of the discourse.[7] This attitude began to change during the Yom Kippur War, when many bereaved families entered the political arena and joined those demanding to dismiss the Minister of Defense, Moshe Dayan, who was perceived as being responsible for the "mishap" leading to the war. Nevertheless, substantive public challenges were only first voiced after the First Lebanon War (1982), which shattered the consensus supporting the sacrifice of lives on the battlefield, with the discourse becoming more critical and even subversive.

"The Beaufort Family" – a group of bereaved parents who protested the deaths of their sons during the battle over the Beaufort Castle on the first night of the First Lebanon War – was one of the first groups that questioned the war's justification. These public challenges were echoed by the group "Soldiers against Silence," composed of discharged reservists, which protested the death toll during the war of attrition in Lebanon (1982-1985). The protesters raised placards opposite the residence of Prime Minister Menachem Begin to show him the latest number of casualties. The phenomenon reached a peak with the "Four Mothers" movement, which protested the human cost of the military deployment in southern Lebanon after two military helicopters had collided en route to Lebanon and claimed the lives of seventy-three soldiers. The Four Mothers' protest played a pivotal role in supporting the IDF's unilateral withdrawal in 2000. Similar protest organizations became active after the Second Lebanon War (2006), formed by reservists and bereaved parents. These protested the army's flawed functioning during the war, which they claimed led to fatalities that could have been prevented or, alternatively, justifiable had the war's objectives been achieved.

These protest movements leveraged their sacrifice both as reservists and as parents of soldiers and translated it into a political voice. Both bilateral withdrawals from Lebanon, in 1985 and in 2000, which were influenced by the protest over the sacrificing of soldiers' lives, clearly reflected the change in the bereavement discourse and its impact on IDF deployment.[8]

The intensification of this critical discourse imposed restrictions on the freedom of action of the governments and of IDF commanders to endanger soldiers, which peaked during the Second Lebanon War when the government waited until the last minute to launch a massive ground operation deep into Lebanon. The Winograd Commission determined in this context that, "The IDF conducted itself during the war as if its concern

about casualties among its soldiers was a central element in its planning process and operational considerations . . . We note that a fundamental component of Israel's security approach is that the army's role is to protect civilians and ensure they live their routine lives."[9]

IDF commanders also acknowledged that Israeli society tolerates causalities less than in the past and that this sensitivity affects military deployments in combat.[10] Since the year 2000, the concern for casualties has deterred the IDF from initiating ground operations in the Gaza Strip; when they were launched, an aggressive fire policy was implemented that mitigated the risk to soldiers and partially transferred the risk to enemy civilians. A clear correlation has been identified since then between Israeli society's heightened sensitivity to casualties and the tendency to adopt an aggressive fire policy, compelling decision makers to use force only when they could claim legitimacy for implementing such an aggressive policy. When such legitimacy has not been achieved, decision makers have opted for military restraint (like the cease-fire arrangements with Hamas, similar to those reached with Hezbollah in Lebanon) in lieu of limited use of force that would increase the risk to IDF soldiers.[11]

Seemingly, this casualty-sensitivity syndrome was not prevalent during Operation Protective Edge. Even if the IDF adhered to the strategy of transferring the risk from its soldiers to the enemy civilians – out of its internalization of Israeli society's sensitivity to casualties – as members of Breaking the Silence have claimed, there are those who will claim that the government and the IDF could have assumed greater risks, given the change in society to accept a higher number of fatalities among its soldiers. I will endeavor to clarify the degree of sensitivity during Operation Protective Edge later on in this article.

Sensitivity to military losses has increased in democratic societies since the 1960s, playing a key role in limiting the state's freedom of operation in deploying the armed forces for military missions, with the Vietnam War representing the turning point. Subsequently, the concept of a casualty-aversion policy was coined, designed to mitigate the risk to soldiers whether by refraining from risk-intensive missions or by launching them in a manner to bolster the soldiers' protection, including through increased use of technology, or by transferring the risk to the enemy civilians by implementing an aggressive fire policy.[12] This casualty-sensitivity syndrome evolved parallel to the strengthening of the liberal culture and its materialistic foundations, and to the diminishing sense of existential threats, particularly

with the demise of the Cold War.[13] This change led to the evolution of a post-heroic culture, in which risk to soldiers constitutes a key constraint when forging military policy.[14] Alongside the sociological explanation, scholars of international relations and political science identified variables that heighten or diminish casualty sensitivity even when a political culture is intolerant of fatalities.

Against this background, I wish to propose a two-tiered theoretical framework for the empirical discussion: the first tier is based on the argument by the American political scientists, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler that support for continuing a military operation in the face of mounting combat casualties is a function of the interactive effect of two underlying attitudes: expectations that the military operation will be a success and belief in the initial justification of the decision to use force. So, the ability to achieve the goals rather than the number of casualties determines the level of casualty sensitivity.[15]

This argument is a convincing explanation, particularly if we recall that, in Israeli reality, the number of casualties does not always explain the protest or, alternatively, the consensus that arose with respect to bereavement. Nevertheless, the weakness of this argument is that it relies solely on public opinion surveys. Changes in military policies informed by casualty sensitivity often occur when antiwar movements garner mass support, as demonstrated in the cases of the Vietnam War and the First Lebanon War. Public opinion matters to the extent that it is translated into collective action and thereby impacts policies.[16]

Subversive collective action develops mainly among the networks of the middle-class groups that have the time, resources, qualifications, and the courage to protest in circumstances in which they bear significant burden. Therefore, we can ask which social groups bear the burden of the casualties and as a consequence, are likely to develop critical attitudes towards their sacrifice, translating into subversive bereavement discourse, and then into protest. Studies show a correlation between the level of resistance to war and the social origins of those bearing the burden of sacrifice: subversive responses are more likely to arise when the more privileged groups bear the sacrifice. This finding leads to the conclusion that the transition from conscription to voluntary recruitment weakens the potential for protest in most democracies inasmuch as the troops are increasingly staffed with lower-class groups, even when the number of casualties increases.[17]

There are two advantages to this framework: firstly, it turns the argument of Gelpi and his colleagues that "success matters" into a more complicated one and gives greater significance to the interpretations of various groups – an interpretation influenced by each group's social status – of the question of whether the military operation achieves its objectives and whether the sacrifice is commensurate with the achieved objectives. Secondly, this argument raises the possibility that critical public opinion might not evolve into protest, primarily in circumstances when lower-class groups bear the burden of sacrifice. In this scenario, public opinion will also not affect military deployment by means of applying pressures to cease a military operation.

The combination of these two theoretical arguments, both which incorporate the variables of success, justification, and social composition, leads to the assumption that as long as the military sacrifice is shouldered by non-privileged groups, the justification of the use of force and the expectation of its success will increase society's willingness to accept a high number of casualties. On the other hand, insofar as those who are sacrificed are from a more affluent class, one can expect a more critical reading of the reality; that is, a critical reading of the justification of the use of force and of the degree of success achieved relative to the level of casualties, as well as to other sacrifices, such as the economic costs of war. This critical reading could potentially be translated into active opposition to the military policy.

Following are a number of assertions that illustrate a variety of aspects of sensitivity to casualties during Operation Protective Edge. With these assertions, we will attempt to answer the question of why casualty sensitivity did not develop in Israeli society during this operation.

1. Intensive war did not lead to the development of protest and sensitivity

In the past, antiwar protest emerged only after the fighting stopped. Thus, for example, the Beaufort Family emerged after the initial days of combat in the First Lebanon War, upon the completion of the war's "official" stage. This was also the case during the Second Lebanon War. Unlike what is envisioned in the collective memory, questions about the circumstances of soldiers' deaths during these two wars arose about a week after the fighting stopped, when bereaved parents joined the emerging circle of protest. It follows that coffins did not trigger a critical reaction immediately upon their appearance. In the past, protest developed also under circumstances of a

protracted war of attrition. This was the case during the war of attrition in Lebanon (1982-1985), with the emergence of the Four Mothers movement, and with the protest started by the Shuvi movement in 2004 against the loss of soldiers in the Gaza Strip during the Second Intifada.

In contrast, Operation Protective Edge may be classified as an intensive war. The majority of the casualties during this operation occurred during about two weeks only, particularly during the ground operation, which could be perceived as intensive combat, but also limited in time and targets (see below). Under these circumstances, the potential for developing both sensitivity and protest was low. It is reasonable to assume that sensitivity and protest would have increased if the ground operation had become prolonged and the number of fatalities had risen, or that they would have developed after the fighting if the operation had been portrayed as having missed its targets, an issue that we will analyze next.

This assertion partially adopts the classic argument of John Mueller, whereas an increase in the number of cumulative casualties heightens casualty sensitivity and thus weakens public support of the military operation.[18] Nevertheless, as other studies cited here show, and as I will elucidate below, numbers alone do not trigger change, unless they are interpreted within the context of the conduct of the operation, its objectives, and achievements.

2. Sensitivity that may arouse protest depends upon the nature of the combat and its political interpretation

Left-wing sensitivity can appear as opposition to sacrifice when the sacrifice seems to lack a political purpose, such as the claim that the First Lebanon War was a "war of choice" – a claim that fueled the left-wing protest. Such sensitivity typified the protests of the Beaufort Family, Four Mothers, Soldiers Against Silence, and Shuvi, although, in fact, even the Four Mothers movement had not condemned Israel's presence in southern Lebanon, but rather, protested only its efficacy, given the death toll. Such protests against the military sacrifice can offer a political alternative or a nonviolent alternative, or one that involves less violence (like the demands of the Four Mothers or Shuvi to defend the state's borders at the Green Line and, by doing so, to also reduce the violence from the Arab side).

Right-wing sensitivity can induce protest about unjustified sacrifice, due to the failure to achieve the highly justified military goals. This is the type of sensitivity that developed after the Second Lebanon War. Bereaved

parents also implied that they would have been willing to accept a higher price (mainly by launching a massive ground operation), as long as it was justified in terms of attaining military goals.[19]

Common to both wings, therefore, is the willingness to sacrifice, provided that the sacrifice is valuable and necessary. Consequently, coffins do not automatically evoke a feeling of revulsion; this feeling depends on the circumstances, as Gelpi and his colleagues assert. In other words, the belief that the fighting is politically essential and achieves its targets will increase the willingness to accept casualties, and vice versa. This is what transpired during Operation Protective Edge.

From the outset of Operation Protective Edge, the government and the IDF did not want a ground operation. The concern about loss of life dissuaded the Israeli leadership from launching a ground operation, under the assumption that it would require an aggressive use of fire power in order to mitigate the risk to IDF soldiers, and subsequently would expose Israel to international criticism.[20] In the final analysis, Israel was dragged into a ground operation, due to Hamas' rejection of the Egyptian ceasefire proposal at the end of the first ten days of fighting. The discovery of the tunnels, perceived as a threat, not only provided legitimacy (and even internal pressures) in both Israel and the international arena for the ground operation, but also enabled the military to focus the operation on a threat with a concrete objective.

Unlike during the Second Lebanon War, the goal of the ground operation during Protective Edge was not to stop the firing of rockets and missiles at Israel's southern population centers. A ground operation with this defined purpose would have failed and would have been portrayed as ineffective, certainly during its initial phases, which would have gnawed away at the justification for sacrificing soldiers' lives. On the contrary, the loss of soldiers' lives during Protective Edge was justified by the need to eliminate a more tangible threat – that of the tunnels – which was presented in the public discourse in a demonic way, strumming chords of fear in the average Israeli.[21]

Any operation to silence the firing on the population centers can be measured for success and failure, and therefore, can garner praise and criticism. In contrast, any effort to remove a future threat is an operation whose success cannot be measured. In the context of Operation Protective Edge, the military efforts to destroy the tunnels and the time it took could all be measured quantitatively. This was a measure of input (destroyed

tunnels) and not output (improved security) and facilitated the decision makers' ability to shape public opinion about the efficacy of the operation. Therefore, this kind of project is almost assured of success, and legitimizes the sacrifice by its very nature. Indeed, at the conclusion of the ground operation, 92 percent of the Jewish population in Israel concurred that the ground operation had been justified, while about half of those surveyed believed that most of the goals had been achieved.[22] Even if criticism was voiced during the ground operation, it focused on the time taken to destroy the tunnels and the way the tactical aspects of the operation were managed, but not on the principal justification of the operation or the price it exacted.[23] It is reasonable to assume that if the ground operation had become protracted and the number of casualties had risen, sensitivity leading to opposition would have increased, all the more so had the objective of the operation been to stop the rockets that Hamas launched at Israel's towns, instead of destroying the tunnels. The situation is different when at issue is an operation that last two and a half weeks and has achievable objectives.

In this way, the government played a significant role in shaping the public discourse by severing the failed efforts to stop the rocket fire on Israel's population centers from the seemingly successful efforts to destroy the tunnels. Most of the casualties, forty-four soldiers, fell during the ground operation (the others were killed during attacks on military concentrations outside of the Gaza Strip), but their deaths did not raise questions. Therefore, when the operation to destroy the tunnels had accomplished all that it could and politicians had to choose between ending the fighting and a massive ground incursion to reoccupy the Gaza Strip, which would have cost hundreds of soldiers' lives, they opted for the first alternative.[24]

Under these circumstances, the potential for protest was not high, even after the fighting had ended. If we compare this operation to the Second Lebanon War, we find that during the weeks following the end of Protective Edge and the subsequent declaration of the ceasefire, 70 percent of the Jewish population believed that the operation did not have any impact on Israel's national security or that the operation had made it even worse. During the weeks after the Second Lebanon War, a similar percentage of the Jewish public (68 percent) believed that the war had ended with some or considerable weakening of Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis the Arab world. In other words, the intensity of the criticism after the Second Lebanon War exceeded that which followed Operation Protective Edge, as the majority of the public believed that the security situation had deteriorated after

the war, while public opinion on this matter was divided after Protective Edge.[25] The difference between the objectives of both wars and the extent to which the objectives were achieved caused this difference in public opinion, even though, in both cases, Israel had failed in its military efforts to stop the rocket fire, achieving it only by means of a ceasefire arrangement.

Furthermore, during the Second Lebanon War, the deaths of soldiers were accompanied by injuries to civilians and heavy property damage by Hezbollah rocket fire. In other words, this ineffective sacrifice could be seen as unworthy. On the other hand, during Operation Protective Edge, the harm to civilians and their property was limited in scope, mainly due to the effective performance of the Iron Dome missile defense system; seven civilians were killed during Operation Protective Edge (including one foreign worker and one soldier on leave) in contrast to forty-four civilians killed during the Second Lebanon War. Thus, the justification of military casualties was even more removed from the degree of success in eliminating the immediate threat to the civilian population. Using the concepts of Gelpi and his colleagues, "success" had been guaranteed and thus had averted the development of sensitivity to military casualties.

An additional factor also helped legitimize the sacrifice of lives. As shown by a study on the American wars, presenting the enemy's losses and, particularly, the ratio between one's own casualties and those of the enemy help to improve public perceptions of the war's success and soften the negative effect of information about one's own casualties by placing the numbers in a larger context.[26] This was also the case during Protective Edge: extensive coverage of the damage and death caused to the Palestinian side played a role in justifying the deaths on the Israeli side, the number of which was far lower than on the Gazan side. "The IDF spokesman," wrote journalist Raviv Drucker, "wants us to see what is happening in Gaza, because it will show what the IDF is doing, and will reduce public pressure on the decision makers to do something, as if they are not doing anything."[27]

In democracies, justifying military death becomes more complicated when soldiers are perceived as having endangered their lives in order to protect the enemy civilians.[28] At issue are fatalities that could have been avoided had a more aggressive fire policy been used. Therefore, indirectly, the presentation of the enemy's losses weakens the potential for criticism, particularly when the public strongly supports the use of force. During Operation Protective Edge, approximately 93 percent of the Jewish public

believed that the IDF had made appropriate use of force or even used too little force.[29] Therefore, one can understand how the impact of images of destruction and death from the Gaza Strip was not mitigated by internal criticism, but rather translated into a sense of success.

The situation described above was the backdrop to the IDF's increasing aggressiveness given the risk to soldiers' lives in densely populated areas during the ground operation. Protecting the soldiers even at the expense of Gazan civilians was paramount.[30] The tendency to transfer risk from soldiers to Gazan civilians increased during this operation in comparison to previous rounds of violence.[31] Israeli politicians and the IDF know that the Israeli public's sensitivity to casualties will accelerate the end of war more than international pressure that is inspired by sensitivity to fatalities among the enemy civilians. As in the past, the tendency to transfer the risk constrained the decision makers to use force only when the international arena deemed it legitimate to implement an aggressive fire policy. In this instance, Hamas' rejection of the Egyptian ceasefire proposal gave legitimacy to this policy, as did the goal of the ground operation to eliminate the tunnels, depicted as a threat to civilian communities in southern Israel.

From another perspective, the higher the sense of threat, the lower the sensitivity to casualties, and the stronger the belief that the use of force is designed to eliminate this threat.[32] True, during Operation Protective Edge, most of the Israeli population was under threat of Hamas' missiles, but it was at a tolerable level. On the other hand, during the Second Lebanon War, only a portion of the population had been under threat by Hezbollah, but it had been so intensive that hundreds of thousands temporarily left their homes and sought refuge in the south. Given that it is difficult to differentiate between the significant levels of threat, this cannot be the main variable that explains the differences between the wars with regard to the attitude toward casualties, particularly, the justification of fatalities during Operation Protective Edge versus the criticism of the large number of deaths during the Second Lebanon War. Thus, the significance of portraying the military operations as successful has a stronger explanatory power.

To recall, the concern about casualties dissuaded the Israeli leadership from launching a ground operation in the Gaza Strip during Protective Edge, under the assumption that such an operation would require an aggressive fire policy in order to mitigate the risk to IDF soldiers, and thereby subject Israel to international criticism.[33] In the end, Israel was dragged into the ground operation as a result of Hamas' refusal to stop the warfare after ten

days of fighting. However, the Israeli leadership concurrently created the conditions necessary to diminish public opposition to the loss of soldiers by implementing the aggressive fire policy, which, as stated, transferred a portion of the risk from IDF soldiers to Gazan civilians. As noted, this policy was legitimized by Hamas' rejection of the Egyptian proposal for a ceasefire, and given that the ground operation focused on eliminating the perceived threat posed by the tunnels. Therefore, it is possible that the politicians and the military enjoyed more freedom of operation than they had previously estimated.

3. Casualty sensitivity is influenced by the identities of those being sacrificed, and not only by an "objective" reading of the reality

As previous wars have shown, casualties from among the secular, middle-class groups induce a critical reading of the reality. Such a reading is likely to be translated into casualty sensitivity among these groups, leading to protest, to a greater degree than would losses from among marginal, immigrant or religious groups. In other words, the variables that influence the degree of sensitivity to casualties – a sense of threat, an assessment of the success or failure of the military operation, recognition of the war as being justified, and more – are mediated through the social status of the group interpreting them. Thus, the more affluent the sacrificing group, the higher the likelihood that even a military success will be critically interpreted.[34] Moreover, as already mentioned, sensitivity will motivate more affluent groups to take action, while sensitivity among lower-class groups is likely to lead to passive acceptance of their sacrifice. And indeed, expressions of protest informed by casualty sensitivity were heard in the past in Israel among relatively upper-middle class families.

In this light, a social map of the casualties is necessary.[35] To better understand the significance of this mapping, a comparison between Operation Protective Edge and the Second Lebanon War (during which 119 soldiers died) is warranted, due to the similar composition of the combat force and the high number of casualties, which aroused protest during the Second Lebanon War. The comparison shows that the overall drop in the proportion of casualties from secular middle-class groups, reflecting the overall change in the army's social composition, has basically remained the same. The percentage of casualties from these groups – the groups with a potential for developing antiwar protest – was the same during both campaigns, about half of the deaths, but were about 15 percent less than

during the first critical week of the First Lebanon War, which triggered unprecedented protest. Therefore, the argument heard in the public discourse that the bloodshed had been more balanced than in the past was not valid. Indeed, more students who had graduated from elite high schools in Tel Aviv were among the casualties of Operation Protective Edge than during the Second Lebanon War, and two who fell during combat were graduates of elitist pre-military academies. Nevertheless, if we differentiate the veteran agricultural sector (kibbutzim and moshavim) from the urban middle-class, we see a 60 percent drop when comparing the two wars. This figure refuted the prevailing public belief that there had been substantial representation of the kibbutz movement among the casualties of Operation Protective Edge. Even within this movement, most of the fatalities were from among those who had moved to kibbutzim, rather than children of veteran kibbutz families. Moreover, the mapping showed a 25 percent rise in casualties from lower-class groups (including those of Ethiopian origin) during the two wars and an increase of about 50 percent from among the religious population, even though they were mainly from communities inside the Green Line and not settlers (so too, most of the casualties who had graduated from religious pre-military academies were residents of communities inside the Green Line).

Even though the rate of casualties from among secular, middle-class groups had been similar during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge, the low absolute number of fatalities from these groups during Operation Protective Edge – 34 versus 63 during the Second Lebanon War – made it even more difficult to form a critical mass to initiate a protest, which, as stated, had little potential from the outset in light of the operation's goals. Moreover, the infrastructure for protest was further weakened because of the low percentage of casualties from among reservists (15 percent in Operation Protective Edge, compared to 45 percent during the Second Lebanon War), with reservists having played a key role in past protests.

The potential for protest might have increased had it focused on incidents of fatalities that could have been prevented, such as by protecting the soldiers in various situations (most blatant was the explosion of an armored personnel carrier in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood of Gaza that had not been properly armored). Yet, as argued above, the low number of casualties from among more affluent groups made it difficult for such a protest to develop.

At the same time, the portrayal of the sacrifice as effective lowered the chances that protest would emerge from the networks of the bereaved religious families, the proportion of which rose, as stated, by about 50 percent between the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge. During the Second Lebanon War, the bereaved religious families were prominent in protesting their disappointment with the functioning of the army and the government.

4. Casualty sensitivity is influenced by the nature of the model of recruitment

Over the last decade, the conscription model in Israel increasingly has been built on selective criteria. Accordingly, conscription formally applies to the entire population, but also exempts a relatively high percentage of the population, whether on a collective basis (such as the ultra-Orthodox Jews or the Palestinian citizens) or on an individual basis, as typifies the pattern of personal negotiations between conscripts from more affluent groups and the IDF.[36] The selectivity applies not only to the actual conscription, but also to assignment to combat units, which in fact, gradually has become a volunteer service.[37]

As the model of mandatory conscription has weakened, the potential for protest informed by casualty sensitivity is weakened as well, including among the more affluent families and their social networks. In the conscription model, it is the state that is responsible for those whom it has coerced to sacrifice, whereas enlistees in a voluntary and even semi-voluntary force like the case of Israel, seemingly have made a free choice. Therefore, with the state's responsibility decreasing, it is less likely that families will channel their sense of loss into allegations against the state.[38] Indeed, prominent during the operation was the phenomenon of the fallen as having been highly motivated to serve in the IDF: the fallen were not described as soldiers who were assigned to combat units out of compulsion, but rather, as soldiers who did so willingly. The media even glorified their personal bravery, isolated from the question of the price that they had paid.[39] Such a sentiment curbs the parents' ability to oppose military fatalities and fosters reconciliation and acceptance of their deaths. To this, we have to add the effective efforts of the IDF and the education system over the last decade to contend with the eroding motivation for military service, mainly among more affluent groups. The IDF-initiated programs to motivate pupils to perform their army service, the widespread campaign in high schools against draft dodging (mainly since 2007), and the strengthening of the

secular/mixed pre-military academies project, and more, are reflections of effective military socialization.

5. The number of casualties has an impact, but not a decisive one

American scholars of casualty sensitivity have debated over the question to what extent did the number of casualties constitute a decisive factor in causing public opinion to oppose military sacrifice.[40] My argument is that the number is not decisive. For the sake of comparison, the War of Attrition in the Suez Canal (1969-1970), which was waged far from Israel's population centers, cost the lives of about 600 soldiers within less than two years, yet aroused little protest. In contrast, the war of attrition in Lebanon (1982-1985), waged a few kilometers from civilian communities in the Galilee, cost the lives of a similar number of soldiers and did arouse protest.

Military operations, which had been widely supported, became controversial, not because of an objective change in the goals of the operations or in the threat they were designated to remove, but rather because of the ability of mainly affluent groups to break loose from the shackles of military thought and to challenge military sacrifice. If we address this factor by comparing the Second Lebanon War to Protective Edge, we will again see that the number had no impact. Although the number of casualties reached 119 and 65 respectively during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge, this difference cannot explain the wave of protest by bereaved parents in the former versus the silence and acceptance in the latter. It is more of a polar than a spectrum situation. It follows that the other factors presented in this article played a decisive role in explaining the presence or lack of protest.

Conclusions

The cumulative circumstances created the difference in protests between the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge. It seems that those same factors that led to the outbreak of protest informed by casualty sensitivity following the Second Lebanon War should have also generated protest after Operation Protective Edge: ambiguous and fluid objectives of war, indecisive performance, failure to prevent rocket fire on civilian communities, surprise by the enemy's capabilities, and mainly, operational failures that caused the deaths of soldiers. The different circumstances of both wars, however, led families of the fallen during Operation Protective Edge to read the reality in a submissive way. These circumstances increased

the leadership's ability to legitimize the military death, while weakening the potential for sensitivity that may elicit antiwar protest: the military efforts were portrayed as swift, intensive, and effective; the sacrifice among the secular, middle-class groups was not high; and selective conscription reinforced the voluntary nature of military service.

Israeli society's attitude towards military casualties is, therefore, complicated. The level of sensitivity is higher than it had been before the watershed of the First Lebanon War, and so also the likelihood that antiwar protest will emerge from this sensitivity. This argument is valid, whether social groups actually demonstrate sensitivity or whether state and military leaders believe in the existence of such sensitivity, even beyond its real potential. Specific circumstances determine whether this sensitivity will erupt or remain dormant. The conclusion that the "spider webs" have become denser, and that coffins arouse indifference appears, therefore, too sweeping.

Notes

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