

Debts of Honor, Costs of War: The Media's Treatment of the Question of Casualties during Operation Protective Edge

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Casualties first appeared on the public, political-military, and media agenda in the democratic, Western world in the 1990s. This article seeks to examine the Israeli media's coverage of military casualties during Operation Protective Edge, especially in light of past patterns of reporting. Despite the public feeling that the operation was necessary, coverage did not totally revert to "traditional" patterns. During the case in point, the media dealt with casualties and the human price paid in war; however, it tried consciously to prevent damage to national morale and avoided being critical. The price in human lives was presented in such a way so as not to induce a sense of demoralization, but rather an intensified sense of national pride. Such conduct leads us to reflect on the Israeli media's role in issues of security, as well as how the media perceives its role in these contexts.

Keywords: army, media, casualties, bereavement, soldiers, Operation Protective Edge

Introduction

At the end of Operation Protective Edge, the daily *Yedioth Ahronoth* devoted its entire front page to a huge collage made up of photos of each of the sixty-seven soldiers killed during the operation. The glaring headline accompanying the photos read, "Thanks to them [*BeZhutam*]." This collage is a perfect example of the way the Israeli media covered casualties during Operation Protective Edge, and it raises questions concerning the media's

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treatment of military fatalities during the operation. The choice of the expression “Thanks to them” – which has a deeper meaning in Hebrew and conveys a feeling of deep gratitude and a debt of honor to the fallen – and the characteristics of the coverage ostensibly tell a clear story. In essence, the newspaper is stating that the loss of soldiers in battle was not in vain, but rather a price that needed to be paid. Does this narrative indeed represent the way the media conducted itself on this issue throughout the course of the operation?

This article examines the Israeli media’s coverage of military casualties during Operation Protective Edge, especially in light of past patterns of reporting. How was the subject presented? Can a pattern of conduct be discerned? Does it continue previous patterns, or is it new? This paper will follow media coverage of military casualties during Operation Protective Edge using Israel’s three major newspapers (print and online versions): *Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Israel Hayom*, and *Haaretz*.¹ The first part of the article reviews the relevant literature, while addressing the media and the issue of casualties, as well as changes and trends in literature concerning coverage of military casualties and bereavement. We then present our findings, following the phases of Operation Protective Edge. Finally, we discuss the findings and their implications.

Changes and Trends in Casualties and Bereavement in Military Warfare

In the democratic Western world, the subject of casualties began to appear more prominently on the public, political-military, and media agenda in the 1990s. This change led to an amplified sensitivity to casualties, also known as “casualty phobia.”² Based on this outlook, the “post-heroic” war – as opposed to the “heroic war” – is characterized by two commandments that dictate post-modern society: The first commandment is that “thou shalt not kill”; the army must avoid enemy casualties (mainly civilians). The second, considered more dominant, is “thou shalt not be killed.” The army must do its utmost to avoid suffering casualties.³ In other words, achieving good operational results no longer suffices; rather society measures its success on the battlefield based on the minimum number of casualties to its forces. At times, this principle dictates the actual taking of military action. At the same time, it is difficult to measure a society’s capacity to tolerate casualties. Such an estimate is an attempt to foretell the “consensual limit” of the loss of human life. In any case, the effect of the number of casualties cannot be

measured in absolute numbers, but rather is seen as relative to society's readiness to absorb them.⁴

Technology in the 1990s made it possible to go to battle with minimal losses, as seen in the First Gulf War (1991), the Kosovo War (1999). In the Israeli case, this became apparent during the country's presence in the South Lebanon Security Zone (1985-2000). During that period, the fear of casualties prevailed to the point that it became a decisive factor in tactical decision-making. The IDF therefore sought to avoid risks inherent in a land offensive. Consequently, the only land forces that routinely dealt with deep incursions were elite units, and heavier attacks on Hizbollah infrastructure were virtually all executed via air or artillery. IDF commanders have indicated that missions were often halted due to fear of entanglement and possible casualties.⁵ This tendency continued into the 2000s: the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead opened with aerial attacks, and not land incursions; this approach was also used in Operation Pillar of Defense. Thus, the tendency in Israel has been to avoid land maneuvers as much as possible.

Casualty phobia, however, cannot be seen as a consistent trend. Different factors, both external and internal, influence this tendency, including the circumstances under which the fighting is conducted. Such factors can mollify or, alternatively, exacerbate sensitivity to casualties.⁶ These factors can arise during the fighting or before it. They are inter-connected and produce a specific and subjective climate that affects the feelings of a given country and society with respect to casualties. These factors include:

1. *Moral justification.* Readiness to absorb casualties increases when the fighting is perceived as inevitable, justified, and necessary.⁷ This factor is usually more likely to be relevant prior to embarking on warfare. That said, the perception of the fighting can transform over time and even during the event itself, thus changing the attitude toward casualties. In the first phase of violence, casualties typically are perceived as justified and necessary, and there is willingness to pay the price and suffer the losses. In subsequent phases, this attitude might change, as the third factor (duration of fighting) becomes increasingly significant.
2. *Success/failure of the operation.* When warfare is perceived as unable to fulfill its objectives or is seen as a failure, society's willingness to absorb casualties decreases; in contrast, when the fighting is seen as successful, the ability to accept higher numbers of casualties is strengthened. Studies show that this variable might outweigh the first variable (moral

justification) in determining the attitude toward casualties.⁸ It appears that this might be a “chicken or egg” question: are failure or success measured according to the number of casualties, or does the number of casualties determine the perception of failure/success?

3. *Duration of the fighting.* Often, when combat is prolonged, it brings about a heightened sensitivity to casualties.⁹ If the violence is protracted, and the fatalities are spread out over a long period of time, society may be willing to adapt to the situation, and thus express a higher readiness to absorb the casualties.¹⁰
4. *The number and identity of the casualties in the fighting.* The rise in casualties affects the willingness to absorb deaths.¹¹ As noted above, it is not only the absolute numbers that are important, but also the accumulation rate of casualties. In other words, the same quantity of fatalities distributed differently over time will produce a varied effect. For example, a single event comprising a high number of simultaneous casualties will be perceived differently than a string of events consisting of an identical number of accumulated casualties.¹² The identity of the casualties, too, is also significant and influences the discourse on the subject.¹³ For example, the deaths of high-ranking officers are perceived differently than those of rank-and-file soldiers.
5. *Leadership during combat.* This variable is usually approached via two aspects:
 - a. *Degree of determination* – A leadership that presents a clear and determined course regarding the goals of warfare, influences the perception of casualties and the human cost of war. Clarifying the justification for casualties strengthens readiness to absorb the deaths, and vice versa. Luttwak argues that leaders with extraordinary willpower and outstanding leadership abilities may (albeit not always easily) be able to bend the public disposition to their will and thus overcome, at least partially, the lack of willingness to absorb casualties.¹⁴
 - b. *Perception of the public* – When the leadership is doubtful regarding the degree to which the public is ready to absorb casualties, it presents a casualty-preventing policy. This may be the case even if such a perception may be completely unfounded. At times, the leadership miscalculates the public’s readiness (or inability) to absorb casualties. A casualty-sensitive policy is, in fact, typically based upon the assessment of the reaction of the social elite to a

high number of fatalities.¹⁵ An Israeli study in 2009 revealed that numerous commanders believed that Israeli society was tired of paying the price of war, and that this perception influenced their tactical decision-making prior to and during the fighting.¹⁶

6. *Change in social values.* A society that still believes in collectivist social values facilitates higher casualty absorption than one that values individualistic tendencies. Perceiving the fallen soldiers as individuals whose loss cannot be survived or accepted, weakens society's readiness to come to terms with casualties.¹⁷ Israeli society in the 1990s evolved into a more individualistic society. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, this identity became complex,¹⁸ and included a return to more collectivist values. However, at the same time, it still encompassed within it individualistic components.¹⁹ This shift in the perception of soldiers as individuals was, in part, due to the status of the soldiers' families, as seen in the next factor.
7. *Changes in the status of the soldiers' families.* The more soldiers' families are involved in their children's military service, the less society is ready to absorb casualties. When a soldier is perceived as a boy, as someone's son, the less expendable he becomes. This contrasts with the notion that the sacrifice of soldiers for the sake of society's security is legitimate. In Israel, the conduct of the soldiers' parents vis-à-vis the military system changed over times. Following the Yom Kippur War (1973), families began to criticize decision makers over the death of their sons.²⁰ In the 1990s, parents of soldiers became increasingly more critical of official policy.²¹ At the same time, the pattern of behavior among bereaved families also changed. To some extent, parents began to behave as though it was the role of the state to protect the soldiers, rather than viewing the soldiers as defenders of society. This relationship, however, appears to have changed from 2000 onwards, as parents reverted to more "traditional" behavior and refrained from challenging issues related to national security. This change may have stemmed from (among other reasons) the intensifying of security issues during this period.²² Some argue that, in contrast to the anti-war discourse of the period between the First and Second Lebanon Wars, recent years have given rise to a new discourse, one that is more accepting of the inevitability of casualties of war.²³

The Media and the Issue of Casualties

In recent decades, the media has become central to shaping attitudes towards casualties and the way in which war deaths are expressed in Western democracies. Luttwak has suggested that media coverage was the deciding factor in the refusal to accept even the smallest number of war fatalities.²⁴ In Israel, the way the media has presented the issue of casualties demonstrates two different and opposing roles; a phenomenon that has existed since the establishment of Israel. On the one hand, there is a desire to use the memory of the fallen to increase patriotism; accordingly, this brings about enhanced coverage. On the other hand, extensive media coverage of casualties is liable to dampen public morale, cause political damage, and even encourage the enemy. Such coverage is viewed as dangerous and should therefore be limited. In the first decades after the establishment of Israel, the second approach prevailed. In many cases, attempts were made to prevent the public from knowing the number of casualties, and the media mentioned them only minimally. Newspaper editors were also asked to scatter the day's obituaries throughout the pages of the newspaper in order not to generate the onerous impression of multiple casualties. The sprinkling of coverage that did appear was discreet, dry, and succinct, containing factual details on the fallen without employing emotional quotes. Personal stories or detailed obituaries were rare.²⁵

Over time, coverage of the issue changed. The Yom Kippur War was the first war in which the issue of casualties became significant, even though coverage of fatalities in events after the Yom Kippur War still remained marginal. Thus, for example, in the *Nun-Daled* Helicopter Disaster (1977), in which fifty-four soldiers were killed, coverage was laconic. The names of the dead appeared in a single list, printed within a single frame. The description of each soldier was brief and technical, and included his name and the location of the funeral. Personal stories about those killed did not appear.²⁶

During the First Lebanon War, new norms in the media's coverage of casualties emerged, and the media began to emphasize the topic. Casualty numbers were published each day, stressing the increasing loss of life. These trends strengthened in the 1990s. The low intensity combat (LIC) during that period, combined with the introduction of Western social mores (such as individualistic values), and the media's accelerated development,²⁷ helped the Israeli media to expand its focus on the issue of casualties. Accordingly, if in the past it was customary to just publish the names of

the dead, without their photos and without individually addressing each and every soldier's social context, now the soldiers' personal stories were at the top of the media's agenda. Coverage included extensive information, as well as personal photos.

The tone with which the topic was addressed changed accordingly. Critical statements began to appear regarding the number of dead and the inevitableness of their deaths in the circumstances of the events. Often, this framed casualties as lives just thrown away for no "real" reason. Casualties were no longer described as necessary sacrifices needed in order to protect society, as in the past, but as boys who were merely cannon fodder and to children that "the army did not protect."²⁸ Naturally, this shift also influenced the way the media covered bereavement and this too acquired a more personal framing. Thus, funerals began to receive broad coverage. Soldiers crying in public became a legitimate item of public interest, and detailed first-hand accounts by soldiers of what "really" happened on the battlefield began to appear.

This trend first began in 1998, when soldiers crying at military funerals were shown for the first time in the media. In subsequent years, the media began to feature close-up images of crying – and even sobbing – soldiers at funerals. Additionally, quotes by soldiers stressing their fear of death and their distress were highlighted to the point of their being portrayed as genuinely frightened.²⁹

Interviews with media professionals in the 1990s reveal that they were aware of this process and the above-mentioned dilemmas of coverage. On the one hand, they viewed coverage of a funeral as a gesture honoring the soldier and his family for their national sacrifice. On the other hand, they realized funeral coverage also affected morale. As one media professional put it: "There's no doubt that funeral coverage has a cumulative effect In th[is] sense . . . television constitutes an anti-war agent that weakens the army's goals." To address such negative effects, the media coverage of funerals was more controlled. As one media professional put it, "Theoretically, [we] should broadcast every [funeral], but this would just produce an intolerable situation of cheapening [the sacrifice by the casualties and] demoralization."³⁰

It is widely accepted that coverage during the Second Lebanon War continued the media's critical approach, particularly regarding casualties. However, a more academic examination of the coverage reveals a far more complex picture. During the first weeks of the war, the media avoided the

question of whether fatalities were justified or necessary. To be frank, during this period, the media actually leveled criticism at the precautions taken in order to minimize military casualties. This was protecting soldiers while leaving civilians in harm's way, exposing the home front to continued rocket fire, and endangering the inhabitants of northern Israel. Criticism over military fatalities appeared in the media only towards the end of the war and immediately following it. Media criticism focused on the high number of casualties during the final days of fighting, in a specific battle perceived as superfluous and unnecessary.³¹ In other words, this was very specific, tactical, criticism regarding casualties.

Operation Cast Lead (2008-9) was perceived as essential and necessary, and had widespread public support. In media interviews during the operation, families of the injured and dead supported the political and military echelon in their decision to continue the fighting in order to reach their goals, despite the personal price they had paid.³² That said, the relatively small number of casualties in this operation does not enable an in-depth analysis of media coverage. Operation Pillar of Defense (2012), was comprised only of aerial attacks, and does not enable a discussion of the pattern of reporting on casualties since there were no Israeli fatalities.

As stated, this paper focuses on the media coverage of casualties in Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014) and is based on a qualitative content analysis. We examined all types of newspaper items: news reports, photos (presented separately or accompanying a report/article), editorials, op-eds, and reports published every day of the operation in Israel's major printed and online press media. We checked *Yedioth Ahronoth*, *Ynet*, *Israel Hayom*, and *Haaretz*, both the printed and online versions. In accordance with this review of the literature, we took care to note whether the media related to the subject of casualties during Operation Protective Edge. If so, in what manner? What subtopics were on the agenda? How was the issue presented in the media?

Media Coverage of Casualties during Operation Protective Edge

Coverage of casualties during Operation Protective Edge revolved around two main themes: first, the actual question of the willingness to absorb casualties; and second, the story of bereavement. Our findings indicate that the first theme was almost absent from the media's agenda. When it was on the table, so to speak, it was only addressed minimally. The second theme, however, was highly prominent. The marginal coverage of the

question of the willingness to absorb casualties is surprising in light of the literature cited above and we therefore concentrated on this aspect.

The media's discussion of the "price of war" seldom appeared as the main focal point of coverage. When it did appear, it seems this was due to external circumstances connected to the four phases of the operation:

- The aerial offensive (July 8-17, 2014)
- The ground incursion (July 17-27, 2014)
- The end of the tunnel phase (July 28-August 5, 2014)
- The unilateral withdrawal and last ceasefire (August 5-26, 2014)

The aerial offensive (July 8-17, 2014). The operation began with an aerial offensive against targets in the Gaza Strip. During this phase, the question of casualties and the willingness to absorb them were not at the forefront of the media's agenda. This seems understandable due to the lack of involvement of ground forces. However, the media's agenda also did not raise the question of the human cost of war when the possibility of a ground operation was discussed. Beginning with the aerial offensive (and actually during the operation in its entirety), the media supported a (limited) ground operation. The media's choice to directly cite politicians in prominent headlines reflected this support. Thus, we find headlines such as "Minister Saar: We Need to Inflict a Strong Blow on Hamas";³³ "Lapid: Calm in Exchange for Calm is No Longer on the Agenda";³⁴ and "PM: When There's No Ceasefire, Our Response is Fire – We Will Intensify the Campaign."³⁵ Senior officials in the military system also were quoted: "IDF Supports a Limited Military Operation";³⁶ "Senior Officer: 'We're Ready for a Ground Maneuver'";³⁷ and more.

The ground incursion (July 17-27, 2014). In the next stage of the operation, IDF ground forces entered the Gaza Strip. The media presented the ground operation as a necessary step; a "war of no choice." Especially large headlines supported this sentiment such as "Inevitable,"³⁸ "War of No Choice,"³⁹ and others. Prominent articles also carried headlines such as "They're Right";⁴⁰ "Hamas Draws Israel into Ground Operation";⁴¹ "Our Right to Defend Ourselves";⁴² in which it was asserted that "if someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first"; and "Hamas Leaves Us No Choice." Again, it should be noted that the media did not note the potential fatalities or the possible human price of the war; rather, the media only made a show of support for the operation, without questioning or criticizing the possible results.

As in previous military operations during the 2000s, the media showed considerable support for the soldiers themselves.⁴³ Given its support for both

the operation itself and the soldiers, during this phase of the fighting, media attention focused on the soldiers set to enter Gaza. Thus, a giant photo of soldiers being briefed before the ground incursion was published with the caption, "Come Back in Peace." The headline of the article accompanying the picture read, "Our Heart Goes Out to the Soldiers," while the article's message asserted that "now we are all united in prayer that they return home in peace."⁴⁴

The battle at Shuja'iyya on July 20, 2014 marked an important point in coverage dealing with casualties. Contrary to what we would have expected, the seven soldiers killed in the battle were not featured prominently on the front pages of the newspapers the following day, but rather these pages were dedicated to bolstering national morale. The front pages of both *Yedioth Ahronoth* and *Israel Hayom* carried the message that it was a "war of no choice." For example: "the war to demolish the tunnels is not an offensive operation. It is a preventative blow, a clearly defensive operation."⁴⁵ Other headlines stated: "We will win: From the day we first returned to this land, the Arab enemy attacks us and seeks to destroy us, and from that same day we are prevailing. Not without paying a price, not without clenching our teeth in pain. But always, when the battle is over, Israel stands strong and united against its enemies who flee from her. We will win this time too."⁴⁶ Another article proclaimed "To win, come what may: 'Protective Edge' is a war declared by a murderous and abominable organization whose existence is justified solely by its goal to destroy us."⁴⁷ Other headlines and quotes on that day reinforced this message: "13 Brothers in Heroism";⁴⁸ "The Loyal and the Brave";⁴⁹ "Regiment commanders and fighters are killed so that families can sleep safely; this too is the price of the current fighting, which for a long time, has not been one of maintaining routine security."⁵⁰

The message that appears in the press is clear: the focal point is not casualties and pain, but rather forging sentiments in support of the military operation. In other words, the fatalities are a painful, but necessary price of war. When society must fight for its life, there is a sad price to be paid. Conforming to this line of thought, the front-page headline in *Yedioth Ahronoth* on the day after the Battle of Shuja'iyya extolled the "exemplary commanders."⁵¹ Further headlines emphasized heroism, fighting, and determination: "They Defended With Their Bodies";⁵² "IDF: Don't Stop Now";⁵³ "We Are Strong and Will Complete the Mission to the End";⁵⁴ "This is the moment to strengthen [those in] despair, [with] a weak knee, a dry tongue and trickling tears; to clench our teeth and continue uphill,

repeating the words of [the poet] Nathan Alterman, that 'No nation can retreat from the trenches of its life.' For this purpose, broad mobilization is essential";⁵⁵ "The Chief of Staff: the Price is Painful, the Achievement is Tremendous."⁵⁶ Additional headlines and articles read: "Don't Stop Yet";⁵⁷ "It might be that we have already seen the epitome of victory this week: Tens of thousands of Israelis at the funerals of three lone soldiers, the victory of an Israel we once knew and thought no longer existed";⁵⁸ "A Difficult Day: Clenching our Teeth and Fighting";⁵⁹ "Brigade Commander: They Fire – and We Win."⁶⁰

Criticism voiced during this phase was scant and referred to the tactical management of the operation, rather than the human costs of war. For example, a representative headline read: "Shuffling [our feet] at the End of the Tunnel."⁶¹ The article criticized the faulty handling of the tunnel issue, not the actual fighting. The media message was clearly that the military must "buck up" and continue fighting due to the explicit threat to security.

This pattern of coverage continued. Front-page photos of soldiers who had been killed, and a daily and cumulative tally of the number of dead featured on the front pages. However, the personal stories of the fallen soldiers appeared only on the inner pages of newspapers and in supplements (places reserved for "color" stories), and not on the front page. While these were still covered in the traditional formats of the past, their visibility was minimized. The effect of the numbers and the photos on the front page was, naturally, cumulative. That said, the sense was that coverage honored those who had paid the ultimate price without giving disproportional weight to mourning.

Towards the end of the tunnels phase (July 28-August 5, 2014). In the third phase of Operation Protective Edge, the withdrawal of IDF ground forces from the Gaza Strip was completed; the fighting continued via aerial attacks, as it had during the first period of the operation. During this phase, the press expressed the feeling that the operation was scuffling along rather than actually accomplishing its objectives due to an indecisive leadership. While the first two phases of the operation had a clear objective and message, at this stage the leadership began to sound confused. Is there a plan of action? Is Israel merely being drawn into a protracted conflict?

Possible options were either expanding the military operation; ending it with an official ceasefire; or ending the operation unilaterally. In light of this uncertainty on the part of the leadership, the media too began to voice doubts, no longer sure of the effectiveness of the ground offensive, and

even advocated for the end of the operation altogether. As a result, criticism of the fighting itself began to appear. For example, a large and prominent headline proclaimed that this was “not an operation, it is a war.”⁶² One article asserted that, “Yesterday’s events⁶³ were grave. Mainly they were sad . . . But that must not obscure the goals the Israeli government set at the beginning of the operation. We have not been defeated . . . We won’t achieve the remainder [of our goals] by force in any case, but only through agreements and understandings.”⁶⁴ Another headline proclaimed that “the gut feeling says to expand [the operation]; the head says: [take care of the] tunnels – and get out.”⁶⁵

It was only when the media presented the position that it was better to check the ground operation that criticism began to appear. This criticism focused on the feeling of confusion and a general sense of “muddling-through” that led to needless deaths. This position enabled some attention to be paid to the issue of casualties, even if it was not in-depth. During this phase, when the issue of casualties surfaced, it was framed within the context of the operation’s lack of clear goals, which also led to inaction. One of the articles, for example, stated:

When I heard Netanyahu last night describing in exactly the same words the merits of deterrence without a [political] agreement, I thought of 33 fighters, good Israelis, who could have still been among us were it not for Netanyahu’s huge fear of arriving at a decision . . . I was both angered and happy. Better late than never . . . The immediate advantage of the idea was that being drawn in by Hamas had ended. Someone got things mixed up here: Hamas is the one that needs an understanding with Israel – not vice versa.⁶⁶

Another article entitled “Costs of War” stated:

The second path strives for a unilateral thinning out of forces. The ground forces have completed their mission, the Prime Minister knows this. Rockets will be answered by bombing. Calm will be answered by calm. This path was proposed to Netanyahu ten days ago. He did not say ‘yes’; he didn’t say ‘no.’ He did not know how to decide. Since then, more than thirty soldiers have been killed in Gaza and on the border. Morale among the ground forces is high, but fear of merely shuffling along is seeping in. The tunnel openings are in

territory the IDF doesn't want to enter. The price in lives won't justify the returns.⁶⁷

This notion came into sharper focus when soldiers were killed while waiting in assembly areas, and not during battle. Coverage of casualties created differences between the active fighters (killed during battle) and the "sitting ducks" (killed while waiting behind the lines). The latter were perceived as unnecessary deaths. In other words, the nature of the combat determined the attitude toward the casualties. A representative example is as follows:

The killing of the soldiers yesterday in Israeli territory clarifies, more than anything else, the situation after three weeks of fighting. The IDF is treading water, perhaps through no fault of its own. But for already a week there has been no real progress in the operation aside from dealing with the tunnels, which has turned out to be chaotic and certainly not keeping up with the timetable set by the defense minister, who said it would take 'two or three days.' This standstill exacts a price in the form of grave events such as yesterday's mortar shell hit, the infiltration of terrorists, and the death of a fighter from a missile during the ceasefire in Gaza. Soldiers waiting behind the lines have become sitting ducks.⁶⁸

It seems, therefore, that during this phase the question of the price of war became more central and was even subject to criticism; however, coverage was concise, specific, and appeared only during this relatively later phase of Operation Protective Edge.⁶⁹

Along with the media's referral to military standstill and lack of decisiveness, prominent articles also appeared with titles such as "The Bereavement of Us All." These contained statements such as "Israel these days is united, both in the sense of feeling its cause is just, as well as through the pain over its fallen."⁷⁰ Another article's headline read "Completion of the mission – neutralization of tunnels – is imminent, indeed at a heavy price, 56 dead soldiers . . . but with a heavy blow to all Hamas structures."⁷¹ An additional article stated that "If they would have told me before the operation that these would be the results, I would have signed on to it unreservedly. The price of 56 dead is painful, very painful; but the de facto number of dead is not the only test of whether the mission is fulfilled. The

test is the restoration of trust and confidence of inhabitants of the Gaza Envelope vis-à-vis the tunnel incidents."⁷²

From the unilateral ground exit until the final ceasefire (August 5-26, 2014). During this phase, media coverage was mixed. On the one hand, the media leveled criticism at the military's senior echelon, and on the other hand, it showed support and even admiration for the soldiers themselves. A clear separation between the two existed; a similar phenomenon existed a decade earlier, as shown in previous studies.⁷³ In this phase too, no linkage was created between the criticism of the senior echelon's conduct in Operation Protective Edge and the casualties of the war. The brunt of the reproach directed at the senior echelon ranged from merely raising questions to sharp criticism. Specific focal points for criticism included sending improperly armored military vehicles into battle, the existence of tunnels, the fact the Chief of Staff, allowed southern residents to return home before it was safe to do so, and more. The following headlines are illustrative: "Operation Confused";⁷⁴ "We'll Meet Up in the Next Round";⁷⁵ "Fifty Days of Pounding, Attrition, and Questions";⁷⁶ "To be Frank, We're Disappointed";⁷⁷ "For Your Examination";⁷⁸ and "In Hamas' Hands."⁷⁹

At the same time, the media expressed admiration for the fighting soldiers and presented them as heroes. Media coverage focused on stories of heroism and held the fighters and the injured in great esteem. One sees a representative pattern in the especially large headlines that appeared on the front pages of *Israel Hayom* and *Yedioth Ahronoth*, with the following illustrative headlines: "And Thanks to the Fighters";⁸⁰ "The Return of the Magnificent";⁸¹ and "We Salute You."⁸² The accompanying subheading of the last article elaborated this point: "Senior Officer: We Ought to Salute the Fighters. Generation Y has proven that it fights no less courageously than its predecessors." The article itself stresses that, "along with the great success of the IDF and its commanders, the displays of heroism, and the amazing accomplishment of the Iron Dome, difficult questions also arise, chiefly: Did the government and IDF address the threat of the tunnels with all due seriousness?" Another article read:

Operation Protective Edge was not a war of generals. It was the war of the simple soldier and junior officer; they were the ones who made decisions during the hand-to-hand fighting. It was the war of the late major Bnaya Sarel . . . and of many other good soldiers whose stories of heroism will appear in the upcoming days . . . The fighters . . . exhibited strength,

persistence, and determination to continue the mission until destruction of the final tunnel was complete. In this operation, the fighters were the light at the end of the tunnel. Facing the complexity of the battlefield and the threats positioned against our forces were our fighters. We ought to salute them. Senior officials will need to supply answers to no small number of questions.⁸³

It seems, therefore, that at the end of Operation Protective Edge, there is reference to the loss of soldiers and the human cost of war; however, the casualties are presented as heroes and the media does not challenge the inevitability of the human cost. In other words, the issue is not presented in a critical manner, despite the criticism levelled at the military's senior echelon. The feeling generated by the media coverage is that there was no way to avoid paying the price of war in casualties. Even when criticism made an appearance, it was aimed at the political echelon or the higher echelons of the IDF and focused on tactical conduct. It did not include reference to the human cost of the fighting.⁸⁴ As a matter of fact, to date, one year after the operation, this pattern remains unaltered.⁸⁵

This observation is complemented by the way bereavement was treated during the course of Operation Protective Edge. In analyzing coverage of the funerals of the soldiers killed during the operation, we see that their stories were kept neutral in terms of questioning the price paid. The conspicuous headlines told the story of collective values and bravery, of self-sacrifice coupled with manliness and heroism, with headlines such as, "The People of Israel Can Be Proud";⁸⁶ "The Final Repose of Heroes";⁸⁷ "He Fell in a Country-Saving War";⁸⁸ and "They Gave Up Their Lives Defending the Homeland."⁸⁹ In this indirect manner, the media-constructed sentiment was that the price paid in casualties was acceptable and was justifiable for a just goal. This notion is further reinforced when considering the photos that accompanied the coverage of the funerals. In contrast with the past, photos of crying soldiers do not appear at all. As a matter of fact, we found only a few photos of soldiers at the funerals. This is a highly significant choice, especially when comparing coverage of Operation Protective Edge to previous events, such as Israel's presence in the Security Zone or in the Second Lebanon War.⁹⁰ The prominent figures appearing in photos at Operation Protective Edge funerals were of civilian women, not of soldiers.

In addition, we checked whether other, more critical voices in the media addressed the issue of casualties during Operation Protective Edge. Such

voices were indeed heard, but they were few and very marginal.⁹¹ These were mainly quotes from bereaved families. For example, one family member said, “We didn’t want him to be a hero or ‘everyone’s soldier’ . . . Nor am I able to say that I am proud of my boy. My boy is gone and he won’t return.”⁹² Another bereaved family member was quoted in the media as saying:

I have no strength to count how many times I heard slogans such as ‘thank you, he saved us’ . . . those angered me very much. I don’t want them to thank me, I want my sweetheart here in the living room, reading the children a bedtime story. But another woman, a stranger, came up to me and said, ‘I live in the South and I just wanted to apologize that you had to pay this price because of us.’ She didn’t say ‘thank you,’ but rather ‘I’m sorry’; and she didn’t say ‘for us,’ she said ‘because of us.’ She moved me . . . The children need a story that will accompany them in their future lives. Slogans such as ‘Daddy died for the sake of the homeland’ don’t do it for me.⁹³

In addition, a few opinion articles had statement such as: “The price is in blood. Even if we say how intolerable it is over and over, we won’t succeed in saying what cannot truly be articulated: just how unbearable it really is.”⁹⁴ Another article explained why the soldiers’ deaths resulted from the failure of the IDF: “When There’s no Brilliant Idea – Sacrifice is Demanded.”⁹⁵

Conclusion

Our findings depict a complex picture, especially in light of the review of the literature. When examining how the media discussed the issue of casualties during Operation Protective Edge, despite framing it as “a war of no choice,” coverage does not entirely revert to “traditional” coverage patterns. While casualties and the price paid in human lives appear in the media, coverage does not focus on mourning and bereavement as it did in the 1990s. Photos of sobbing soldiers were not featured, for example. In contrast with the critical coverage of casualties in the past, the media’s presentation of the casualties and the human cost of the operation did not foster a sense of demoralization, but rather one of national pride.

This might be a new phenomenon worth noting: contrary to the past, casualties did not generate media pressure and criticism over the human cost of the war; rather, the pain of casualties and bereavement produced a feeling of national “togetherness” and assisted in justifying the fighting.

This tendency manifested itself particularly during the critical stages of Operation Protective Edge. The old patterns of coverage shifted, and assumed a form that merged the need to talk about bereavement and casualties, together with the reluctance to discuss their significance and effect on national morale.

As discussed above, a number of components influenced the perception of casualties. The number of casualties at the beginning of the operation (the second phase) was concentrated and high, with high-ranking officers included among them. Accordingly, this should encourage critical media coverage. Yet the sense of undergoing a “war of no choice,” along with a certain revisiting of collective values, apparently neutralized this tendency, and returned coverage to the traditional propensities of the past.

At this point, it should be asked: Does such coverage indeed have implications for the actual management of the battlefield? It is possible that the media’s behavior might have been conducive to creating a public mood whereby casualties did not dictate military tactics.

Can these findings be explained? It could be claimed that the media behaved according to a liberal model based on market forces and ratings; thus, the media is only supplying the public with what it wants. In this case, the public craved elevating national morale and a feeling of unity and got what it wanted. However, it seems to us that this explanation cannot truly explain the behavior depicted here. A careful analysis reveals that the watershed in terms of coverage of casualties was after the battle in Shuja’iyya, when a conscious editorial decision was made to play down the issue. The editor-in-chief of *Ynet*, Eran Tiefenbrunn, admitted that he knowingly chose this policy, i.e., to reduce the amount and centrality of coverage of bereavement during the fighting. The rationale was to try to prevent bereavement from dictating policy: “Journalistic and public common sense in wartime necessitate an editorial hierarchy that draws readers’ attention to what is central – the military activity . . . We must not allow emotional matters to determine how the country’s conduct is handled nor the manner according to which media is edited.”⁹⁶ Conforming to this line of thinking, major media platforms agreed jointly how funerals would be covered. This led to the creation of a uniform and official position in the media, contrary to the past.

Such conduct is thought provoking when considering the part Israeli media plays in security matters, and its place in Israeli public discourse – particularly the coverage of casualties – and how it perceives its own

role in these contexts. These points are worthy of a direct and in-depth discussion in light of their possible ramifications for warfare and in light of Israel's reality as a democratic country amid a state of constant conflict.

Notes

- 1 Our research did not extensively utilize electronic media. A pilot study we conducted indicates similar findings in this venue as well.
- 2 Yagil Levy, *Who Governs the Military? Between Control of the Military and Control of Militarism* (Jerusalem: Magnes University Press, 2010).
- 3 Edward Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995): 109-122.
- 4 Steven Rosen, "War power and the willingness to suffer," in *Peace, War and Numbers*, ed. Bruce Russett (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972), pp. 167-183.
- 5 Moshe Tamir, *A War without a Medal* (Tel Aviv: IDF – Ministry of Defense, 2005).
- 6 Levy, *Who Governs the Military?*
- 7 See, for example, Meital Eran-Yona and Batya Ben-Hador, "On the Sensitivity to Casualties: Comparative and Local Perceptions of Commanders and Significance in the IDF," in *Military Operations in Civilian Environments: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Meital Eran-Yona (Tel Aviv: IDF Behavioral Sciences Center, Bemachane Publishing, 2013), pp.126-142.
- 8 Levy, *Who Governs the Military?*; Eran-Yona and Ben-Hador, "On the Sensitivity to Casualties."
- 9 Edward Luttwak, *Strategy of War and Peace* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 2002); John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (2005): 44-54.
- 10 This happened, for example, during most of the period of Israel's Security Zone in the South Lebanon (1985-2000). See Zipi Israeli, "Relations between a political-security establishment, protest groups and media in a low intensity conflict: Israel in Lebanon (1985-2000)" (PhD diss., Bar Ilan University, 2007).
- 11 Zipi Israeli, "Media and Strategic Aspects of Low Intensity Conflicts; Case Study of Israel in Lebanon, 1985-2000," *Mekhhkarim BePolitika Yisraelit* 4 (2011): 255-288; Levy, *Who Governs the Military?*; Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome."
- 12 Thus, for example, in June 2009, when eight British soldiers were killed in Afghanistan, photos of the coffins being taken out of transport planes were publicized. This event stimulated discussion over British involvement in Afghanistan.
- 13 As is the case when high-ranking officers are the casualties, such as when Brigadier General Erez Gerstein, commander of the Lebanon Liaison Unit in South Lebanon, was killed by a roadside bomb in February 1999.

- 14 Luttwak, *Strategy of War and Peace*.
- 15 Levy, *Who Governs the Military?* Thus, for example, decision makers in the United States declared they were removing troops from Somalia in light of the images in the media. This was despite the fact that public opinion indicated the public felt otherwise. See Cori Dauber, "Image as Argument: The Impact of Mogadishu on U.S. Military Intervention," *Armed Forces & Society* 27, no. 2 (2001): 205-229.
- 16 Eran-Yona and Ben-Hador, "On the Sensitivity to Casualties."
- 17 The attitude to bereavement and commemorating the fallen underwent a significant change during this period. See, for example, Shelly Geffen-Koshilevitch, "From Sacrifice to Victim, Functioning of the Media in Covering Bereavement in Military Disasters," in *Security and Media: The Dynamics of a Relationship*, ed. Udi Lebel (Beersheva: Ben Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2005), pp. 284-309; Udi Lebel, "Recruited in their Death, Bereaved Parents, Secrecy, and Challenging the Military Hegemony," *Studies of Israeli and Modern Jewish Society* 17 (2003): 267-286; Levy, *Who Governs the Military?*
- 18 Uri Ben Eliezer, *Israel's New Wars: A Historical-Sociological Explanation* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2012).
- 19 Elisheva Rosman and Zipi Israeli, "Our Forces Become Alexei, Yuval and Liran: The Transition of the Media Image of the Israeli Soldier from the Collective to an Individual," *Res Militaris* (2015), in press.
- 20 Zipi Israeli and Elisheva Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'? The Israeli Soldier as Reflected in the Press," *Iyunim BeTkumat Yisrael* 24 (December 2014): 184-218; Gidon Doron and Udi Lebel, *Politics of Bereavement* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz HaMeuhad, 2003).
- 21 Lebel, "Recruited in their Death."
- 22 Udi Lebel, "We Will Break the Wall of Secrecy: Civilian-Military Bargaining over Transparency of the Security Space in the Arena of Israeli Bereavement," *Medina VeHevra* 1 (2007): 19-41.
- 23 Yagil Levy, "An Unbearable Price: War Casualties and Warring Democracies," *International Journal of Political Culture and Society* 22 (2009): 69-82.
- 24 Luttwak, *Strategy of War and Peace*.
- 25 Rafi Mann, "Letter to a Bereaved Father," *HaAyin HaShvi'it*, April 19, 2010, <http://www.the7eye.org.il/34062>.
- 26 Zipi Israeli, "The Air Force and the Media, an Analysis of the Relationship between the Air Force and the Printed Press in 1977-1997 in Light of Air Accidents in the Air Force" (master's thesis, Bar Ilan University, 2000).
- 27 During the 1990s, electronic media changed completely. Both television and radio expanded significantly. Additionally, the magazine section of the printed press also developed. Accordingly, the media began functioning according to commercial models. Such models brought with them, among other things: competition, drama, focus on the individual and human

interest stories, emotions, and, occasionally, yellow journalism. Naturally, the topic of bereavement and casualties is accorded broad coverage in this sort of media.

- 28 Geffen-Koshilevitch, "From Sacrifice to Victim"; Israeli and Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'?" ; Elisheva Rosman and Zipi Israeli, "From 'Rambo' to 'Sitting Ducks' and Back Again: The Israeli Soldier in the Media," *Israel Affairs* 21, no. 1 (2015): 112-130.
- 29 Israeli and Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'?"
- 30 Drora Kalfon, "Coverage of Funeral Ceremonies of Soldiers on Mabat News, Goals and Functions" (master's thesis, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1993).
- 31 Eran-Yona and Ben-Hador, "On the Sensitivity to Casualties."
- 32 Israeli and Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'?" ; Eran-Yona and Ben-Hador, "On the Sensitivity to Casualties."
- 33 Yoav Zitun, Matan Tzuri, Roi Kais, Elior Levy, and Atilla Shumplabi, "Minister Saar: We Need to Inflict a Strong Blow on Hamas," *Ynet*, July 8, 2014, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4539416,00.html>.
- 34 "Lapid: Calm in Exchange for Calm no Longer on the Agenda," *Ynet*, July 10, 2014, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4540877,00.html>.
- 35 Shlomo Cesana, Lilach Shuval, and Roi Kais, "PM: 'When There's no Ceasefire, our Response is Fire – We Will Intensify the Campaign,'" *Israel Hayom*, July 16, 2014.
- 36 Yoav Zitun, Elior Levy, and Roi Kais, "Attacks Renewed in Gaza: The IDF Supports a Limited Military Operation," *Ynet*, July 15, 2014, <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4544000,00.html>.
- 37 Shlomo Cesana, Daniel Sarusi, Lilach Shuval, and Yoni Hersch, "The Cessation that Never Was," *Israel Hayom*, July 16, 2014.
- 38 Nahum Barnea, "The Right to Defend Ourselves," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 18, 2014.
- 39 "War of No Choice," *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2014.
- 40 Ari Shavit, "They're Right," *Haaretz*, July 24, 2014.
- 41 Amos Harel, "Hamas Draws Israel into Ground Operation," *Haaretz*, July 18, 2014.
- 42 Shimon Shiffer, "Our Right to Defend Ourselves," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 20, 2014.
- 43 Israeli and Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'?" Rosman and Israeli, "From 'Rambo' to 'Sitting Ducks' and Back Again."
- 44 Eitan Haber, "Our Heart is with the Soldiers," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 18, 2014.
- 45 Nahum Barnea, "Preventative Blow," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 21, 2014.
- 46 Hanoach Daum, "We Will Win," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 21, 2014.
- 47 Amos Regev, "To Win Come What May," *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2014.
- 48 "13 Brothers in Heroism," *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2014.
- 49 "The Loyal and the Brave," *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2014.
- 50 Amos Harel, "National Failure," *Haaretz*, July 22, 2014.

- 51 "Exemplary Commanders," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 22, 2014.
- 52 Yossi Yehoshua, "They Defended with their Bodies," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 22, 2014.
- 53 Itamar Eichner, Yossi Yehoshua, and Orly Azulay-Levi, "IDF: Don't Stop Now," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 22, 2014.
- 54 Quote from Golani Brigade commander, Colonel Ghassan Elian, cited by Yossi Yehoshua, "We Are Strong," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 23, 2014.
- 55 Dan Margalit, "On Our Dearly Beloved," *Israel Hayom*, July 21, 2014.
- 56 "Chief of Staff: Painful the Price, Huge the Achievement," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 27, 2014.
- 57 Yuval Diskin, "Don't Stop Yet," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 22, 2014.
- 58 Sima Kadmon, "Picture of Victory," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 25, 2014.
- 59 "Difficult Day: Biting our Lips and Fighting," *Israel Hayom*, July 29, 2014.
- 60 "Brigade Commander: They Fire – and We Win," *Israel Hayom*, July 23, 2014.
- 61 Nahum Barnea, "Marking Time at the End of the Tunnel," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 20, 2014.
- 62 Yossi Yehoshua, "Not an Operation but a War," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 29, 2014.
- 63 This refers to three fatal incidents that took place in a single day: infiltration by terrorists, anti-tank fire, and a mortar shell.
- 64 Sima Kadmon, "The Limits of Force," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 29, 2014.
- 65 Yoav Limor, "The Gut Feeling Says Expand; the Head Says: Tunnels, and Get Out," *Israel Hayom*, July 29, 2014.
- 66 Nahum Barnea, "The Day After," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 25, 2014.
- 67 Nahum Barnea, "The Costs of War," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 1, 2014.
- 68 Yossi Yehoshua, "Not an Operation but a War," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 29, 2014. Similar criticism was also leveled in an article by Amos Harel, "First Cases of Friction between the Political Echelon and the Army," *Haaretz*, July 30, 2014.
- 69 It should be noted that such coverage was more discreet in *Israel Hayom*.
- 70 Hanoch Daum, "The Bereavement of Us All," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 1, 2014.
- 71 Yoav Limor, " Hamas under Pressure: From the IDF and the Gaza Population," *Israel Hayom*, July 31, 2014.
- 72 Quote by a senior officer in the Gaza Division, as cited in: Lilach Shuval, "Eight injured by Mortar Shell," *Israel Hayom*, August 1, 2014.
- 73 Israeli and Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'?"
- 74 Alex Fishman, "Confused Operation," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 15, 2014.
- 75 Alex Fishman, "We'll Meet Again in the Next Round," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 5, 2014.
- 76 Yoav Limor, "Fifty Days of Pounding, Attrition, and Questions," *Israel Hayom*, August 26, 2014.
- 77 Nahum Barnea, "Fair, We're Disappointed," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 10, 2014.

- 78 The article contains questions and criticism focusing on different topics, under the subheadings "Hizbollah Draws Conclusions," "Senior Hamas Officials not Liquidated," "Low Tide in Relations with U.S." and more. See Itamar Eichner, "For Your Examination," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 6, 2014.
- 79 Nahum Barnea, "In Hamas' Hands," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 15, 2014.
- 80 "And Thanks to the Fighters," *Israel Hayom*, August 6, 2014.
- 81 "The Return of the Magnificent," *Israel Hayom*, August 6, 2014.
- 82 "We Salute You," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 6, 2014.
- 83 Yossi Yehoshua, "Battle Heritage," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 6, 2014.
- 84 Even when featuring headlines such as "The Price of the Operation," the focus was on the economic rather than the human price of war. See, for example, Gad Lior, "The Price of the Operation," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 7, 2014.
- 85 One exception is the criticism leveled in retrospect over the casualties in the battle of Shuja'iyya. However, this was tactical and specific criticism that focused on the use of weapons of warfare.
- 86 Lior El-Chai, "The People of Israel Can be Proud," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 21, 2014.
- 87 "The Final Repose of Heroes," *Israel Hayom*, July 23, 2014.
- 88 Goel Beno, "He Fell in a Country-Saving War," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 21, 2014.
- 89 "They Gave Up Their Lives Defending the Homeland," *Israel Hayom*, July 23, 2014.
- 90 Israeli and Rosman, "From 'Warrior' to 'Momma's Boy'?"
- 91 It is interesting to point out that this criticism was voiced mainly by female journalists. Naturally, similar thoughts were not heard in *Israel Hayom*.
- 92 These are the words of Dalya Carmeli, mother of Sean Carmeli, who was killed in Operation Protective Edge. See Anat Meidan, "My Values Brought Sean to Israel, My Values Brought Him to His Death," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 25, 2014.
- 93 These are the words of Michal Kedar, widow of Lieutenant Dolev Kedar who was killed in the tunnel incident near Kibbutz Nir Am. Quoted by Smadar Shir, *Yedioth Ahronoth*, July 31, 2014.
- 94 Ariella Ringel-Hoffman, "Depressive Edge," *Yedioth Ahronoth*, August 7, 2014.
- 95 Amir Oren, "Between Brilliance and Sacrifice," *Haaretz*, August 8, 2014. Similar ideas appeared in pieces such as "Time is Blood," *Haaretz*, July 29, 2014.
- 96 Oren Persico, "Don't Sabotage the War Effort," *HaAyin HaShvi'it*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.the7eye.org.il/118327>.