Paving the Road to Gaza
Israel's National Role Conception and Operation Cast Lead

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On December 27, 2008, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) began their assault on the Gaza Strip in what they called Operation Cast Lead. 13 Israelis and as many as 1400 Palestinians were killed in the three weeks of fighting. The war enjoyed wide support among Israelis: according to the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research, 94% of Jewish Israelis (76% of Israel's population) supported the attack.[1] Operation Cast Lead caused enormous suffering in Gaza and has been a thorn in the side of Israelis since its commencement. Numerous human rights organisations have issued reports on the conflict accusing both sides of war crimes, and the Israeli government has denied any but the noblest intentions. How did we get here?

Most theories of war examine personal, system-wide, political or historical causes of war. However, if the government or military that initiates a war is held to account by its citizens, it is relevant to ask how the citizens themselves may have caused the war. What theories of war might be used to make sense of this conflict?

The theory of national role conception (NRC), as put forth by Holsti (1970) and extended by Backman (1970), attempts to explain foreign policy behaviour of governments in terms of identifiable patterns. These patterns form part of the "intellectual setting in which day-to-day decisions on foreign policy are made" because of the importance of image and self-image. Roles are classifications such as "non-aligned", "bloc leader", "satellite", "revolutionary leader" and so on.[2] These roles describe "a broad but typical range of diplomatic behaviours and attitudes", along with, perhaps, tendency to war.[3] For instance, a state with clear

role conceptions of "liberator", "anti-imperialist" and "regional leader" may be expected to be involved in more wars than one adopting the roles of "mediator" and "developer". The former describes Egypt in the mid-1960s (before the Six Day War and War of Attrition) and the latter describes Sweden in the same time period.[4] Given that a state's role describes a consistent set of actions and decisions, role theory can illuminate a state's self-image and thus predict when a state might fight to maintain its identity.

Holsti's theory of NRC examines general foreign policy statements made by high level state officials and policymakers. This essay takes a different tack. It attempts to analyse the common understandings most Israelis hold regarding their state's role in dealing with the Arab threat. Holsti writes that foreign policy decisions derive from three main sources: 1) policymakers' role conceptions; 2) domestic pressures; 3) significant external events or trends.[5] Instead of choosing number one, as Holsti does, I have chosen number two.

We will find Israel's NRC by studying Jewish Israelis' perceptions that were formed before Operation Cast Lead.[6] There are certain stories, certain versions of history that a majority or at least a plurality of voters, opinion leaders and decision makers agree on. These stories become experiences through their telling and retelling, and are highly formative of public perceptions. Pressure from other governments, norms, or "world opinion" do not adequately explain national behaviour in conflict.[7] Public perception, on the other hand, guides the hand of the state, and can lead to war. As Professor Mira Sucharov writes, "something happens between the point at which citizens articulate their preferences and those preferences are translated into policies."[8] The citizens of a democracy approve policy enacted in their name, especially high-stakes policies such as those to go to war. Israel is a highly representative and pluralist democracy, and this applies as much to it as anywhere. In a democracy, the people must approve

of a war for it to last, and national leaders running the war need to believe they will have the support of the people when taking a potentially career-making decision. In initiating Operation Cast Lead, as seen above, Israel's leaders had that support.

Democracy may even increase the likelihood or ferocity of a war. Though it is widely held that democracies tend not to fight each other, they often "adopt a crusading spirit", constraining policymakers and forcing them into ill-advised wars.[9] Democracies turn wars against groups they perceive as terrorist from conflicts of interests into "moral crusades" of good against evil.[10] According to Professor Jack S. Levy, the belief held by most liberals that elites always trick the public into going to war despite an otherwise peaceful political culture is wrong. There are numerous examples, Levy says, of a hawkish public pressuring the elites to declare war.[11] I should state that I am not looking to prove that Israelis pressured their leaders into the war in Gaza, nor that Israeli culture started Operation Cast Lead. This essay attempts, instead, to understand Israel's national role conception and thus better understand why the Israeli public supported the war, and why public pressure may have arisen. It proposes that approval for Operation Cast Lead was built into Israeli political culture. Thus, this essay asks two questions: what is Israel's national role conception, and how did Israel's role lead to support for Operation Cast Lead?

To answer these questions, we will look at the Israeli self-image of victimhood, its ethos of conflict and its effects as a major factor in Israeli culture, how Israelis feel about the occupation and how the Israeli media tie these things together and reinforce Israel's NRC. Finally, we will analyse Israeli perceptions of the events leading up to Operation Cast Lead through the lens of this NRC.

Along with things like geography and resources, NRC depends on public demands, national values and ideologies, and public

mood.[12] Consistency is key, and while public mood and demands vary over time, whatever patterns emerge in the long run are relevant to NRC. This essay will examine evidence of Israel's role and find that it points to what is best described by Sucharov as the "defensive warrior". This essay draws on various sources such as public opinion polls, election results and Israeli media accounts to give an accurate picture of Israel as defensive warrior. It asserts that the two essential and related elements of Israel's NRC are perceptions of victimhood and morality.

Six Million Victims

Operation Cast Lead's stated objective was "stopping Hamas' constant rocket and mortar fire on Israeli civilians and property".[13] The rocket attacks were not aimed at particular individuals: they were fired to cause pain. Who was under attack? Not a few people or towns in Israel: the people of Israel as a whole were under attack. In an interview, Dore Gold, an Israeli statesman and prime ministerial advisor, voiced the Israeli position quite clearly: "Israel was under attack for eight years".[14] That means that more than six million people are still victims after all these years. Do Israelis feel this way about themselves? Larry Derfner of the Jerusalem Post writes that, to Israelis, Israeli history is "one unbroken legacy of righteous victimhood".[15] Professor Tanya Reinhart said "the dominant narrative remains that Israel is struggling to defend its very existence", even though short-range rocket attacks might not seem like an existential threat. [16] Professor Ilan Pappe described Israel's self-image thus: "Israel presents itself to its own people as the righteous victim that defends itself against a great evil".[17] Sever Plotzker, a well-known Israeli columnist for Yedioth Ahronoth, one of the most widely read newspapers in Israel, wrote that, due to the apparent rise of political Islam and Muslim anger, "Israel finds itself an inch away from an erupting volcano, on the frontlines of the 'clash of civilisation'".[18] Such arguments reflect the common understanding in Israeli discourse: Israel is fighting for its life.

Where does this narrative come from? Since victimhood is perceived as characterising Jewish Israeli society, the narrative is transmitted at every level. [19] In the army and mass media, to which we will turn shortly, Israelis repeat the narrative; however, Israelis begin learning about the Jewish people's suffering in school. [20] The Peace Research Institute in the Middle East believes that Arab and Jewish teachers and schools present "deeply entrenched and increasingly polarised attitudes on both sides of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict". [21] Professor Elie Podeh of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem writes that a state or national education system is a major instrument for inculcating the desired values of the society. [22] As a consequence, Israel's education system "has consistently aimed to emphasise Jewish and Zionist identity" in its teaching of the Arab-Israeli conflict. [23] Podeh finds that Israeli textbooks' teaching of Islamic history, religion and culture contain "many distortions, biases and omissions", and are "explicitly patronising and prejudicial". He quotes one popular textbook as saying that the Jews "exercised tremendous influence over the mostly illiterate Arabs". [24] Textbooks usually ignore the Arab presence in Palestine when the Jews arrived, calling the land empty of inhabitants. The "very small number of Arabs" who were there are characterised as "thieves, cowards, lazy" and, central to the myth that Palestinians have no legitimate claim to the land, "lacking national consciousness". [25] Accordingly, around one third of Israelis believe that "the ultimate aspiration of Arabs" is "to conquer Israel and wipe out a large part of its Jewish population". [26] These beliefs are central to feelings that any security measures are justified against the Arab enemy. [27]

A high school teacher in Jerusalem named Yitzhak Komem says that, whatever the textbooks teach, his job is circumscribed by society itself. There are taboos on the language one can use to describe the conflict. Israel's 1948 war was a war of independence and it is not permissible to call it something like a "Jewish war of expansion". [28] Most students bring ready-made opinions to the classroom. He decries them as generally very ignorant about the

facts of the conflict. They do not know why Jerusalem is holy to Muslims or what the PLO was or wanted beyond being terrorists.[29] From mass media, family and friends, students learn numerous falsehoods that they take as facts. Some of the most damaging are, that all the Jews of the British Mandate period wanted to live in peace and harmony with their Arab neighbours; the Palestinians left their lands in the 1948 war because invading Arab armies told them to; Palestinians living in "the territories" have nothing against Israeli rule but are incited to uprisings; and that the Israelis always offer peace and the Palestinians always reject it.[30] Overall, students are "defenseless against stereotypes. Without being acquainted with the basic facts, real understanding is impossible.... Not knowing means in effect not sympathising".[31] So when they went to war in Gaza, the Israelis were fighting faceless terrorists.[32]

Victimhood is a complicated phenomenon, but has generalisable symptoms across ethnicities. Those who feel their group is a victim tend to have a history of violent trauma caused by aggression; a belief that no aggression the enemy initiates is justified; the fear that the aggressor could strike again at any time; and the belief that the world is against the victim.[33] We will see in the following sections that all these elements of victimhood are present in Israel's recent history.

The Formation of Israel's National Role Conception

Israel's pre-state experiences played a highly formative role in its NRC.[34] Israelis see Israel as a defensive warrior. Israel needs to be a warrior because its pre-state experiences that form its dominant narratives are those of oppression (slavery in Egypt), military defeat (eg. at Masada in 73 CE), or, most prominently, genocide (the Holocaust).[35] Its early state experiences, such as the Arab states' ganging up on Israel in 1948 or 1967, reinforced this perception. To this day, Israelis feel the need to be an ever stronger David in the face of the Goliath that has always surrounded them.

But why "defensive"? In this case, defensive means taking

up arms only when necessary, engaging only in wars of no alternative and only employing "purity of arms".[36] Experiences such as the Holocaust have made Israelis afraid of becoming aggressive and in particular, genocidal.[37] Assuming it fits with this NRC, the IDF can never attack innocents and never fight wars of aggression. The first five Arab-Israeli wars were wars of self-defense: the innocent David facing down the evil Goliath and winning.[38] Moreover, when Israelis have perceived their state as aggressor, in the Lebanon War of 1982 and during the first Intifada, they subsequently voted into power a government who ran on a platform of peace. Sucharov's contention is that Israelis felt cognitive dissonance over these events, as anyone could when one's self-image is in question, and they decided, collectively, that it was time to realign their desired self-image with reality. Israel, the more powerful side, graciously gave something to the weaker Palestinians. The Oslo Accords were signed.

But something happened, or appeared to happen, that turned this benevolence into violence. The Oslo Accords were part of a peace process that continued through the 1990s. In 2000, Ehud Barak and his negotiating team met with Yasser Arafat and his at Camp David. The talks broke down, however, after something happened. What, precisely, happened? Well, we can never be sure: contradictory reports emerged about why the talks collapsed. However, the story the Israeli press latched onto immediately, and which has formed the dominant Israeli narrative since, was Barak's: Arafat rejected a very generous offer by Barak and started the second Intifada.

The dominant narrative is illustrated by two accounts of the Israeli perspective. First, journalist Jonathan Cook writes that

> "[Israeli] officials argued that the Palestinian leader [Arafat] had been hoping at Camp David to use demographic weapons, most notably the insistence on the right of return of millions of

Palestinian refugees, to destroy Israel as a Jewish state and turn the whole area into 'Greater Palestine'. When he failed, they alleged, he fell back on Plan B, unleashing the armed Intifada."[39]

Nigel Parsons of Massey University puts it another way. The negotiators from Israel and the US quickly spread the idea that

"the genial Clinton and well-intentioned Barak could not persuade and intransigent Palestinian leadership to accept an offer of unprecedented generosity. Insatiable and rapacious, the unworthy Palestinians, and principally Yasser Arafat, then went home to plan, provision and orchestrate a violent uprising against an innocent Israel to better extract an improved deal by force."[40]

The benevolent Israelis had spent seven years giving to the Palestinians, only to be snubbed in the most violent way. After this attack, which could only be against the state of Israel and the Israeli people themselves, Israel was fully justified in taking whatever action deemed necessary to end the bloodshed. After all, it was acting defensively.

The Israeli Media

The Israeli media play a major role in reinforcing Israel's role as defensive warrior. Take the case of the Six Day War, Israel's greatest military victory. The historical accounts show that the leaders of Egypt, Syria and Jordan were not optimistic about their prospects in any conflict with Israel. They did not particularly want war.[41] But they were beholden to their public nonetheless, and, according to Benny Morris at least, the public everywhere in the Middle East was whipped into war frenzy, thirsting for blood, unable to wait because they knew Israel was about to meet its

doom.[42] Israelis, especially Holocaust survivors, saw a repeat of the 1930s, and "there was a feeling of a noose tightening around the nation's neck".[43] Israeli newspapers likened Nasser to Hitler.[44] The press had a huge effect on public opinion--so big that it could make people feel in danger of losing their lives and their country when there was no such danger. Perceptions have led to support for war.

That was more than 40 years ago. The media continue to portray Israel as isolated and teetering on the brink of destruction. In his book *Suppression of Guilt*, Daniel Dor outlines how Israeli media enable the feeling of victimhood and shroud the state of Israel in innocence. His opening example is of the day the International Court of Justice commenced hearings on the legality of Israel's Anti-Terrorism Fence around the West Bank. The day before, a suicide bomber killed eight Israelis on a bus in Jerusalem. The news stories of the day combined the two events to turn judgment away from Israel and toward the ICJ. How dare they judge us? This and Dor's other examples explain how the Israeli media, including the so-called doves such as Haaretz, do most or all of the following: suppress information that might imply guilt; accentuate the Jewish people's victimhood; counter-blaming (they are guilty, therefore I am not); dismissing the judging authority (who are they to judge us?); blurring intention (that was an accident; we meant to do something far more innocuous); claiming coercion (they forced our hand); and bluntly tossing guilt aside in defiance (yes, I did that; so what?).[45] The Israeli media are "[o]bsessed...with the discourse of guilt" and as such, Israeli society cannot develop the "discourse of *responsibility*" (italics in original) it needs if Israelis want the violence to end.[46] Dor also says that the Israeli media's job is to describe what it should feel like to be Israeli. During Operation Defensive Shield, a large-scale IDF operation in the West Bank, the Israeli media showed "being Israeli" meant "being accused by the entire world, and sometimes by other Israelis, of something you are not guilty of".[47]

Tamar Liebes, director of Israel's Smart Institute of Communication, states that Israeli journalists and publishers do not see themselves as critical outsiders but as actors within the Zionist movement.[48] A consequence is that criticism of the military is muted in Israel.[49] Yonatan Mendel, writing in the London Review of Books, gives numerous examples of how the Israeli media enable the image of Israel as defensive warrior. First, the IDF never intentionally kills anyone. Even when it dropped a one-ton bomb on Gaza, killing one gunman and 14 innocent civilians, it successfully completed a "targeted assassination". "An Israeli journalist can say that IDF soldiers *hit* Palestinians, or *killed* them, or *killed them by mistake*, and that Palestinians *were hit*, or *were killed* or even *found their death* (as if they were looking for it), but *murder* is out of the question."[50] (Italics in original). Furthermore, the IDF never initiates anything. It only "responds" to rockets, "responds" to terrorism and "responds" to unjustifiable Palestinian violence.[51] With such media treatment of the Israeli versus the Palestinian condition, one could be forgiven for mistaking the Israelis for the captive people.

According to Reporters without Borders, Israeli journalists have not been allowed in the occupied territories for the past two years. In November 2008, on the eve of Operation Cast Lead, the IDF closed Gaza Strip to foreign journalists, claiming that it was being "adequately covered by reporters already there".[52] Journalists cannot see things for themselves and, according to Reinhart, with a few exceptions, the Israeli press is compliant, and "faithfully recycles military and governmental messages".[53] If the press does not give one the opportunity to feel guilty or responsible for the outbreak of violence, and if those committing the worst atrocities are the enemy, it is easy to maintain both the victimhood and the purity of morals necessary for the defensive warrior.

The media's treatment of the case of Gilad Shalit is an example highly illustrative of Israel's dominant perceptions. Gilad Shalit is a corporal in the IDF who was captured by Palestinian

militants in a border raid on the Gaza Strip in 2006. He has been in captivity ever since. Professor Daniel Bar-Tal of Tel Aviv University explains that Gilad Shalit is seen as a victim of a kidnapping, a form of violence that Israelis consider beneath them.[54] A defensive warrior would never stoop so low as to kidnap anyone. But why was the word "prisoner of war" never used? Because it would provide the enemy with legitimacy, as more than terrorists. Mendel describes the media's reaction as one designed to reinforce Israel's self-image as moral soldier:

> "[F]our days after the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was *kidnapped* from the Israeli side of the Gazan *security fence*, Israel, according to the Israeli media, *arrested* some sixty members of Hamas, of whom 30 were elected members of parliament and eight ministers in the Palestinian government. In a well-planned operation Israel captured and jailed the Palestinian minister for Jerusalem, the ministers of finance, education, religious affairs, strategic affairs, domestic affairs, housing and prisons, as well as the mayors of Bethlehem, Jenin and Qalqilya, the head of the Palestinian parliament and one quarter of its members. That these officials were taken from their beds late at night and transferred to Israeli territory probably to serve (like Gilad Shalit) as future bargaining-chips did not make this operation a kidnapping. Israel never *kidnaps*: it *arrests*."[55]

Since the IDF has an entire legal system on its side, it can never be accused of such a terrible crime as kidnapping. Palestinian prisoners are faceless, while Gilad Shalit has become a national hero. Haaretz, considered one of the more dovish of Israeli newspapers, runs a counter at Haaretz.com displaying the time, *to the second*, that Gilad has been under lock and key. Over a Jewish

holiday in 2009, newspapers displayed pictures of Gilad as a toddler, dressed in a sad clown costume. Poor Gilad: an innocent boy kidnapped by terrorists. The 7700 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails, apparently, are all guilty. [56]

As discussed above, to the victim, no violence by the enemy is justified. Any IDF operation that is merely *responding* to foul crimes like *kidnapping* or Qassam rocket fire can be seen as morally pure. Israel needed to become a warrior to defend the Jews against a world out to get them, and it needed to become a defensive warrior to shield itself from guilt. Let us now turn to the warriors that embody the image.

The Ethos of Conflict

In a recent survey, the Tami Steinmetz Center for Peace Research found that, while less than 40% of the Jewish Israeli public felt they could trust the police and the government, 91% of Jewish Israelis trusted the IDF.[57] In an earlier one, 60% of Jewish Israelis strongly agreed that wearing the IDF uniform is a great privilege.[58] These results say more than just that the military is generally moral; it situates us at the heart of Israel's NRC.

A central point of Holsti's definition of NRC, as we saw, was that it provided an intellectual backdrop against which important foreign policy decisions are made. As such, decision makers know that they can count on some 91% of their constituents to support military actions against the Palestinians, and trust that they used "purity of arms". As we saw with our look at media coverage, nearly all abuses the IDF commits are either unknown (because reporters cannot enter the occupied territories), unreported or glossed over. Its opponents are terrorists and those who want to drive the Jews into the sea.[59] We can see both victimhood and morality, the two components of Israel's NRC, at work in the suppression of guilt, the victimisation of the Jewish people at every rocket attack unpunished and in Levy's "moral

crusade" that drives the public's perceptions of the IDF's operations.

But the IDF are not the only crusaders. The media, as Liebes noted, are actors within the Zionist movement. The public is as well. Most men and women, from the age of 18, are called up to serve in the military for at least two years, and remain reservists for many more. It is a nationalising force in Israel. Ehud Barak, Yitzhak Rabin and Ariel Sharon, three recent prime ministers, were all military leaders before they became civilian politicians. As a consequence, Israelis widely believe in the goals and morality of the IDF, as indicated by the deep trust of the military shown in the Tami Steinmetz survey result. As Jewish Virtual Library puts it, "[i]n essence, the society and army are one...with those in and out of uniform virtually interchangeable".[60] Combine the feelings inculcated by military service with an Israeli education and the people become the soldiers, the defensive warriors, all mobilised with a crusading spirit. They are all aware of Israel's "ethos of conflict".

Daniel Bar-Tal identifies the features of Israel's ethos of conflict. In the first place, the Zionist claim to the land of (Eretz) Israel extends back two thousand years, far further than the Palestinians'.[61] Second, the most central need and value of Israeli society is existential security. This need drives Israel's foreign policy, and acting aggressively can always be justified in its name. At any given time in the past three years, about half of Israelis have supported an immediate strike on Iran's nuclear sites.[62] Even bigger proportions--76% to 82%--supported the construction of the "security fence" around the West Bank as it was being built.[63] Binyamin Netanyahu won the 1996 election by promising to guard Israel's security, while making voters believe Shimon Peres, his opponent on the left, would sacrifice Israelis' security for a peace treaty. There had been "a string of Hamas-sponsored terrorist attacks during the election windup", so the Israeli collective mind was focused on security.[64] Both Netanyahu and Peres played on

Jewish Israeli fears, each trying to convince the public they could contain the Arabs.[65] For a counterexample, the 1982 invasion of Lebanon was widely protested, and conscientious objectors appeared in Israel for the first time. Israelis did not agree with a war fought in their name that did not seem to provide any increase in security. When a war can be justified with goals that specifically mean ending attacks on Israeli civilians, the people do not feel any cognitive dissonance. The IDF is doing what it is supposed to.

Third, Israeli society holds dominant beliefs about patriotism and national unity. The intractable conflict has meant that a consensus has arisen that all people, as an intertwined society and military, must be willing to sacrifice in times of need. Israelis must be ready to endure hardship and even to die in battle. Those who show patriotism are rewarded; deserters and conscientious objectors are stigmatised.[66] Consistent majorities of Jewish Israelis believe that a soldier "may not" refuse an order to serve in the occupied territories or evacuate settlements.[67] This consensus has made it difficult to criticise the justness of Israel's security means and ends. The media have, at times, focused so intensely on victims that to question the IDF's goals and tactics would be unconscionable. Dor's look at the television media on the first day of Operation Defensive Shield quotes a Channel 2 news broadcast that opened with the following. "...Twenty people were murdered in a suicide attack in Netanya yesterday. It seems that the sentence in our Hagada - 'in every generation they have risen against us to annihilate us' - has not rung so true for many years".[68] It "is hardly an atmosphere conducive to inquiry about the objectives of the military operation just embarked on by the IDF".[69] Like guilt, critical inquiry must be suppressed. A united front in the face of aggression plays into the defensive warrior NRC by insisting that Israelis will once again be victims if they do not stick together.

Fourth, Israelis hold negative stereotypes of the "other" that serve to delegitimise the enemy. They, of course, are not alone: all

collectives hold views of outsiders that are negative. Israeli views of Arabs are worth examining. Bar-Tal describes early stereotypes of Arabs as "primitive, uncivilized, savage, and backward. In time, as the conflict deepened and became more violent, Arabs were perceived as murders, a bloodthirsty mob, treacherous, cowardly, cruel, and wicked".[70] We learned above that narratives of victimhood, an essential part of Israel's role conception, are learned in school. This learning and its accompanying stereotypes perpetuate the demonisation of the Arab enemy. They still want to drive the Jews into the sea. They are rejectionists: they rejected the UN Partition Plan of 1947, rejected peace with Israel at the Khartoum Conference after the Six Day War, rejected Barak's generous offer in 2000, and Hamas, of course, is the biggest rejectionist group of all (or at least, for now). And when Israel offered a worthy peace deal, from 1993 until the present it was rebuffed. [71] After Hizbullah in 2006 kidnapped two soldiers to taunt Israel into a war, an article in the Israeli paper Maariv stated "Messers Ahmadinejad, Nasrallah [leader of Hizbullah] and Mishal [leader of Hamas] are as bad as Hitler, perhaps more".[72] A slight exaggeration, perhaps? There is no reason to negotiate with or hold back against people who only understand the language of force.

Fifth, Israelis hold that members of their own society have positive traits and behaviours, pure values and intentions. This belief goes well with the age-old Jewish self-image as God's chosen people. Journalist and professor Henry Siegman says "Israel's public never tires of proclaiming to pollsters its aspiration for peace and its support of a two-state solution".[73] Such a positive self-image is the core of Israelis' beliefs about the morality of their nation, its military and the intractable conflict. Along with general feelings of peacefulness, courage and hard work, Israel's narratives portrayed it as moral and humane toward Arabs in times of peace and war alike.[74] Pappe says this last myth has a long history in Zionist discourse. "Every act whether it was ethnic cleansing, occupation, massacre or destruction was always portrayed as morally just and as a pure act of self-defense reluctantly

perpetrated by Israel in its war against the worst kind of human beings".[75] For example, in a book that Norman Finkelstein calls "canonical", soldiers who fought in the Six Day War spoke of how guilty and ashamed they felt about having to pull the trigger.[76] The assumptions behind these feelings of guilt lead to a kind of "righteous fury" that "shields the society and politicians in Israel from any external rebuke or criticism".[77] Pappe explains that the media shouted unanimously in righteous fury during Operation Cast Lead.[78] This purity of values and intentions is clear when one contrasts the typical Israeli reaction to the deliberate killing of civilians by Palestinians with the actions of the Irgun, a Zionist terrorist group in the British mandate of Palestine. The Irgun was also the group that bombed the King David Hotel in Jerusalem in 1946. Menachem Begin, later Israel's prime minister, was leader of the group at the time. And yet, a poll taken in September 2003 found 83% of Jewish Israelis strongly agreeing with the statement that "terrorism is never justified under any circumstances", and 79% did not consider IDF assassinations of Hamas and Islamic Jihad leaders acts of terrorism.[79] Either Israelis have conveniently forgotten the Irgun, or only the Jews' independence movement was justified in brutality.

All of these common beliefs "gave Israeli-Jewish society its dominant orientation in the context of the intractable conflict" and laid the ground work for legitimacy for any attack against those who would threaten Israel and its people. [80] They diminished in the wake of peace processes (starting with Anwar Sadat's trip to Jerusalem) and Israel's short period of cognitive dissonance (see Sucharov), but have risen again since the collapse of the Camp David talks of 2000. They form part of the "intellectual setting" for foreign policymaking that is Israel's NRC.

The Logic of Occupation

The dominant Israeli attitude toward the occupation of the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza is a necessary part of this

orientation. The West Bank, at least, is a part of Eretz Israel. The media often refer to it as Judea and Samaria, invoking Israel's two millennia old claim to the land. Tight screws on the lid of the places where the suicide bombers and Qassam rockets come from are the most apparently logical tools to keep down the enemy and maintain security.

Israelis are not evil: Israel is a defensive warrior, not an aggressive one. Many Israeli human rights organisations have been started in order to monitor and lobby against the suffering of the Palestinians in the occupied territories. Uri Avnery believes hopefully that, while Israelis feel proud and protective of Eretz Israel, they feel that they have acted unjustly toward the Palestinian people, and are beginning to understand the meaning of the Nakba.[81] But these are isolated examples. NRC theory posits that foreign policy behaviour falls into identifiable patterns, and these patterns determine the state's NRC. Reinhart describes one such pattern for Israeli public opinion since the early 1990s. About one third, Israel's peace camp, is firmly against the occupation, another third believes in Israel's right to the whole land, and the final third has no ideological view of the matter. The latter group sided with the peace camp and supported the Oslo Accords, and has generally agreed with ending the occupation since.[82] But how much withdrawal are Israelis truly willing to put up with, and how do they perceive the territories?

According to Mendel, the occupied territories were originally termed the "Administered Territories"; today they are often simply called the territories. "It might make sense for citizens of an *occupied territory* to try to resist the occupier, but it doesn't make sense if they are just from *the Territories*".[83] There is also much talk in the press of "illegal outposts", meaning smaller settlements that most Israelis disagree with; however, this wording obscures the fact that all settlement of conquered land is illegal. In March 2008, 55% of survey respondents called the West Bank a "liberated territory", as opposed to 32% who called it an "occupied

territory".[84] In contrast to Reinhart's assertion about the majority of Israelis' wanting to end the occupation, a 2008 survey found that 66% of respondents opposed withdrawal to the 1967 borders (the borders of Israel under the UN Partition Plan, Israel's boundaries before the Six Day War, the basis of some Arab peace proposals).[85] Journalist Amira Hass reckons that Israelis do not regard the settlements as any kind of temporary bargaining chip. The proof, she says, is in the growth of the settlements during the "peace decade" of the 1990s.[86] Examination of dominant Israeli perceptions of the occupation do not find strong opposition to it.

Many Israelis who approve of granting Palestinians their own state seem to find no inconsistency with holding on to large settlement blocs. Likewise, despite a clear majority's supporting the two state solution, on the eve of Operation Cast Lead 63% of Israelis surveyed believed Palestinians would destroy Israel if they could. On the other hand, proportions of Israelis favouring the establishment of a Palestinian state have risen from 21% in 1987 to 65% in 2007.[87] So why does Israel continue to brutalise Palestinians in the occupied territories?

According to Hass, most Israelis are convinced that Israeli military offensives in the occupied territories are effective means of curbing terrorism.[88] Add to this belief the corresponding one, described variously above, that the IDF can do no wrong, and there is no need to change Israel's self-perception as highly moral. When asked if Israel's policy toward the Palestinians was too harsh, of all Israelis, including Arabs, 36% said "correct" and 25% said "too easy". Only a third--consistent with Reinhart's claim--believes it is too harsh.[89] Why should these figures be surprising? Most Israelis believe that the state of Israel never consciously kills anyone, and the occupation is necessary to protect Israelis from Palestinians, who continually kill deliberately. Writing in Maariv, journalist Dan Margalit reflects the dominant narrative that feeds Israeli understanding of IDF actions. "[E]ven if an Israeli shell killed them, there was no intention to kill peaceful civilians on a beach in

Gaza. On the other hand, the Qassam [rockets] fired at Sderot is an ongoing, systematic and conscious effort at the premeditated killing of [Israeli] civilians".[90] He concludes that "only a world lacking integrity and full of conspiracies ignores the decisive difference in intentions between the two sides".[91] There is no moral equivalency (despite the wildly uneven death tolls) because, as Leon Wieseltier of the New Republic argues, "the death of innocents [is] an Israeli mistake but a Palestinian objective".[92] The occupation can continue to safeguard Israeli security interests, with all its accidental Palestinian deaths, and there is no disconnect between it and Israel's defensive warrior NRC.

Jewish settlements are a thorny issue, but as a major part of the occupation, they also show clear patterns in Israeli thinking. Surveys found that less than 20% of Israeli respondents in 2006 and fewer in 2007 think all settlements should be dismantled.[93] Even if Palestinians held up their end of a peace agreement, one third of Israelis (39%) would oppose all withdrawal from the West Bank, one third (36%) would support evacuating some settlements and one fifth would support evacuating all of them.[94] Though Israelis, of course, want peace, they seem to see it as somewhat incompatible with security. A June 2008 poll revealed that a slight majority opposed "dismantling most of the settlements in the territories" if it meant peace with the Palestinians.[95] Another found that, again, even if it meant peace with the Palestinians, relinquishing the Western Wall and Temple Mount was unthinkable (opposed by 96% and 89% respectively.) The same survey found only a quarter in favour of stepping up peace negotiations.[96] Besides, why dismantle settlements again? The last time they did that, the ungrateful Palestinians voted a band of terrorists into power. The University of Colorado's Ira Chernus says that "[t]he Israeli public would rather have war than accept...a genuinely just peace".[97] The status quo may be perceived more favourably. To find out why, let us return to the violence that followed the collapse of the Camp David talks in 2000.

The Road to Gaza

Role relations are reciprocal. In other words, NRC depends on how a state views the NRC of its role partners, or other actors it deals with.[98] The patterns of Israel's actions toward the Palestinians between Intifadas displayed a kind of unspoken agreement between parties. This agreement is not the type that only one set of leaders commits to; it persists beyond the short tenure of any decision makers. In short, it is "you do not harm Israelis and we will give you concessions." These concessions were originally the autonomy offered by the Olso Accords. Such agreements commonly take place between role partners who cast themselves and each other into roles that seem suitable.[99] Having cast itself as a defensive warrior, Israel casts enemies such as Hamas and Hizbullah as terrorist organisations (rather than political parties).[100] When each party acts in accordance with its own interpretation of its role, the relationship between the actors is strained.[101] When the weaker accommodates to the wishes of the stronger, in this case, by ceasing suicide bombings, uprisings in the territories, rocket attacks and so on, the potential for conflict diminishes accordingly.[102] However, the Palestinians did not see their role in the same light as Israelis did. As Camp David ended and the Second Intifada began, the unspoken agreement was violated.

It soon became a matter of course that there was no Palestinian partner for peace, that the Palestinians' goal was to destroy Israel and its inhabitants, and that negotiations with terrorists were out of the question.[103] In March 2002, suicide bombings killed 135 Israeli civilians.[104] Operation Defensive Shield, which took place mostly in April 2002 in the occupied territories, was supported by 90% of Israelis.[105] Anger was high not only because Israelis were dying but because the agreement had been so violently repudiated. The first of a string of right wing governments was elected, and Ariel Sharon became prime minister. 20 years earlier, it was widely believed that Sharon had not only ordered the IDF to allow the massacres at the Sabra and Shatila

refugee camps during the First Lebanon War, but also misled the government in order to prosecute the war.[106] However, what the Israeli public wanted was someone they knew would beat the Palestinians to a pulp. Sharon would prove once again he could do so.

The operation killed some 500 Palestinians. Though only 30 Israeli soldiers met the same fate, as part of the war on Arafat's armed uprising, the deaths were regarded as an unwarranted attack on the state of Israel. [107] Cook explains: "The rising death toll on the Israeli side, even if it paled beside the Palestinian one, allowed government spin-doctors to present the intifada as a well-planned assault on the Jewish state, led by the Palestinian security forces under the direction of Yasser Arafat himself".[108] After all, the IDF only killed by accident; the Palestinians just wanted to sow suffering. Media coverage of Defensive Shield did nothing to hide Israel's morality. TV channels 1 and 2 time and again expressed their undivided support for the soldiers and gave little voice to Israeli opposition parties. "Even more importantly, both channels make an effort to conceal the fact that the IDF closed the territories to journalists during the first phase of the operation. The anchors never inform their viewers that what they are watching is secondhand material provided by the IDF".[109]

It was in front of this backdrop that the Roadmap for Peace was unveiled. Among other provisions, the Roadmap committed Israel to withdraw from Palestinian cities and freeze settlement expansion, and the Palestinian Authority to put an end to Palestinian violence and hold elections. The official Israeli line, generally believed by Israelis and Westerners, was that the government was fully committed to the two state solution as expressed in the Roadmap.[110] In June 2003, Mahmoud Abbas, Ariel Sharon, George Bush and Jordan's King Abdullah met in Aqaba, Jordan, to implement the peace plan. "From the Aqaba summit onwards, any Palestinian resistance to the army's brutality could not be tolerated because, in the eyes of Israeli public

opinion, Israel had already fulfilled its part of the bargain" when Sharon promised to end the occupation.[111] Sharon, now a man of peace in the eyes of his compatriots, completed a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005. Though not all Israelis agreed with the disengagement, they clearly saw it as a concession. But, inevitably, Israel's giving was only to result in its continued victimisation.

The Palestinian elections that the Roadmap envisioned brought Hamas to power. Stunned, Israeli and foreign officials immediately stated they would not deal with a terrorist group, democratically elected or not.[112] Hamas took over the Gaza Strip and allowed rockets to continue to dot the sky of southern Israel. Israel was under attack, and the rockets were not going away. Israel and Egypt worked together to blockade Gaza, to turn the vice on Hamas and force it to renounce violence. In 2007, a survey found that more than 50% of Israelis were in favour of a ground operation in Gaza, and 62% said Israel should depose the Hamas government by force.[113] Roughly the same percentage approved of a ground operation in January and May of 2008 as well.[114] Concessions had not helped to fulfill Israel's top priority, security, and neither had blockade. Perhaps ceasefire would do it.

But ceasefire was not a particularly popular idea. A defensive warrior, after all, accomplishes nothing without his sword. Pressure from the opposition (Likud) pushed the government not to sheath the sword at all. Binyamin Netanyahu said at the time, "This is not a relaxation, it's an Israeli agreement to the rearming of Hamas".[115] "In the next conflict we will find ourselves facing deadlier weapons and we'll pay a heavier price. We have to have faith in our own military strength and we have to utilize it to bring Hamas down. Anything else is escapism".[116] Some polls taken at the time reveal that public mood in Israel generally agreed and was not conducive to peace.

At the time of the ceasefire, a poll of Jewish Israelis found

that about as many supported as opposed a ceasefire agreement; a majority opposed negotiations with Hamas; and a clear majority said they believed the majority of Israelis opposed negotiations with Hamas. Most opposed releasing Marwan Barghouti, a high ranking Fatah leader, from prison, unless it was in return for Gilad Shalit. [117] 78% of Israelis surveyed said a condition of the truce should have included Shalit's release.[118] A clear majority said that meetings between Ehud Olmert and Mahmoud Abbas were not beneficial and should stop; a majority believed it would be impossible to reach a "compromise agreement" with Abbas and Fatah; a minority believed a political settlement with the Palestinians would be possible within ten years and a quarter believed it would never be possible; even if a settlement is reached and a Palestinian state is established, a quarter believe "full reconciliation" would be possible within ten years and 29% believe is would never be possible; 70% disagree with the proposal to make Jerusalem a shared capital of Israeli and Palestinian states; two thirds were worried they or their family members would be harmed by Arabs in their daily lives.[119] Admittedly, these results may have been skewed by the fact that, the month prior to the surveys, Israelis observed Holocaust Remembrance Day, Israeli Fallen Soldiers and Victims of Terrorism Remembrance Day, National Independence Day, and Jerusalem Day (the day Jerusalem was reunited with Israel after the Six Day War). They may simply have been in the mood to be victims.

Nevertheless, the ceasefire began on June 18, 2008. Some debate in Israel on the future of Gaza during the ceasefire centered on the question, who benefits from this temporary ceasefire? Hamas would have time to increase the range of its rockets but Israel would be able to develop a defense against them.[120] The fact that both sides violated the ceasefire did not escape attention but, as righteous victims, the Israelis considered Hamas's actions criminal. According to the Israeli government, 1750 rockets and 1528 mortar bombs were fired into southern Israel from Gaza in 2008.[121] The fatalities these bombs caused were very few in

number, and as such, official Israeli statistics focus on the number of rockets fired and the "close to 30%" of residents of Sderot, the town that was usually the target of Qassam rockets, who suffered shell shock.[122] These statistics led the Israeli public to conclude that Hamas had broken a ceasefire Israel had not needed to offer it. Can a defensive warrior be blamed when it righteously attacks terrorist murderers? Of course not; and that is why even Amos Oz applauded Operation Cast Lead.

Amos Oz is an Israeli writer and professor. An influential member of the Israeli peace camp, Oz is a prominent advocate of the two state solution, a member of the peacenik Meretz party and a founder of the NGO Peace Now. Surely, if anyone would speak out against the war, it would be Oz. But instead, he joined in the chorus.[123] In an interview with *the Guardian*, Oz said "Israelis were genuinely infuriated, as was I, about the harassment and bombardment and rocket attacks on Israeli towns and villages for years and years by Hamas from Gaza. And the public mood was 'Let's teach them a lesson'. Trouble is, this so-called lesson went completely out of proportion".[124] What was he expecting? A stern, fatherly talking to? If peace advocates like Oz can support wars initially, approving of them because they are, at root, Zionists, and this is a war against anti-Zionists, then we can see where the 94% approval for Cast Lead came from.

The first five Arab-Israeli wars, plus Operation Defensive Shield and the Second Lebanon War, have always been considered wars of self-defense. Operation Cast Lead was no exception. Israel was under attack for eight years; thousands of rockets were hitting southern Israel; reporters were not allowed into the occupied territories and needed to take the government's word for what was happening; Gilad Shalit needed rescuing; the only language the Palestinians understand is that of force; the Palestinians answered peace with violence; the only way to protect Israel was to invade Gaza. With all this already taken as given, the logic of the operation was not difficult for Israelis to put together. They

supported it not despite but because of Israel's NRC.

Conclusion

This paper has used the theory of national role conception to explain Israelis' decision to support Operation Cast Lead. I have shown how domestic factors such as culture, public mood and education have oriented Israel as a defensive warrior, an NRC comprising victimhood and morality. When viewed through the prism of the defensive warrior, it is visible how the combination of events that preceded Cast Lead would ensure that the Israeli public would support a war to end rocket attacks against Israeli civilians. High school textbooks shape the dominant narratives of victimhood and righteousness, while curdling and stereotyping perceptions of Arabs. Ancient and recent collective experiences do the same. Israel has had to become a warrior to protect itself against the world, but a defensive one to keep in line with its very scrupulous conduct. The Israeli media, especially with respect to coverage of Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the kidnapping of Gilad Shalit, reinforce this self-image at every turn. The vast majority of Israelis trust the IDF to safeguard the country and its role conception, making the IDF's actions unimpeachable in the eyes of most Israelis and fully justified in using violence to end terrorist attacks. The occupation is not really an occupation, since Israelis would never stoop so low, just like killing is always inadvertent. Israelis do not want to dismantle more settlements because such peace offerings are always thrown in their faces. Peace is not necessary. The status quo is easier: every time the Palestinians get rowdy, the IDF will take care of it. Israel's approval and waging of war in Gaza was understandable and predictable. In all probability, the next one will be as well.

Notes

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[2] Holsti, K. J., "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy." *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Sep., 1970): 246.

Ibid., 233.

[3] Ibid., 233.

[4] Ibid., 276.

[5] Ibid., 243.

[6] Throughout this paper, references to Israelis and their opinions are not meant to represent all Israelis, only those who represent the mainstream, the majority, the dominant voice of Israel as a whole. Wherever possible, I have included survey results to be specific.

[7] Ibid., 243.

[8] Mira M. Sucharov, *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli-Palestinian Peace* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005), 21.

[9] Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Politics and War," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars (Spring, 1988): 659.

[10] Ibid., 659.

[11] Ibid., 664.

[12] Holsti, 246.

[13] Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Operation in Gaza –Factual and Legal Aspects," http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-
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[14] Al Jazeera, "Frost over the World - Middle East peace process - 16 Oct 09," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xaZ5W4vAuP0.

[15] Larry Derfner, "Rattling the Cage: Some victims we are," *Jerusalem Post*, October 28, 2009.

[16] Tanya Reinhart: *The Roadmap to Nowhere: Israel/Palestine since 2003* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 1.

[17] Ilan Pappe, *Israel's righteous fury and its victims in Gaza*, http://ilanpappe.com/?p=82 (accessed November 11, 2009).

[18] Henry Siegman, "Hamas: The Last Chance for Peace?," *The New York Review of Books* Vol. 53, No. 7 (April 27, 2006).

[19] Daniel Bar-Tal, "Ethos of Conflict". *Beyond Intractability*. Ed. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. September 2004, Conflict Research Consortium,

University of Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA,
http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/ethos_of_conflict/?nid=1079
(accessed November 11, 2009).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Peace Research Institute in the Middle East.
http://www.vispo.com/PRIME/leohn.htm (accessed November 2, 2009).

[22] Elie Podeh, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict in Israeli History Textbooks, 1948-2000*
(Westport, CT.: Berin & Garvey, 2002), 21.

[23] Ibid., 26.

[24] Ibid., 76. Many such biases were eliminated in the most recent generation of
textbooks. However, the above is an example from textbooks of
contemporaries of Ariel Sharon, Ehud Barak, Ehud Olmert, Binyamin
Netanyahu, and so on.

[25] Ibid., 80
Ibid., 81.

[26] Jewish Virtual Library.
http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/ispopal_200
7.html
 (accessed November 10, 2009).

[27] Podeh, 75.

[28] Yitzhak Komem, "Teaching the Arab-Israeli Conflict: Notes from the
Classroom," *Palestine-Israel Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2001): 36.

[29] Ibid., 36.

[30] Ibid., 37.

[31] Ibid., 36.

[32] It would be fair to note that Israel's Ministry of Education now directs high
schools to discuss an incident in 1956 where the IDF killed 49 Arabs.
(Sucharov, 129) A small softening of attitudes toward the distant past is
better than a complete ignoring or revision of history--we are not perfect,
after all.

[33] Sarah Rosenberg, "Victimhood". *Beyond Intractability*. Ed. Guy Burgess and
Heidi Burgess. July 2003, Conflict Research Consortium, University of
Colorado, Boulder, Colorado, USA.

[34] Sucharov, 3.

[35] Ibid., 3.

[36] Ibid., 3-4.

[37] Ibid., 4.

[38] Ibid., 4.

[39] Jonathan Cook, *Blood and Religion: the Unmasking of the Jewish and
Democratic State* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), 35.

[40] Nigel Craig Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority: from Oslo to
al-Aqsa* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2005), 244.

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[44] Ibid., 308.

[45] Daniel Dor, *Suppression of Guilt: Israeli Media and the Reoccupation of the West Bank* (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2005), 1-3.

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[49] Sucharov, 43.

[50] Mendel.

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[52] Reporters without Borders, *Foreign journalists allowed to enter Gaza Strip for first time in a month*, http://www.rsf.org/Foreign-journalists-allowed-to.html and http://www.rsf.org/en-predateur26822-Israeli_defence_Forces.html (accessed October 29, 2009). It was opened again but only briefly.

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[54] Eetta Prince-Gibson, "Prisoners Dilemma," *Jerusalem Post*, March 25, 2009.

[55] Mendel.

[56] Gideon Levy, "Return Gilad Shalit, but not at any price," *Haaretz*, August 30, 2009. Levy says Israeli prisons are portrayed as if they were rest homes.

[57] Tami Steinmetz; Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/nationalpride.html (accessed November 28, 2009).

[58] Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/IDF.html (accessed November 28, 2009).

[59] Sucharov, 51.

[60] Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/ispoiran.html.

[61] Bar-Tal.

[62] Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/ispopal_2007.html.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Michael Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and the Peace Process: Recreating the Unthinkable," in *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, eds.

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[65] Yona Teichman and Daniel Bar-Tal, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict: Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 139.

[66] Bar-Tal.

[67] Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/ispopal_2007.html.

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[69] Dor, 54.

[70] Bar-Tal.

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[74] Bar-Tal.

[75] Pappe.

[76] Finkelstein, 114.

[77] Pappe.

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[81] Uri Avnery, *Rest has come to the weary*, in Gush Shalom, April 11, 2009, http://zope.gush-shalom.org/home/en/channels/avnery/1239519715/ (accessed November 7, 2009).

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[83] Mendel.

[84] Jewish Virtual Library, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Society_&_Culture/ispopal_2008.html.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Amira Hass, "Indefinite Siege," *Counterpunch*, June 13, 2002.

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[99] Ibid., 313.

[100] Mendel.

[101] Backman, 314-5.

[102] Ibid., 317.

[103] Henry Siegman, "Sharon's Phony War," *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 50, No. 20 (December 18, 2003).

[104] Beverley Milton-Edwards, *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: a People's War* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 56.

[105] Finkelstein, xxiii.

[106] Sucharov, 94.

[107] Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Operation Defensive Shield," http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2002/3/Operation%2 0Defensive%20Shield.

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