

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY: ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY AND  
THE 2006 WAR IN LEBANON.<sup>1</sup>

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This article seeks to illuminate the context within which Israel responded in 2006 to the capture by Hezbollah of two Israeli soldiers by launching the second Lebanon War. The context that forms the focus for analysis is that of national identity. Which ideas constructive of the Israeli collective sense of self were emphasised in the lead-up to the war and how might these have functioned to produce certain policy choices as possible or desirable? In answering this question the article contribute to the existing body of work concerning the 2006 conflict<sup>1</sup>, as well as the wider established literature that discusses Israeli identity.

A constructivist analysis is utilised, drawing on theorists such as Wendt, and Katzenstein,<sup>2</sup> to consider the role of the social construction of identity in the Israeli action in Lebanon in 2006. At the heart of such a constructivist approach is a rejection of the assumption that notions key to the traditional understanding of the political world are given facts, existing exogenous to human experience<sup>3</sup>. Whereas realists – for example – see notions such as anarchy as one of a set of “timeless truths about human reality”<sup>4</sup> constructivists suggest that such ‘realities’ are actually socially constructed through intersubjectively<sup>5</sup> held practices, identities and norms,<sup>6</sup> (essentially, shared ideas<sup>7</sup>). Identity is seen as central to this process<sup>8</sup>. In a socially constructed political world, identities operate to tell actors about themselves and others and to entail interests and preferences for actions in given situations involving other actors<sup>9</sup>. Thus identity provides actors with a method of predicting the behaviour of others, and, since interests are constituted by identities<sup>10</sup>, for guiding actor actions<sup>11</sup>. For constructivism, identity is an “empirical question to be theorised within a historical context”, in contrast to, for example, a neorealist position which treats actor identity as universally and unchangingly that of the self-interested state.<sup>12</sup> Constructivism makes the assumption that identities are created out of cultural, political, historical and social contexts<sup>13</sup> and are subject to flux<sup>14</sup>. Identity is, therefore, not a ‘thing’ separate from the wider terrain of socially

constructed reality. It is used in this article as way of talking about a set of meanings which illuminate a collective sense of self, and contribute to the constitution of a policy issue in a particular way and defines the possible in terms of response to that policy issue. The analysis focuses on the interaction of key strands of meaning productive of Israeli national identity and considers how the historically constructed and contingent discourses which were articulated in the identity politics of the Israeli political party Kadima, operated to construct what Barnett refers to as an identity of the possible within which the military response to Hezbollah in 2006 by the Kadima government was situated. Barnett uses this notion of an identity of the possible to express the manner in which identity – expressed through framings, narratives and institutions define policies and policy decisions. As he expresses it:

The relationship between the contestation of national identity; how that contestation is tied to a historical narrative linking past , present, and future; and how frames that link historical narratives and discrete interests affect societal mobilisation in favour of a particular project or policy<sup>15</sup>

Identity is defined as the strands of meaning that constitute the sense of national (as opposed to state)<sup>16</sup> self, arising out of intersubjective and interacting processes<sup>17</sup>. These meanings productive of identity interact, for example, in the electoral processes of democracies, providing an important indicator of identity flux, competition and crisis<sup>18</sup>. Identities influence foreign policy by constructing the reality of the political world and making certain policy behaviours possible or probable.<sup>19</sup> Barnett’s theoretical framework of narratives, frames and institutions provides the analytical basis of the work. Using this three-pronged analytical device Barnett explores how identity works to create “conditions that make certain action possible”<sup>20</sup>. Having set out a definition of identity, the way in which the concepts of narratives, frames and institutions are used will be elaborated. Narratives are the broad historical stories defining common historical memories<sup>21</sup> within which identities are situated.<sup>22</sup> This story, at a national level, will encompass an internally produced account of origins, a sense of self, and a sense of what the future is likely to hold<sup>23</sup>. These narratives are

debated, and contested: “actors will reconstruct the past as they debate the future”<sup>24</sup>. Frames are “metaphors, symbolic representations [and] cognitive cues”<sup>25</sup> which serve to interpret the world and create shared understandings that thus suggest solutions,<sup>26</sup> which are then translated into policy options. Institutions are the context of the domestic political environment of party politics and elections,<sup>27</sup> which also shapes the “possible and the legitimate”<sup>28</sup> within a continual process of debate concerning this collective identity, a debate which finds expression in the electoral politics of democratic states.

To summarise, this analysis is not an attempt to describe ‘the’ Israeli identity, or to present ‘identity’ as a static object. Instead, the analysis is concerned with the way in which various strands of meaning, constructive of a collective sense of self, emerged out of historical continuities, interacted and were made meaningful in relation to each other around a particular policy issue, and how they framed, contextualised and constituted that policy issue to form a situated and contingent identity of the possible<sup>29</sup>. By examining how the ideational world of political reality is ‘put together’ a constructivist analysis is able to explore the ways in which certain political behaviours are possible or probable.<sup>30</sup>

This research draws extensively upon primary sources indicative of the way in which meanings constructive of a collective sense of Israeli national self were articulated during the 2006 Knesset elections, and in the run up to and during the war. These materials were primarily speeches and texts by Israeli politicians, supplemented by contemporary news reports, mainly from the Israeli media. These texts were read to identify themes, until saturation was reached; that is until the same themes had been noted extensively across a range of texts. The aim was to unpick key themes, in a process that would illuminate the interactions between strands that coalesced to form the Kadima vision of Israeli identity, the

historical construction of these strands, and the way in which they informed and constituted the policy context for the 2006 war. The analysis of secondary research on Israeli identity politics provided a way of organising the identified themes, and plotting historical continuities. This analytical approach thus involved analytical dialogue between the primary sources, secondary texts and the theoretical concepts to develop an account of the social construction of an identity of the possible.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 2006 Hezbollah, a Lebanon-based Shiite Organisation, launched a cross-border raid into Israel, capturing two and killing three Israeli soldiers.<sup>31</sup> The Israeli government described the attack as an “act of war” and authorised “severe and harsh” retaliation on Lebanon, whom it held responsible<sup>32</sup>. Israel then began a thirty-four day military campaign, which caused extensive damage to Lebanese infrastructure and resulted in approximately 1,000 Lebanese and 159 Israeli deaths – mostly civilian<sup>33</sup>.

Although the timing of the conflict and some statements made by the Israeli constructed the narrative that the campaign was mainly responsive to the Hezbollah raid<sup>34</sup>, the conflict was a response to the wider perceived threat of the Hezbollah problem, of which the raid was merely the latest symptom, and against and through which meanings constructive of a sense of national identity crystallised to produce the possible in policy terms. Evidence to the Winograd Commission - appointed by the Israeli government to inquire into the 2006 conflict – suggests that Israel’s campaign in Lebanon was planned in advance, with the 12<sup>th</sup> of July raid acting as a trigger<sup>35</sup>. In addition the raid was not an unexpected anomaly in the pattern of recent Hezbollah activity. The leader of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah, had hinted on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2006 that a Hezbollah “resistance action” was imminent as part of its campaign for the release of Israeli-held prisoner Samir Kuntar. At the same time, Nasrallah

suggested that the Israelis were expecting an abduction attempt on their soldiers.<sup>36</sup> In addition, Hezbollah had a record of taking Israeli military prisoners, including Colonel Elhanan Tennenbaum in 2000.<sup>37</sup> In January 2004 a Likud-coalition Israeli government and Hezbollah (with the help of German negotiators) had successfully undertaken a prisoner exchange, which resulted in the release of Tennenbaum.<sup>38</sup> On the day of the raid, Nasrallah demanded “direct negotiations” with a view to a second prisoner exchange<sup>39</sup> and - following the war - stated that he would not have undertaken the 12<sup>th</sup> of July raid if he had known how Israel would retaliate.<sup>40</sup> The expectation of negotiations was not confined to Hezbollah; within the Israeli Defence Force (IDF), Major General Udi Adam, chief of the Northern Command, suggested that a diplomatic solution was needed to minimise the Hezbollah threat.<sup>41</sup> Why does this matter? The foreign policy response by Israel was neither inevitable, nor necessarily expected. Crucially, the Likud and Kadima responses to what was essentially the same threat were divergent. The war became constructed within the Kadima government as possible and desirable foreign policy<sup>42</sup>, based upon a particular understanding of the Israeli self articulated by Kadima, and observable during their election campaign (as discussed below). Particularly prominent in the constitution of the foreign policy context in which the decision to go to war was made were, as shall be discussed, ideas of Israeli vulnerability combined with the narrative of the Fighting Jew. This is not to say that such ideas within an Israeli national identity were unique, or in any way a disjuncture, or that a Likud or Labour government emphasising different strands constructive of the Israeli sense of self would have necessarily made a different foreign policy choice. These narratives were characterised by their historical embeddedness and continuity, and are of course not confined to one single political group. Instead, what the analysis aims to show is the situated nature of the policy decision; the way in which the decision was grounded in a vision of the Israeli self which

*emphasised* certain specific meanings, and made certain policy responses more *possible or desirable*.

## ISRAELI NATIONAL IDENTITY & THE 2006 WAR

This section explores themes constructive of a sense of Israeli national identity, focusing on strands that came to be particularly salient to the construction of a military foreign policy response in 2006. An Israeli national identity is the product of interconnected and mutually constituting strands of meaning.<sup>43</sup> The Holocaust is examined here as part of a continuity of a Jewish Historical narrative of vulnerability - the “common myth and historical memories”<sup>44</sup> out of which national identity arises. The way in which this historical narrative has been subject to an ongoing domestic reinterpretation significant within modern notions of Israeli national identity will then be discussed by drawing on the role of Israeli nationalism (Zionism) - which sought to leave behind the established historical narrative of vulnerability - and the post-1967 legacy of the Super Jew identity construct which introduced the vital identity facet of the Fighting Jew into modern Israeli identities<sup>45</sup>.

### The Jewish Historical Narrative, the Holocaust and the Fighting Jew

The centrality of the Holocaust in Israeli understandings of identity is unparalleled. As Segev states, the Holocaust both “formed the collective identity” of Israel and is the “shadow” in which “the most fateful decisions in Israeli history” were conceived.<sup>46</sup> The Holocaust forms a twentieth century link with an established narrative of two millennia<sup>47</sup> of Jewish history; a past which is remembered as being marked by expulsions, pogroms, persecution<sup>48</sup> and other constant existential struggles.

The combination of the Holocaust experience and the Jewish historical narrative of persecution<sup>49</sup> have resulted in an identity phenomenon within which the Gevalt syndrome/Doomsday Mentality (a “historically conditioned sense of foreboding”),<sup>50</sup> Galut Mentality<sup>51</sup> (the mentality of the exile<sup>52</sup>), Masada Complex<sup>53</sup> (where past events are framed as historical warnings concerning persecution and death<sup>54</sup>), and “victim in history” self-image<sup>55</sup> are all interconnected and often synonymous elements. This phenomenon may be distilled into a fundamental sense of vulnerability<sup>56</sup> and insecurity<sup>57</sup> in a hostile world,<sup>58</sup> in which threats are to the very existence<sup>59</sup> of the Israeli nation. This creates identity narratives in which the need for protection culminates in what Arian terms a “religion of security”, based on “deep-seated core beliefs about the nature and destiny of Israel”.<sup>60</sup> The Holocaust was also central to the construction of an Israeli identity of isolation and self-reliance<sup>61</sup> - the notion that the Israeli people are alone in a hostile world; the international community being seen as having “offered up the Jews ‘as prey to the enemy’s jaws’”<sup>62</sup> during the Second World War. This self-reliance is closely linked to the Jewish narrative of being a “people that dwells alone” and the two camp thesis; the world is seen as bifurcated into Jewish and non-Jewish ‘camps’ with the non-Jewish camp being basically aggressive towards the Jews.<sup>63</sup>

Unsurprisingly, the ongoing debate concerning Israeli identity has at its core a fundamental indecision regarding the influence of the Jewish historical narrative on modern Israeli understandings of national self. Despite attempts by the Zionist movement to distance the modern Israeli from the narrative of the Jewish past, which was seen to be based on weakness and a mentality of exile (Galut), it was inevitable that the narrative of the Jewish experience would continue to shape and define an Israeli national identity.<sup>64</sup> Much of the debate concerning modern Israeli identity has focused on the framing of the narrative of the past. An example of this is the historical event of the siege of Masada in AD 73, where – following a

failed Jewish revolt - 960 Jews are said to have opted to commit suicide rather than face death at the hands of the Romans.<sup>65</sup> In the early days of Zionism and up until the Yom Kippur War this event was commonly framed, as Zerubavel terms it, as a “patriotic death in the battle for freedom”. Following the Yom Kippur War however, this same event was reframed as a “historical model of a hopeless situation in which Jews face persecution and death”<sup>66</sup>.

The period between the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War is vital to the understanding of modern Israeli understandings of national self, particularly with regard to security. The Six-Day War saw the emergence of what Elizur terms the Super Jew identity - a construct which has had a lasting effect on national identities in modern Israel, with particular power to influence security policy. The Yom Kippur War resulted in the decline of this construct,<sup>67</sup> as well as a return to a framing of the Masada Myth more congruent with the Jewish historical narrative of vulnerability, demonstrating a trend in the identity debate back towards the established narrative of the struggle for existence in a hostile world.

The Holocaust and the narrative of Jewish vulnerability in a hostile environment has, therefore, been highly significant to understandings of Israeli identity. However, modern Israel also arises out of a narrative of Israeli military success, most importantly the Six-Day war. The 1967 victory over a combined Arab adversary created a break from the passivity in the face of existential threat that continued to haunt the Jewish psyche.<sup>68</sup> It was thus an opportunity to redefine a sense of identity that was formed in the shadow of the Holocaust, from “victim-in-history” to united nation of the Fighting Jew – “stalwart, fearless, invincible” victor<sup>69</sup>. The victim/vulnerability identity was too powerful to be displaced by the Super Jew trope but it came to interact with the more established strands of the Israeli narrative to influence modern Israeli understandings of self. The power of the notion diminished after the

Yom Kippur war in 1973, when Israel came perilously close to military defeat, undermining the power of the notion of Israeli invincibility.<sup>70</sup> Whilst the Super Jew identity was not sustained in the wider Israeli identity narratives, it remains powerful to this day with regard to military policy<sup>71</sup>, where it interacts with the victim trope. Whilst a modern Israeli identity draws heavily on the established Jewish narrative of existential struggle and ‘victim-in-history’ it also draws on the strength of the Israeli military, integrating the idea of the Fighting Jew. If and when Israel is faced with an existential threat it will “go down fighting”<sup>72</sup>. The importance of this strand is demonstrated by the significance of military service in Israeli life; seen as “a pillar of the personal and collective identities of the Israeli people”<sup>73</sup>. Thus, meaning strands constructive of a sense of collective self in modern Israel orientate around the tensions, contradictions and insecurities of ideas of invincibility and passivity.

#### Sharon, Kadima and the 2006 Elections

A collective sense of national self is not static, instead in constant flux, renegotiation and reappraisal. Such flux is illustrated within the institutional context of electoral, coalition and party politics, revealing the co-constitution of Israeli notions of identity, interests and policies<sup>74</sup>. Examination of how debates concerning Israeli identity played out in the 17<sup>th</sup> Knesset elections, and which strands productive of an Israeli identity were emphasised, is crucial to understanding the conception of Israeli identity which dominated within the government in the summer of 2006, and formed the policy context for the decision to go to war.

The 2006 Israeli election has been described as the “big bang” in Israeli politics – a major realignment of “parties and power”<sup>75</sup>. Prior to the March 2006 elections, Israeli politics was dominated by Likud, the main centre-right party<sup>76</sup> and Labour, the main centre-left party.<sup>77</sup> Due to the electoral system, Israeli governments have consistently been formed of coalitions between Israel’s main parties and partners drawn from the large number of smaller parties<sup>78</sup>. The Left-Right split and the dominance of Likud and Labour ended<sup>79</sup> in November 2005 when Ariel Sharon left Likud along with 13 Members of the Knesset and founded Kadima (in English, ‘Forward’), a move that followed fundamental splits within Likud concerning Sharon’s Disengagement Plan.<sup>80</sup> Kadima presented itself as a Centrist party; drawing politicians from both Likud and Labour, including former Labour Leader Shimon Peres<sup>81</sup> a move which appeared to capture the mood of the Israeli electorate.<sup>82</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> of January 2005<sup>83</sup>, Sharon suffered a severe stroke which ended his political career. This transformed Kadima into a party which would, from that moment on, base its policy on the continuation of the Sharon legacy<sup>84</sup>. Sharon’s legacy and the emphasis on a certain vision of Israeli identity it represented came to define Kadima. “Sharon’s hand-picked successor”<sup>85</sup> as leader of Kadima, Ehud Olmert, was perceived as the politician most likely to continue Sharon’s legacy. Olmert himself was conscious of his role, stating after the 2006 war that he believed he had acted as Sharon would have done.<sup>86</sup> Security issues dominated the election campaign<sup>87</sup> and ultimately the election became a referendum<sup>88</sup> on Sharon’s Disengagement Plan for the West Bank, a policy rooted in a vision of Israel articulated by Sharon. Analysis of a series of addresses made by Sharon during 2003-2005 concerning the Disengagement Plan, reveal Sharon’s version of Israeli identity This account of Israeli self framed the Disengagement policy within the broader existential struggle of the Jewish people, a vision of Israeli identity congruent with the vulnerability narrative. For Sharon the Disengagement policy was framed as the latest part of the intergenerational “ongoing war” for Israeli existence<sup>89</sup> in a “hostile

world”<sup>90</sup> with Israel’s future only guaranteed by self-reliance<sup>91</sup>, strengthening security<sup>92</sup> and the creation of “secure and defensible borders”<sup>93</sup>. In this way, Sharon’s account adheres to the established narrative of the Gevalt syndrome, which sees separation as synonymous with survival.<sup>94</sup> Sharon’s framing contrasted with that of the depleted Likud, who also framed Disengagement as part of the existential struggle, but framed it as a defeat for Israel rather than a tactical victory<sup>95</sup>. Secondly, Sharon incorporated some elements (the Fighting Jew and Israeli national unity) of the Super Jew trope of Israeli identity, contrasting the past – where Israel stood “defenceless” in the face of the hostility of the world – with the present, where Jews “have Israel’ - a country which, through the nation’s “security and strength”, ensures that “the Jewish people cannot be broken”<sup>96</sup>. The contrast between the passive past and the proactive present was explicitly drawn; “we have the strength to defend this country and to strike at the enemy which seeks to destroy us”<sup>97</sup> and “we will not be caught unprepared as in ... the past”<sup>98</sup>. Sharon further evoked the Six-Day War – the historical context of the of the Super Jew identity construct - emphasising that no withdrawals would relinquish territory gained in the 6-Day War.<sup>99</sup> An additional facet of this strand is the centrality of Israeli unity, with Sharon stating that unity was necessary for the defeat of existential threats and that the aim of the Disengagement Plan was to increase Israeli cohesion.<sup>100</sup>

Thirdly, Sharon explicitly stated that the Disengagement Plan was directly sympathetic with Israel’s status as a Jewish and liberal democratic<sup>101</sup> state, and would benefit the economy<sup>102</sup>, acknowledging Israel’s identity as a free-market<sup>103</sup> democracy and a modern ‘western’ nation. By implementing the Plan, Sharon could “guarantee a Jewish majority in the State of Israel”<sup>104</sup>, vital both in terms of Israel’s identity as a democracy and that of the Jewish nation being a ‘people that dwells alone’. Firstly, by emphasising an identity of modernity Sharon was demonstrating a wish to break, in identity terms, with the past - a position congruent with

his continued adherence to a Super Jew model of identity. Secondly, the reinforcement of an identity of separation (being a ‘people that dwells alone’) frames the policy within the notion of Israeli self-reliance.

Thus, the vision of Israeli identity put forward by Sharon leading up to the 2006 election, and which came to define his legacy, was built upon three interconnected strands; the enduring narrative of the vulnerable Israeli nation engaged in the perpetual crisis<sup>105</sup> of the existential struggle in a hostile environment, coupled with a vision of Israeli identity symbolised by the Super Jew, (a notion which – as set out above – describes a united, “stalwart, fearless, invincible”<sup>106</sup> Israel) and with Israel’s identity as a modern, democratic, western state. As the above analysis suggests, these constituent strands are, to some extent, dichotomous; for example, the continued adherence to a narrative of vulnerability might appear contradictory to an adherence to a Super Jew or Fighting Jew identity. Whilst it is true that in its purest form the Super Jew trope was a rejection of vulnerability, it did not survive in this form for long. Any modern sense of Israeli identity is formed out of a dialogue between the identity strands, fed by their internal inconsistencies, and their interpretation and reformulation is the process out of which identities are continually reconstituted.

The elections of the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2006 can be interpreted as either a rejection of the Kadima vision, or an endorsement of it. Kadima won 22% of the vote and took 29<sup>107</sup> seats to make it the largest single party in the Knesset. Crucially however, turnout was the lowest in Israeli history at 63%<sup>108</sup> and Kadima failed to win as convincingly as some analysts had predicted.<sup>109</sup> Binyamin Netanyahu of Likud suggested in the days after his party’s defeat that the outcome was a symptom not of a fundamental shift in Israeli politics, but a result of public dissatisfaction with Likud state spending<sup>110</sup>. This position is given credence by the

growth in support for Israel Our Home (from 5.5% of the vote in 2003, to 9% in 2006)<sup>111</sup>, positioned comparably with Likud on the right of the political spectrum. This seems to suggest that disenchanted Likud voters shifted allegiance to a party in broad political agreement with Likud, rather than endorsing Kadima. This argument remains unconvincing however. Whilst the drop in turnout was remarkable it is attributable to disenchantment with Israeli party politics in general, resulting from a succession of scandals<sup>112</sup>, rather than a rejection of Kadima. Likud's share of the vote dropped from 29.4% in 2003, to 9% in 2006. This collapse cannot be attributed to a shift towards other right of centre parties because, although Israel Our Home did gain, these parties in total received a marked reduction in their vote share<sup>113</sup>. Overall, the shift was toward Kadima,<sup>114</sup> who received 7.1% more of the vote than their nearest rivals labour on 15.1%.

Whilst the significance of the 2006 election result is unquestionably opaque, the most convincing analysis is that the result *was* an endorsement of Kadima as a party committed to Sharon's legacy, and as such, an endorsement of Sharon's vision of Israel. Sharon's vision was a seductive one; offering a hope for Israel's peaceful coexistence alongside but separate from her Arab neighbours, coupled with the inherently "ego-inflating"<sup>115</sup> identity concept of the Super Jew. The additional acknowledgment of Israel's free-market<sup>116</sup> democracy identity provided an important indicator of Israel's status as a modern 'western' nation. This vision of Israel allowed Kadima to transcend the traditional 'dove' – 'hawk' splits of the left and the right in Israeli electoral politics, to create a centrist party incorporating a composite vision of Israeli self. With a consistently high level importance given to security issues by the Israeli electorate,<sup>117</sup> Sharon's status as "Mr Security"<sup>118</sup> resonated with the electorate who, whilst they had lost patience with the Likud hawks<sup>119</sup>, had little faith in the abilities of the Labour doves to guarantee Israeli security. With a track record as a politician who embodied the "last

hurrah” of the Super Jew identity within post-1967 Likud<sup>120</sup>, Sharon offered a more positive, affirming and proactive version of Israeli identity with regards to security. This was contrasted with the position of the majority of Likud politicians, typified by Binyamin Netanyahu whose election slogan in 1996, “peace with security” was seen as appealing to the electorate’s fears and emphasising a victim-self image, reactively to the *intifada*<sup>121</sup>.

### Identities of the Possible and the 2006 War

The emphasis on ideas associated with the Fighting Jew trope during the summer of 2006 is central to the construction of a context within which the policy of a military solution to the Hezbollah problem became possible and legitimate. The Fighting Jew identity strand, predisposed to a military solution, emerged and became important as a result of the interaction of the constituent strands of the ‘vulnerability’ identity. In the early stages of the conflict, constructions associated with the fighting Jew identity strand permeated every level of Jewish society, in an unprecedented climate of consensus<sup>122</sup>. A poll conducted in the first days of the conflict found that 86% of respondents backed the military operation with 58% saying that Israel should fight until “Hizbullah is wiped out”<sup>123</sup>. Sentiments invoking the Fighting Jew identity were widely expressed in Israeli popular culture. The pop song *Yalla Ya Nasrallah*, written in a spirit of parody, was taken at face value and became a major hit, recalling as it did Israeli songs from the past that celebrated “Israel’s effortless defeat of the Arabs in previous wars”<sup>124</sup>. The national mood was captured by the bumper stickers and billboard advertisements issued by Israeli banks and newspapers proclaiming “We Will Win”<sup>125</sup>.

The Hezbollah threat was situated within the established narrative of the Jewish-Israeli ordeal. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert<sup>126</sup> framed the conflict within the narrative of what

he termed “3,000 years of ... [Jewish] existence”. To Israelis, Olmert framed Hezbollah as the latest of “many enemies who rose against us to destroy us”<sup>127</sup>. The conflict was also presented as part of a continuing narrative of the fight for the right to live a “normal life” – a fight that Olmert envisaged would continue for “many years to come”<sup>128</sup>. In a speech at the start of the conflict, the Israeli Prime Minister made a link between the threat from Hezbollah and the historical narrative of the Holocaust, drawing on the experiences of a family of European Jews whose founders in Israel had survived the Holocaust and whose son had been killed in the fight against Hezbollah. This association both framed the conflict with Hezbollah on a timeline of struggle, and also evoked the defining historical memory of modern Israel – a memory which served (like the Masada myth) as a warning from the past concerning the dangers of passivity. Thus by demonstrating the dangers of passivity in the face of threat, this construction advocated a proactive policy; advancing the Fighting Jew view of Israeli defence.

Associated with the narrative of Jewish-Israeli struggle is the notion that the Jews whilst “proud” are also “vulnerable”;<sup>129</sup> they are the underdogs<sup>130</sup> in the ongoing struggle. This notion was emphasised by Shimon Peres<sup>131</sup>, the Vice Prime Minister, who framed Israel as David - with Hezbollah presumably representing the Arab Goliath. By invoking a religious myth<sup>132</sup>, Peres places the Hezbollah threat on a historical footing with the foundational myths of Israel, as well as implying the lessons to be learnt from the David and Goliath tale; David, the Israelite underdog, was not passive in the face of a much stronger enemy. The association also evokes memories of the Six Day War, a defining event in Israeli history, framed at the time as a modern day David and Goliath battle<sup>133</sup> and the event that constituted the Super Jew identity of which the Fighting Jew strand is a legacy<sup>134</sup>. The lesson to be learned from this historical narrative does not concern the dangers of passivity (a negative focus), instead it

emphasises positively the rewards of a proactive military response to threats. This framing of the Hezbollah threat within a narrative of a struggle of epic proportions made myths and memories of previous threats directly relevant to the present, positioning them as all part of the same continuum of danger. The threat from Hezbollah thus became comparable with defining moments in Jewish-Israeli identity and in line with the concept of the ‘Masada Complex’ these associations carried with them lessons for the present crisis. Underdogs must fight hard to gain victory.

Secondly, the established narrative of Jewish-Israeli struggle is a narrative of the struggle for survival; a struggle for the right to exist. In broad terms, by placing the Hezbollah threat within the narrative of this struggle, Olmert framed the threat as one to Israel’s existence. More explicitly, Hezbollah was constructed as an existential threat on two levels; first by associating Hezbollah with the Iranian regime, and secondly by emphasising the threat to the Israeli way of life and the physical safety of Israeli citizens. A report by the Intelligence & Terrorism Information Center, an Israeli-based research group, stated that Iranian Revolutionary Guard units were operating within Lebanon in support of Hezbollah.<sup>135</sup> Although the factual accuracy of this assertion is disputed<sup>136</sup> the claim was enormously significant, meaning that Israel was faced and was addressing both the Hezbollah *and* Iranian threat in Lebanon when it chose a military policy response in the summer of 2006. Earlier in 2006, Iran’s President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had delivered a speech in which - as translated at the time<sup>137</sup> - he said that Israel should be “wiped off the map”. The accuracy of this translation has since been fundamentally questioned<sup>138</sup>, but at the time, Olmert made a direct comparison in response, likening the Iranian President to Adolf Hitler.<sup>139</sup> On the most overt level, the link to Ahmadinejad made the conflict with Hezbollah a conflict with Iran as well, a country which (at least on the plainest reading of Ahmadinejad’s apparent pronouncements) wished an end to the existence of Israel. The conflict was thus an existential

one. In a climate of consensus<sup>140</sup> across the political divide Binyamin Netanyahu<sup>141</sup> spoke of Israel facing “a threat to our very existence” and that as such it must “identify the threats to its existence and develop the capacities to thwart those threats”. As a politician who typified Likud and a renowned adherent of the vulnerability identity,<sup>142</sup> Netanyahu’s statement emphasised a reactive rather than Fighting Jew response; but the threat he conceptualised was the same one identified by the Kadima government. On another level the framing of the conflict as one that encompassed Ahmadinejad placed Israel in direct conflict with a new ‘Hitler’ in the Middle East thus making the Jewish-Israeli narrative of the Holocaust of overwhelming significance. There is a consistent record of Israeli leaders making associations between their regional Arab enemies and Adolf Hitler; in the Six Day War the press as well as politicians compared President Nasser of Egypt to Hitler<sup>143</sup>, and in 1982 Menachim Begin sent “the Israeli army to Beirut to destroy Adolf Hitler”<sup>144</sup>. Segev identifies this pattern as an Israeli urge “to revive and obliterate Hitler over and over again”<sup>145</sup>. As the Masada Complex would suggest, by framing the conflict with Hezbollah as a conflict with a 21<sup>st</sup> century Hitler, Israel drew on the lessons learnt in the Jewish ‘first’ encounter with Hitler, thus bringing the identity strands of self-reliance and rejection of passivity into play, boosting the Fighting Jew identity.

The second facet of the existential threat was the framing of Hezbollah as a threat to the Israeli way of life and the physical safety of individual Israelis. In his speeches during the summer of 2006 Olmert couched threats to the existence of Israel in terms of threats to “the right to a peaceful and normal life”<sup>146</sup> for Israelis. Olmert quoted David Ben Gurion, stating that Israel’s existence was dependent on its freedom<sup>147</sup>; a freedom which is seen as going to the heart of an Israel’s identity characterised by offering the Jewish people a place to live, free of fear of politically motivated violence and with their own personal safety guaranteed.<sup>148</sup> Thus, for Olmert, Israel’s existence was dependent on the rights of Israelis “to

live safely in [their] own homes, [and] on the streets of [their] cities and towns”<sup>149</sup>. This viewpoint has lead Israel to develop a very broad interpretation of threat to security, and this, coupled with Israel’s deep sense of ‘familism’ means that “the death of a single Israeli [for political reasons] is seen as an attack on a family member and as a personal threat” to all Israel<sup>150</sup>. This ‘familism’ is illustrated by Olmert’s language regarding the imprisoned Israeli soldiers. He described Israel as a nation which counts and grieves for every one of its dead<sup>151</sup> and speaking of the two soldiers imprisoned by Hezbollah, and the one held by Hamas, said<sup>152</sup>:

Pictures of three boys now stand in my room. Many times during the day I look in their faces, into their eyes, and embrace them in my heart. I do not forget them for one minute. They were there on our behalf and for our sake. We will do everything and make every effort to bring them home

The prisoners are framed by Olmert not as men, or as soldiers, but as “boys”; children of Israel, and as such part of the Israeli family<sup>153</sup>, a family which would be incomplete until they were returned “home”. The “boys” were serving “on behalf” of the Israelis, and an attack on them was thus an attack on the family of Israel. Regardless of whether Olmert’s purported attitudes are taken at face value, the speech was clearly expressing the wider Israeli national attitude to its individual citizens. By taking military personnel prisoner and launching rocket attacks into Israeli territory – threatening the personal safety of Israelis – Hezbollah was challenging the tenets of Israel’s being, and thus, challenging it existentially. This last tier further reinforced the sense of existential threat, and in doing so the appropriateness of a policy response congruent with the Fighting Jew identity.

Thirdly, constituted by the memory of past episodes of persecution, the Israeli identity is one of self-reliance – a strong sense of Israel being alone in a hostile world. The combination of a Jewish identity strand of being the ‘people who dwell alone’<sup>154</sup> and a narrative of passivity by the international community<sup>155</sup> – and as some Israelis perceive it, by the Jews themselves<sup>156</sup> -

during previous crises in Jewish history were constructive of a narrative that ultimately the Israelis can only rely on themselves when facing threats from the hostile non-Jewish world<sup>157</sup>. As outlined above, the recent history of the Holocaust (invoked by the associations between Hitler and President Ahmadinejad, and the notion of a broader existential threat) brought the lessons of the Holocaust into focus during 2006. There was a strong sense that the international community was in a state of what Shimon Peres referred to as “paralysis” concerning the Hezbollah problem<sup>158</sup>. In 2006, Peres wrote of Hezbollah:<sup>159</sup>

Israel really is alone. No one else can stop them. And, on the other hand, no one else can defend us. We have to defend ourselves in ... a dangerous world

Olmert<sup>160</sup> expressed similar sentiments. Quoting David Ben Gurion he stated that in the struggle for continued existence, Israelis must “depend first and foremost on ourselves”. The lessons of the narrative of 3000 years of the non-Jewish world offering up the Jews “as prey to the enemy’s jaws”<sup>161</sup> has created a tendency to interpret non-action on the part of the international community very broadly, thus framing threats as requiring self-reliant action on the part of the Israelis. The view that the non-Jewish world is hostile arises out of the lessons from the narrative of the past; that passivity in the face of threat is a form of defeat and subjugation. Compromise by the non-Jewish world is thus tantamount to support for those enemies who wish to destroy Israel. As Olmert stated at the start of the conflict, in a hostile world, “restraint” is interpreted as “weakness”<sup>162</sup>. In the same speech, Olmert framed Israel’s options regarding Hezbollah as two opposing alternatives: “consent to living under the axis of evil” or the mobilisation of “inner strength” and “determination” in a military operation. The alternative to war with Hezbollah was thus framed as submission to the enemy.

These strands also played out in the incorporation of the global ‘war on terror’ into the account of the Hezbollah threat. Olmert stated that Israel’s conflict with Hezbollah was “crucial to all nations of the free world, who struggle against global terror”<sup>163</sup>. Israel was said

to be fighting “the free world’s struggle with terror” a conflict that was positioned within the Israeli narrative of Jewish struggle by analogy with the “struggle of the Zionist movement against terror”<sup>164</sup>. Emphasising that the Hezbollah threat was not a problem of limited scope, Olmert stated that the threat was one that threatened stability not just within Israel, or the Middle East but globally.<sup>165</sup> Positioning the Hezbollah threat as part of the narrative of the War on Terror, Olmert made a comparison between Israel facing the Hezbollah threat and the people of New York enduring the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni framed Hezbollah<sup>166</sup> as part of the “axis of terror and hate” composed of Hezbollah, Hamas, Syria and Iran, a point also made by Defence Minister Amir Peretz<sup>167</sup>. On this framing the Hezbollah threat encompassed not only Hezbollah in Lebanon, but also the strong Palestinian-based threat of Hamas, and Iran, which – as explored above - was seen as posing an explicit existential threat to Israel. In an address to the Knesset, Olmert presented the threat and Israeli response in the terms of a choice:<sup>168</sup>

We are at a national moment of truth. Will we consent to living under the threat of this Axis of Evil or will we mobilise our inner strength and show determination and equanimity?

However, the construction precludes any real choice in foreign policy terms. ‘The possible’ is constructed very narrowly. The former option – “living under the threat of the axis of evil” – is constructed as virtually impossible since compromise with the enemy is tantamount to submission and passive acceptance of what the historical narrative of Jewish vulnerability taught were attacks on the existence of the Jewish-Israeli nation. The ‘axis of evil’ trope, invoking the War on Terror, positions Israel within a ‘War’, the narrative of which was defined by a series of military confrontations with what were framed as international terrorist threats. Since al Qaeda bomb attacks in Africa in 1998, states framing themselves as part of the international community of the ‘free world’ had undertaken military responses to what were framed as international terrorist threats in Sudan, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Chechnya amongst others.<sup>169</sup> The framing of the threat of international terrorism and the response to it

as a ‘War’ on Terror creates – at the most explicit level – a narrative of an ongoing military campaign. Framed in these terms, the Israeli campaign against Hezbollah was merely a battle in an ongoing war. This view was expressed in such terms by George W. Bush, for whom the conflict in Lebanon was expressed as one of three “fronts” in “the global war on terror”<sup>170</sup>. This construction - which frames Israel as one General in a world army, fighting one battle – makes anything other than a military solution nonsensical.

The interaction of these three constituent strands of an Israeli identity of vulnerability made specific policy responses to the Hezbollah threat possible by offering up lessons from the past, as analysed above; lessons which emphasised a Fighting Jew identity strand as a context within which the policy decision to go to war was taken. Support for the military policy response was such that Israeli consensus reached a level in the first month of the campaign not seen since the start of the Yom Kippur War<sup>171</sup> when the Super Jew identity was untarnished and at its peak. Thus far we have seen how the Jewish-Israeli narrative of struggle, the fear of existential threat, and the notion of Israeli self-reliance came together to offer lessons that placed major emphasis on a Fighting Jew identity strand. Next, the analysis clarifies how the manifestations of the Fighting Jew identity strand in the summer of 2006 constituted a context that made the military policy response to the Hezbollah threat more possible or desirable.

Earlier, the analysis explored how the Super Jew identity trope had left the legacy of the identity strand of the Fighting Jew, an identity of faith in and appreciation of the rewards of Israeli military strength. The Fighting Jew identity is the culmination of the narrative of warning; the fruit of the Masada Complex. It is the means by which Israelis can avoid the horrors of the past. As Ben-Gurion<sup>172</sup> put it, it enabled the Israelis to “be reshaped into a

nation of warriors”. This identity has manifested domestically in the centrality of the Israeli Defence Force in Israeli society, which has acted to hold Israeli society together and “has reshaped the way Jews the world over think of themselves”<sup>173</sup>. In 2006, with party politics tarnished by corruption and scandal, the IDF was the one remaining institution trusted by the Israeli population – “public trust” ratings for the IDF were running at 79% compared with 22% for political parties<sup>174</sup>. In direct terms the fighting Jew identity entails a rejection of passivity, a strengthening of Israeli unity and a sense that due to the inner strength, courage and fearlessness of Israelis, existential threats can be overcome through military means. This identity is thus predicated on a military solution to threats to Israel and as such its overwhelming prominence in the summer of 2006 framed a military solution to the Hezbollah threat as both possible and desirable. This was reinforced by the framing of the alternative – a non-military solution – as submission to the enemy and acceptance of their agenda of existential challenge to the state of Israel, as set out above.

Examples of the adoption of the fighting Jew identity in Israeli popular culture were mentioned at the start of this section, but it was also given overwhelming and explicit emphasis by the Israeli government. In his speech at the start of the campaign, Olmert made a direct link between the strength of the state of Israel and the strength of the IDF. His language was heavy with Fighting Jew sentiments, invoking the “strength, determination, valor, sacrifice and dedication” of the Israeli nation, and emphasising the identity of Israel as a nation of united fighters:<sup>175</sup>

...our enemy comes up against a united nation, which fights together, shoulder to shoulder. We do not surrender and we do not panic

A fortnight later, Olmert<sup>176</sup> detailed the last moments of Roi Klein<sup>177</sup>, a deputy commander in the IDF who had been killed in action:

Roi, who was leading his fighters, jumped on the grenade thrown at them, absorbed the force of the explosion on his body and saved the lives of his fighters. He still had the chance to murmur “Hear O Israel, the Lord God, the Lord is One” and asked the signal operator to report his death. This is how he died.

This account positions Roi Klein as the embodied epitome of the Fighting Jew: as the brave warrior making the ultimate sacrifice for the Israeli nation. This frames him as a modern day war hero and positions him within the narrative of military successes remembered through the bravery and sacrifices of past Israeli war heroes.<sup>178</sup> A link is therefore created between the present conflict and the past, particularly the Six Day War when the notion of the Israeli war hero became most resonant in Israeli society as a representation of the Super Jew identity. The framing of Roi Klein, a representative of Israel and part of the Israeli family, as the embodiment of the Fighting Jew identity is indicative of the importance of this identity strand. Crucially, the comparable fates of the two soldiers detained by Hezbollah on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July tapped into a very different identity strand – as discussed above. This is important because it constructed a potent mix of familism (the need to protect, at whatever cost, the captured members of the Israeli ‘family’) and military confidence.

As discussed earlier, hostility has been defined very broadly within the Israeli identity of vulnerability to encompass apathy by the non-Jewish international community, which is seen as tantamount to support for enemies of Israel. Within the War on Terror this shifted. Threat was framed as emanating from the “Axis of Evil”<sup>179</sup> or the international movement of “hatred and tyranny”<sup>180</sup> – perceived as an organised alliance stretching far beyond the established regional Arab threat. Therefore, in the era of the War on Terror the world became hostile not merely because it was populated by apathetic appeasers of Israel’s regional Arab enemy, but

because it was populated by the antithetical “evil other”<sup>181</sup> On another level, the belief that appeasement is tantamount to support acted to make anything other than the most extreme measure against the ‘Axis of Evil’ fundamentally incompatible with the Israeli identity. By framing the identity other as ‘Evil’, any policy response that could be construed as apathetic would be dichotomous to the Israeli identity; implicating it in the ‘Evil’ it opposed.<sup>182</sup> The impossibility of anything other than an absolute rejection of the antithetical other is illustrated by George W. Bush’s well known Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 2001<sup>183</sup>, in which he framed the new War on Terror as entailing a choice for every nation of the world: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”. Anything other than absolute adherence to the identity of the self is demonstrative of a realignment of the identity toward that of the antithetical ‘evil other’.

## CONCLUSION

The leadership acts within a world of myths and monsters of its own creation

Israeli columnist Boaz Evron made this observation regarding Israel’s policymakers in 1980<sup>184</sup>. Written ten years before constructivism became influential within International Relations, and made in a spirit of journalistic rhetoric, it nevertheless captures in popular terms the way in which “myths” and “monsters” which populate the political world, define and are defined by a state’s identity and in doing so, work to entail policy choices. This article has sought to illuminate this process, examining the way in which strands of meaning, constructive of a collective sense of self, emerged out of historical continuities, interacted and were made meaningful in relation to each other around the issue of the Hezbollah threat in 2006. They framed, contextualised and constituted that policy issue to form a situated and contingent identity of the possible, within which the policy decisions that produced the second Lebanon war were taken. The decision to go to war occurred within the context of a particular understanding of the Israeli self articulated by Kadima, and observable during their

election campaign. Particularly prominent in the constitution of this policy context were ideas of Israeli vulnerability combined with the narrative of the Fighting Jew, ideas which came up against and were rearticulated in the context of the global 'war on terror'. The way in which the decision was grounded in a vision of the Israeli self which emphasised certain specific meanings, made certain policy responses possible or desirable.

The IDF was seen within Israel as having lost the second Lebanon war.<sup>185</sup> Even whilst it was still being waged the conflict was being framed within the narrative of the Israeli nation – not as a triumphant return to the remembered glories of the Six Day War, but as military – and national – failure. It became another event to be incorporated into the Israeli understanding of self: another emergent myth to populate the terrain of meaning within which policy decisions are defined and taken.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example: Amos Harel & Avi Issacharoff, *34 Days: Israel, Hezbollah, and the War in Lebanon* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Dalia Gavriely-Nuri, "The 'metaphorical annihilation' of the Second Lebanon War (2006) from the Israeli political discourse", *Discourse and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2008), pp. 5-201; Katy Parry, "A visual framing analysis of British press photography during the 2006 Israel- Lebanon conflict", *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2010), pp. 67-85; Gil Merom, "The Second Lebanon War: Democratic Lessons Imperfectly Applied", *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2008), pp. 5-33; Yagil Levy, *Israel's Materialist Militarism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State", *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2 (1994), pp. 384-396; Peter Katzenstein, "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security", in P. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations", *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (1998), p. 181, 183.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Michael Barnett, 'Social Constructivism', in J. Baylis & S. Smith (eds.), *The Globalisation of World Politics: And Introduction to International Relations*, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 258

<sup>4</sup> Hopf, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> Dale C. Copeland, "The Constructivist Challenge to Structural Realism", *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2000), p. 189.

<sup>6</sup> Hopf, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> Copeland, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

<sup>8</sup> David Patrick Houghton, "Reinvigorating the Study of Foreign Policy Decision Making: Toward a Constructivist Approach", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2007), p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Hopf, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>10</sup> Jutta Weldes, "Constructing National Interest", *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1996), pp. 275-318.

<sup>11</sup> Hopf, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

- <sup>14</sup> Shibley Telhami & Michael N. Barnett, "Introduction: Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East", in S. Telhami & M. N. Barnett (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 8.
- <sup>15</sup> Michael N. Barnett, "The Israeli Identity and the Peace Process: Re/creating the Un/thinkable", in S. Telhami & M. N. Barnett (eds.), *Identity and Foreign Policy in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 61.
- <sup>16</sup> Telhami & Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>17</sup> Martha Finnemore & Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4 (2001), p. 399.
- <sup>18</sup> Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 70-87.
- <sup>19</sup> Finnemore & Sikkink, *op. cit.*, p. 394
- <sup>20</sup> Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 60.
- <sup>21</sup> Telhami & Barnett, *op. cit.* pp. 8-9. See also: Barnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.
- <sup>22</sup> Barnett, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- <sup>30</sup> Finnemore & Sikkink, *op. cit.*, p. 394.
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- <sup>64</sup> Alan Dowty, "Zionism's Greatest Conceit", *Israel Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1998), p. 2.
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- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
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