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When Victimhood Goes to War? Israel and Victim Claims

Tadek Markiewicz (iD)
University of Kent

Keren Sharvit (iD)
University of Haifa

Prominent sociopsychological approaches interpret collective victimhood as inseparable, central characteristic of societies involved in intractable conflicts. Victimhood is broadly perceived as an essential conflict-supportive belief also in other disciplines. In the context of Israel, there is a cross-disciplinary consensus that collective victimhood is the country's foundational identity. This project argues that states' employment of this theme changes and is context dependent. It discusses under what conditions Israel's political elites incorporate victim narratives towards armed conflicts. It examines public communication during the 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense (OPD) and the Yom Kippur war of 1973 (YKW). Employing a modified method of narrative conceptualization analysis, the research demonstrates that victim narratives were used almost twice as much during OPD than during YKW. The findings suggest that we need to differentiate between the role these narratives play for collectives versus states. For the latter, the presence of victim narratives is highly variable and reflects strategic developments. The project is the first systematic study exposing that victim narratives can be a challenge for governance. By conceptualizing victim narratives as claims, it captures the dynamic, contextual characteristics of collective victimhood in state affairs offering a theoretical tool for understanding the political dimension of this identification.

KEY WORDS: victimhood, Israel, conflicts, International Relations

While the sociopsychological literature offers an impressive range of studies on the role of collective victimhood in intractable conflicts (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1998b; Cohrs, McNeill, & Vollhardt, 2015; Noor, Shnabel, Halabi, & Nadler, 2012; Oren, Nets-Zehngut, & Bar-Tal, 2015; Shnabel, Halabi, & Noor, 2013), it has not assessed its role during periods of escalation of conflicts, such as wars and military operations. Collective victimhood is conceptualized as a central characteristic of the community engulfed by conflict (e.g., Bar-Tal, Chernyak-Hai, Schori, & Gundar, 2009), an inseparable element of its ethos (Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). In most cases it has been analyzed as a phenomenon reflecting intergroup/ingroup perceptions (e.g., Noor et al., 2012). This article highlights the importance of analyzing the political dimension of victimhood. It is argued that victimhood can be a theme of statecraft—that it is not solely a shared societal belief but also a motif employed by the ruling class to influence their constituents.

This article will explore how victimhood is employed by Israel's state elites during armed conflicts. It concentrates on the examination of the conditions under which Israel's state elites incorporate victim narratives in public communication. It is theorized that for the state, victimhood is

a claim. Namely, a particular narrative expressing a desire to be recognized as a bearer of a victim status and to gain benefits associated with it. The focal point of this project is to expose the differences between narratives during full-blown interstate wars versus military operations (i.e., conflicts that do not endanger the country's existence). In order to understand the factors influencing the state's employment of victim claims, the article is based on a comparative study of two different armed conflicts of Israel: the Yom Kippur war (YKW) of 1973 and Operation Pillar of Defence (OPD) from 2012.

This article will first address the existing literature regarding victimhood and its place in society and politics. Next, we discuss the role of victimhood in intractable conflicts. The subsequent section outlines the knowledge gaps in the field of victimhood studies in politics and armed conflicts. Later, we introduce the research problem and the concept of victim claims. Finally, we discuss the research context and methodology, results of the study, and our interpretation and limitations.

Victimhood and Conflicts

In the sociopsychological literature, collective victimhood is often considered to be one of the central societal beliefs or cognitions regarding the situatedness of the collective involved in protracted conflicts (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1998a; Hareven, 1983). It is understood as a group identity built on a sense of victimization (Bar-Tal et al., 2009); consequently it is a belief that does not have to reflect a direct experience of victimization. Sense of victimhood proliferates in society through victim narratives, that is, accounts or stories of victims' experience. These narratives are a platform through which individuals and groups share their stories and externalize their status (e.g., Bilali & Ross, 2012). For societies involved in protracted and intractable conflicts, it is a central element of their cognitive repertoire that permeates the ingroup through public debate, media, and education (Bar-Tal, 1998b, 2000; Hammack, 2009).

According to Bar-Tal et al. (2009), there are eight characteristic functions collective victimhood fulfils for groups involved in conflicts. First, a victim provides the sense of being to explanations regarding the ongoing intergroup struggle. Second, it helps to cope with stress by providing a meaningful narrative of the events. Third, a sense of victimhood offers moral justification for violent acts seen as preventing additional victimization. Fourth, it contributes to establishing the ingroup's differentiation and superiority by portraying the rivals as vile and violent, while idealizing the ingroup. Fifth, collective victimhood prepares and immunizes society against potential harms and harsh everyday conditions. Sixth, it strengthens ingroup solidarity by stressing potential dangers. Seventh, it promotes patriotism and mobilization. Finally, collective victimhood helps the ingroup gain international support. Other studies, while proposing a less comprehensive outlook on the functions of collective victimhood in protracted conflicts, generally concur with Bar-Tal et al.'s observations (e.g., Nadler & Saguy, 2004; Simon & Klandermans, 2001).

Victimhood Culture

In the political context, victim status can be functional and employed by states not only due to the identifications of the collective but because of more pragmatic considerations. In a time that idealizes victims, a sense of victimhood can be exaggerated or misrepresented by interest groups (e.g., Berbrier, 2000). The victim chic can lead to a perverse monetization of victims by state actors. In media studies (Illouz, 2003), political thought (Žižek, 2010), sociology (Campbell & Manning, 2014), and human rights studies (Meister, 2002), there is a growing concern about the appropriations and calculative political employment of victim status.

Political elites exploit society's fear of victimization to gain support and increase the community's coherence (Elias, 1986, p. 3). Moreover, since victimized groups gain sympathy on the

international arena, state actors sometimes "aspire" to the status of a victim. This practice is especially pervasive during military struggles (Kuperman & Crawford, 2006). Both Meister (2002) and Cunliffe (2010) argue that human rights may be used by the mighty against the weak and serve as a new rationale for war. Cunliffe (2010) warns against a politicized "ideology of victimization," pointing that we should be cautious whenever state actors incorporate victim narratives in their message.

Victimhood may be a useful status, facilitating social advancement and boosting the image of individuals and groups. Consequently, groups often treat victim identifications as a resource and try to establish themselves as a collective that was hurt more than its opponents (Noor et al., 2012; Noor, Vollhardt, Mari, & Nadler, 2017). Some scholars conclude that a sense of victimhood is emerging as a distinct, central characteristic of our times. Describing the effective employment of victim discourse in strategies of political conservatism, Convery (2006) talks about the "cult of victimhood"; Fassin and Rechtman (2009) write about the "Empire of Trauma," a modern society built on victims being treated as an unassailable moral category; and Campbell and Manning (2014) warn against the "Culture of Victimhood" ascending in American life. In his foundational work on the epistemology of history, Koselleck (2002) links the experience and heritage of victimization with the strength, innovativeness and civilizational tenacity. Clarke (2018) shows that a victimhood theme may be used as a tool of political advocacy for groups of interest. Research findings in social psychology stress the importance of scrutinizing the political consequences of victim identifications. Zitek, Jordan, Monin, and Leach (2010) warn that victimization can lead to feelings of entitlement, while Gray and Wegner (2011) show it can be used to escape blame for wrongdoing.[1]

The Research Gap: The Centrality and Passivity of Victimhood

While previous studies have illuminated the role of collective victimhood as part of the general mindset of societies involved in protracted or intractable conflicts, they did not differentiate between the usages of this theme in times of relative calm and during active military clashes. Additional research has examined the function of collective victimhood in postconflict settings such as Northern Ireland (Cohrs et al., 2015) or Serbia and Croatia (Volkan, 1997) and showed how it impacts intergroup reconciliation and conflict management (Vollhardt, 2015). However, limited attention has been dedicated to the issue of collective victimhood during war, even though it can play a crucial role in such instances. One's victimhood is one of the most common shared beliefs justifying wars. It is omnipresent in the discourse of both strong (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009; Pratkanis, 2009) and weak belligerents (e.g., Kuperman, 2009; Toal, 2017). While we know that states employ a sense of collective victimhood during armed conflicts, we do not know the reasons behind this practice. The conditions under which states abstain or employ narratives of victimhood have not been researched systematically and remain an uncharted practice of war making. We need to account for its role in interstate relations.

Moreover, past studies have not evaluated the actual application of sense of victimhood by states in service of their particular needs. Jacoby (2015) argues that "International Relations is particularly glaring in its short supply of theories of victimhood given its focus on the most abominable cases of mass violence and human suffering" (p. 514). While sociopsychological conceptualizations provide an invaluable understanding of the different functions that group-based victimhood plays for collectives (e.g., Cohrs et al., 2015; Noor et al., 2012), they do not address the state-focused political dimensions of victimhood narratives.

Furthermore, previous research focused on the motivating aspects of collective victimhood while ignoring possible demotivating implications of the "victim card." Collective victimhood is

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[1]Both studies investigated the effects of victimhood at the individual level. Findings at the individual level are not always applicable to the broader collective (Vollhardt, 2012). Nevertheless, we believe these studies are telling examples of the double-edged consequences of a sense of victimhood.

conceptualized as a "conflict supportive" platform (Oren et al., 2015) that helps collectives to cope with conflict, providing a predictable image of the situation (Bar-Tal et al., 2009). The pervasiveness of collective victimhood is illustrated by research on groups sharing this identification without directly experiencing victimization (Bar-Tal, 2000; Noor et al., 2017; Wayment, 2004; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Consequently, group-focused research interprets the sense of victimhood as a lasting prism through which individuals understand their surroundings (Bar-Tal et al., 2009; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). While this may be the case for the members of the collective, a theme of victimhood in the political context reflects not only identifications of the group but also the situatedness of the state. Collective perception of victimhood can be used by states as leverage, or it may be treated as an obstacle. It may be a motivating, conflict-supporting narrative or just the opposite—a poignant reminder of the country's incompetence, a source of ontological fear (see Mitzen, 2006) that undermines peoples' need for predictable surroundings. Consequently, there is a need for a systematic inquiry of the political applications of this belief.

More importantly, the literature often overlooks the possibility of instrumental implementation of the collective perception of victimhood. This perspective is related to the post-World War II gradual idealization of victims (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Enns (2012) warns that the victim is "capable of any degree of violence is almost never considered" (p. 24). She calls for scrutiny of victim status and argues that we too rarely question the moral authority we grant to groups using victimhood. Interestingly, Convery's (2006) extensive analysis of victimhood framing by feminist journals shows that they tend to simplify perceptions of victimhood by presenting victims of domestic violence, crime, and so on as passive, helpless, and weak. Similarly, political scientists often associate victimhood with inaction, passivity, and a weak actor's desperation. Such overarching narratives can be found in *The Cult of True Victimhood* by Cole (2007) or *Introduction to Political Theory* by Hoffman and Graham (2015).

This study draws on literature that accentuates the competitive dynamics of actors involved in conflicts (Schopler et al., 2001; Sherif, 1966) and the rivalry driving belligerent groups to establish their victim status (Noor et al., 2012). Since collective victimhood reflects not only a group's deprivation but also its desires (McNeill, Pehrson, & Stevenson, 2017), the logic behind its political implementation is more complex than what is sometimes anticipated. Sometimes a group's victim identity is not solely an unwanted outcome of a calamitous past but a useful status through which they can fulfil broader aspirations.

Victim Claims

In the context of Western democracies, there is a growing concern with the misuse and calculative employment of victim status (e.g., Amir, 2012; Sykes, 1992). Victimhood is increasingly associated not only with the lack of agency but also political initiative (e.g., Campbell & Manning, 2014). Yet victimhood is rarely conceptualized as a theme of statecraft. This study investigates the role of collective victimhood in armed conflicts, with the aim of exposing the political mechanisms behind state employment of this identification. While the sociopsychological literature perceives victim narratives as inseparable, invariable, and central for societies involved in intractable conflicts, there is a need to assess how state actors utilize this identification. Due to the memory of the Holocaust and ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, victimhood plays a central role in Israeli society. Therefore, we propose the following research question: Under what conditions do Israel's political and military elites incorporate victim narratives into public communication of a country's armed conflicts?

We focus on victim narratives, which are understood as *claims*. Following the constructionist sociological perspective coined by Holstein and Miller (1990), victim claims are a rhetorical device that describes an actor as a victim. They "constitute rather than report victims and victimization" (p. 121). They are an assertion about the world and a process of an actor negotiating its status with the

audience—not an unassailable moral category. This term reflects that the present research analyzes the political logics behind states' implementation of victim narratives. It is coined due to three reasons. One, it points out the key characteristic of victimhood, which in order to become "reality"—a social fact—need not only to be presented to the public domain but also externally recognized. They are an attempt to socially institutionalize victim status.

Second, drawing on McNeill (2014), the article does not refer to victim stories as expressions of needs. Instead, it is argued that political expressions of victimhood are subjective, self-referential expressions of desires—meaning that victim narratives are not necessary a sign of deprivation of the ingroup's basic needs (see Shnabel & Nadler, 2008) but implicitly express other goals.

Third, the concept of victim claims captures the political, ideational character of victimhood identification. It is seen as a process, not a static and objectively constituted phenomenon (Holstein & Miller, 1990). Thus, there is nothing objective in group victimhood: "Collectives that are strong and powerful . . . still perceive themselves as victims . . . in the conflict" (Bar-Tal et al., 2009, p. 241). States' aspiration of gaining victim status may be disconnected from harm experienced by the group or not recognised externally. Furthermore, victimized states may not make victim claims.

When Victimhood Goes to War

It is suggested that collective victimhood can not only be the group's modus vivendi but also states' modus operandi. The research focuses on the war-time employment of theme of victimhood predominantly because armed conflicts are a phenomenon exposing the fundamental reasoning behind state making. Since they challenge the state's standing, they are a unique instance that makes the political actor more calculative and pragmatic. Wars as "an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will" (Clausewitz, 1997, p. 5) are a laboratory of sociopolitical enabling. The state's role in the life of the collective, as the possessor of a monopoly on violence, is exponentially augmented during armed clashes. States employ a vast array of tools and draw on collective identities in order to achieve their goals. Consequently, the analysis of the war-time employment of collective victimhood can be particularly instructive in our efforts to better understand sociopolitical functionalities of this narrative.

The authors argue that the concept of victim claims helps to uncover context-dependent characteristics driving political implementations of collective victimhood. Furthermore, the concept helps to theorize collective victimhood as a distinct theme of statecraft. Governance can be linked with victimhood by looking at states' practice of justifying wars. Pratkanis (2009) notes that war propaganda is often based on references to true/manufactured harm to the ingroup. Such conflict-instigating narratives were crucial before the genocide in Rwanda, the outbreak of World War I, during the Yugoslav wars, or the First Gulf War. Kuperman and Crawford (2006) look at the collective victimhood of weak actors and show that paradoxically, they can use victimization to their benefit. Drawing on the case of Bosnia, Kosovo, and Darfur, they expose pragmatism of weak actors employing self-perceived victimhood "strategically" in order to gain international support.

The motivation for the present study is to investigate how the standing of the state may change the role of victim claims as a tool of statecraft. The authors argue that during armed conflicts that threaten the existence of a belligerent, victim claims are less persistent in its public communication than during operations that do not pose a serious threat to its welfare. Building on Kuperman and Crawford's (2006) investigations of strategic dimension of victimhood, it is contended that during warfare, political elites' usage of victim narratives weakens if their party's mere existence is endangered. Even though the victimhood ethos is a useful tool in advocating for gaining support of actors uninvolved in the conflict, in cases in which the survival of the belligerent is endangered, it is likely they will refrain from using this narrative. The entity that fights for its survival becomes preoccupied with short-term goals such as motivating its soldiers/citizens in resistance and organizing military

operations. When warfare becomes a "life or death" equation, suddenly victim claims are unnecessary baggage for decision-makers. Not only can they cripple the morale of belligerent's forces but also boost the enemy's frame of mind.

The Research Context: Israel and Victim Narratives

The research reported in this article was conducted in Israel. Collective victimhood is present in most Western societies; nevertheless, it is more persistent in some countries. Israel—often referred to as the "Jew among nations"—is an exemplary case of a society whose identity is deeply rooted in victimhood (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1998a; Zertal, 2005). The importance of sense of victimhood in Israeli society has been extensively researched. According to Enns (2012), the tragedies of the Holocaust and Masada are omnipresent in Israel's public life. Amir (2012) claims that post-Holocaust victim narratives dominate Jewish thought and are used to legitimize Israel's regional politics. The country's relationship with the Holocaust is a major topic for psychologists (e.g., Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), sociologists (e.g., Bauman, 1991), and historians (e.g., Segev, 2000, 2007). The Holocaust and collective victimhood are salient components of the Israeli psyche (e.g., Bar-Tal, 1998b; Smooha, 1987). They are omnipresent points of reference for the state's major political debates (Amir, 2012). Enns (2012) infers that the Jewish experience symbolizes absolute victimhood. Hareven (1983) compares Jews to biblical Cain, noting that one of the dominating traits among Israelis is the need to avert the victim role.

Apart from the historical perils experienced by the Jews, another salient factor that discursively justifies Israel's victim status is the ongoing intractable conflict with Palestinians and their Arab allies (e.g., Nyhan & Zeitzoff, 2018; Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014). It is argued that the Palestinian issue invigorates the presence of victim narratives in the public sphere (Bar-Tal, 1998a).

Methodology

In order to examine the role of victim claims vis-à-vis military conflicts, the authors conducted an intraunit (Israel) comparative study (e.g., Lijphart, 1975) of two armed conflicts: the YKW of 1973 and OPD from 2012. The rationale for choosing YKW and OPD follows the most similar system design, where the researcher finds factors that account for the variance between two related cases (Przeworski & Teune, 1970). The project looks at "two instances of the same subclass" (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 83), namely two cases of Israel's involvement in armed conflict.[2] YKW and OPD are distinctively different in scale. The first conflict was a full-blown war that involved several international actors, while the second was a military operation of one state actor against nonstate armed militias. However, since it is hypothesized that the scale of danger posed by military conflict influences belligerents' use of victim claims, the size of the clash serving as a case study does not have to be the same. Furthermore, in light of the stated hypothesis, it is crucial to compare conflicts differing in the scale of danger they posed to Israel. The YKW–OPD comparison fulfils this requirement well.

The study seeks to compare the use of victim narratives in Israel's public communication between a case characterized by high (perceived) geostrategic threat and a case characterized by lesser threat. By comparing the YKW and OPD, we examine whether Israel used victim narratives to a greater extent during OPD than during YKW. This operational hypothesis will serve as a test of the theoretical prediction, that during military conflicts that threaten the existence of the belligerent,

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[2]Casing methods are one of the most contested elements of comparative designs (see Sartori, 1991). However, the project is based on a methodological assumption that intraunit (sometimes mistakenly defined as single case study) small-*n* comparisons may actually be more productive than interunit research, precisely because they provide higher degree of similarity (e.g., Smelser, 1973) and better capture causal relations (Collier & Mahoney, 1996).

victim narratives are less prevalent in its public communication than during operations that do not pose a serious threat to its welfare.

The Selection of Cases

YKW was strategically the most perilous and socially the most traumatic war Israelis have experienced (e.g., Bar-On, 2012; Rabinovich, 2005). Bar-Joseph (1999) underlines that one of the reasons of the "Yom Kippur trauma" was that on the eve of the Arab attack, the country's intelligence was convinced that war was improbable. He compares the scale of this intelligence failure to Pearl Harbor (Bar-Joseph, personal communication, November 25, 2013). Israelis were shocked and overwhelmed by the advancement of the Arab forces. Some of the country's decision-makers such as the Minister of Defense Moshe Dayan (Bar-On, 2012) or Prime Minister Golda Meir lost their nerves following developments on the front (Burkett, 2008). Dayan famously announced endangerment of "The Third Temple," by which he meant the Jewish state (2008, p. 324).

OPD was a military retaliation to rocket attacks by Hamas militants. In terms of geopolitics, the future of the "Third Temple" was not questioned. The beginning and the end of the operation solely depended on the fulfilment of IDF's strategic goals, and Hamas' influence on Israel's modus operandi was limited. Also, the scale of power relations among the actors of these conflicts were significantly different. While OPD for Israel was a limited aerial campaign conducted by the Air Force, the YKW engaged the whole strength of the IDF's standing army and thousands of its reservists. During OPD, Israel's enemy was Hamas and its several thousand fighters, while during the YKW the IDF faced a coordinated attack by the Syrian and Egyptian armies, side by side with small forces from Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, North Korea, and Sudan. Furthermore, Israeli casualties of OPD were limited, six people died, two of which were soldiers (Consulate General of Israel in NY, 2012). Conversely, Israeli losses during the YKW were significant—2688 soldiers died (Israel MFA, n.d.).

Materials

The authors performed a comparative study of statements, opinions, and commentary by Israeli political elites, as appeared in articles published in two newspapers over the duration of the conflicts: *The New York Times* (NYT) and *The Jerusalem Post* (JP). By combining materials from a domestic and an international newspaper, the authors aimed to minimize potential biases of Israeli media's "self-reporting" and to provide a more diverse media coverage. The analysis of elite statements as covered by the media provides a broad range of political commentary about the conflict. It permits access to multiple views of the country's elite.

In the case of the YKW, the authors analyzed coverage from October 7, 1973, to October 25, 1973 and for OPD from November 15, 2012, to November 22, 2012. Articles published in JP and NYT during the YKW were accessed via the microfilm collection of the University of Haifa's Younes and Soraya Nazarian Library. JP and NYT reporting on OPD was gathered through digital archives of the newspapers. The coverage from the first to the last day of each conflict was examined. All issues of JP and NYT published during the YKW and OPD were studied. The aim of this query was to gather all items dedicated to ongoing military operations. Next, authors closely read the collected articles and located unedited, unabridged quotations taken from public officials. Overall, 898 relevant articles were located and studied: 695 articles concerned the YKW—388 were published by JP, 307 by NYT; 203 articles dealt with OPD—173 were published by JP, 30 by NYT. While the collection of articles regarding the YKW (695) was more than three times as big as the one about OPD (203), the amount of comments that fulfilled the criteria of the research design was almost identical

for both conflicts (112 for the YKW and 89 for OPD). Consequently, the ratio of included statements is significantly lower for the YKW than for OPD.[3]

Analytic Method

The analysis concentrated on statements, opinions, and commentary by the Israeli political elites about the ongoing military struggle. Authors ignored editors' commentary and journalistic descriptions and focused on Israel's public communication. Only official discourse was evaluated. Anonymous opinions were excluded from the analysis. All political elites' descriptions of the fight were collected. Next step was an analysis of the texts in search of victim claims. The authors collected every comment regarding the ongoing fight that fulfilled the research criteria stipulated earlier. Narratives were categorized into three groups: (1) comments where victim claims are the main point of speakers' argument; (2) comments where victim claims are one of the speaker's arguments; and (3) comments where victim claims are absent.

The criteria for identifying victim claims were inferred from three streams of the literature. The authors took guidance from sociopsychological research such as Bar-Tal's (e.g., 1998b) fundamental articles on intractable conflicts and rely on victimology (e.g., the classical work by Elias, 1986). Lastly, the understanding of victim claims was formed by the sociological interactional approach to victimhood (Holstein & Miller, 1990). Based on this multidisciplinary review, victim claims are conceptualized to include expressions of misfortune, suffering, and loss, as well as feelings of helplessness and self-pity, a tendency to blame external factors for the perilous situation, and a conviction about being a target of harmful actions.

The text analysis follows Shenhav's (2015) works on narratives—understood as a "succession of events" (p. 19). The project's toolbox employs a modified version of the technique of narrative conceptualization analysis. Instead of identifying the analyzed concept (victim claims) through a set of key words—that the researcher a priori identifies as "referring to the concept under examination" (Shenhav, 2004, p. 84)—it approaches the text from the perspective of thick-level analysis (Shenhav, 2005). The authors examined "narrative knots"—the broader textual units that derive their meaning from components such as descriptions of events and political actors. This technique identifies victim claims not by singular designates—key words that may be constitutive of collective victimhood—but by broader story-telling practices.

Collective victimhood can arise through explicit victim-experience pronunciations, or it may emerge implicitly. A researcher may detect it by being attuned to the relation of the text and its sociohistorical surroundings (see Shenhav, 2015). This approach reflects the authors' recognition of the complexity of victim claims as a concept which can come about through a broad set of designates. Actors may signify their claimed victimhood employing different practices. They may directly talk about being harmed or traumatized. However, they may also refer to events that only subjectively (from the ingroup perspective) led to victimization. Some descriptions of victimhood require a tacit knowledge about the collective and could not be detected by more traditional text-analysis methods, like content analysis (see Holsti, 1969). For instance, there are references to the UN in the Israeli slang. Often when Israelis compare behavior of their politicians with the UN, they actually want to express a critical view. When they want to say that something is nonsense, they may say it is like "Um-Shmum" (derogatory reference to the UN) which signifies dismissal of the politics. It also reflects an opinion in Israel that the UN is biased and applies double standards to the country. Consequently, when Israelis are referring to the "UN treatment" of their nation, they may mean that

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[3]The reason for that is associated with the evolution of journalism. JP and NYT account of YKW was stylistically different than during OPD. In the case of OPD, it was easier to find statements that fulfilled the requirements of the research design.
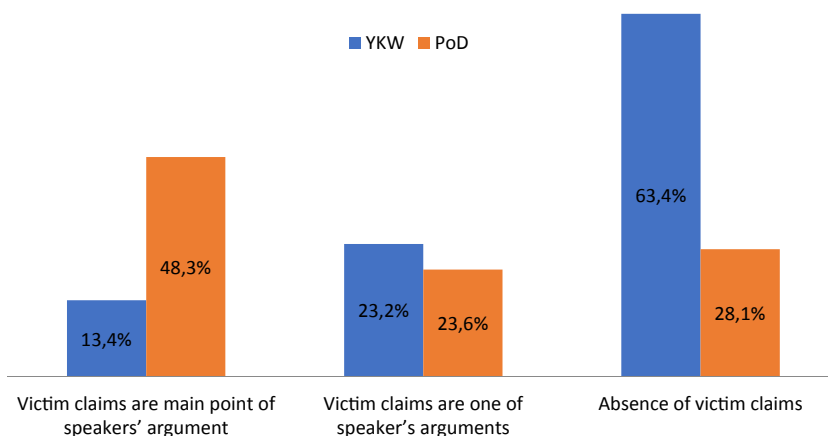
Figure 1. Presence of victim claims in Israel's political elites' comments about Yom Kippur War/Operation Pillar of Defense.

they are being victimized by the unfair approach of foreign diplomats. Furthermore, since authors analyze victim claims from the state perspective, the project looks at victimhood at the societal (macro) level of analysis. Victim claims are often highly politicized shared beliefs. They may arise through descriptions of direct victimization; however, they may also refer to indirectly experienced victimization (see Elcheroth, 2006). Consequently, when looking for victim narratives, researchers have to pay attention to cultural tropes and references to historical events that bring about associations of victimhood indirectly.

This approach entails that authors are performing an interpretive analysis (e.g., Geertz, 1993) of meaning. The analysis of texts is not linear but iterative and recursive. Following hermeneutic tradition, texts are studied multiple times until no new insights arise from the analysis. This orientation provides a robust, contextualized "thick" analysis of the evidence (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013).

Findings

Of 695 articles that covered the YKW, 112 comments fulfilled the research design criteria (44 in NYT, 68 in JP). In 15 cases (13.4% of included statements) the main point in the speakers' argument regarding the conflict was a victim claim. Twenty-six comments (23.2%) included victim narrative as one of speaker's argument. Seventy-one comments (63.4%) did not include such narration whatsoever.

In 203 articles that covered OPD, authors found 89 comments that fulfilled the criteria of the research design (18 in NYT, 71 in JP). In 43 cases (48.3%) the main point of the speakers' argument regarding the conflict was a victim claim. Twenty-one comments (23.6%) included sense of victimhood as one of the speaker's argument. Twenty-five comments (28.1%) did not include victim claims (see Figure 1). The distribution of statements into the three categories was significantly different between YKW and OPD ($\chi^2(2) = 33.90$, $p < .001$).

The comparison of the data provides support to the article's hypothesis: Israel's political elites used more victim narratives during OPD than during the YKW. During the YKW, Israeli elites mostly avoided the usage of victim claims—in 63.4% of comments they were absent. During the OPD they occurred (with different intensity) in 71.9% of cases. Thus, political elites used victim claims almost twice as much during OPD compared to the YKW.

Analysis: Examples

Examples of comments analyzed for the project are listed below, the first two dealing with OPD, while the latter concerns the YKW. The section illustrates the reasoning behind the categorization of the comments.

Example 1. Comment where a victim claim is the main point of the speakers' argument.

Our intention is not to raise the flames, but already for days, day and night, they are shooting rockets at Israel. Women and children cannot sleep at night . . . I visited Sderot this morning and saw with my own eyes the pain of these mothers and children, and the difficulty the South is facing. You know, there are limits. So, I want you to know and I wanted to explain our motives. (President of Israel Shimon Peres quoted in Lazaroff, 2012)

These comments are categorized as a case where victimhood identification plays a central role in the speaker's narration. What is typical for the victimized self-perception is the conviction in one's superiority and innocence. Peres underlines that the Israelis' intention during the OPD is not to "raise the flames." Israel as a party involved in armed struggle is innocent because Hamas is "day and night" "shooting rockets at Israel." Peres devotes much effort to describing Israelis' sufferings caused by enemies.

Example 2. Comment where victim claim is one of speaker's arguments but not a main argument.

Ronnie Bar-On, Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee chairman during OPD conveys a more complex message:

The residents of the South are in the real line of fire, and only their strength will allow the IDF to exercise its capabilities. Israel is passing on a clear message to terrorist organizations in Gaza that disrupting life in the South will not continue. . . . [air force] is crushing Hamas and strengthening Israel's deterrence. . . . the State of Israel has no intention or desire to harm Gaza residents that are not involved in terrorism. (Harkov, 2012)

On one hand, Bar-On portrays Israeli citizens as obvious victims of ongoing hostilities: "The residents of the South are in the real line of fire." However, he does not hesitate to also present his country as an efficient military power. He states that the country's air force "is crushing Hamas" and speaks about Israel's deterrence capabilities. This comment is categorized as containing victim claims alongside other crucial narrations.

Example 3. Comment where a victim claim is absent.

Moshe Dayan, Israel's defense minister during the YKW presents a different take on the country's struggles:

Dayan last night predicted that the Syrian front would be "finished for all practical purposes" . . . . "I think that Syrians are practically broken. You can see their forces on this front withdrawing or running away. Those which remain have no military value on this front. We have to teach the Syrians a lesson—that the road from Damascus to Eretz Yisrael, also leads from Eretz Yisrael to Damascus." (Jerusalem Post, 1973)

Dayan concentrates solely on Israeli offensives. He underscores that the IDF managed to break Syrian leadership. He mentions military successes, underlining that the enemy is "running away" and that the Syrian forces left on the front do not have "military value." In contrast with the first two examples, the commander avoids describing hostilities from the opponent and does not mention Jewish sufferings. He does not blame external factors for the ongoing offensive. Consequently, this comment is categorized as free of victim claims.

For additional examples see the online supporting information.

Discussion

The findings suggest that during the YKW and OPD Israel's political elites incorporated victim claims into public communication selectively. The study demonstrates the context-dependent, political functionalities of victim narratives. Israel avoided using such narratives during the YKW—a full-blown, multifrontal war that could considerably endanger the well-being of Israelis and that in elites' perception posed a threat to the country's existence (Kumaraswamy, 2000). Conversely, during OPD—a limited aerial military operation that posed considerably less danger to the state and its citizens—victim claims were omnipresent.

The article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of collective victimhood in Israeli society. It challenges previous works which emphasized the dominating influence of victimhood in Israeli culture, politics, and education and portrayed it as a central building block of the Israeli psyche (e.g., Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992; Smooha, 1987). The new wave of critical rereadings of the role of Holocaust in the state's politics accuses the state of systematic employment of the tragedy (e.g., Bauman, 1991; Burg, 2008). A sense of victimhood is believed to be one of the main motivations behind state actions, a motif extensively "utilized" by the country's elites, often to the detriment of the whole society (e.g., Segev, 2007). If the centrality of collective victimhood is as dominant and context independent as previous works suggest, then state representatives should not hesitate to use victim claims to describe an event in which their state and citizens are indeed severely victimized, as in the case of the YKW. Needless to say, the YKW is perceived as the biggest military failure and national tragedy in Israel's history (Bar-Joseph, 1999). The study demonstrates the selective usage of victim claims by state representatives, showing that the employment of victimhood as a method of statecraft is context dependent. Possibly, the variance in application of victim claims by the political elites comes from their responsibility for society's welfare. While scholars rightfully point out that victimhood narratives may enhance social control, political mileage, and state legitimacy (Elias, 1986), this argument seems to be missing that for the polity, such narratives are foremost a tool of political enabling, which is used selectively when it is believed that it can advance collective goals.

The study may serve as a foundation for more state-focused inquiries into victimhood beliefs. Group-focused research conceptualizes victimhood as an integral element supporting the ontological scaffolding of the collective (Oren et al., 2015; Rouhana & Bar-Tal, 1998). However, while the usage of victim narrative has certain advantages during conflict, the same narratives, from the perspective of the polity, might in certain situations pose dangers to society. By conceptualizing victim narratives as claims, the project provides a theoretical tool for understanding the political dimension of victimhood and exposes the dynamic characteristics of victimhood in state affairs. The variation in the employment of victim claims supports our hypothesis that during warfare, the state's usage of victim narratives in its public communication is influenced by the perceived levels of tangible threat. It appears that the political application of a sense of victimhood is more nuanced than is often conceptualized. Contrary to the assumptions that the theme of victimhood is invariably a valuable power currency, its employment may be more selective.

The article is the first systematic study exposing that sociopolitical implications of victim narratives may be an obstacle for governance. It provides a unique empirical account of how geopolitical context changes the role of victimhood in a state's public communication. State victim identity can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can be an important tool for elites to advocate for international support and boost the society's solidarity. However, during warfare, when a military clash poses danger to the future security of the community, the usage of victim claims becomes dangerous. It may not only cripple the morale of the belligerent's forces and citizens, but it also boost the enemy's frame of mind. The case of the YKW illustrates that for Israeli elites, facing a looming national tragedy, the potential advantages from the use of victim claims became less important. While fighting for "their survival," they were more focused on short-term goals such as motivating their soldiers and citizens, organizing military operations, and creating supply chains for their forces. For the polity, victim narratives are a part of an apparatus used to influence communities. Our findings suggest that if the armed conflict becomes a "life or death" equation, political elites tend to avoid alluding to victimhood for the sake of their constituents. This process exposes the calculative characteristics of the political adoption of collective victimhood.

The Janus-faced consequences of victim claims urge us to reexamine the functions of victimhood. The theoretical framework presented by Bar-Tal et al. (2009) is based on the assumption that victimhood beliefs help society cope with conflict because they provide explanations, enable members to deal with stress, give moral justification, support a sense of superiority, prepare and immunize, and increase solidarity, motivate, mobilize, and attract international support. The advantages collective victimhood provides make it central to the narratives of collectives in conflicts. However, during clashes such as the YKW, the functionality of victimhood can erode. For example, a victim narrative about ongoing fights will not help a group to cope with stress if the situation on the front is truly dramatic. Conversely, it may even cause fear. Similarly, losing in life-threatening armed conflict may dramatically decrease the belief in the group's superiority. Likewise, victimization brought on by a military clash may immunize the group to war tragedies in the future, but in the present it may shatter the will to fight by highlighting the conflict's horrors. Lastly, instead of encouraging patriotic mobilization towards a common enemy, collective victimhood may demobilize individuals by emphasizing the ongoing victimization of the collective.

OPD as a limited conflict was not perceived as a serious challenge to Israel's future. Consequently, the state's representatives could employ collective victimhood without worrying about the negative implications of this identification. Being certain about the country's upper-hand vis-à-vis Hamas, they anticipated mostly benefiting from the narrative. The YKW was a situation in which state officials could lose more than they could gain by applying collective victimhood in their comments.

Some limitations of the present research are worth noting. First, the research considered only one state actor and two armed conflicts. The intraunit comparison limits the ability to draw general conclusions. Additionally, while the media coverage of elites' official narratives toward ongoing conflicts provides key insights about a country's public identifications, it does not necessarily provide a comprehensive review. Citations published in JP and NYT likely present a partial image of a broader spectrum of opinions and statements expressed by the political elites during YKW and OPD. Due to the small number of comments collected, the research examined victim claims broadly and did not identify different subcategories of this narrative. Furthermore, the number of comments is not sufficient to explore the influence of the audience on the political use of victimhood.

Moreover, the two cases chosen may differ in dimensions other than the degree of danger to the state. For example, the demographic and political composition of Israeli society changed considerably between 1973 and 2012. Hence, while the findings provide preliminary support to the notion that the use of victim claims is reduced under existential threat, additional research is required in order to provide stronger support for this argument and to generalize beyond the specific cases studied.

Lastly, the study relied on English language sources, which could possibly bias the analysis toward statements addressed to the international community at the expense of those directed toward an Israeli audience. Yet it is worth noting that JP bases its coverage on statements made originally in Hebrew. A future study relying on Hebrew sources could further support the present findings.

While OPD and the YKW constitute only small samples of political elites' application of collective victimhood in their narration about ongoing conflict, they suggest that the political employment of victim identification is context dependent and selective. Future studies could investigate whether similar discrepancies in the usage of collective victimhood during armed confrontations is observed in other cases. If an association between the severity of ongoing armed conflict and the usage of victim narrative by political elites is confirmed in other contexts, it would be a step toward a more complex understanding of the role of a sense of victimhood in armed conflicts and the political applications of victimhood by state actors.

Conclusion

The present study is the first to investigate how the nature of military struggle changes the role of collective victimhood in belligerents' public communication. Despite the growing recognition of the importance of victimhood politics and the role of collective victimhood in intergroup relations, little empirical evidence has linked state policies and victimhood practices.

The research was guided by the notion that during armed conflicts that threaten the existence of the belligerent, victim narratives are less prevalent in public comments than during confrontations that do not pose serious threat to its welfare. The article understands victim narratives as claims, expressions of a desire to be recognized as a bearer of a victim status. This term reflects the article's focus on exposing the political logics behind states' implementation of victim narratives. It captures the dynamic, contextual characteristics of collective victimhood in state affairs. It was shown that Israel's public communication during OPD used victim claims to a greater extent than during the YKW.

The findings suggest that for the state, the employment of collective victimhood may have calculative characteristics and be context dependent and thus not an integral building block of state's identification. Collective victimhood is a double-edged sword. It can have positive effects, functioning as the enabling agent of statecraft. However, it may also be an obstacle that demotivates collectives, shattering their ontological and physical security.

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