

# **Towards the Greater Good: Militarized Education in Israel After 1948**

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**Abstract**

One cannot deny that the military in Israel plays a crucial role in day to day life, including the education system. This paper will argue that the influence of the military in Israel on the education system is to a large extent responsible for the creation and maintenance of negative mental representations of the “Other”, namely Palestinians, in preparing young Israelis for war. These representations facilitate loyalty to the State of Israel and enable the continuation of war whereby the “Other” remain portrayed as enemies of Israel. First, this paper will explore the topic of militarization in the social science literature. Second, this paper will employ the case of Israel to provide examples of militarization in the classroom, focusing particularly on storytelling and the commemoration of holidays. Third, this paper will discuss the institutionalization of militarization by applying a comprehensive definition of institutions as well as demonstrating the link between power and institutions. Lastly, this paper will point to the cognitive reinforcement of militarization present in the Israeli education system. Evidently, the Palestinian refusal to accept the legitimacy of the Jewish State of Israel continues to pose a significant challenge to peace, further strengthening Israelis’ negative mental representations of the “Other”. Nevertheless, the continued militarized education in Israeli schools perpetuates mental representations that value war over another alternative.

This paper will attempt to offer an understanding as to why the education system in Israel marginalizes the “Other” and will focus on the phenomenon of militarized education as one of the major, but not the only, influence of power in Israeli schools. This paper will argue that the traditional Israeli narrative views the preservation of the military in both *physical*, the act of enrolling in the army, and *abstract*, allegiance to the army through one’s mental representations, forms as essential to the continuation of the State of Israel. Surrounded by a sea of enemies, Israel relies on its strong military for protection of its territory and identity. The influence of militarization begins within the education system and is institutionalized, to the point that it is accepted instinctively by the majority of Israelis and therefore remains relatively unquestioned.

The following paper will first define ‘militarization’ by employing basic literature from the social sciences. Second, it will use the case of Israel to provide examples of militarization in the classroom, focusing particularly on storytelling to the commemoration of holidays. Third, this paper will discuss the institutionalization of militarization by referring to a comprehensive definition of institutions based upon social science literature. Lastly, this paper will point to the cognitive reinforcement of the military, which is present in the Israeli education system and has been transmitted in Israel for decades.

“Militarization” as a term has often been defined in similar ways within social science literature. Distinguished feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe defines militarization as “a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas” (3). This definition can certainly be said to apply to the case of Israel, a state which relies so heavily on its military force. In addition, another scholar has argued that, “society can become militarized when the military’s role expands in

societal institutions such as education or the development of rural paramilitary forces” (Bowman 19). As will be demonstrated, the Israeli military is certainly infused in the education system in Israel through curriculums, textbooks and lesson plans. Both definitions presented above will support the arguments made throughout this paper to illustrate the immense role of the military on the education system in Israel.

The Israeli military in its current form, known as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), was created with the birth of Israel in 1948. However, a “Jewish” army existed prior to this date. This group of fighters was known as ‘The Haganah’, the official Jewish militia, and was “formed with British help to enable the Jews in Palestine to defend themselves against attacks from Arabs” (Rea and Wright 40). Additionally, “During the Second World War, thousands of Jews were trained, equipped and fought with the British army in Jewish Brigades” (Rea and Wright 40). The Haganah was the predecessor of the IDF, although less organized and formal, and was even joined by the late founding father of Israel, former Israeli Prime Minister and Minister of Defense, Shimon Peres.

The military in Israel is the epitome of power and has been, and continues to be, recognized as one of the strongest armies in the Middle East and around the world (*Business Insider*). According to the IDF’s website its mission is, “To defend the existence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the State of Israel. To protect its inhabitants of Israel and to combat all forms of terrorism which threaten the daily life” (*IDF Blog*). The Israeli army strives to uphold its image as a powerful entity, often above all else, including its portrayal in the media and with the general public around the world. However, what it means to defend Israel and protect its inhabitants can be subjective and evidently lead to more harm than good. As a result, Israel’s image globally is

largely negative and its military actions have been met with extreme criticism. One example is the 2009 Israeli war in Gaza, whereby the UN declared over 2000 Palestinian casualties at the hands of Israeli forces (*BBC News*). Although Israel continues to claim that most of its targets are not civilians, but instead are militants or terrorists, as was maintained by the IDF in response to the 2009 war in Gaza, the country struggles to present itself as a partner for peace when it relies so heavily on its military. Further, the impact of the military in Israel is felt in all aspects of society, including the education system.

In Israel, the socialization of children includes the influence of the military to a large extent. Israeli scholars Gal Levy and Orna Sasson-Levy argue that “militarized education in Israel is still the prime form of political socialization” (350). In this sense, children are exposed to militarized indoctrination from a young age (Levy and Sasson-Levy 354) to the point where their eventual enrollment in the military is not only perceived as normal but is expected. Further, these authors argue that “militarized socialization is responsible both formally and informally for reproducing the centrality of the military in the lives of Israelis,” including children (Levy and Sasson-Levy 356). Militarized education begins within the education system in Israel and continues to shape the mental representations of Israelis throughout their lives.

Several authors have pointed to the strong link between the influence of the military along with storytelling and commemorations of holidays in the Israeli school system. One of the most prominent stories presented to children in Israeli schools is the story of Masada. Although largely controversial and its accuracy has been questioned, this story imparts a valuable lesson. During the first Jewish-Roman war in 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the second temple in Jerusalem and surrounded Masada, a fortress in central Israel overlooking the Dead Sea, which was home to

hundreds of Jews. As the Jews of Masada saw the Romans approaching, the story says that the men slaughtered their wives and children, as well as themselves, in an act of mass suicide to avoid capture. Haggith Gor argues that, "The story has become a myth about an unflinching stand against the enemy, a symbol of power and heroism" (212). The story of Masada, among others, is used to reinforce the image of the Jewish people as powerful and their everlasting loyalty to their identity and nation. Additionally, Gor argues that, "The exercise of power serves, therefore, as an appropriate response to the feeling of powerlessness" (210). It is likely no coincidence that stories such as Masada are taught in conjunction with the Holocaust, a period in modern history resulting in the attempted extermination of Jews.

The Holocaust, in some ways like that of Masada, has been a lesson to Israelis that weakness among Jews can never again be permitted. In addition, it further reinforces the necessity of a Jewish state to prevent such a terrible tragedy from ever occurring again. Since no legitimate argument that can be made in defense of a massacre against an ethnic group, Israeli society tends to point to anti-Semitism as the cause. Several authors have argued that, "Israelis are disposed to believe they live in a hostile world where anti-Semitism is the norm" (Wald and Feinstein 151). Anti-Semitism is often viewed as the reason why Jews worldwide are, have been, and continue to be, targeted and discriminated against, which fuels and strengthens a young Israeli's commitment to defend the state and protect it from harm. The ultimate way to combat anti-Semitism, as Israelis are led to believe by their leaders and institutions, is to serve one's country through military service.

The institutionalization of the military is further emphasized through the commemoration of secular holidays in Israel, particularly in Hebrew speaking secular schools. For example, the

events of Memorial Day, or *Yom Hazikaron* in Hebrew, and Israeli Independence Day, known as *Yom Haatzmaut* in Israel, are usually held one day apart in the spring. On the former, Israelis remember the lives of soldiers who were lost, as well as victims of terror, and on the latter they celebrate the birth of the State of Israel. In 1948, coinciding with the creation of Israel, a new format for memorial services were created and “the state became the embodiment of the nation, whereby allegiance to it, willingness to work for it, and, if need be, to sacrifice one’s life for it, were consigned to the highest level of moral behavior” (Ben-Amos and Bet-El 263). In this way, death in defense of the state is regarded in Israel as the ultimate sacrifice and therefore as one in need of proper recognition. One author argues that, “memorialization of the dead is such a central leitmotif in Israeli political culture that it has evolved into a national cult” (Aronoff, 2014 43). A continued emphasis on preserving the memory of the dead may further be a way to justify the military in defending the state. The next section of this paper will refer to the definition of institutions provided earlier and apply it to the ideas at hand.

This paper offers a comprehensive definition of institutions based upon social science literature. First, institutions are legitimized entities that play a role in the “social construction of reality.” In other words, institutions are socially constructed and do not exist naturally. Second, institutions are perceived as possessing a form of reality that is largely taken for granted. In this sense, institutions come to acquire a certain status where they become inseparable from the society they are a part of. Lastly, institutions have a tendency to persist, although they have the capacity to be modified if deemed necessary. The last part of this definition indicates the potential for institutional change.

The military is an institution that satisfies the three conditions mentioned in the definition presented above. In Israel specifically, the military permeates daily life to a greater extent than in other states because the legitimacy of the state continues to be questioned by other countries around the world. Considering the first component of the definition provided, the Israeli military can be described as a social construction designed with the ultimate purpose to safeguard the state. It did not arise spontaneously but was instead created to fulfill the ultimate need of the state – survival – similarly to how the social contract was proposed by in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651) to bring order to society. Second, the military in Israel is easily taken for granted because it is so much a part of Israeli identity that it becomes difficult to conceive of the state without its military. Lastly, the military in Israel has and will continue to persist because of the ongoing legitimation it has found among the majority of its population since its founding. However, as mentioned in this last point, although institutions may change, the Israeli military is an exception because it is inseparable from the Jewish nation as it currently exists. These points will further be touched upon by providing examples below.

An example that illustrates the institutionalization of the military in Israeli society is a program by the name of *Derekh Erekh*, translated to “Path of Values”, designed to strengthen ties between Israeli schools and the army. With this program, the Israeli Ministry chose to allow the military to play a more central role in Israeli schools. An article from *Haaretz* published in 2012, states that the *Derekh Erekh* project saw hundreds of lieutenant colonels and colonels who were “sent to talk principals and teachers about how to increase motivation to serve in the army” (Kashti 2012). Mirta Furman, who has written widely on the military and militarism in Israel, claims that, “In Israel the fusion between the state’s political ideology and formal education



begins in the preschool setting” (Furman 146). Therefore, the “politics” inherent in the education system is clear, particularly through the use of the military in reaching adolescents. This enables continued acceptance and legitimation so that when youth reach the age of conscription, their allegiance to the army is intrinsic to their identity.

The second component of the definition of institutions that was presented above deals with the idea that institutions are taken for granted. Educating children about the military at a preschool level is not viewed negatively by the majority of Israelis, but is simply a way of life in Israel. In fact, not doing so, or presenting an alternative narrative that would minimize the role of the Israeli military, would likely be treated with suspicion. Gor argues that breaking away from the traditional idea that Israel is under constant threat, particularly by Palestinians, and “examining other possible narratives, means defying the militaristic consensual education” (Gor 216). Therefore, the dominant Jewish discourse in Israel, particularly relating to the Israeli military, remains largely unquestioned as doing so would conflict with what children are taught in Israeli schools. Another scholar argues that, “Successful service entails the inculcation of a collective narrative emphasizing heroism and militarism, the suppression and abandonment of individualistic behavior, and submission to authority” (Furman 146). Therefore, those that accept these conditions are viewed as successful members of society and those that are not, are deemed a risk to a state which relies so heavily on its defense. In fact, “refuseniks”, a marginal group that often refers to Israelis refusing military service, often on behalf of moral or ethical reasons, are harshly punished and often jailed.

The last component of the definition of institutions presented in this paper deals with their persistence. Gor argues that Israel’s narrative is based upon its “victim mentality”, mainly

as a result of the Holocaust and a promise that never again will Jews be “sent like sheep to slaughter” (Gor 214). She also argues that Israel’s constant fear of annihilation serves as “a manipulative mechanism of control in the education system” (Gor 215). After the Six Day War, in 1967, there was a greater emphasis on the suffering of Holocaust victims in Israeli schools, which led to mass delegations of pupils travelling to European countries such as Poland to visit concentration camps beginning in 1987 (Ben-Amos and Bet-El 271). The students on these trips are typically only a few years away from conscription into the army, which is surely no coincidence, as they prepare to defend the Jewish state at all costs.

The “victim mentality” may enable Israelis to better serve Israel, realizing that the responsibility to protect the Israeli nation rests on their shoulders. However, it appears that Israelis’ fear that their state may be wiped out supersedes a critical assessment of the intrinsic narratives disseminated by the education system that includes the perception of the “Other”. As it has been demonstrated in several studies (Adwan, Bar-Tal and Wexler 2014), the “Other” is generally portrayed negatively in the Israeli educational system, primarily through its use of texts. One scholar argues that, “The one-sided historical narrative that, through the education system, is internalized in the Jewish Israeli psyche has, in turn, provided the basis for maintaining a deeply divided society and its many discriminatory practices” (Abu-Saad 44-45). The victim mentality guarantees that the majority of Israelis will fulfill their duty to their country and ensure the continuation of the army and the Jewish state, often at the expense of other groups and how they are both treated and portrayed.

The concept of power can also be examined in relation to the Israeli Ministry of Education and militarized education in Israel. Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci remarked that the power of

hegemony is reproduced when social institutions— such as education, religion, and the family — all contribute to the production of meaning and values (Levy and Sasson-Levy 358). Further, “these values produce, direct, and maintain “spontaneous” consent for the status quo among the various strata of society, a status quo that serves the interests of the dominant group” (Holub 6). The Israeli military, and by consequence its education system, certainly contribute to the production, and maintenance, of meaning and values in Israeli society. These include a collective identity and narrative, along with a strong belief in the necessity to defend the state against those who wish to seek its demise. The status quo serves a purpose in Israeli society and thus more positive perceptions of the “Other” lie in direct conflict with already entrenched meanings and values so heavily relied upon by the state; thus, they are unlikely to change in a profound way without a shift in mindset. This idea will be touched upon more at the end of the paper.

Challenging the military indoctrination of children in Israel may be problematic since the presence of the military in Israel is so ingrained in society, in schools and other institutions, that imagining the state without the army is virtually impossible. This point leads to the final section of this paper on the cognitive reinforcement of the army that is present throughout all aspects of society and age groups. Many individuals have recognized the link between militarized education in Israel and the cognitive role. Several authors have argued that, “By the time they enter nursery school, little boys and girls already understand the centrality of military service to social identity and have begun cognitive preparations for military service” (original source: Arian, Talmud and Hermann 1988: 67) (retrieved from: Wald and Feinstein 151). In other words, children are in a sense, like all other citizens, required to be loyal to the state of Israel, including

the army, early on and this idea is reinforced through its institutions, including the education system.

There are several significant ideas that the cognitive sciences can bring to the study of institutions. For example, the concept of 'neuroenvironmental consonance', which will be expanded upon in more detail below is very relevant to this discussion. Further, cognitive scientists have also considered institutions as mental scaffolds in arguing that the mental representations that we construct, and which become institutionalized over time, help us make sense of reality.

According to cognitive science, reinforcement can occur two ways – positively or negatively. Specifically, "Behaviors are maintained by reinforcement, which is defined as a stimulus that occurs contingent on the occurrence of behavior and increases the likelihood that the behavior will occur in the future" (Hersen 1977). Further, "The two types of reinforcement involve either the removal of an aversive stimulus (negative reinforcement) or the presentation of a desirable stimulus (positive reinforcement)" (Hersen 1977). The military in Israel positively reinforces messages of loyalty and commitment to the state over and over again, particularly through the education system, so that allegiance to the state and the army is inevitable. These beliefs are further reinforced by a child's parents, who "themselves have internalized a political ideology that entails commitment to military challenges" (Furman 1977). The role of parents in reinforcing mental representations must not be overlooked as education most often begins in the home. Surely, there are pacifists who refuse army service, and pass on their anti-war views to their children, although these cases continue to be rare.

The idea of cognitive reinforcement ties in with the theory of 'neuroenvironmental consonance'. As Bruce Wexler, Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry at Yale University, argues (2008),

neuroenvironmental consonance implies a balance between one's internal and external structures (144). This translates mainly to a positive relationship between the self (internal) and environment (external). A balance between the two is pleasurable whereas imbalance is uncomfortable (Wexler 144). Thus, human beings, whether they may realize it or not, actively work towards ensuring that equilibrium is present in the self at all times to avoid a contradiction in the mind. If one's internal thoughts do not line up with reality, this may cause confusion and even chaos where an individual may have trouble differentiating between what is real and what may be conjecture.

Similarly, a balance is necessary between individuals and society on a greater scale. If the values and beliefs upon which institutions function are in direct contradiction with those of the people, there will be disorder and chaos. Thus, institutions construct and, at the same time, reinforce values and beliefs that are already present on some level. For example, it has already been established that Israeli children receive militarized education through state schools at a young age. These ideas may be necessary to an extent to ensure that youth are mentally, as well as physically, capable and willing to serve in the army. This has been a continuous cycle that has gone on for approximately seventy years. It may appear that these facts imply that change is impossible and that the "Other" will always be treated with suspicion because commitment to defending the state of Israel is paramount. However, this may not be completely true.

The arguments made throughout this paper have indicated that the Israeli military is a powerful institution that both creates and reinforces mental representations of reality, and by consequence of the self and of the "Other". By learning what it means to be a "good" and "productive" citizen, a large component of which includes military service, Israelis quickly learn

to understand their role within Israeli society. In this way, Israelis are taught, to an extent, how they are to think and behave as individuals, which fall in line with the values and beliefs of the Israeli military.

Similarly, as mental representations are created and reproduced, they also construct a very specific projection of the “Other”. Hegel claimed that in the encounter “self-consciousness sees itself in the other”, suggesting that self-other identification is the starting point in interpretation (Brons 78). An individual’s perception of him or herself is projected onto the other, similar to what Wexler referred to as ‘projective identification’ (129). In the Israeli case, Israelis view themselves as defenders of the state and therefore perceive outsiders as those who the state needs defending against. This relationship creates a contradiction and makes it more unlikely that a relationship will form between Israelis and individuals belonging to another group, such as the Palestinians. The military in Israel is merely one institution that acts as a scaffold which creates one’s reality. Other institutions, such as the education system and the family, have a similar role to play. All of these institutions mutually reinforce one another in perceiving the self as being in constant danger and in need of protection for the greater good. As a result, the “Other” is identified as someone to stay away from and not trust.

A shift in mindset is not particularly simple in this scenario. A point was made earlier in this paper that questioning the dominant narrative, which is continuously reiterated to Israelis from a young age, means defying the military along with its other institutions and consequently poses a threat to the state. This raises the question of how peace is realistically possible between Israelis and Palestinians without altering the ideological foundations upon which the nation stands. What is perhaps necessary is that the cognitive reinforcement of the military throughout

Israeli society be transformed in a way that allows for an inclusion of the “Other”, rather than the neglect that is often found. Evidently, this suggestion is easier said than done because, after all, Israel is a unique state facing a constant existential threat. However, the continued line of thought put forth by the Israeli military, along with other institutions in Israel, may be putting the state at further risk rather than discovering a way to work towards greater cooperation between Israel and its neighbours.

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