The Victory Image: Visualising Israeli Warfighting from Lebanon to Gaza (Draft)

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Abstract

This article interrogates the concept of the ‘victory image’ in Israel as a militarized visual economy. What began as a visual illustration of warfighting became an integral part of operational considerations. My own contribution as an embedded photographer to that economy is used as a prism for larger changes in visual politics. These changes relate to the proliferation of an actuarial gaze as the overarching ordering principle of imaging in the subsequent Gaza Wars. Instead of celebratory images of military achievements, Israeli officials opted for information visualizations to convey a sense of achievement, allowing for the continuation of the ‘visual economy,’ but with Palestinian victims of indiscriminate attacks ignored.

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I took this picture on 13 August 2006 in Lebanon as an embedded photographer with an engineering unit of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). The company was making its way into Lebanon, one last push of some 10,000 soldiers before the imminent cease-fire when we came under fire. In this article, I will use the picture, its reception and its place in a wider ‘visual economy’ as a prism through which to explore the changing role of images in war in Israel and generally.

War photography offers a realm in which the personification of the nation as hero or victim simultaneously claims to be the embodiment of the battle. It has the power to bring political events down to a human scale and at the same time to be canonized into a higher order of significance as constituent of a sacred national iconography.

There is an established tradition of depiction of war through moments of high drama captured from within the battlefield. Such pictures utilise a ‘documentary gaze’ that draws on the authority of proximity and the truth value of the photograph to make the claim that an iconic ground-level view from within the battle could represents the war.

In this article, I locate the stakes and context first in recent theorising on visuality in IR, then I use my own experience as the author of a picture that momentarily made such a claim, to explore the ‘visual economy’ (Poole, 1997) that it participated in, which encircled the idea of the ‘victory image.’ I argue that a requirement for ‘victory images’ that was established in Lebanon to contrast a sense of military failure was integrated into military thinking. I then proceed to demonstrate the visual economy’s shift from a documentary gaze to an actuarial gaze in Gaza.

I argue that while the visual economy remained in place, the type of desired gaze had changed. Since the first Gulf war, Feldman (2005) noted the rise of the ‘actuarial gaze,’ a mode of visuality that that makes risk and success, or losses and profits, abstract and quantifiable. It ‘screens’ representations of threat and ‘screen[s]-off’ (Ibid: 212) the violent consequences of the remote-operated war waged in response to threat. This move is not only an aesthetic reflection, but a fundamental shift in the way war is legitimised.

**Politics, Security and Visuality**

Increasingly, International Relations (IR) scholars are turning to the politics of visual representation.[[1]](#footnote-1) This ‘aesthetic turn’ (Bleiker, 2001) in IR, which is related to the ‘pictorial turn’ (Mitchell, 2005: 257) in the social sciences and the humanities, is most recently evident in the extensive 51-chapter handbook *Visual Global Politics* edited by Roland Bleiker (2018). These turns have taken effect in Security studies, which has undergone a ‘visual turn’ (Heck and Schlag, 2012: 892), which has proven to be a fertile ground for visual scholarship, mostly through the framework of ‘visual securitisation’ (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Andersen, Vuori and Mutlu (2015: 88) suggested that visual analysis in security studies ranges between two poles. The first is ‘Visual security,’ the interrogation of visual artefacts for their securitising function, which is well summed up by Hansen (2018: 272): ‘“Security images” are used to support claims that something is a threat to our security.’ The other pole is ‘Visualities of security’, which concerns the way vision is ordered, framing and filtering the visible into what Rancière termed ‘aesthetic regimes’ (Rancière in Anderson, Vuori ad Mutlu: 89).

In this article, I draw on both poles, reflecting both on the meaning of pictures as well as the larger culture structures within which they are implicated. The theorisation that I suggest, following Campbell (2007), is of a visual economy, and in particular a militarised visual economy. I consider the ‘visual economy’ to be related to the conditions of the production of material artefacts – visual images, to instances of their interpretation, as well as to political sensibilities that take part in its very constellation. I explain what I mean by ‘militarised’ in the following section.

Deborah Poole (1997: 8) introduced the concept of the ‘visual economy’ in her study of practices of depiction of Andean peoples and the persistent colonial frames in which they are entangled even when practiced by the indigenous population. She explained that the ‘visual economy’ ‘allows us to think more clearly about the global-or at least trans-Atlantic-channels through which images (and discourses about images) have flowed between Europe and the Andes’. It is an alternative to a ‘visual culture’ that the different participants of the ‘Andean image world’ do not share.

Campbell (2007: 361) explained: ‘people in disparate places can be part of the same economy when they may not be part of the same culture.’ Of importance here is Hansen’s (2011: 53) distinction between the ‘inter-visual’ level of analysis, which pertains to the ‘way in which visuals interact with visuals’ and the ‘intertextual’ level of analysis, which explores how texts (or visuals) interact with texts. The former may connect communities in conflict across well-guarded cultural divides, while the latter, as the interpretive explication of visuals, will have more difficulty traversing cultural boundaries. The visual economy then is a transcultural constellation of inter-visual interaction.

**(Visual) Militarisation and (Visual) Ontological Security**

To understand the nature of the ‘militarised visual economy’, the idea of ‘militarisation’ requires some unpacking. Cynthia Enloe described militarisation as a ‘multi-tracked process by which the roots of militarism are driven deep into the soil of society’ (2004: 219-220). This is certainly the case in Israel, the paradigmatic ‘nation-in-arms’ (Ben-Eliezer, 1995: 264), where the military is viewed as the most important and trusted institution, ‘the corporate custodian of national values’ (Cohen, 2008: 1) and ‘one of the central organizational principles of the society’ (Kimmerling, 1993: 197-199) that is integrated in the daily lives of its citizenry.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Israeli state accepts frequent bouts of warfighting as a source of ‘ontological security.’ This comes about when a nation’s identity is predicated on a familiar routine (Mitzen, 2006: 347). Hanging on to that identity trumps even considerations of physical security (Ibid; Steele, 2008: 2). A state can be locked into a harmful routine, such as an intractable conflict, but that routine provides it with a ‘sense of self’ (Mitzen, 2006: 257) or a ‘biographical narrative’ (Steele, 2008: 54-55) that it hangs onto. Recurring conflict and creeping securitisation as a practice of ontological security make up the basic metre of Israeli life.

Socially, militarism solidifies a gendered approach to the most important aspect of daily life in the state - security, whereby ‘women are “conscripted” and required to serve [but] their role as soldiers is subordinate to that of motherhood’ (Twine, 2013: 53). This is the ideal of ‘republican motherhood’ (Helman, 1999), which tasks women with the role of the reproducing of soldiers as a matter of security. Relatedly, militarism frames army service as a masculine coming-of-age ceremony for young men, for which many prepare through private courses (Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari, 2010: 155-157). Moreover, Levy (2008: 253) demonstrated how ethnic inequalities in society were reproduced into the army, which legitimised them.

Historically, warfighting has been a common occurrence in Israel and it had generally been socially and economically fruitful (Levy, 2008). The casualisation of conflict is evident in the material conditions of the deployment of military power. The signals given for the commencement of military orders do not indicate a situation of ‘war’ and military acts that form a possible *casus bello* are a matter of course (Azoulay, 2011: 267). In turn, the media ‘represents war and injuries as positive experiences’ (Gavriely-Nuri and Balas, 2010: 419) and acts as a ‘fiery advocate’ for the deployment of military power (Kalb and Saivetz, 2007).

The normalisation of violent conflict is a major theme of the Israeli militarized biographical narrative. Sociologist Baruch Kimmerling (1993: 206) termed the condition in which militarism ‘suffuses both the structural and cultural state of mind of the collective‘ as ‘Civilian militarism’. He traced the fatalist overarching narrative that frames this condition to an oft cited speech given by Defence Minister Moshe Dayan on the grave of an Israeli soldier, Roy Rothberg, in 1956. There, Dayan referred to war as the ‘fate of our generation’ (Ibid: 209).

Over the years, this narrative often returned. The late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin referred to the Israeli-Arab conflict as a perpetual ‘dormant war’ that occasionally flares up into inevitable skirmishes (Inbar, 1990: 432), while former Prime Minister Ehud Barak often describes Israel as a ‘villa in the jungle,’ (Black, 2012) where one must routinely deal with a terrain that is inhospitable by its nature.[[3]](#footnote-3) This imagery is reflected in security discourses and was adapted by the IDF in its actual counterterrorism strategy, which is termed ‘mowing the grass’ (Inbar and Shamir, 2014: 65). As I later explain, such mental images come into play in the visual politics of conflict.

The normalisation of conflict is reliant on the visualisation of militarisation, which forms a part of the ‘Israeli cultural codex’ (Brownfield-Stein, 2010: 304). In particular, photography was often charged with ‘the production of national memory via the visual field’ (Ibid: 307). Roei drew on Kimmerling to argue that the visual sphere was important in bringing about the condition of civilian militarism through ‘a naturalised (militaristic) visual field’ (Roei, 2016: 18). Photography was often used to tell the national story, especially in regard to wars (Monk, 2002; Roei, 2016). My pictures entered a well-established visual field, but as I explain below, they were quickly rejected. Next, I will use this experience to consider the ‘visual economy’ within which my pictures were implicated. This will allow me to offer an account of the visual field and its subsequent development.

**Friendly Fire**

In August 2006, I joined an Israeli army unit as an embedded photographer. We arrived on the third morning to a bombed-out school-house near the town of Bint-Jbeil, a few kilometres north of the Israeli border. A group of soldiers entered the building to prepare a field clinic and since this was the first opportunity to disembark after spending several hot days in a crowded armoured personnel carrier (APC), I joined.

The building was perforated by Israeli air force bombings. Teletubbies pictured on the wall bore the signs of cluster munitions and sheep lay dead on the second floor - they must have been shepherded up there with the thought that the schoolhouse would be spared. I was moving about the building, photographing.

Suddenly, the building shook as a large blast hit and smoke and plaster filled the rooms. Everyone ran back towards the APCs and I was relieved to see that I was unharmed. It took a long few seconds for the adrenaline to fade and for the bodies of the soldiers to give in and collapse. A medic was tending to one of the other soldiers when he realised that the wounds on his body ran deep and he soon collapsed too.

The low hanging morning light, what photographers call ‘golden hour,’ was combined with the drama of those first moments waiting for evacuation, what medics similarly call ‘the golden hour.’ The picture above was the one that stuck. It shows an intimate moment between a soldier and his officer. The soldier’s body bears the marks of violence, his gaze is affixed at his commander tending to him, who in turn is looking at his wounds. It is a moment of great drama and uncertainty – the soldier lived, but at the time he was slipping in and out of consciousness, his eyes rolled up like a tilted shutter.

The life of this picture was a strange one. While it did not belong to any official government agency, I submitted some of my pictures to the Israeli press photo competition, which awarded and prominently displayed them. The Israeli newspaper for which I was working as a freelancer, then the largest daily newspaper in Israel, also ran the images often.

The pictures that I took performed an ontological-securitising function that is concerned with the depiction of familiar routine.[[4]](#footnote-4) They helped to align what was widely perceived as a losing military exercise with an established tradition of heroic warfighting. In particular, they drew on a key Zionist trope that Zertal (2005: 113) termed, following Lyotard, ‘the beautiful death,’ in which the hero sacrifices their life for the nation as a final feat of heroism.

Of course, this trope is not unique to Israel. Benedict Anderson’s (2006: 206) final paragraph of ‘Imagined Communities’ reminds us that ‘the nation’s biography snatches, against the going mortality rate… poignant martyrdoms.’ However, in this case, my pictures served as a visual ontological securitisation, framing the occurrence as a chapter in the ongoing biographical narrative rather than an icon in the canonical national epic.

However, Anderson further explained that in order ‘to serve the narrative purpose, these violent deaths must be remembered/ forgotten as “our own”’ (Anderson, 2006: 206) and this is where my images failed. During the promotional campaign for the Israeli press photo competition, I learnt from one of the injured soldiers that the source of the fire that wounded him was the IDF - it was a case of friendly fire. I asked whoever was using the images at the time to update the captions accordingly, but the new caption meant that the images lost their appeal. They were now ‘falsified by their captions’ (Sontag, 2003: 11). Inside the frame was the sanctified experience of sacrifice in battle, in the caption was the profane reality of warfighting, that ‘unmaker of truths’ (Barkawi and Brighton, 2011: 133).

If the perpetrators of the violence in my images were Israeli soldiers and not Hezbollah fighters then the picture does not simply fail to ‘serve the narrative purpose’ (Anderson, 2006: 206) of supporting a sense of ontological security. By depicting a clear moment of failure, it supports a competing narrative that I explicate next.

**The Lebanon Conflict as Failure: Victory Staging**

The 2006 campaign in Lebanon is commonly viewed as a failure. Even a sympathetic analysis by Henriksen (2011:117) accepts that it was ‘one of the bleakest moments in Israel’s military history.’ The Winograd Commission, appointed by then Prime Minister Olmert to investigate the conduct of the 2006 campaign in Lebanon explicitly stated in its final report that:

*‘it is not only that the IDF did not achieve victory over Hezbollah, despite its substantial quantitative and qualitative advantage, but also that the firing of rockets towards Israel continued until the last day of the war, and some forces did not fulfil some of the tasks they were given. This state of affairs contributed to the feeling of a missed opportunity and disappointment that a major part of the Israeli public felt’* (Winograd Commission, 2008: 249).

The 34-day-long conflict between Israel and Hezbollah began with an act of aggression by the militant Lebanese organisation: the abduction of two Israeli soldiers on patrol at the disputed border. Israel’s response, which began with air assaults and continued a couple of weeks later with large-scale ground operations, was meant to stop Hezbollah’s ability to launch missiles. However, the IDF could not halt the 4000 missiles that hit the north of Israel until the last moments of the hostilities, killing 53 Israeli civilians (out of a total of 161, most of whom soldiers) and forcing hundreds of thousands to flee (Harel and Issacharoff, 2008: 259).

The Lebanese toll was much higher. About 1,100 Lebanese were killed in the heavy bombardment and as many as three quarters of a million people fled the south of the country (Bregman, 2016). ­Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah later admitted that he had not foreseen the hostilities blowing up as a war and that the cost of the conflict was not worth it, explaining that *‘in the history of wars, it never happened that a state launches a war against another for a few apprehended soldiers and a few others killed’* (Ibid: 287).

Nevertheless, the campaign was widely supported in Israel, much because of the unflinching endorsement from the Media. Israeli NGO ‘Keshev’ (2007: 4) produced a substantial report concerning the media’s role in the conflict and concluded that:

*‘The media created a general atmosphere of complete and absolute support and justification of the war, and systematically suppressed questions that arose as early as the first day of the fighting.’*

Israeli journalist Amnon Abramovitz cited an anonymous source from the government’s war cabinet meeting that framed the mission of the war in stark contrast to Nasrallah’s depiction of a minor skirmish: ‘in the absence of a victory, the hourglass of our existence will turn over’ (Ibid: 95). The belief that failure to defeat Hezbollah will encourage other enemies indicates a crisis in the national biographical narrative and in the general sense of ontological security.

The mission to prevent ‘the absence of victory’ was noted by the Winograd Commission, which wrote that fighting was at times motivated by the ‘conscious or symbolic meaning of success’ (Winograd Commission, 2008: 370). The report often used the term ‘image’ to denote the perceptual aspect of the operation, which was to be ‘… a wide-ranging ground assault that would radically change both the reality in south Lebanon as well as the image of the operation from a military standpoint’ (Ibid: 387).

Dan Haloutz, the Israeli chief of staff during the Lebanon conflict shares this understanding, as evident in his definition of ‘deterrence’ as ‘a situation in which the consciousness of the rival creates an image (based on facts, rumours, news and their interpretation) that the cost of an action is larger than its benefit’ (Haloutz, 2011).[[5]](#footnote-5)

These examples demonstrate that images are not only visual. Mitchell (1986: 37) argued that ‘the tyranny of the picture,’ or ‘the conviction that these pictures have a kind of identity with natural human vision and objective external space’ is false (Ibid: 32). Instead, following the Hebrew use of the word, he suggested that ‘images’ should be understood as ‘likeness,’ with the visual image a particular type of ‘image.’ This distinction is important because of the constant conceptual slide between visual and non-visual images.

The Winograd commission gave as an example an operation in the town of Bint-Jbeil. This was the site of a major ground assault that served not to comply with overall strategic goals such as the stopping of missile fire, but to achieve a symbolic success and to ‘create images’ (Winograd, 2008: 370).

The idea that the goal of military operations is to manage the enemy’s perception by projecting ‘images’ has been a staple of the IDF since the Second Intifada (2000-2005). Erstwhile chief of staff and future Minister of Defence Moshe Ya’alon explained that the IDF must ‘sear in its [the Palestinians’] consciousness’ an understanding that ‘terrorism and violence will not defeat us, will not make us fold’ (Ya’alon in Shavit, 2002).

This term ‘consciousness searing’ illustrates a violent projection of ‘imagery.’ It was invoked by the Winograd commission, which reprimanded the IDF for approaching the military operation in a shallow way (Winograd Commission, 2008: 273). However, Drucker and Shelach (2005: 335-337) explain that during the Second Intifada, the IDF had already learnt that ‘consciousness searing’ and frustrating a population under occupation out of their desire to resist is not possible.

Instead of ‘victory searing’, Eival Giladi, head of the IDF’s Strategic Planning Division, suggested ‘victory staging,’ or to ‘simulate a state of victory, so that we could stop,’ an elaboration of American Senator George Aiken’s famous formula for getting out of Vietnam: to say we won and get out (Ibid). Under these terms, a symbol of victory becomes a condition for the cessation of fighting. This thinking is reflected in the words of then IDF’s head of operations and future chief of staff Gadi Eisenkott, who suggested that the ground war should continue only to create a ‘symbolic victory’ (Winograd Commission, 2008: 98). In other words, consciousness may still be ‘seared’, but it was not that of the people that the IDF was fighting.

In Lebanon, the token of symbolic victory to be presented to the Israeli public took a visual form. The search for a visual image of victory to prevent the ‘hourglass of our existence’ from turning echoes an earlier chapter of Israeli visual politics. The ‘victory albums’ following the 1967 war celebrated the sense of deliverance from impending doom. More than 100 boastful picture-books were published in the few years following the war (Sapir-Weitz, 2017) and fed a hubristic stance.

In his review of the pictorial history of the 1967 war Monk (2002: 152) reflected on ‘the horror of a world in which wars may be happening for the sake of their pictures.’ In Lebanon in 2006, the Israeli army defaulted into just such a position as it mobilised a documentary gaze to present the Israeli public with a visual token of victory. However, the military operation for the procurement of a ‘victory image’ was a failed one. To understand the logic behind the visual economy of the ’victory image,’ we must first explore the background to the inter-visual relations on which it was constructed, which is the subject of the next section.

**The Victory Image in Bint Jbeil**

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On 25 May 2000, the Israeli army withdrew from the security strip in Lebanon after an 18-year stay. Two days later, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah arrived at the southern town of Bint-Jbeil and gave a rousing victory speech from one of the balconies.[[6]](#footnote-6) He addressed the Palestinians and called on them to rise against the Israelis. He explained that Israel may appear to be strong, but its society was not resilient and could not withstand the pressure of conflict. He likened Israel to a spider’s web that could easily be destroyed. The second Intifada began less than four months later.

The image of Nasrallah covered in glory and goading the Palestinians to attack Israel haunted Israel’s military commanders, many of whom have experienced the withdrawal from Lebanon, as well as the Second Palestinian Intifada. Now they were back in Lebanon and they wanted to answer Nasrallah’s iconic speech. Their plan was to come up with what they termed a ‘victory image,’ a picture of an Israeli flag waving over the very same balcony in which Nasrallah made his speech (Rappoport, 2007: 259-260). The aesthetic patrimony (Shapiro, 2007: 293) of the documentary picture displays a neat inter-visual knot (Hansen, 2011: 53) that attempts to declare victory over Hezbollah as well as the Palestinians in one go

For this purpose, IDF infantry units that had already advanced beyond the town of Bint-Jbeil were supplied with cameras and ordered to turn back, retake the town and film the planting of a flag on the site of Nasrallah’s speech. The intertextuality can be gathered from the operation’s title: ‘Web of Steel’ (Ibid: 264- 265). The inter-visuality draws on the established trope of the flag-waving over taken territory. One of the most iconic images in Israeli history is that of the conquest of Um-Rashrash, which was renamed Eilat, now a popular tourist destination on the Red Sea. Ariella Azoulay (2011: 271) labelled the picture a ‘victory shot’ and explained that ‘a classic victory shot is one in which soldiers are seen planting a flagpole in an occupied or liberated area.’

The act of the raising of the flag over a Hezbollah position had an additional inter-visual element that harks back to the earlier iteration of the Lebanon conflict, when Israel occupied the security strip between 1982-2000. An infamous Hezbollah attack in 1994 failed to take an Israeli outpost near the town of Nabatieh. However, Hezbollah had videotaped a Hezbollah fighter’s thrusting of the flag into the ground of the outpost during the attack, an image of symbolic victory that had enormous effect, especially in light of IDF’s initial denial that such an incident took place (Kotz Bar, 2012).

Matti Friedman (2016: 34) described the effect of that image in Israel society: ‘the Hezbollah man entered everyone’s living room, raised his arms, and drove his flag in again and again. Israelis were horrified.’ The image was powerful because it challenged Israeli militarized biographical narrative – it’s ontological security, or in Friedman’s terms: it served as ‘a sign of decay in the army and a frailty among Israel’s youth’ (Friedman, 2016: 34).[[7]](#footnote-7)

The flag-raising image was an inter-visual act within a militarised visual economy that took on an operational form. It aimed to establish a collective visual memory (Brink in Hansen, 2015) that would function as ‘victory staging’ and serve the operational purpose of legitimising the cessation of fighting and also align the operation within the established biographical narrative of the state, supporting a sense of ontological security.

The recording of the flag waving was uploaded by the IDF Spokesperson Unit to an Israeli video streaming service unedited, where it was available until recently (Flix, 2007). The short clip records the performance with the audio detailing the directions/orders.

The video was shot from another rooftop. The flag-waving soldier is distant, grainy and barely visible. As he steps into the balcony, the commander orders him to crouch, for fear of fire. The cameraman taking the video is then asked to zoom out and take a wider shot, as proof that they are in Bint-Jbeil, but then the flag is hardly visible.

The Israeli soldier was waving the flag to demonstrate that the Hezbollah stronghold had yielded. However, the narrow angle and the blurry image give away the great distance between the flag-waving soldier and the camera. This is very different from the iconic images of flag-waving noted above, in which the planted flag symbolises domination.

Together with the accompanying ‘director’s commentary’ the performance appears more like an act for the camera: the momentary presence of a body enacting its dominance over the landscape while not exposing itself to it, in stark contrast to the Hezbollah image and completely in line with the idea of ‘victory staging.’

The camera is operated like any other military gear. It is an act of surveillance gathering rather than a documentary recording of a shared sense of achievement. When the staged ‘victory image’ was taken, the IDF had no control over the town of Bint-Jbeil. While as many as three quarters of a million Lebanese (Bregman, 2016: 290) had evacuated the south of the country, the town still had Hezbollah fighters. Rappoport (2007: 264-265) as well as Harel and Issacharoff (2008: 175-176) describe how the commander charged with the mission, well-aware of the danger, decided to fulfil it as quickly as possible.

He realised that his unit was not occupying the right building, but still went ahead with the filming and he also refrained from telling his troops about the flag waving exercise until the very last minute because he found the mission absurd. This sense of reluctance and futility contrasted with the claim of perseverance and achievement. Furthermore, it was punctuated by the death of two soldiers, most likely of friendly fire, during the retaking of the town (Rappoport, 2007: 264-265). This was the ultimate reason for the killing of the image.

Both my picture and the flag picture were at some point promoted to become prominent representations of the conflict. In both cases, they were rejected for a similar reason: friendly fire. Altogether, as many as one in six IDF soldiers were killed from IDF fire during the conflict (Lambeth, 2011: 188). The act of fratricide, a common occurrence in any conflict and much more common in Lebanon, undermined the images as stories of sacrifice and victory that would align them with the overall militarised biographical narrative. Instead, these pictures told the same story of failure that the Winograd report did.

**The Visual Economy of ‘The Victory Image’**

Eventually, a victory image was found. In 10 August 2006, Major Tomer Bohadana was badly injured in the village of Markaba. He was helicoptered away and as he was being led from the helipad to the emergency room in the northern Israeli town of Haifa, he gestured towards a group of photojournalists, holding up two fingers to flash the victory sign, while a doctor was pressing his hand over a wound on his neck. The next day, the picture was the front page of the newspaper I worked for, Yediot Aharonot, with the caption ‘I am victorious.’

Gavriely-Nuri and Balas (2010:419), who conducted a study of media representations of the 2006 Lebanon conflict wrote that ‘his picture immediately enter[ed] the national album as one of the purest symbols of the IDF’s fighting spirit.’ It assured the public that the positive values ascribed to warfighting were being upheld. As one commentator explained: ‘Tomer Bohadana supplied us with the merchandise. Simple, direct, to the point, accurate, in the international language of Symbols’ (Kotz Bar in Doner, 2015). The language of commodification indicates the ‘visual economy’ that operated at the time, in which the army and the media scrounged for a visual representation of the desired ‘victory image.’

One week after the picture was published, Bohadana explained his gesture, perfectly reproducing the operational logic of ‘victory staging’ that was behind the bungled attempt in Bint Jbeil:

*‘I understood that just like we have the fighting on the battlefield, so we have to fight over consciousness. If we take Beirut it doesn’t mean we won. We need to do something on the level of consciousness and photography is an instrument’* (Bohadana in Doner, 2006).

Adi Nimrod, the doctor who is pictured alongside him, recalled those moments in an interview and extended the drama of the battlefield to the scene of the photo-op:

*‘we alight, we get on the gurney and I’m pressing on his neck, and then we get to the point that I see the photographers and I notice Tomer lifting his hand and “tack!” and comes up with a “V” and it is clear to me that this is going to be the picture of the war, in that moment it was as clear to me as seeing the beach and the sun that this is the picture of the war and I, still within the storm of battle, I shout to him “show them! show them! the bastards!”’* (Uvda, 2007).

When asked who the ‘bastards’ were, Nimrod replied:

*‘the photographers, the journalists, the Hezbollah, the Iranians, all those who strike fear in the heart of the people, all those who do not support those who are actually doing…I return from the war and all these controversies begin, the president and Ramon and Tsahi Hanegbi and everything”* (Ibid).

Then acting Israeli President Moshe Katsav was convicted of rape, Former Minister Haim Ramon was convicted of indecent assault, whereas Hanegbi was indicted but not convicted in bribery. In lumping together sexual violence, the corrupt behaviour of elected officials and Israel’s foes and contrasting them with the supposed moral purity of war and sacrifice, Nimrod was demonstrating how ‘the roots of militarism are driven deep into the soil of society’ (Enloe, 2004: 219-220).

Within the militarised imaginary that he offered, the gesture performed by the soldier somehow had the power to project itself through the lenses of the photographers and to have a shocking effect on the Israeli public. It would be an uncut, consciousness-searing flash of battle-forged militarised virtue unleashed on a sinful civilian sphere. It would contrast those who are “doing” with those who don’t. Even the sexual assaults that President Katsav perpetrated repeatedly over the course of many years are rendered as ‘distractions’.

To a degree, the Israeli press reflects this militarised imaginary and often explicitly referred to the picture in terms of ‘consciousness searing.’ A term that denotes the successful suppression of a population under military occupation is now used to refer to the achievement of consensus amongst the Israeli public. A recent example from Gaza is particularly telling:

*‘Twelve years after major Tomer Bohadana was seared in our consciousness as the wounded officer who was rescued from Lebanon and marked a ‘V’ with his fingers a moment before entering the surgical suite, fighter Emannuel Zerah, who was wounded yesterday on the Gaza border, followed his lead and also marked the victory sign’* (Ynet, 2018).

To summarise, if we re-examine the actors in this visual economy, then the aborted flag waving at Bint-Jbeil, written into the army’s battle plans, elaborated the established trope of a ‘victory image.’ It transformed it into a militarized visual economy as an integral tool of warfighting that is directly related to retaining ontological security by challenging the sense of failure around the Lebanon conflict. Photography was written into the battle plan but the heavy toll it required prevented its transmission.

The image I took aligned the conflict with a sense of sacrifice and victimhood. It was not a ‘victory image’ per se, but it normalised the violent conflict by painting it as part of the Israeli biographical narrative as another in a series of heroic sacrifices. The fact that both these images depicted an incident of friendly fire in a campaign marked by miscalculation and error quickly eliminated them from the visual economy.

The eventual image that was used was a distillation of the idea of victory into a simple gesture, a reminder that the fighting spirit of the Israeli soldier survives his injuries, that the journey into battle is noble and that the return is heroic. The IDF, as well as the Winograd commission of inquiry, have had strong reservations about the notion of ‘searing’ when it comes to the people that the IDF is fighting. However, the army’s ‘fiery advocates’ (Kalb and Saivetz, 2007) in the Israeli media readily mobilised the term to frame the positive effect of this picture on Israeli public opinion.

**The Victory Image in Gaza**

During the next military operations in Gaza in 2009, 2012 and 2014, the Israeli media constantly referred to the ‘victory image’ as a strategic goal. Numerous op-eds and on-air pundits explained that what is needed now was a ‘victory image.’ For example, journalist Ronit Zach (2014) wrote that ‘for a month I’ve been hearing endless blabber from the television studios about the wished for “victory image.” Moreover, both in 2012 and in 2014, media watchdog journal ‘The Seventh Eye’ titled its analyses of the coverage of the military operations ‘the victory image.’ However, while the search was on, such images were not to be found in Gaza.

Gaza is a small territory of some 1.8 million Palestinians that Israel had occupied since 1967 and had evacuated in 2005. Still, Israel had maintained effective control over it and had imposed an economic blockade after the takeover of Hamas in the territory in 2007. The Gazan wars, as Bregman (2016: 310-311) calls them, are different from the conflict in Lebanon in that they are predicated mostly on targeted assassinations that are carried out by the Israeli air-force.

Levy (2017) found that the IDF in Gaza engaged in risk-management by lowering the threshold on actions that may cause collateral damage to Palestinians to favour the safety of its own soldiers. The three large military offensives by the IDF between 2009-2014 that are marked by large scale carnage and destruction would not readily yield any sense of ‘victory’.

Operation Cast Lead in 2009 caused 1166 Palestinian deaths (and 13 Israeli), Pillar of Defence in 2012 caused 87 Palestinian deaths (and four Israeli), while operation Protective Edge in 2014 caused 2202 Palestinian deaths (and 68 Israeli). The number of non-combatant Palestinians killed in the last operation has been estimated by B’tselem at 63 percent (Kamisher, 2016).

Even a cursory search through the wire services would reveal the damage inflicted on Gaza. This is how Bregman (2016: 328) summarised the result of the 2014 operation:

‘*The destruction the Israelis inflicted on the Gaza Strip was enormous, and by the end of the war some neighbourhoods of the Gaza Strip resembled Dresden during the Second World War – utterly devastated.*’

The terrible human toll seemed to have toppled the militarized visual economy. However, the term was still used to denote occurrences rather than visuals, or non-visual images. For example, prominent journalist Ron Ben-Yishai (2009) wrote at the end of the first of the Gaza operations, Operation Cast Lead, that the targeted assassination of Hamas official Said Seyam served as a ‘victory image.’

The image Ben-Yshai offered was not a visual one. To be sure, there were images of the event, but the caption of one of the images by AFP photographer Abid Khatib reveals why it was not used: ‘A Palestinian man holds a dismembered leg after an Israeli strike which hit the house of top Hamas official Said Siam's brother on January 15, 2009 in Gaza City, Gaza Strip’ (Getty Images, 2009). The scene of Seyam’s assassination offered nothing resembling a visual ‘victory image’, but according to the senior Israeli journalist the achievement embedded in the incident, the killing of a senior Hamas official, was just that.

Journalist Uzi Benziman (2012) explained that: ‘lacking a spontaneous victory image, the Israeli leadership is trying - through verbal media, to instil in the public consciousness a feeling of unequivocal achievement.’ The image of ‘victory’ was now painted with words. For example, in this account by Eldar from 2014:

*‘On the eighth day of Operation Protective Edge, the IDF reported that over 1,400 targets in Gaza had been attacked, including rocket launchers, weapons stockpiles, the homes of activists and institutions associated with Hamas. Hitting these 1,400 targets was supposed to have been the IDF’s excuse to exit the operation, leading to a cease-fire’* (Eldar, 2014).

Much per Senator Aiken’s formula of ‘victory declaration,’ in accordance with the IDF’s formula of ‘victory staging,’ and in alignment with the demands of the ontological security of militarized Israeli society, the victory image performed a conceptual slide away from its visual meaning. The visual economy of the victory image was still operational, minus the visual.

As I showed above, one does not necessarily need pixels to make up an image. The tall tally of 1,400 targets was a compiled metric, a statistical stand-in for a visual ‘victory image,’ much like a scoreboard at the end of a level in a computer game. This was a shift towards what Alan Feldman (2005: 206) called ‘the actuarial gaze:’

*‘a cultural-political agenda…a visual organization and institutionalization of threat perception and prophylaxis, which cross cuts politics, public health, public safety, policing, urban planning and media practice.’*

The shift was manifested in Three ways: First, under the ‘actuarial gaze’ visuality is organised in response to intangible threats and importantly, the ‘political prisms’ (Ibid: 208) that refract and frame the visual effectively ‘screen-off’ (Ibid: 212) the wider aspects of political violence. This is done through a dialectic of ‘shock and awe’ and ‘collateral damage.’ The former is ‘codified in material destruction, ruins and catastrophic imagery’ (Ibid: 204) while the latter is ignored, or screened-off (Ibid: 212, 214). Using the terms of the actuarial gaze, Seyam’s assassination and the 1,400 targets hit were the screened ‘shock and awe’ victory image, while the documentary depiction of these indiscriminate bombings was the screened-off ‘collateral damage.’

Second, the actuarial gaze contains within it a ‘scopic regime’ or a ‘martial gaze’ (Bousquet, 2018: 10). It is not only a mode of representation, but also a technique of targeting. In a testimony to Israeli NGO Breaking the Silence, an infantry Lieutenant framed the practice of firing artillery as a spatial exercise of threat response. He explained that ‘these weapons are statistical, and they strike 50 meters to the right or 100 meters to the left, and it’s... It’s unpleasant’ (Breaking the Silence, 2015: 205).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Third, as I will next demonstrate, the actuarial gaze was prominent in a re-visualisation of the images. Feldman (2005: 210) wrote that one of the prevalent forms rendered by the actuarial gaze is the ‘profile.’ Because the threat is imperceptible, it is approximated, or ‘arbitrarily fused with categories of race, class ethnicity, religion, immune system status and political geography’ (Ibid: 206-207). The ‘profile’ is similar to that of ‘graphical primitives’ that Manovich (2011: 38) uses to theorise information visualisation (infovis), which‘is able to reveal patterns and structures in the data objects that these primitives represent.’

Manovich explained that the ‘extreme reduction of the world’ is related to the chance to ‘gain new power over what is extracted from it’ (Ibid). One may add the obvious corollary, it screens-off what is excluded and ‘that which is screened-off must be recorded by media and government into surfaces of threat- display, a security profile and an alarm signal’ (Feldman, 2005: 209).

Shock and awe and collateral damage are encoded into simplified visual narratives that explicate the mitigation of threat and screen-off violent civilian death. The images below were promoted in English as well as Hebrew by the IDF’s ‘new media unit’ after the conclusion of operation ‘Protective Edge.’ They are a small sample. They serve as a compiled visual image that employs the actuarial gaze within the established visual economy of the victory image.

These images resemble a computer game’s scoreboard and make a ‘mission accomplished’ style declaration. The level was cleared, so to speak, and ‘all of Israel is now safer.’ These function as ‘threat- display, a security profile and an alarm signal’ (Ibid). They are also victory images: visual depictions of sufficient achievement, a staged victory, now compiled under the terms of the actuarial gaze and widely disseminated by the IDF throughout the Gaza wars.

Figure 3 in here

**Coda: The Hannibal Directive**

It is beyond the scope of this article to canvass the ample graphic output of the IDF, its visual language and its various inter-visual links. Suffice to say that it corresponds with other strategies of depiction, possibly a visual economy, which also illustrates Palestinian suffering.[[9]](#footnote-9)

At the same time, the traditional visual economy of the ‘victory image’ as a documentary evidence of achievement is still at play. The former commander of the IDF’s new-media unit, Sacha Dratwa (youtube, 2015), argued that images of destruction in Gaza could function as a ‘victory image’ for Hamas. Similarly, a testimony published by the NGO ‘Breaking the Silence’ (2014: 231-232) explains the effect of the fear of a visual ‘victory image’ for the other side on the intensity of fighting:

*‘”Hamas is pushing for a display of victory” [sic: the correct translation is the victory image] that’s always the expression used… So that’s why you go up a level, to turn the threat around and also as a show of might.’*

Much like the attempt to ‘sear in the Palestinian consciousness’ that victory is impossible backfired as a demand to sear ‘victory’ in the Israeli consciousness, so did the demand to provide visual evidence of victory turn into a desire to prevent Hamas from gaining one.

In this final part I will illustrate how this inversion manifested itself in 2014 in a horribly familiar form. How a perceived encroachment on the visual economy from Hamas lead to an extreme response that weaponised the actuarial gaze and caused Friendly fire amongst the IDF and civilian carnage amongst Palestinians.

While the first two operations in Gaza in 2009 and 2012 were aimed at stopping rocket fire, Operation Protective Edge’s stated goal was to address the threat of tunnels that were used by Hamas (Israel State Comptroller, 2017). The very idea of tunnels in the heavily surveyed Gaza reflects the most basic fear that instigated the actuarial gaze in the first place (Feldman, 2005: 208), the invisible and shapeshifting ‘global sleeper’ burrowing underground.

On ‘Black Friday’, 1 August 2014, following a skirmish with Hamas fighters near the city of Rafah in the southern Gaza strip, two IDF soldiers were killed and a third was captured and carried through a tunnel. Once the IDF realised that a soldier fell captive, the infamous ‘Hannibal Directive’ was operationalised: the unleashing of heavy fire with the aim of killing the captured soldier in order to prevent a hostage situation.

The Hannibal Directive originates from the days of the Israeli security strip inside Lebanon, when captured Israeli soldiers were traded for great concessions. It was also used in Lebanon in 2006 after the abduction of the two Israeli soldiers, but it had never been applied in such a densely populated area (Bregman, 2014). Despite initial denials by the IDF, the issuance of the Directive in Rafah was widely publicised in Israel and the order is explicitly heard in a recording of the radio network from the operation (Zitun, 2014).

The Hannibal Directive, as it was used in Gaza, is arguably the culmination of the actuarial gaze because it designates an incapacitated soldier as a threat, initiates friendly fire to kill the soldier and screens-off any consideration of collateral damage. Israeli NGO ‘Breaking the Silence’ published the testimony of a soldier who was tasked with preparing a list of targets for the Hannibal directive, which demonstrates the actuarial nature of targeting.

*‘I consider all the possible scenarios of what happens if [an IDF soldier] is kidnapped. Where there are [tunnel] shafts they could come out of, where there are buildings they can hide in. I brought them a list of targets for preliminary approval, and they told me: “That’s not enough targets, bring it back [with more].” Now, I look at the aerial footage, and I don’t know – I mean, I don’t know if there are civilians in there, I don’t know anything - I just analyze it…Hannibal is like, everything’s allowed*.*’* (Breaking the Silence, 2014: 219-220).

With the captured soldier transported underground, the ‘shafts’ could be anywhere. The shelling resulted in the killing of as many as 200 Palestinians, 100 of whom on the first few hours (Amnesty International, 2015). The reason for this Samsonian response is better understood through the familiar visual economy and the desire to prevent Hamas from achieving a ‘victory image.’

In January 2018, the family of the captive soldier published a short document that relayed its frustration with the government’s handling of the case. In it, they state that the family was asked to allow for the conferral of religious burial rites even though his body was missing, in defiance of Jewish tradition, because if Israel recognised that Hamas held the soldier’s body, it would furnish the organisation with a ‘victory image’ (Goldin, 2018: 4).

Meira Weiss (2003: 166) explained that ‘the sacrifice - as inculcated by the Zionist ethos - has become the genetic code of the Israeli soldier’. The valorisation of the ‘beautiful death,’ which is written into militarized Israeli visual culture is not far removed from the veritable Valhallization of the militarist ideal. In the previous cases, death by enemy fire was a risk that was retroactively legitimised as sacrifice. Here, the sacrificial act was a case of risk aversion. Whereas in the cases above, friendly fire was a failure, on 1 August 2014, it was the plan. Any collateral damage was screened-off.

**Conclusion**

War photography, which was my leeway into this analysis, has the power of imposing an order of meaning on the chaos of battle. It draws on established tropes to link the triangle of personal embodied experience, the play of warfighting and the biographical narratives of the nation. In the 2006 Lebanon conflict, a sense of failure instigated a crisis in Israel’s unfolding biographical narrative. It initiated a pursuit of a ‘victory image,’ a visual depiction that would endow the military operation with a sense of achievement and align it with the militarised ontological security. For a while, the picture that I took seemed to fulfil that role, until it was revealed that it represented a case of failure: friendly fire.

An additional candidate for the ‘victory image’ was integrated into the army’s operational thinking in the Lebanese town of Bint-Jbeil in 2006. It was a made-to-order picture that was taken at great cost and was ‘killed’ for a similar reason. It played off familiar tropes as well as intricate inter-visual connections, referencing two iconic images taken by Hezbollah that celebrated the IDF’s failures: the first was the victory speech of Hasan Nasrallah and the second was a Hezbollah attack that documented the planting of a flag near an IDF position. Israel’s new ‘victory image’ was meant to answer these earlier moments of defeat and to establish the supremacy of the IDF, thus achieving ‘victory staging’. Eventually, a ‘victory image’ emerged that fulfilled the minimal requirement of showcasing the fighting spirit of the Israeli soldier.

In the subsequent campaigns in Gaza, the same visual economy of the victory image was enlisted, but it had transformed. The use of war photography was abandoned in correspondence with a wider shift towards an ‘actuarial gaze,’ a visual culture structure that concerns the mitigation of intangible risk and the screening-off of the human toll of the violence, which had grown substantially. However, the fear of the procurement of a ‘victory image’ by Hamas motivated the unleashing of extreme and indiscriminate power in a manner that weaponised the actuarial gaze.

A soldier taken from his mission and held captive in Gaza would have disturbed militarized ontological security. It certainly did in 2006, when Gilad Shalit was captured. However, this time, the fear of an intrusion on the established visual economy led to the targeting of the soldier by extreme friendly fire in a heavily populated area. Besides minor protests, the massive collateral damage that predictably killed of hundreds of Gazans did not raise much concern in Israel. It was successfully screened-off. It was simply that the dormant war momentarily awoke, the grass was mowed, so it goes.

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1. See a list in Hansen (2015: 266, note 19). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, this refers only to the majority Jewish population. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compare with David Campbell and Marcus Power’s (2010: 171) description of a similar imaginary that is applied to the continent of Africa that serves to ‘make the contemporary apocalyptic imagery of war, violence, disaster and social unrest appear as something ‘natural’, since the continent is seen to be governed by the forces of nature and not those of reason or civilisation.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is different to Hansen’s (2011: 59) visual security of ‘familiarisation,’ which concerns the profanation of venerated subjects. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Deterrence has been a core concept informing how communication is considered in US mainstream International Relations theory: actors signal to others their strength and intention and much of the practical matter of conducing international relations entails managing these perceptions (Jervis, 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A transcribed recording is available on-line (Youtube, 2014) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In 2012, an Israeli newspaper published an interview with the soldier who abandoned his post where the picture was taken. His words attest to the magnitude of the event and to the crushing weight of masculine militarist myths on young bodies: ‘they expected me to die. In the state of Israel if you don’t fulfil that expectation, or you are afraid, if you panic, you have lesser rights…sometimes I think, maybe if I were killed there I would have been thankful. Maybe it would have been better for me to die than to live’ (Kotz Bar, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Additionally, the IDF managed to develop a discourse of prudence in its use of lethal force by drawing on the actuarial gaze. ‘Roof-Knocking’ is a practice in which a small explosion warns residents of a building of an incoming larger blast to allow them to flee. The documentation of this practice, commonly used in Gaza, is promoted via distant and blurry drone shot videos as a demonstration of the exercising of judgment by the IDF and sparing civilian lives. Both the high number of casualties and the lethal effect of the initial blasts indicate that this is not the case (B’tselem, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In particular, see the output of Visualising Palestine at: http://visualizingpalestine.org. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)