Engendering Dissent
The Four Mothers Movement and Israel’s Lebanon War

Daniel Lieberfeld, Ph.D.
Graduate Center for Social and Public Policy
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, PA 15282 USA
email: lieberfeld@duq.edu

DRAFT VERSION—COMMENTS WELCOME
PLEASE DO NOT QUOTE OR CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION
Abstract

How did the “Four Mothers—Leave Lebanon in Peace” movement become one known as “one of the most successful grassroots movements in Israel’s history?” The movement, which was founded and led by family members of combat soldiers, sought to end the country’s war in Lebanon. The article examines how grievances, collective identity, leadership and internal organization, and goals, tactics, and issue framing impacted the movement’s political effectiveness, and considers the opportunities and limitations of the political and media environment in which the movement sought to influence public and elite opinion. The conclusions address the particular characteristics of the movement’s experience, and the broader question of how antiwar movements can effect change in national-security policy.
When and how can antiwar social movements constrain the state?¹

Social movements can activate and intensify debate over the government’s war policies—particularly during wars that are widely seen as elective, rather than matters of national survival, and which become costly and prolonged past initial expectations. When antiwar movements effectively highlight the war’s human, economic, and moral costs and question its benefits, then the political costs of pursuing an unpopular war can create incentives for state leaders to end it. Peace movement organizations (PMOs) can, through the media, propagate facts and arguments about the war that put war proponents on the defensive and turn a majority of the public against the war. Mediated by political institutions, antiwar majorities can, in turn, cause government policy to change. This article considers the conditions under which this outcome, unilateral war termination, becomes possible. However, even prolonged and costly “wars of choice” do not necessarily produce effective PMOs. By analyzing a particularly effective grassroots PMO led by soldiers’ family members, the article induces hypotheses

¹ Social movements are collectivities acting in an organized way, outside of institutional channels, to challenge or defend existing authority and policy (Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2004: 11).
concerning the political circumstances and internal characteristics that permit successful antiwar movements.

Through a single-case study with comparisons to other national and cross-national movements, the article hypothesizes features of the political environment that contribute to PMO effectiveness, notably a high-degree of competition between political parties, rather than dominance by one party; proliferation of mass-media outlets; and relatively low public perceptions of overall threats to national security. In terms of state-society relations, PMOs can be effective when the state’s ability to wage war relies heavily on citizens’ participation in the military. A political culture inclining toward individualism and liberal democracy, instead of communitarianism, appears conducive to effective antiwar protest (Ezrahi 1997: 242-243).

The article also considers characteristics and strategies of PMOs that enhance their political effectiveness, particularly in terms of movement identity, issue framing, and tactics. Regarding identity, the article argues that PMOs gain political credibility for their arguments to the extent that movement leaders and members are associated with the most valued institutions of the state, particularly with the military. Protesters’ association with the military and other core state institutions supports the perceived legitimacy of their claim debate national-security questions and makes them
harder for war proponents to ignore or discredit. Movements also increase their chances of success by focusing on a single-goal, and framing issues with metaphors and images drawn from mainstream national culture.

"Four Mothers: Leaving Lebanon in Peace" was formed by a small group of Israeli mothers whose sons were fighting in Lebanon. The movement is widely credited with turning Israel’s public against the war and precipitating withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 (Frucht 2000; Shavit 2006; Hermann 2006: 51). In 1997 when the movement began, a majority of the Israeli public and political elites supported the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) remaining in southern Lebanon in the absence of a negotiated agreement with Lebanon and Syria. Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai maintained that there was "no alternative to the IDF presence in the south Lebanon security zone."

According to Military Intelligence chief, Major-General Moshe Ya'alon, even to debate the value of the Lebanon war represented a victory for Israel’s chief Lebanese adversary, the Iranian and Syrian backed militia Hezbollah (Collins 1997). Support for the military’s presence in Lebanon transcended political party lines. The Labor party’s leader, Ehud Barak, a former IDF Chief of Staff, considered a unilateral Israeli withdrawal “disastrous because it would bring Hezbollah right to our border” (Honig 1997).
Despite such pronouncements, public opinion turned decisively against the war between 1997 and 1999. By the time Barak unilaterally withdrew Israeli forces from Lebanon in May 2000, fulfilling his campaign promise from the previous year (Harmon 1999), about three fourths of Jewish Israelis favored doing so. Conversely, public opinion that strongly opposed withdrawal declined from about a third of Jewish Israelis in 1997 and 1998, to a quarter by early 1999 (Arian 1999). While this change is not attributable solely to the activities of the Four Mothets movement, the argument here traces the causal links between movement activities, public opinion shifts, and Barak’s troop-withdrawal decision.

**Dissent over the Lebanon War in Israeli Politics**

The pullout from southern Lebanon in 2000 was Israel’s first unilateral withdrawal from long-held territory, and ended an Israeli military presence that began in 1978. Political scientist Gil Meirom (2003: 177) notes, “Before the Lebanon war, the human cost of Israeli wars hardly ever divided the Israeli public or raised the question of whether a war itself was worthwhile.” But in response to unanticipated and escalating human, economic, and moral costs of the war, there emerged in 1982 an unprecedented antiwar movement that contested the Begin-Sharon government’s claim that the war was a matter of national survival. Protests arose within the military, based on
soldiers’ feelings that war should only be a last resort, whereas the Lebanon war was “conducted with the aim of occupying territories rather than thwarting an existential danger” (Barzilai 1996: 144). Antiwar voices included Parents Against Silence, established a year after Israel’s 1982 invasion, which effectively protested the war via demonstrations, rallies, petitions, and press releases (Wolfsfeld 1988; Gillath 1991; Sharoni 1997; Azmon 1997: 112-115). An early example of a bereaved Israeli mother who broke with the stereotype of national mourner and became an effective critic of the war was Raya Harnik, who accused the government of murdering her son “because of an unnecessary war” (Ezrahi 1997: 239).

In 1985, Israeli forces withdrew to the self-declared “security zone” extending several miles into southern Lebanon, where the IDF’s ongoing presence fueled an insurgency led by Hezbollah. By the mid-1990’s, about 25 Israelis were killed and many more wounded in Lebanon each year. Rocket attacks by Hezbollah and by militant Palestinian groups also caused insecurity, although relatively few fatalities, for citizens in northern Israel.

Although Prime Minister Begin eventually resigned due to the failures of his government’s policies in Lebanon, his successors—Yitzhak Shamir, Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, and Binyamin Netanyahu—treated the security zone as necessary protection against Hezbollah’s attacks on Israel’s North. Nor
did organized opposition to the Lebanon war develop from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. Public inattention to Lebanon ended in February 1997, however, after two military transport helicopters collided en route to the battlefield, killing 74 soldiers, Israel’s largest single-day military loss since the 1973 “Yom Kippur” war (Eisenberg 1997).²

Background on the Movement

The Four Mothers movement began in February 1997 when four neighbors jointly wrote a letter of support to a small group of members of parliament (the Knesset), who, immediately following the helicopter crash, had publicly called for Israel to leave Lebanon. A leading member of this group, known as the “Kochav Yair circle,” was Yossi Beilin, a former government minister from the Labor party. Beilin responded to the four women’s letter by visiting them and personally encouraging their activism. The women, who each had sons in combat in Lebanon, added the name “Four Mothers” to their original name for the

² The helicopter accident, along with a increase in combat casualties due to tactical innovations by Hezbollah, raised to 111 the number of Israeli soldiers who died in the war in 1997—more than four times the previous year’s total. It seems plausible that public opinion does not readily discount non-combat deaths in its understanding of a war’s costs.
group, “Leaving Lebanon in Peace,” after an article about them with that appellation, connoting the four Biblical matriarchs (Sarah, Leah, Rebecca, and Rachel) appeared in a national newspaper.

In the months after its formation, the group received front-page coverage in Israel’s largest daily newspaper and appeared on national television to demand an immediate and unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon. On the anniversary of the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the group organized a large-scale protest in Tel-Aviv and antiwar vigils at 30 highway junctions around the country. Movement supporters undertook similar vigils each time an Israeli soldier died in Lebanon. The group demonstrated outside government ministries, and brought an ostrich, to symbolize myopic policymaking, to an August 1997 demonstration at the prime minister’s residence. The movement also protested at the convention of the governing Likud party, collected signatures on a pro-withdrawal petition, lobbied Knesset members face-to-face, and ran a hotline for soldiers’ families.

The Four Mothers movement was a much smaller organization than the main Israeli PMO, Peace Now. Nevertheless, with only about 1,000 active supporters and one part-time paid staffperson, and even though only about 1,500 Israeli soldiers at a time were fighting in Lebanon, the Four Mothers movement kept the war in the public eye through its high media
visibility, its small-scale yet widespread protests, and large rallies on the anniversaries of the invasion and of the helicopter disaster. During the three years of movement activity, public opinion on the Lebanon war shifted dramatically: Before the group began its activities, fewer than 40 percent of Jewish Israelis favored Israel’s unilateral withdrawal; over 70 percent did so when the group disbanded in 2000. In the first year of movement activity, the percentage of the public who thought the security zone in Lebanon was too costly in terms of the lives of Israeli soldiers rose from 28 to 38, while those who believed it made a positive contribution to Israeli security declined from 72 to 62 (Arian 1997, 2000). These trends continued in 1998 and 1999.

These public-opinion shifts prompted policy change in the context of national elections. Ehud Barak, the main opposition candidate for prime minister in 1999, pledged that if he won he would withdraw troops from Lebanon by June 2000, while the incumbent, Binyamin Netanyahu, also stated, for the first time, that he would get Israel out of Lebanon in a year, via unilateral withdrawal if a negotiated settlement with Syria was unachievable. Barak was elected in May 1999 and withdrew

---

3 The number of supporters is based on the movement’s list of approximately 100 regional leaders in Israel with an estimated average of 10 active supporters per region.
Israeli forces in early 2000. The Four Mothers movement, which The Jerusalem Post called “one of the most successful grass-roots movements in Israeli history” (Sontag 2000), disbanded right after the withdrawal, amid internal rancor over whether to broaden its goals and continue the movement.

Grievances and Movement Identity

In interviews with the Israeli newspaper Haaretz (Shavit 2006) women who joined the Four Mothers movement recalled their responses to the helicopter crash. The disaster triggered an emotional outpouring and prompted them to turn into public activism their formerly suppressed or privately held misgivings and grievances toward the war. For these mothers the crash evoked an intense feeling of protectiveness toward their sons and other young soldiers from their own communities. For Bruria Sharon, an early movement member,

The helicopters disaster sent me into shock. I cried for two weeks. And from that moment I breathed, ate, slept and talked only Lebanon. To get out of Lebanon....

Youth from kibbutz communities were overrepresented in elite commando units, due to socialization and norms within the kibbutz. Thus, soldiers in commando units not infrequently shared a kibbutz background and attended the same high school.
My youngest son, Ofer, my jewel, was then a new recruit in the commando unit of the Paratroops. At the end of his training course, I told him and his buddies ... that we parents have the responsibility to ask questions and not allow anyone to lead our children to death without asking questions.

I don’t know what sets a person afire. But I was suddenly on fire. I was hysterical. Overwrought. I felt I was on borrowed time. That if I did not turn the world upside down, my child would die. I wrote a letter to [Prime Minister] Netanyahu saying that if my son were killed he would not be to blame; I would be to blame, because I did not do enough to make sure my son would not die. I let the chief of staff decide about him. I let the defense minister decide about him. I abandoned him to them.

Even before the crash, some parents felt that the Lebanon war imposed an unwarranted sacrifices on their families and communities. The helicopter disaster, occurring so close to home, and taking the lives of the sons of families they knew, inflamed this ongoing, hitherto private, sense of grievance. Confronted with continued rocket attacks, Rachel Ben Dor and other movement founders could observe on a daily basis that the war did not, in fact, provide security for northern Israel, as government officials claimed. “We were residents of the North and we knew that this was a big lie that they were selling us.
We were there, and we thought that we would pay in our lives for this lie,” Ben Dor recalled.\(^5\)

For the movement’s founders, the state was failing in its most basic functions: It was not protecting its citizens in the North from rocket attacks, and it also was endangered families in those communities a second time by sending their sons to a “war of choice.” Four Mothers activist Orna Shimoni related her frustration at public acceptance of the situation:

The feeling that then existed among the public that the IDF was established to protect civilians, so it is natural for soldiers to be killed - drove me crazy. Because the IDF is the Israel Defense Forces but the soldiers are our children. And every child that fell, I had a kind of feeling that he was my child. That I had not protected him.

Witnessing the helicopter crash, which took place on the grounds of the high-school that her and her friends’ sons had attended before entering the army, impelled Ben Dor to actively dispute the prevailing conception of the war as inevitable and without alternatives. The movement’s founders were friends who had already bonded over their shared experience of life in kibbutz communities near the Lebanese border. Their children,\(^5\) Unless noted, quotations from Rachel Ben Dor are from telephone interviews with the author on May 27-28 and June 3, 2006.
once schoolmates, had joined combat units in Lebanon. Other parents of soldiers, Ben Dor noted, were attracted to the group because it functioned as a support group and made them feel that they were “doing something to save their sons.” Participants shared an urgent need to take an active role in saving their sons’ lives and the lives of others with whom they identified.6 As Linda Ben Zvi, spokesperson for the group’s Tel Aviv chapter, reported, “I put a lot of time into this work because I feel that every day we’re in Lebanon, another kid’s life is in danger” (Novis 1999).

Movement leaders were generally middle-class professionals. Generally public, support for withdrawal from Lebanon correlated with higher educational attainment, European (Ashkenazi) background, secularism, and support for the political left and the Labor party (Arian 1998). Support for withdrawal was higher among women than men, although the Four

6 As the Four Mothers campaign gained popularity, movement leaders, such as co-founder Ronit Nachmias, were told by people close to the military that they could get her son out of military if she would stop the campaign. Nachmias reflected, “They didn’t understand that I wasn’t doing this just for my son but because I believe that our presence in Lebanon was bad for the country as a whole. Even when my son completed his army term … I continued to be active” (Frucht 2000).
Mothers movement’s rank-and-file was approximately 40 percent men.

The ultimate motivation of saving the lives of their own and other’s children enabled the group’s leaders to do what they would not ordinarily do, to “cross all the boundaries,” except for blatantly illegal activities. “It’s a mother thing,” Ben Dor recalled. “The feeling that your child is hanging from a cliff and you have to grab him before he falls” (Ahronovitz 2006).

**Nationalist Symbols, Analogical Frames, and Tactical Choices**

Social movement leaders are “strategic decision-makers” whose tasks—in addition to recruitment, mobilizing resources, and capitalizing on political opportunities—include strategizing and framing goals and issues so as to highlight the grievances, attribute blame or causation, and specify remedies (Morris and Staggenborg 2004: 171). As with other social movements, Four Mothers’ political effectiveness depended on its leaders’ ability to create perceptual and discursive frames that resonated with the culture of potential supporters (Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford 1986). Movement co-founder Rachel Ben Dor was equipped with knowledge of cultural traditions and had trained as an educator and as a military officer. Beginning with the Four Mothers name, Ben Dor adapted Biblical narratives and traditional cultural themes
in service of war protest. Biblical narratives were easily interpreted by both secular and religious Israelis. Ben Dor—a scholar of Midrash, a practice of homiletic exegesis that analogizes Biblical stories to the problems of contemporary society—noted that Judaic scholars had traditionally “used familiar texts, used familiar issues, and just hit their agenda…. I felt very comfortable using these tactics, so that is what I did—all the time.” Ben Dor sought to “use the sacred things,” the most powerful symbols of Jewish culture, to communicate the group’s message about the war.

A protest around the Passover holiday in 1998, for example, took the holiday’s primary theme—exodus from Egypt, deliverance from slavery, and liberation in one’s own land—and “midrashized” it, analogizing it to the Lebanon situation: In speeches, placards, and rituals enacted at the demonstration, the group celebrated the idea of Exodus—from Lebanon instead of Egypt; liberation—from an unnecessary war; and a return to the protection and safety of one’s own land. The group added a theatrical element as protesters symbolically rebuilt a fence on the internationally approved border with Lebanon, providing visual appeal for the television and newspaper reporters in attendance.

The group incorporated other cultural metaphors in the same demonstration: references to Jeremiah’s telling of the Lord’s promise of a safe return of Rachel’s children “from the
land of the enemy” to their own land, and the prophecy of peace when they returned. Metaphors related to holidays are easily apprehended by most Israeli Jews—for whom holidays are part of a cultural tradition, not only a religious one.

The group was aware of nationalist accusations that their actions undermined the morale of the soldiers, and the tendency of some government officials to make support for soldiers the focus of political debate, rather than the merits of the war policy. Signs at the Four Mothers demonstrations included “Support our soldiers,” implying, “Yes, we do support them.” Since demonstrators were often soldiers’ relatives, their assertions of support were not easily contested. Demonstrators also carried Israel flags since, according to Ben Dor, “We realized that the right-wing are using the flags to show how patriotic they are. So we started to walk with Israeli flags to show that patriotism is on our side as well.” The strategy was to “take everything they say and give it a spin, and own it. And say, ‘We say the same. We are not against.’” The group sang “Ha’Tikva,” the national anthem that highlights the Biblical theme of the return to the Promised Land, and invoked nationalist heroes and symbols. According to Ben Dor, “We thought this was our right: Why is just one side able to use these myths of sacrifice?”

In keeping with their policy of remaining within the political mainstream, the movement had few links to the
Lebanese "enemy." Four Mothers thus differed from PMOs in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that included members of both national groups, or that sponsored joint activities, and may therefore have been marginal to national political debate. As Hermann (2006: 57) notes,

civil organizations that relate to national values and norms and emphasize their patriotic nature have a much better chance of gaining public support in times of conflict—which almost always prevail in the Middle East—than organizations, like the peace groups, that advocate universal values and apply the same normative standards to their own collective and to that of the "enemy."

For this reason, movement leaders also avoided focusing their discourse on war casualties among the Lebanese. As Ben Zvi recalled,

Sometimes I wanted to say "It's not just our boys: Look what we're also doing to Lebanese mothers." But I think that if that had been the public policy of the Four Mothers, it would have been very difficult ... because a lot of people lost their sons in Lebanon.

We debated among ourselves whether we should talk about the problem of what we’re doing to the Lebanese population, the idea of occupation. But we decided that the only way we would get out of Lebanon [was] to win the minds of the Israelis.
Attracting wider grassroots and elite support meant avoiding radical goals and tactics. Like the leaders of Parents against Silence, Ben Dor sought to create consensus, to present ourselves as reasonable, knowledgeable, including about military matters…. Other guidelines were to obey the law. Not to chain ourselves to fences for example. To be normal, mainstream. Not to play into the stereotype of the hysterical mothers crying over their sons. [As a result] our movement was able to attract military people, officers.

The movement also had less need for disruptive tactics, given its access to politicians, made possible in large part by the leaders’ status as mothers of soldiers.7

The leadership’s strategic and tactical choices were made with a view to influencing public opinion. Ben Zvi attributed the movement’s success to its focus on “talking with mainstream Israelis and not making it too complicated” by adopting goals beyond ending the war and withdrawing the soldiers. She also noted leadership’s rejection of some group members’ proposals

7 The group occasionally used disruption, for example by blocking traffic with a demonstration in Tel Aviv, but generally avoided such tactics.
for illegal non-violent or violent tactics, so that “People weren’t threatened by us.”

Peace activist Uri Avnery (2006) divides Israeli PMOs into two types: the “Zionist peace camp,” exemplified by Peace Now, which generally avoids straying from the national political consensus, and the “radical peace camp,” a political avant-garde which more frequently departs from the consensus. Groups in the radical camp are far less popular, but can, in Avnery’s analysis, influence the mainstream PMOs which, in time, adopt the radical groups’ positions when they prove correct. The Four Mothers movement, in its choice of goals and tactics, fits within the Zionist peace camp, according to this typology, and probably benefited from the “radical flank effect” (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996: 14) whereby more radical peace groups help moderate ones attract political support.

---

8 Quotations from Linda Ben Zvi are from a June 15, 2006, telephone interview with the author, unless noted. Rejecting illegal tactics was at times divisive, leading the movement to expel at least one member who persistently advocated them. Ben Dor assessed that movement members who advocated confrontational tactics, such as arguing with soldiers or blocking army convoys on the road to Lebanon, tended not to be parents of soldiers.
Four Mothers leaders were careful to direct protests at government policy rather than at the army. The group had to refute accusations that it was undermining army morale: In 1998, a year of increasing activism by the movement, the public widely perceived intervention in army affairs by parents of soldiers as highly damaging to Israel’s security (Arian 1998). Israel’s citizens’ army included not only the sons of movement participants, but other family members. Some women at the forefront of the movement had themselves served in the army, including as officers, and their husbands typically belonged to army reserve units. Their opposition to the war thus had to coexist with support for their family members. The group did not advocate draft resistance and avoided association with groups that did.

The lead role played by residents of the North, the region most directly affected by the security of the border with Lebanon, enhanced by the movement’s public credibility: Proponents typically invoked the safety of the area’s residents as a rationale for the war, while the prominence of northerners among its leadership allowed the movement to counter such arguments. Despite participants’ above-average levels of education and liberal politics, Ben Dor noted, “We were kibbutzniks from the North. We played on this characteristic because it legitimimized our talking about the issue. We weren’t
yuppies from Tel Aviv. We were the ones suffering from the war. This gave us moral power."

Israeli women’s peace organizations that do not adopt a maternal identity tend to be less politically effective, due to the tendency to view feminism “as an extreme movement that posed a threat to the stability of Israeli society, particularly in times of crisis” (Sharoni 1997: 153; see also Yuval-Davis 1994: 112.) Ben Dor assessed that Israel’s largely patriarchal and militarized society would be more responsive if the movement did not directly challenge those institutions. The movement’s relatively “polite” tactics and limited goals, along with its use of maternal identity, alienated some Israeli feminists. As Parents against Silence had done in the 1980’s, the Four Mothers movement avoided links with women’s organizations in order to prevent stereotyping (Azmon 1997: 114). However, the movement’s political legitimacy and efficacy exceeded that of Israeli antiwar groups that were either non-Zionist or exclusively female, and those such as Women in Black whose women-only, black-clothed, silent mode of protest symbolically set them apart from mainstream Israeli society (Helman and Rapoport 1997).

Theorists note the desirability of peace movement leaders crafting “very simple yet broad movement goals in order to attract very diverse constituencies” (Marullo and Meyer 2004: 243). Movement leaders kept a strong focus on the mission of
getting Israeli soldiers out of Lebanon. Ben Dor underlined the importance of “surviving for the long term” and having one focus, one agenda... I had to be strong and not let people pull it in different directions.”

**Political Context and Opportunities**

Lower public perceptions of security threats in the late 1990’s, and correspondingly greater tolerance of dissent, sharper divisions among political elites, as well as greater availability of political allies, all afforded opportunities for enhanced movement effectiveness. Notably, the period 1996-1999, within which the movement’s activities took place, had the most sustained favorable attitudes toward the possibility of peace of any time between 1994 and 2005 (Yaar and Hermann n.d.). Poll results indicate that fears that Arabs intended to destroy the Jewish state and kill Jews dropped to historically low levels from 1997 to 1999 (Arian 1997, 1998, 1999). Lowered threat perceptions correlate with greater willingness to negotiate and take risks for peace (Lieberfeld 1999; Maoz and McCauley 2005). The public’s relatively low threat perceptions

---

9 The proportion of Israeli Jews believing that Arabs wanted to destroy Israel had fallen to 19 percent in 1997 and 1999, compared with 49 percent in 1991, at the time of the Gulf war (Arian ibid.).
in the late-1990’s likely facilitated acceptance of the group’s message and blunted criticism by government and military leaders and accusations of treason by hard-line Israeli nationalists.

The movement remained politically unaffiliated in hopes of attracting a wider range of grassroots support than affiliation would permit. Nor, before 1999, was there any mainstream party whose platform endorsed withdrawal from Lebanon. The movement did benefit from the availability of informal political allies, however. Beilin helped the movement hold its first national-scale rally. Sympathetic politicians also helped movement leaders obtain demonstration permits and access to parliament, where they were able to personally lobby about two thirds of the members. Movement leaders sense of efficacy—a necessity for translating a sense of injustice into collective action (Gamson 1992, in Klandermans 1997: 17-18)—came from the encouragement of national politicians, which indicated to movement leaders that they could change national politics, and from a combination of their personal backgrounds and experience and the example of PMOs such as Parents Against Silence.

With the Israeli body politic “split almost entirely down the middle between Left and Right” (Peri 2004: 197), divisions among political elites in the late 1990’s presented opportunities for greater movement effectiveness. Such divisions can encourage social movements by confirming that
politicians can be persuaded to support movement goals and by making their achievement seem a realistic possibility (McAdam 1982). The absence of a hegemonic party in Israel helped the Four Mothers movement get support from leading politicians of different parties, which meant that they could not be dismissed as politically peripheral.

While willing to allow politicians to appear at Four Mothers events, and to avail themselves of such support as politicians could provide, movement leaders nonetheless sought to keep politicians from the spotlight and from compromising the grassroots character and potentially broad appeal that were the movement’s major assets. While the movement drew support mainly from the left-wing, secular, and Ashkenazi sectors of society, its leaders hoped to appeal to members of other demographic groups, such as women of Sephardic origin, who typically supported right-wing parties and who would have rejected a group closely linked with a left-wing politician like Beilin. Describing the late 1990’s, Peri (2004: 196) notes that “In Israel’s total politics, everyone must belong to a political camp: subscribing to one camp’s principles means that one is denied support by the other camp’s members.” Yet dissatisfaction with the prolonged stalemate in Lebanon existed in the ranks of parties that held hawkish positions regarding issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, with no Jewish settler communities in southern Lebanon, or
historical Jewish connections to the region, and hence no popular constituency for remaining there, the Lebanon question was less ideologically and politically inflammatory than withdrawal from the Palestinian territories in Gaza and the West Bank.  

**Relations with the Media**

In order to mobilize support, peace movements must enlist the support of established institutions, such as the media (Marullo and Meyer 2004: 660). News media, Peri (2004: 207) observes, are “the central arena for political debate in western countries and those who hope to promote their ideas to the public have few alternative channels.” It is the news media that determine “who gets to speak and what is considered an appropriate form of argument.” As Doug McAdam et al. note (1996: 17), when a social movement establishes itself to the degree that it is taken seriously by political establishment, an intense “framing contest” develops among state, the movement, and counter-movements that is filtered through news media. “Thus the outcome … will turn, not only on the

---

10 A faction within Zionism’s “revisionist” movement has laid claim to southern Lebanon in the past, but it is politically marginal.
Movement leaders recognized the crucial importance of media coverage and the political power it conferred. The movement courted the media and, Ben Dor noted, included in their planning for each big demonstration high-visibility, media-oriented “gimmicks” to invite coverage since “If we stood there and nobody came, then we didn’t do anything!” Ben Dor characterized the relationship between the group and the media as mutually beneficial, bordering on mutually exploitative:

We always provided “action.” This [helped] many people to join us: Whenever they put our pictures in the newspapers, we [included] our ad and our phone number, so it was free advertising for us…. The idea was to be “on” all the time in the news, to create something—not too crazy, but provocative enough that they will want to cover it. They knew that the Four Mothers would provide them with news—sometimes funny, sometimes, tender, sometimes dramatic, but always something.

Several factors helped the movement attracted media attention, much of it positive. First, in Israel’s “media centered democracy,” television is heavily news oriented. Live broadcasts and special broadcasts on issues such as the fighting on the Lebanese border “provided material of special interest and received extensive treatment” (Peri 2004: 124).
With the Palestinian front relatively unthreatening in 1997-99 and with Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq quiescent, the movement’s attempts to focus national attention on the war in Lebanon faced few competing war-and-peace issues. As the only large-scale movement actively protesting the Lebanon war, Four Mothers did not contend with competing movements that might have caused “market saturation.”

The movement’s easily comprehensible, culturally based metaphors were well suited to the broadcast media, which typically eschew complexity and are drawn to two-sided controversies. Regarding media coverage of war and peace issues, “Simple story lines, especially when they are accompanied by good visuals, are the key to reaching a mass audience” (Wolfsfeld 2004: 18, 20, 54). News media also search “obsessively” for drama, with the assumption that “dramatic coverage is the only way to compete for audiences.” Media competition in Israel grew during the 1990’s, with the appearance of a new commercial television station and multiplication of radio stations (Wolfsfeld 2004: 55). This competitive media environment created opportunities for the movement to attract coverage. (The movement also attracted considerable international media coverage; however, this was probably less directly influential politically than was coverage by national media).
Attacks on the movement also created more controversies and inspired more coverage. For example, a colonel in the military derogated the movement as “the Four Rags” and was eventually compelled to issue a halfhearted apology (O’Sullivan 2000). A disparaging remark toward the group by the bureau chief in Prime Minister Netanyahu’s office also attracted media coverage (e.g., Collins 1998).

By not focusing its argument on the harm that the war was doing to Lebanese civilians, movement leaders avoided breaking with the media’s essential ethnocentrism in which stories are almost always about “us” and “claims about our own acts of aggression and the other’s suffering are either ignored, underplayed, or discounted” (Wolfsfeld 2004: 22). In this sense, the group attracted media coverage more easily than could human-rights oriented groups whose focus was the harm that Israeli military occupation caused Palestinian civilians, for example, or a joint Israeli-Palestinian peace group.

Did journalists share the movement’s goals and actively cooperate in promoting them? This question deserves deeper analysis than is possible here; however, for many veteran journalists, the Lebanon war was personally and professionally significant: The 1982 invasion inspired the conversion of the Israeli press from a propagandistic to an adversarial role. Peri (2004: 87-88) notes that after initially rallying around
the flag, Israeli journalists ultimately became a factor in the government’s decision to withdraw from Lebanon in 1985.

Media professionals appear to be more willing to take a watchdog role and focus on negative aspects of a war when elite consensus about the war declines. This tendency was evident in Israel during the Lebanon war in 1982 and also in the United States during the Vietnam war (Hallin 1986). The movement was thus fortunate to have acted at a time when the governing coalition’s parliamentary majority was fragile. Israeli media’s willingness to show casualties and to provide coverage of antiwar protest proceeded in tandem with the emergence of politicians who took pro-withdrawal stances, and with the vulnerability of Netanyahu’s coalition, which by early 1997 faced possible collapse.

In media scholar Gadi Wolfsfeld’s analysis, Israel’s media “went far beyond reflecting the changing public opinion, and actually accelerated it by giving generous coverage to anyone in favor of a withdrawal.” However, until 1997, the media had been relatively unquestioning of Lebanon policy, suggesting that an effective protest movement, more than journalists’ antiwar agendas, was ultimately responsible for altering public opinion. Wolfsfeld himself concludes that Four Mothers’ “main contribution was to legitimize the public debate over Lebanon. Before they came along, debating what we were doing in Lebanon
was a taboo subject: It wasn’t patriotic to raise it” (Frucht 2000).

**Public Opinion and Political Efficacy**

How do social movements affect policymaking on war and peace, and how should their political efficacy be understood and evaluated? McAdam and Su (2002: 716) posit a two-stage process in which social movements in democracies stimulate shifts in public opinion, which then influences policymaking. In assessing the Four Mothers movement’s impact on public opposition to the Lebanon war, and the latter’s influence on policymaking, evidence of causality derives from temporal sequencing, correlation, policymakers’ statements, analogous examples, and weaknesses of alternative explanations.

Beginning with the associative criterion in causality, there was an immediate appearance, following the helicopter crash, of a “raging” debate on whether and how to withdraw from Lebanon (Rolef 1997). The Four Mothers movement, while not solely responsible for initiating such debate over the war, sustained and intensified public debate, and, through focused advocacy, built public and elite support for withdrawal. In terms of temporal sequence, the shift toward greater public support for unilateral withdrawal (i.e., even without an agreement with Lebanon or Syria) followed increases in movement activity and media coverage in 1997-98. Opinion favoring
unilateral withdrawal was approaching 50 percent by the time Netanyahu’s coalition government collapsed in late 1998, and had crossed the 50 percent threshold during the run-up to the March 1999 elections (Arian 1999).

Evidence of movement effectiveness also comes from statements by officials who blamed it for the IDF’s difficulties. Kaye (2002: 571) notes, “Critique of the movement by high-ranking political and military officials, who argued that the movement was threatening the morale and effectiveness of the IDF, suggests that Four Mothers did emerge as a powerful force in Israeli society” and was “a major force in the security discourse over Lebanon.” While Kaye’s analysis of Barak’s withdrawal decision attributes causality to top-down decisionmaking and policy-framing by elites, rather than by social movements; however, it also unequivocally endorses the causal role of public-opinion change on elite decisionmaking, concluding that, after the 1997 helicopter crash, “public debate led to a shift in elite thinking about Lebanon in both the Likud and Labor parties, allowing the withdrawal option to be considered seriously” (2002: 566). The causal role of public opinion was also emphasized by public officials including Ephraim Sneh, deputy defense minister and former Lebanon commander, and a prominent anti-withdrawal voice, who judged that Israel was leaving Lebanon “because of problems
with the ability of the Israeli public to stand firm. That is the whole truth. There is no point in pretending” (Luft 2000).

Regarding the association between the shift in public opinion and the shift in Barak’s position on Lebanon, a former Barak advisor noted that Barak’s American campaign consultants, Robert Shrum and Stanley Greenberg, had polled the public on this issue before Barak announced his pro-withdrawal position. Barak thus articulated his new position on the issue knowing that he was moving with the tide of public opinion. With the race for prime minister still apparently close in early 1999, Barak, by endorsing withdrawal from Lebanon, had a wedge issue that helped in distinguishing himself from Netanyahu, the incumbent, whose own endorsement of withdrawal was more conditional and equivocal. Noting the public’s weariness of divisive politics, Barak responded by positioning himself as a unifying candidate, after initially running a negative campaign (Peri 2004). Given this electoral strategy, it is unlikely that Barak would have chosen a pro-withdrawal position if public opinion had been running against withdrawal. In at least a permissive sense, therefore, the public opinion shift on withdrawal caused Barak’s campaign promise.

It need not imply that Barak’s only motive for his policy reversal on Lebanon was the desire to win election, to assume

---

11 Interview with author, 2006.
that political leaders are answerable to some “winning coalition” of voters and that their foreign policies are designed to maximize their chances of being elected (Mattes and Morgan 2004: 179). An imperfect, but still relevant, analogy can be seen in Israel’s 1992 election, in which a central question was whether Israel should withdraw from the West Bank and Gaza. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, shifts in public opinion of 10-15 percent had, as with the Lebanon issue, produced a majority in favor of withdrawal. This shift in public opinion was necessary, although not sufficient, cause of Yitzhak Rabin’s decision to pursue territorial compromise with the PLO, following the change of government from Likud to Labor.

Regarding alternative explanations, Kaye (2002: 580) writes that Barak “had long believed substantively that the security zone was undermining, rather than enhancing Israeli security and that Israel could defend itself from the international border,” but offers no specific examples or evidence for this assertion. To substantiate this interpretation, one would also have to explain Barak’s rejection of the withdrawal option up until the 1999 campaign, when pro-withdrawal opinion had already reached 50 percent. For example, Barak had attacked Beilin, an official of Barak’s own Labor party, for advocating unilateral withdrawal (Honig 1997). Barak reiterated his opposition to withdrawal in a
meeting with leaders of the Four Mothers movement. Nor is there evidence that Barak, who oversaw Israel’s Lebanon policy as IDF chief of staff, sought withdrawal during the 1992-1996 period, in which the Labor party controlled the government.

The movement’s influence on security policy via public opinion was enhanced by a structural change to Israeli political institutions. The 1999 election, in which the Lebanon issue was prominent, featured direct election of the prime minister. Previously, voters had only one ballot and could vote for only one party. Under this system, parochial interests tended to guide voters’ choices, and Israelis felt that they had little influence over issues of foreign policy and national security (Inbar 1991: 157n, in Zionts 2004: 110). In 1999, however, voters had two ballots—one for prime minister and one for a party’s parliamentary list—and, as a result, were able to split a ticket, expressing their parochial concerns on the ballot for Parliament, and their national-security concerns on the ballot for prime minister. In consequence, candidates for prime minister were pressured to display greater sensitivity to public opinion about foreign policy issues. It was in this electoral context that Barak began publicly to support a unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon (Zionts 2004: 111).

Conceivably, Barak’s change of position on withdrawal resulted primarily from an apolitical reassessment that the
status quo harmed national security. The difficulty with this argument is that no geostrategic changes occurring during 1997-99 can readily account for Barak’s reversal. Like his predecessors, Barak prioritized an agreement with Syria and his announcement of his intention to withdraw from Lebanon unilaterally may have been intended to pressure Syria to show more flexibility in stalled Israeli-Syrian negotiations (Luft 2000). However, pro-withdrawal forces had long claimed that doing so would pressure Syria while Barak had insisted that withdrawal posed intolerable security risks. Rather, the salient changes during this period were internal, including elevated IDF casualty rates in Lebanon in 1996-98, so that by the May 1999 elections public opinion had already swung decisively against the war, even though casualties ultimately declined over the course of the year.\textsuperscript{12} Reports of eroding

\textsuperscript{12} Despite the decline in Israeli casualties if 1999 is taken as a whole, the high-profile death, early in the year from a roadside bomb, of the top Israeli commander in Lebanon—a brigadier general who had strongly criticized the Four Mothers movement—symbolically indicated the futility of the occupation policy.
morale among IDF soldiers in Lebanon (Goldenberg 2000) may also have influenced Barak.\(^\text{13}\)

Barak’s endorsement probably accelerated public support for withdrawal. As of 1998, discussion by senior Likud-party officials of conditional withdrawal may also have helped legitimate unilateral withdrawal. Yet if Barak and other politicians accelerated a public-opinion trend that was already in process, they did not initiate the trend; indeed, Barak publicly resisted it until he his campaign for prime minister. Temporal sequencing, correlation, and available evidence indicate that changed public opinion caused or, minimally, permitted Barak’s shift, rather than Barak’s electoral pronouncements in favor of withdrawal causing public support to reach and cross the majority threshold.

**Conclusions and Scope**

The movement’s founders turned their grievances into activism after the traumatic deaths in the helicopter crash. A strong sense of shared identity and urgency at the life-and-death

\(^{13}\) In the early 1990’s demoralization among soldiers in the West Bank and Gaza during the first Palestinian intifada motivated Prime Minister Rabin, also a former IDF chief of staff and defense minister, to try to extricate the IDF from its role as an occupying force.
stakes of the Lebanon issue kept participants’ commitment high. While the founders and many active supporters did base their protests largely on their identity as mothers, the media also reinforced or imposed a maternal identity on the movement (Lemesh and Barzel 2000). Although somewhat distorting the movement, since about 40 percent of its supporters were male, the maternal frame that the media reinforced helped legitimize movement leaders’ participation in national-security debates, even as opponents devalued the women’s views on security as inexpert or emotional.

Political allies inspired the movement’s formation and facilitated its growth. The favorable political environment featured sharply divided political elites, relative tolerance for dissent, and a watchdog role among elements of the media.

Constraining its goals and tactics within the national political consensus, and framing withdrawal in terms of easily understood nationalist analogies, allowed the movement greater media coverage and influence with politicians and the public. Finally, due to changes to electoral institutions, the prime minister’s office grew more responsive to public views on foreign-policy issues, which helped the movement use public opinion to effect policy change.

Table 1 summarizes the main factors in movement emergence and political efficacy, with feedback loops indicated by double-headed arrows.
What aspects of the Four Mothers movement might apply to other antiwar movements? More generalizable aspects of the analysis include the potentials and limitations conferred by the movement’s maternal/familial identity, the benefits and costs of restricting goals and tactics to those upheld by the political consensus, the efficacy of framing antiwar discourse in terms of human costs, and the role liberal individualist trends in national political culture. More particular features include the military’s pervasive and exalted role in Israeli society, the state’s high degree of reliance on citizen participation in the military, and political and social-psychological factors that facilitated withdrawal from Lebanon.

Essentially, the argument over policy toward the Lebanon war concerned contending strategic and political orientations. Anti-withdrawal arguments assumed that any demonstration of weakness would invite further aggression, while the pro-withdrawal position assumed that reasonable compromise by one side could lead to reasonable compromise by the other.¹⁴ In the

¹⁴ This formulation was suggested by Arik Ben Zvi. In social-psychological terms, the first worldview is consistent with the one-sided “aggressor-defender model” of conflict, while the
struggle over Israel’s Lebanon policy, the first view saw Hezbollah and its allies implacably committed to destroying Israel, such that withdrawal would be an invitation to increased violence. The second view saw Hezbollah as acting to rid Lebanon of Israel’s occupation, and not committed to attacking Israel once the IDF withdrew. The debate over whether the country’s military presence abroad worsens or alleviates security threats to the home country is typical of costly impasses in foreign counterinsurgency campaigns. The example of the Four Mothers movement shows that by highlighting the costs and questioning the necessity of wars that large proportions of the population see as non-existential, antiwar movements led by soldiers’ family members can effectively promote policy changes that “bring the boys home.”

The political challenge for supporters of prolonged counterinsurgencies is that its costs may seem more concrete and immediate to the public than its benefits. Beyond arguing that such costs are necessary, officials may try to hide the costs. In the short-term, events in Lebanon, such as soldiers’ deaths, tended to direct public attention to the current costs of Israel’s policy, rather than the policy’s more distant and abstract benefits. The opposing argument, that a certain level second conforms to the dynamic “spiral model” (Pruitt, Rubin, and Kim, 1994).
of casualties was acceptable, due to the need for the security zone, was more abstract than the argument that young lives were being wasted for no security benefits.

To counter pro-war propaganda, war opponents must enlist credible sources of information about the costs of the war, its dim prospects for "victory," and its detrimental effects on national security. Information that undermines pro-war government propaganda must come from newsworthy sources with "standing" to speak on national security, given most citizens' inclination to believe in the wisdom and expertise of pro-war officials, and given their disinterest in policy issues that do not affect them directly. Parents in the Four Mothers movement who had lost children in combat were widely perceived as having such standing. They effectively stressed the current human costs of the occupation, for example by showing their sons' photographs at demonstrations and reading aloud their last letters home. The movement enhanced its standing by enlisting speakers who had served in the army, particularly in Lebanon.

Soldiers' mothers and other relatives can use their elevated national status to challenge government propaganda and public apathy about prolonged and costly "wars of choice." In a militarized society in which most civilians, especially women, are denied a voice on national-security decisions, the particular status of mothers of soldiers in Israeli society probably insulated the movement from the sort of harsh
repressive response that diminishes possibilities for movement
success (McAdam 1988: 130-131). Due to the nationalist belief
that mothers of dead soldiers are particularly bereaved, and
that their loss should be respected, politicians and military
officials were hard pressed to ignore women who contested the
necessity of the war. Authorities who cannot ignore antiwar
protests often try to discredit movement leaders’ expertise or
loyalties (Marullo and Meyer 2004: 661). While the movement
was subjected to such attacks, the slurs against it often
backfired and generated sympathetic press coverage and, at
times, apologies from official accusers.

The assumption that women’s social worth is rooted in
their maternal relations with their soldier sons, while
regressive from a feminist perspective, nevertheless enabled
parents in the movement to participate in policy debates on the
war from which they otherwise would have been excluded. Some
movement founders also had sons in prestigious combat units.
Participation in such units commonly confers social benefits
such as the possibility of a successful political career, and
also brings the soldiers’ parents honor.

Soldiers’ mothers who renounce silence and become antiwar
activists, transgress their socially sanctioned role of
national mourners. Before the Lebanon war it was nearly
unimaginable that families of soldiers, bereaved or otherwise,
would publicly protest their children’s having to risk their
lives or to die in war. Without a compelling rationale for this war, however, some mothers of soldiers began to use their moral authority to subvert the state-sponsored image of their children as heroes who sacrificed for the nation, and instead framed their children as the victims of unimaginative policy makers (Ezrahi in Frucht 2000). In Ezrahi’s view, the women of the Four Mothers movement had enormous power because “they sit on the neurological center of an evocative symbolism of Israel and can empty the symbols of sacrifice and heroism, point fingers at government and show it is not doing its duty” (Kaplan 1998). Ben Zvi recalled,

The idea that mothers would say “I’m sick of this and I’m not going to take it any more,” was shocking to the Israeli public…. We decided that we would definitely play the women’s card, the mothers card—the idea being that we were demanding answers to something that the government really had no answer for.

To change government policy, antiwar movements are obliged to position themselves within the political mainstream. The Four Mothers movement achieved this by eschewing illegal actions and political affiliation, by adopting and adapting nationalist discourse to their cause, and by refraining from directly attacking political and social institutions. In these respects, the movement differed from organizations like Argentina’s Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose children were
not soldiers, or from Gold Star Families for Peace, the group formed by U.S. antiwar activist Cindy Sheehan: Despite an initial wave of media attention and public interest in Sheehan’s outspoken opposition to the Iraq war following her son’s death, she and the organization became politically marginal due to Sheehan’s decision to court arrest through protest activities and her immoderate and politically partisan rhetoric (e.g., Sheehan 2005). In further contrast to Gold Star Families for Peace, the Four Mothers movement maintained one clearly defined goal, withdrawal from Lebanon. Single-issue groups are less prone to spreading resources too thin and to internal divisions over priorities and resources than those pursuing multiple goals (Gamson, 1990: 44-46, in McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996: 15).

Sheehan’s example also raises the question of whether mothers whose children have been killed in war may be less effective antiwar advocates than mothers of still-serving or recently discharged soldiers. Leaders of the Four Mothers movement recognized that self-presentation as mothers who were merely frightened for their sons would also mean political marginalization. “We were not mothers who mourned for our sons,” Ben Dor asserted. “Grieving people were seen as pitiable and not rational. We tried to be at the same level as the generals, to have a serious discussion based on our ability and knowledge, to have the legitimacy to be partners.”
Ideally, women could claim a political voice both as mothers of soldiers and as knowledgeable, rational citizens, but the difficulty of doing so made Ben Dor see the movement’s maternal identity as “a real double-edged sword.” Moreover, movements that oppose masculinized militarism on the basis of female gendered traits like empathy, cooperation, and non-violence, risk having “limited impact on the war system because their actions may feminize peace and thus reinforce militarized masculinity” (Goldstein 2001: 413, in Evangelista 2003: 330-331; Radcliffe 1993).

Distinctive aspects of the Israeli situation included the system of near-universal conscription in which antiwar protests in Israel take place. The Lebanon war also took place just a few miles from Israel’s border, and thus was more easily conceptualized by Israelis as essential to national security. Psychologically, however, the unilateral-withdrawal option was

---

15 Interview with author, September 12, 2006. For Orna Shimoni, “It’s part of my womanhood. To envelope, to protect. And when [Four Mothers was] accused ... of operating from the womb, I said that we operate both from the head and from the womb. We studied the subject. We did a rational analysis. But we also worked from the womb. We knew that the outcry of the womb would get through. Because the womb is the place that gives life. And we were out to protect life (Shavit 2006).
politically palatable since proponents could avoid framing withdrawal as a concession to Hezbollah or Syria, and instead could claim that it would deprive Syria of a bargaining chip in any future negotiation over the Golan Heights. Since it was very rare for bombs from Lebanon or cross-border raids to kill civilians inside Israel, there was less public resistance to withdrawal than might have been the case had terrorist bombings inside Israeli been ongoing. Fewer civilian deaths also made it easier for the critics of the Security Zone to challenge its purported benefits for national security.
References

Retrieved January 4, 2007

(The following four items, retrieved January 4, 2007, are at
(http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss).)


Azmon, Yael, “War, Mothers, and a Girl with Braids: Involvement of Mothers’ Peace Movements in the National Discourse in Israel.” Israel Social Science Research 12 (1): 109-128.


McAdam, Doug, John McCarthy, and Meyer Zald. 1996. “Introduction: Opportunities, mobilizing structures, and


Author Interviews
