MORE HILLS TO CLIMB:  
DEFINING THE LEGACIES OF SUCCESSFUL ANTIWARP MOVEMENTS

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“After climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.”  
— Nelson Mandela, Long Walk to Freedom

“For Mothers—Leaving Lebanon in Peace” was, according to journalistic and academic sources, a remarkably successful antiwar movement—“probably the most influential protest movement in the history of Israel,” according to one veteran observer (Shavit, 2006; see also Hermann, 2006 and Frucht, 2000). In the three years between 1997 and 2000, movement activists helped turn Israeli public opinion against a counterinsurgency war that Israel had been fighting in Lebanon since 1982. The group, which was the only national grassroots movement active against the Lebanon war at the time, was founded by the parents of soldiers assigned to combat in Lebanon, most of them residents of collective kibbutz communities in the Galilee region near the Lebanon border in Israel’s North. The Four Mothers name connotes the four Biblical matriarchs—Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel. Movement leaders, including this article’s first co-author, used Jewish and secular nationalist imagery to appeal to Jewish Israeli public opinion, which, in the course of the movement’s protest, shifted from less than 35 percent in favor of unilaterally ending Israel’s military presence in Lebanon to more than 70 percent in favor (Arian 1997, 199a, 199b).

This opinion shift was not solely attributable to the movement’s demonstrations, lobbying efforts, petitions, and media and public education campaigns: Increasing Israeli casualties were also an important factor. However, as the Four Mothers protest expanded into a national movement, it managed to garner considerable media and public attention to its message: that Israel’s 16-year-long occupation of southern Lebanon had failed to protect the northern communities—the war’s ostensible purpose—and pointlessly endangered Israel’s soldiers as well. In 1999, in the context of national elections, Labor party leader Ehud Barak promised to withdraw the army after becoming prime minister. As an ad hoc movement whose goals were limited to ending Israel’s military involvement in Lebanon, Four Mothers—Leaving Lebanon in Peace voted to dissolve itself after Barak in May 2000 ordered the soldiers’ return to Israel.

Despite overwhelming public support for ending the war at the time, and considerable esteem for the movement’s accomplishments, even from right-wing nationalists who opposed its goals, the legacy of the Four Mothers movement was, within several years, sharply contested. When war between Israel and Lebanon’s Hezbollah organization broke out in July 2006—after Hezbollah abducted two Israeli soldiers near the border, and following the abduction of another soldier by the Palestinian group, Hamas—Israeli nationalists blamed the Four Mothers movement for having caused the war. This attribution of blame was based on the proposition that, had the movement not caused the army’s withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, its ongoing presence there could
have prevented Hezbollah from acquiring rockets that it used to attack Israel in 2006 and from carrying out cross-border raids. Moreover, the movement was blamed for undermining the morale of the army and setting a precedent whereby Israeli society itself became unable to tolerate military casualties in war, for weakening the military’s deterrent capabilities, and for inviting attacks by emboldened adversaries. By this logic, Israeli withdrawal in 2000 was an act of appeasement that not only encouraged Hezbollah to more aggression, but also encouraged Palestinian militants within the West Bank and Gaza to attack Israelis in the intifada (uprising) that began in late 2000.

The article considers the merits of these arguments in a later section. Its main purpose is to raise theoretical and a practical questions concerning the evaluation of antiwar movements’ impact or success: On a theoretical level, it explores whether the criteria of success should be expanded to include the ability of movement representatives, in the aftermath of the movement’s activism, to advocate effectively for their interpretations of the movement’s social and political significance, or for the lessons they draw from their protest experience (Meyer 2006)—a concept for which the article uses the term “legacy promotion or protection.” On a practical level, the article raises the question of how activists, particularly in ad hoc antiwar movements, might go about promoting or safeguarding the legacies of their protests. In raising these questions, the article draws on the experiences of Four Mothers—Leaving Lebanon in Peace as it ended its activities and afterward.

At the outset, it is worth noting that the claims made by some right-wing Israeli nationalists about the Four Mothers movement and about the Lebanon war—specifically, that Israel’s withdrawal was a mistake—repudiated the lessons that the leaders and supporters of the Four Mothers movement hoped to instill. These lessons conveyed that resort to military force in hopes of solving complex political and security problems not only failed to accomplish its objectives, but such “wars of choice” were counterproductive and end up harming Israeli interests—as Israel’s 18 futile and costly years of military involvement in Lebanon showed. Furthermore, by re-invading Lebanon in 2006, Israel inadvertently strengthened Hezbollah politically and weakened Israel, its military superiority notwithstanding. A government-appointed commission in the wake of that fiasco concluded that the war’s negative outcomes were a result of Israeli political leaders having made “a vague decision without understanding and knowing its nature and implications. They authorized the commencement of a military campaign without considering how to exit it” (Winograd Report, 2007).

Contestation of Legacies of Successful Antiwar Protests

What motivates contests over the legacies of successful antiwar protests? For many social movements, as Meyer (2006) notes, the stakes of claiming credit are high for movements’ reputations and ongoing influence. However, for an ad hoc movement, such as Four Mothers, whose activists typically had no further interest in social-movement participation after their goal of ending the Lebanon war was achieved, there were no compelling political reasons to be concerned with the movement’s legacies or the further establishment of its reputation in service of current political goals.

Those who promoted and supported costly and disastrous wars, however, often find it politically and psychologically expedient to shift the blame for its failure onto antiwar protesters, rather than to admit responsibility. Many politicians and military
leaders (who in Israel often overlap) had a personal and professional stake in not acknowledging that the extended occupation of Lebanon was a self-inflicted national wound. As well, the Four Mothers challenged a widespread, deeply held political and moral worldview among nationalists by contesting the idea that retaliation and hitting back is a source of power and security, which incurred an emotionally fueled backlash against the movement. Acknowledging the failure of war policy in the past may also constrain the government’s ability to wage war in the future. Such constraints on executive power are typically resisted by government officials, particularly those identified with nationalistic and hawkish positions.

Some right-wing nationalists in Israel also have an interest in discrediting anti-Lebanon war activism because the withdrawal from Lebanon potentially sets a precedent for withdrawal from other territories under Israeli military occupation, particularly the West Bank—although the situations differ markedly, since Israel had no settlements in or ideological ties with Lebanon.

The Four Mothers movement, by advocating a voice in decisions on national-security policy for citizens, pushed for wider inputs into such policymaking. Movement activists did not claim security expertise equivalent to that of army leaders and security specialists, even though some did have experience in military and security affairs, but they did advocate that the voices of the citizens in whose name the war was being fought be added to the debate over the costs and benefits of the government’s Lebanon policy. In this sense, they advocated redefining state-society relations to some degree, which prompted a negative or suspicious response from some in Israel’s government and society.

There was also an important gender component to the anti-movement backlash against the Four Mothers movement, during both their years of activity and in the years following Israeli withdrawal from Lebanon. The movement’s identity was typically understood by the media and the public, as well as by many activists themselves, primarily in maternal terms—even though a substantial portion of activists were either men, or women who were not mothers. In any case, these women broke from their socially sanctioned roles as bearers of the nation’s soldiers or mourners for children killed in war, and instead used their moral authority to accuse state officials of pointlessly endangering or wasting their children’s lives, evoked censorious and often derogatory responses from those who felt that women citizens, in particular, should stay out of national-security debates.

Movement leaders were particularly concerned to deflect criticisms that activists were motivated mainly by hysteria over their children’s safety. Concern for their sons’ well-being did, to be sure, powerfully motivate many protesters. However, news stories that appeared in 2006, in which former activists expressed ambivalence about the outcomes of their earlier protest, or supported a military response to the contemporary crisis with Lebanon, played up the angle of women’s regret for previous antiwar activism, which reinforced stereotypes of activists as unstable flip-flopers who changed political positions based on their fearful emotions. News editors seemed attracted to the angle of remorse or repentance, even when the opinions expressed by former activists in support of the 2006 war were more akin to ambivalence (e.g., Shavit 2006). The evident interest in this angle may also reflect the media’s tendency to depoliticize the work of
former activists, which reassures the public that earlier political activism was a transient phase of no lasting significance (McAdam, 1999, 118).

Overall, arguments over the movement’s legacy can be seen as continuations of earlier arguments between the war’s supporters and opponents while the movement was active, including the claim that Israel’s withdrawal would embolden Hezbollah (e.g., Honig 1997) and that antiwar activism weakened the army’s morale and the state, along with the protesters’ counterclaim that what weakened the state most were ill-considered, elective wars.

These ongoing arguments also reflected a common phenomenon after lost wars, whereby right-wing nationalists portray war outcomes as the result of betrayals on the home front. As has been documented in the German nationalists and militarists’ response to the loss of World-War I, as well as in France after the lost Algerian war, and in post-Vietnam America, nationalists and militarists have propagated “stab-in-the-back” narratives. According to these, the war could have been won militarily, had the soldiers’ spirit not been undermined by unpatriotic, morally degenerate, Leftists (Lembcke, 1998; Rotter, 2003). Such mythologizing is often accompanied by cultural reassertions of “traditional” dichotomous gender roles (e.g., Theweleit, 1987 and 1987; Gibson, 1994; Jeffords, 1994), which may give added impetus to post-war criticisms of women-led peace movements. Peace activists were also slow to claim credit for ending the Cold war, assisting the political right in erasing peace movements in Europe from their analyses and apportioning of credit for these outcomes (Meyer, 1999, 182-203).

In sum, post-war political and cultural backlashes against the achievements of antiwar movements appear to be a predictable element of such movements’ struggles and, arguably, should be taken into consideration by antiwar movements concerned with their political influence and legacies. In this regard, the concept of movement "success" extends beyond accomplishing changes in policy, and should also comprise the movement’s ability to define in the public sphere what it achieved. This element of success is important so that positive achievements of the movement will last and be available as inspiration or a model for future movements. The struggle to define lessons from Israel’s 18-year Lebanon war, and the Four Mothers movement’s role in ending it, is an example of a wider phenomenon whereby militant nationalists succeed to a significant extent in reframing the achievements of antiwar movements as, at best, misguided appeasement, if not intentional betrayal of the nation’s interest. The Second Lebanon war in 2006 showed the Israeli public to be capable, within a very short time, of forgetting the lesson that resort to force in response to non-existential threats often undermines one’s own political goals and incurs unanticipated costs, and forgetting why in the late 1990s it overwhelmingly favored ending the army’s presence in Lebanon.

The 2006 war, in this regard, exemplified a process in which nationalists, in a climate of fear, actively promoted the unlearning of lessons promulgated by antiwar movements such as the Four Mothers, and the relearning of faith in the resort to force that the last failed war should have discredited. This process also entails relearning unquestioning faith in military and political authorities, and transferring feelings of insecurity onto the political adversary within, so that those who speak out against a new war are again viewed with suspicion and hostility. The effect is to once again narrow the inputs into security policymaking that successful antiwar movements have, perhaps only temporarily, expanded (Marullo and Meyer, 2005).
Activists and Movement Legacies

Many antiwar activists might agree that the inevitable post-war arguments over activists’ efforts make it potentially worth their while to try to define the legacies of their movements—during the life of the movement and after its dissolution. However, activists may not take up the challenge for reasons having to do with limited resources, movement identity, and internal disagreements: After a single-issue antiwar movement disbands, the tendency, understandably, may be for activists to return to normal life without making an additional effort to define the movement’s meaning and political lessons. Leaders of ad hoc antiwar movements do not typically see themselves as professional activists. In the Four Mothers movement, none of the leadership had previously been deeply involved in political protest. They understood their goal as “simply” ending the war and its casualties, and they looked forward, after this goal was achieved, to returning their full attention to families, professions, and neglected elements of their normal lives. Beyond the wearing effects of years of daily activism, movement leaders’ self-conception did not include becoming the guardians of their political legacy. Doing so implied a full-time commitment that would, in effect, lead them into careers in politics, such as happened with several leaders of Israel’s largest peace movement, Peace Now.

By contrast, the Four Mothers activists considered themselves a truly grassroots movement of community members or “people next door.” The movement derived legitimacy and credibility from its very lack of professionalism and its leaders’ lack of aspiration to formal political power. Nor did activists see themselves necessarily engaged with matters of high politics in the Middle East peace process. Part of their reluctance to continue the protest stemmed from a sense of modesty about what they could achieve, and to a moral stand in regard to the use of power and success. Testifying to one’s own achievements appeared to them excessively self-promotional—appropriate perhaps for politicians, but unseemly in grassroots activists. The culture of the kibbutz movement, which influenced the movement’s founders and many of its participants, prized doing over talking, which made activists reluctant to comment excessively on their own work.

Some Four Mothers activists were also conscious of their potential to serve as role models of women’s organizational ethics and behavior. After doing what they thought was right, and with the goal of returning soldiers to Israel achieved, their attitude was something like, “We did our part, and it’s now the public’s turn to evaluate the results of our actions and perhaps take them forward.” A seemingly open-ended commitment to guarding the movement’s legacy raised the question of whether activists were in some way obliged to take responsibility for their work on an ongoing basis, or instead, like artists, to release their creation into the public domain, whereupon its reception was no longer the artist’s responsibility?

Even at an intellectual level, it was not clear that the responsibility of activists should include evaluation of their own accomplishments. In any movement’s immediate aftermath, there is less detachment toward and perspective on what it has achieved or failed to, certainly, than would befit an evaluation with historiographic integrity. Although glad to have contributed to ending the war, and to have received recognition for
their contribution (e.g., Frucht 2000; Sontag, 2000), leaders of the movement were ambivalent about their achievements insofar as they did not know whether the impact they had made on the country’s politics would last. At times that impact seemed substantial; at others, a mere scratch on the hard surface of politics, or a step forward that could well be followed by more backsliding on a Sisyphusian slope. Activists’ own uncertainties about the nature of their legacy, and their wariness of the subjectivity of their own assessments, made them tend to avoid self-evaluation. As noted, Israeli social norms also discourage talk about one’s achievements; for people to discuss their own victories or successes is commonly considered immodest: The “right” behavior is to wait for someone else to do so.

In fact, at the time its founders dissolved the movement, they were concerned that some former activists might continue to issue messages or take actions in the movement’s name that would damage the movement’s reputation and legacy. For example, on the day the army’s withdrawal from Lebanon was accomplished, movement leaders decided to hold a demonstration at the Ministry of Defense—where the group had over the previous three years routinely held protests and vigils when there were army casualties in Lebanon—and present flowers to the minister of defense and the prime minister. However, at the same time, a somewhat marginal group within the movement decided to go instead to the Lebanese border, where media had gathered to cover the withdrawal. There, with groups of Lebanese and Hezbollah followers cheering and parading, as if in victory, the small group of Four Mothers activists made an effort to talk with the cheering Lebanese. The scene, which was carried by the media the following day, put the movement in a foolish and shameful light, as if its members were begging the national adversary for forgiveness and pleading for a chance to talk with them.

The problem grew in an unforeseen way when a minority of Four Mothers activists tried to establish a new movement, using the same name. However, those who wanted to continue using the political influence that the movement achieved during three years of intense advocacy and media exposure lacked an agreed-on direction; they would have had an organizational identity and a name, but no cause. Others, outside the movement, also suggested that the Four Mothers group might take up a variety of social issues. Continuing under such circumstances, the founding group felt, would only discredit the movement’s actual achievements. The founding group also feared that messages issued in the movement’s name after its dissolution might contravene what they believed the movement actually stood for. The founding group, therefore, eventually resorted to legal action to prevent anyone’s speaking thereafter on the movement’s behalf. The at-times-bitter internal divisions, stemmed partly from cultural and regional differences that Israeli social movements often experience (Safran, 2006). In the case of Four Mothers, the tensions between the kibbutzniks from the country’s periphery, who had founded the movement, and the urban activists, who had joined later and who were not typically parents of soldiers, diminished the potential for agreement about and advocacy concerning the movement’s legacies.

More important than internal schisms, however, was the simple fact that movement activists had no agreed-on direction or shared ideals that formed a basis for continued activism after the war ended: The only political platform common to the group was that Israel should “leave Lebanon in peace.” In the sense that the agreed-on platform was limited to ending the war, the group might well have had a difficult time defining its
own legacy, and might have proven unable to agree on a definition. Assuming that such agreement had been possible, however, and that the movement’s leadership had recognized the need to undertake pro-active measures with legacy promotion or protection in mind, what might it realistically have done?

Conclusions: Considering How to Safeguard Movement Legacies

In thinking about approaches antiwar movements might take to promoting or safeguarding of what they see as their legacies, it may be worth distinguishing between three types of thinking. One sort of analysis concerns what a movement actually did; a second is what it might realistically have done under circumstances that prevailed at the time its campaign ended; and a third is what it might ideally have done under such circumstances. These differing contexts for assessment have something of the quality of parallel realities.

In considering the first approach—what actually happened—it should be noted that ending a war does not mean the end of interaction between the adversary sides. Some other state of relations merely replaces a state of active hostilities. Former antiwar activists may decide to advocate what this new state of affairs should be. Following the end of the Lebanon war in 2000, the Barak administration failed to establish an alternative security regime for Israel’s northern border. Although the six years that followed were largely without hostile incident, the absence of a security regime among Israel and Lebanon, and possibly other interested parties, was responsible for the eruption of war in 2006 following Hezbollah’s abduction of Israeli soldiers.

After Barak’s election in 1999 and his promise to bring the soldiers home from Lebanon, the Four Mothers leadership formally changed its organizational policy to focus on the government’s need to establish security measures for the northern border. Movement activists met with the prime minister in Barak’s office and talked with him about the importance of not getting drawn back into Lebanon with any new Hezbollah attack. As non-experts in security and diplomatic matters, movement leaders did not set forth detailed policy suggestions. However, they did write letters, talk with officials, and issue statements, about the need for the government to attend to border security following the army’s withdrawal from southern Lebanon. However, little or nothing was done, with some populated areas of the border lacking even a fence between Israel and Lebanon (Orland, 2007).

To help document its activities, the group, in its last meeting, voted to use its remaining funds to support an archive for preserving the legacy of the movement. However, this was not the same as seeing the group as keepers of a message, which would have entailed a different level of activism—one less intense than the activism undertaken against an ongoing war, but still a more focused and coordinated effort than anything that took place after the movement disbanded. With hindsight, such an effort seems worthwhile.

It is perhaps only in an ideal world that activists could have also contested attacks on the movement’s history and legacy, most basically by reminding audiences of the actual policy options facing the country at the time of the protest, and of their relative costs and benefits, and by debunking the myth that the protests kept the army from winning. This type of post-war activism might entail education campaigns designed to
keep what the movement considers to be the war’s real lessons in the public view. Such education might publicize a citizens’ view of the history of the country’s involvement in the failed war, and discuss how wars that are necessary to ensure the country’s continued existence can be differentiate from “wars of choice,” which can often lead to grinding, ultimately futile counterinsurgency campaigns in foreign territory.

It would likely prove difficult to coordinate such messages, be they ad hoc responses or more concerted campaigns, and there is no way to keep ex-activists from taking public positions that even appear to renounce movement ideals, as happened when some Four Mothers activists discussed in the media their support for the reinvasion of Lebanon in 2006. When the group was active, meetings about what messages to send the public were continual, and leaders adjusted the movement’s messages in response to the changing political context. But who can decide what the movement’s message should be after the movement is no longer active, not to mention fine-tuning such messages to changing political contexts?

It may, however, be possible to agree, before a movement disbands, on guidelines for some forms of consultation among former activists regarding statements to the press, use of the movement’s name, when and how to respond to criticism of the movement, and what the most important legacies of the movement should be. (This sort of decisionmaking process might benefit from involving a third-party facilitator from outside the movement.)

Clearly, promoting or safeguarding movement legacies cannot be accomplished in some simple fashion, and, as noted above, even internal agreement on what the movement’s legacies are may be hard to achieve. Nevertheless, the experience of the Four Mothers movement showed that its leaders attempts to put the movement’s history away like a sealed box in a drawer were impracticable and unrealistic because that history was inevitably going to be brought into current political and national-security debates. As Faulkner put it in Requiem for a Nun, “The past isn’t dead. It isn’t even past.”

Particularly for movements with a grassroots identity, whose organizers do not intend to continue as activists after the movement ends, the questions remain, first, whether or not to leave the definition of the movement’s legacy up to whoever is interested in commenting on it—knowing that movement critics are likely to fill any vacuum? Second, assuming the desire to take action regarding legacy definition exists among activists, what steps can realistically and collectively be taken? While this essay can offer no definitive answer to these questions, it proposes that they are worth raising and worth grappling with for activists as well as theorists.

References

(The following three items, accessed January 4, 2007, are at <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss>.)


