

# Supremacy of Social Media in the Hebron Shooting Incident

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The controversy in the case of Elor Azaria, an Israeli soldier who shot a Palestinian assailant in the Palestinian city of Hebron, after he was wounded and neutralized, led to a highly emotional public debate threatening a major crisis in the government and society. The incident divided the Israeli public and its leaders, with some expressing outrage over the killing of an incapacitated man, and others supporting even the most extreme response to a stabbing attack. The research argues that the role of governments in preventing exposure of security information was badly shaken following the inability to control information, as the incident was recorded on a mobile phone and uploaded to social media. As demonstrated in this case, local organizations have assumed a new prominence by providing information that previously had been limited by local authorities. The research is looking at the question of who was superior in the Hebron shooting incident: the army, the government, public opinion, traditional media or social media. The conclusions in this case are clear-cut: Social media dominated the entire process and determined its outcome, which was obvious once the video was uploaded on the Internet.

*Keywords:* social media, Israel, Hebron, shooting, army, public opinion

## Introduction

On March 24th, 2016, an Israeli soldier, Elor Azaria, serving in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), shot a Palestinian assailant who had just stabbed an Israeli soldier, as he lay wounded on the ground (Levy, Zitun, & Kimon, 2016). The Hebron shooting incident occurred in the Tel Rumeida neighborhood, when Abdel Fattah al-Sharif was shot, wounded, and neutralized. He was shot again in the head by Azaria, as he lay wounded on the ground, 11 minutes after he was neutralized. This led to al-Sharif's death a few minutes later (Bob, 2016a). The incident was recorded on a mobile device and uploaded to social media. It sparked widespread discussion, debate, and outcry over the actions of the soldier and the consequent actions of the army and the government. Azaria was arrested and the Military Police opened an investigation against him for the charge of murder (Benovadia, 2016), but later reduced the charge to manslaughter. He was sentenced to 18 months in jail (Steger, 2016a).

A video of the incident released by human rights organization B'Tselem caused a huge political storm. The video footage was captured by a Hebron resident, Imad Abu Shamsiyeh, who sent it to B'Tselem, who then distributed the video on the internet. B'Tselem is the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories. This group takes upon themselves to document and educate policy-makers and the Israeli public about human rights violations in the Occupied Territories (El-ad, 2016). In the posted video, Azaria is seen cocking his weapon and aiming it in the direction of the terrorist on the ground. A truck passed in front at the moment of the shooting. After it passes, the terrorist is seen with blood flowing from his head down the pavement (Winer, 2016).

The video of the shooting prompted the IDF to launch an investigation into the incident. The investigation stated that the Azaria said that the assailant “needs to die” before killing him (Choen, 2016). He claimed that he feared the assailant had an explosive vest hidden under his shirt. IDF officials rejected this, saying the assailant had already been checked for explosives, and Azaria did not follow the procedures for such concerns before opening fire (Bob, 2016b). During the investigation, he also claimed that the assailant tried to reach for a knife that was “within reach” of him, while the documentation in the video showed the knife was a significant distance away from the assailant, who was critically injured (Steger, 2016a).

Israel is a country with a pervading military culture as a result of its army and compulsory conscription (Katz, 2012). Throughout its history, Israel had to deal with the multitude of security issues that arise naturally for a country with such a strong military culture (Deprez & Raeymaeckers, 2010). These issues include the portrayal of the military in the media, the role of the media and security and secrecy issues (Sucharov, 2005). As technology changes, so too does the nature of these issues (Gustin, 2012) and the government and the army have the task of adapting technology to suit the needs of the country (Zeizff, 2016). This situation requires limitations on publication of information that relates to national security affairs (Peri, 2006); however, as evident in the Azaria case, with the development of technology, local organizations are able to make an influence on the turn of events (Bergman, 2016).

Just as the O. J. Simpson trial exposed the fault lines and racial divisions in American society decades ago, the public reaction to Elor Azaria’s trial and verdict revealed how sharply Israelis are split into deeply divided political and social camps (Kaplan Sommer, 2017). The case characterizes a multitude of issues that pertain to security culture in Israel, mainly the pervading prevalence of social media in every aspect of today’s society (Harreldon, 2016). Social media is so embedded within people and their behavior that it can no longer be ignored (Heemsbergen & Lindgren, 2014). The political involvement through social media of the Hebron Shooting shows the impact social media has on the political arena. A video taken by a single man was able to influence and set the agenda about the issue. Immediately after the explosion of the video online, Israeli politicians expressed their views via Twitter and Facebook, but were only able to respond to the situation, as they did not have full control over the media.

### **The Political Impact**

The Azaria case sparked much controversy and inflamed political tensions in Israel (Steger, 2016b). The shooting drew widespread condemnation, including from then Israeli Defense Minister and the Prime Minister, who called it a violation of the army’s ethical code. In contrast, two leaders of right-wing parties publicly supported the soldier. It is interesting to see however, that all four leading politicians posted their opinions on Facebook and Twitter, but had no real impact on the end-result of the controversy. It is also interesting to see that two of these leading politicians changed their opinion following public reaction.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu termed the criticism of the shooting as “outrageous”. Initially he issued a statement that “the IDF expects its soldiers to behave with composure and in accordance with the rules of engagement”, adding that the incident in Hebron does not “represent the values of the IDF”. Two days later he wrote a Facebook post saying: “The IDF is a moral army that does not execute people. IDF soldiers have absorbed with their bodies the terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens and deserve support”.

Despite these comments, he later phoned Azaria’s father to express his support. He told the father that he understood his distress as he himself was a father of a soldier. He also reassured him that the difficult

situations faced by soldiers confronting terrorists will be taken into account, and the system will be fair to his son. As the case progressed Netanyahu was criticized for his conflicting statements although he called for a pardon for the soldier. During an interview with Channel 2 News, Netanyahu stated he had no regrets about calling Azaria's parents. When questioned whether he had made telephone calls to parents of other soldiers who had transgressed, he replied that he didn't but had talked to those parents of soldiers who were killed or missing. This created a controversy. Netanyahu was criticized by opposition politicians and the media who saw it as comparing parents of fallen soldiers to Azaria's parents. The Prime Minister's Office later issued a statement rejecting these claims and called them a "base, distorted and lying" misrepresentation. Netanyahu himself also denied these claims and apologized if his words were misunderstood or misinterpreted.

His conflicting public statements perhaps reflect the conflicting opinions of the public on the matter and his desire as Prime Minister to appease the citizens of his country. As the public gained access to information, it became more important for the government to incorporate public opinion into policy and decisions. He later urged for "balance" in the trial, saying that he is sure the court will act wisely in weighing Azaria's killing of the Palestinian attacker and the context in which he operated (Lis, 2016).

Later on, he had a few posts on Twitter in relation to the situation but nothing was direct, as he focused more on the UN's opinion on this matter: "The Human Rights Council of the UN has become a circus of anti-Israeli attacking the only democracy in the Middle East and ignoring the gross violations in Iran, Syria, and North Korea" the values of the IDF. After the verdict, Netanyahu gave his backing to the calls for clemency, saying that he supported granting Azaria a pardon. The Prime Minister tweeted: "My opinion has not changed on the question of granting a pardon. When the subject comes up, I will offer my recommendation for a pardon to the relevant authorities".

The Prime Minister led a chorus of social and political leaders calling to issue a pardon, contrary to the position of the army: "It is a difficult and painful day for all of us", Netanyahu said in a statement issued eight hours after the conviction was announced. "First and foremost for Elor and his family, IDF soldiers, and many citizens and parents of our soldiers, I included". Although declaring his support for the idea of pardoning Azaria, Netanyahu called on citizens to refrain from words and/or actions which would be detrimental to the cohesion of the IDF or the broader Israeli society: "I call on all citizens to behave responsibly toward the IDF, its officers, and the chief of staff", he said. "We have one army which is the foundation of our existence. The IDF soldiers are the sons and daughters of all of us, and they must remain above all disagreements".

In contrast, Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon, the then Defense Minister, strongly condemned Azaria's actions (Winer, 2016). Ya'alon was very quick to post his view of the state of affairs, only a few hours after the situation occurred. Ya'alon said: "The incident is highly severe, and completely contrary to the IDF's values and its combat morals. We must not allow, even as our blood boils, such a loss of faculties and control. This incident will be dealt with in the strictest manner".

In another post he wrote: "We must not allow, even at a time that our blood boils, this loss of control. This event will be handled with the utmost severity". In yet another post he wrote: "An incident where an IDF soldier is documented shooting a terrorist a minute after being neutralized and lying on the ground, is most serious and completely contrary to the values of the IDF and its combat ethics and morals". Later on, Ya'alon wrote: "We must not allow, under any circumstances—even at a time when tensions are high—such irrational behavior and loss of control. This incident will be addressed most seriously".

After he resigned from the Defense Ministry, Ya'alon criticized politicians who praised Azaria and attacked him and the IDF. He also criticized Netanyahu for switching his opinion about the shooting and "embracing" the soldier. Announcing his resignation from the government and parliament in a post on Facebook, Ya'alon said: "I informed the Prime Minister that after his conduct and recent developments, and given the lack of faith in him, I am resigning from the government and parliament and taking a break from political life".

Two prominent figures who had vocal support to the soldier and his family were Education Minister Naftali Bennet and then Knesset Member Avigdor Liberman, serving today as Minister of Defense. Bennet called for immediate pardon of Azaria if convicted because it was important to back soldiers in their efforts to "protect Israel from terrorists". He also raised doubts that Azaria was receiving a fair trial. He acknowledged that the soldier may have "misjudged" the situation by believing himself to be in danger when he wasn't, but insisted he was no murderer. On Twitter Bennet wrote: "The soldier is not a killer. Just mentioning this section and the use of the term 'killer' is indicative of deep moral confusion. A murderer is someone that comes out with a knife to kill civilians". After the verdict Bennet tweeted: "It is time to pardon. For the sake of our soldiers stationed on the front lines and so as not to lose our deterrence, he must be returned to his home. I have nothing but trust in the IDF".

Liberman slammed Netanyahu and Ya'alon for their condemnations of the soldier and said they acted as presenters for B'Tselem: "What happened in Azaria's case was that even before the court of law started to try him, they already convicted him". He expressed emphatic support for Azaria immediately after the incident occurred: "You have, on the one hand, an exemplary soldier, and on the other, a terrorist who tried to kill Jews, and everyone must take that into account", he said.

A few months later when Liberman became the Defense Minister, he said that the government must not express a stance on the shooting until the end of the trial and criticized the earlier reaction of his predecessor Ya'alon. Later he said that he would support Azaria even if he is convicted and urged the court to "ignore the noise" and judge according to the facts. "We need to support the IDF and the chief of staff", he added. "The denunciations and attacks harm the security of the state of Israel, and that must not happen. The IDF must be outside the political debate".

Liberman expressed his opinion on the issue in a letter to Azaria's legal team: "As Defense Minister, I feel, like most of the citizens of Israel, a sense of unease about the court's decision ... "I am sorry about the progression of the saga from its inception. My message is not to convict anyone in advance ... I believe, as I've said several times, that serious mistakes have been made from the first moment, bringing the case to a place it never should have gone ... My position on this issue was and remains that after all was said and done, we must remember that this is a case of a soldier with a distinguished record on one side and a terrorist who came to kill Israeli soldiers on the other ... I am not a jurist and I have no intention of referring to the professional performance of the prosecution, the defense, or the court, nor am I able to evaluate the prospects of an appeal, but as Minister of Defense, I feel, like most of the citizens of Israel, a sense of unease about the court's decision. I think about what's good for Elor and feel empathy for him and for his family, with concern for the resilience and values of the IDF and the unity of the Jewish people".

The verdict was uncomfortable for him, since before he was appointed, Liberman led protestors outside the military court. "The claim has collapsed, I'm sure he will be acquitted", Liberman said then, accusing Yaalon of "pre-determining the results of the military investigation and harming the military". After the result

was announced, he executed a neat U-turn, urging all parties to respect the legal decision and to exercise restraint, no matter their opinions. “A verdict has been delivered”, he said. “Even those, like myself, who like the verdict less, must accept and respect it”.

The minister, who had urged a pardon for Azaria before he became Defense Minister, refrained from explicitly calling for Azaria to be pardoned. In a Facebook post, he did, however, suggest that a pardon might be the appropriate move: “Now, after the sentencing, I hope that the two sides will do what is necessary to finish this issue for good”, Liberman wrote. “As I’ve said in the past, even those who don’t like the verdict or the sentence are bound to respect the court, and as I’ve also said, the military must stand beside the soldier and his family”. Liberman requested that Azaria’s family would not appeal the decision, but rather ask IDF Chief of Staff for a pardon.

### **The Impact of Public Opinion**

The Israeli media are experiencing the intensity of the conflict on a daily basis and particularly during intense military and political events. During periods of tensed security, the media present unifying information, even though in other periods it tends to be critical of the government (Peri, 2001). Although independence and autonomy from political influence are core values among professional journalists in most western societies, research has shown that news media organizations rely heavily on official information for the construction of news (Shehata, 2010). Following the rise of new media technologies and globalization of the media, there is a growing demand in Israel for investigative journalism, alternative voices, accurate information, and, in particular, specialization and in-depth interpretation (Nossak, 2009).

Israel is a modern example of a country whose way of life has been molded by war (Zeevi, 2009), although Israeli media have undergone a complete transformation revolution in communications technologies (Gilboa, 2008). Media-state relations changed fundamentally (Paterson, 2011) as global coverage and the impact of new technology changed the way the media and governments operate. According to Liebes (2011), Israel’s media and the influence of internal groups have totally changed in recent years. In contrast, Schejter (2009) claims that the media in Israel operate within a closed and highly regulated regime that aims to fulfill cultural objectives dictated by the dominant group.

In trying to examine the role of the media in the Azaria case, it is evident that the media maintained a neutral position, representing the different public views on the issue. This position can be explained in that one of the main dilemmas that Israeli society is dealing with is the role of the army in defensive and peace-oriented events (El-Nawawy & Powers, 2010). Debate has focused on the imperative of providing full coverage of events even during wartimes or other security threats while not harming state security (Sucharov, 2005). According to Maoz (2006), the news media are a major source of public information on political processes and can be regarded as a crucial tool for mobilizing opinions in political and social conflicts and disputes involving Israel. This position is supported by the conclusion of Wolsfeld (2004) that the media doesn’t initiate policies but intensifies them. Tenenboim-Weinblatt (2008) found that the mainstream press—in tune with political elites and public opinion—largely support political and military goals.

The trial deeply divided the country, with politicians and current and former army generals alternately supporting or condemning Azaria’s actions (Harrelson, 2016). The incident divided the Israeli public and its leaders, with some expressing outrage over the killing of an incapacitated man, and others supporting even the most extreme response to a stabbing attack (Edmonton, 2016). The Azaria case sparked widespread public

debate that became a continuation of an already widespread debate over how one should implement the Rules of engagement orders in the wake of the wave of Palestinian political violence.

On the one hand, Israeli lawmakers from the center-left reacted harshly, warning of the dangers of moral decline and of loose rules of engagement in the military. Right-wing politicians, in and outside of government, have demanded a shoot-to-kill policy in every incident. That includes Liberman, who said after the shooting: "Better a soldier who was wrong and remains alive than one who hesitated and got himself killed". He also said: "we can't reach a situation in which a soldier has to ask for a lawyer before he heads out on a mission".

On the other hand, over the course of the wave of attacks, both Ya'alon and IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot ordered soldiers to shoot only in life-threatening situations, react cautiously when dealing with attackers who are minors, and provide immediate medical treatment to perpetrators after they're shot. Eizenkot was the first to experience the right wing's wrath after he called on soldiers not to empty their ammunition magazines into "13-year-old girl[s] with scissors".

The debate also influenced society. Within hours of the video being uploaded to the Internet, the Israeli public was divided (Mazor & Mehager, 2016). Parts of society felt that the soldier's actions were not within the "Rules of engagement" and that the soldier was out of line, murdering a man who no longer posed a risk to the soldier himself and to other soldiers in the area (Landes, 2017). Other people held the opinion that the soldier was only acting in the interests of protecting himself and others and that he felt there was still was a significant danger (Harel, 2016). The vast range of opinions was spread across Facebook forums, Whatsapp group messages and Internet news articles and op-eds (Nov, 2016). The fact that the story gained such widespread attention determined that government policy-makers and army officials had to react and respond to the issue by releasing statements aligning themselves with one opinion. It simply could not be ignored.

The controversy turned into a bitter political debate, splitting Israel's rightwing government and inspiring demonstrations in support for the soldier (Scheinder, 2016). Demonstration was in support of Azaria in Rabin Square. Translation of text on the poster: "If we don't protect our soldiers, who will protect us?" The soldier also attracted widespread support on Israeli social media with more than 13,000 people joining Facebook support groups and another 50,000 signing a petition backing his actions. Supporters of the soldier posted a video online of the moments before the shooting.

Azaria enjoyed widespread public support and his trial became a public spectacle (Edmonton, 2016). Nearly half of Jewish Israelis support the extrajudicial killing of Palestinian attacker who no longer poses a threat, according to a poll of the Israel Democracy Institute. Broken down into various demographic segments, those most likely to justify Azaria's actions are ultra-Orthodox Jews (95 percent), those between the ages of 18-24 (84 percent), and self-described right-wingers (83 percent). One in five self-describe left-wing Jewish Israelis said they justify Azaria's action, as well as half of "centrists". According to a poll conducted for Israel's Channel 2, 57% of Israelis opposed the soldier's arrest, while 42% described his actions as "responsible". Only 5% of those polled said they would describe the shooting as murder (Schaeffer Omer-Man, 2016).

One day after the incident, an analysis of social media revealed that half of the Israeli public supported the actions of the soldier, while the other half was critical of his actions. Two days later, once Netanyahu publicly changed his tune, a second analysis of social media revealed that 82% of the public now supported the actions of the soldier. There is also an online petition calling for Azaria to be awarded a medal that so far has gathered more than 56,000 signatures.

Support for Azaria was expressed by three former generals, who testified for him, among them former Deputy Chief of Staff, Uzi Dayan, that stated that it was unjustified that a military police investigation was opened against Azaria, blaming the command and the management of the scene. General Shemuel Zakai stated that the pictures of the incident certified that Azaria acted out of a reasonable concern that Sharif may have been carrying a bomb. He blamed the command for the incident, asserting they acted contrary to instructions. He also criticized Defense Minister Ya'alon and IDF Chief of Staff for their behavior after the incident, claiming it destroyed any chance of a fair trial. Dan Bitton criticized officers at the scene of the incident and stated that an incorrect ruling will lead to a situation in which no soldier will be able to shoot to save lives in future.

But the position of the army was in sharp contrast to public opinion (Rapoport, 2016). IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot stated during a meeting with soldiers that the shooting ran counter to the professional and ethical norms of behavior demanded of IDF troops. Eizenkot criticized those depicting the shooter as a “confused little kid” demeaned the army’s character. The Chief of Staff said: “This is not the IDF, these are not the values of the IDF and this is not the culture of the IDF” (Benovadia, 2016).

After the court rejected his appeal, Azaria was faced with two options: either appeal to the High Court, or request IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eizenkot to reduce his prison term. Shortly after the court ruling, Eizenkot said that “If Azaria decides to file a request for a reduced sentence, it will be seriously considered, along with a review of the other considerations related to this case and from my commitment to the values of the IDF, its soldiers and its service members”.

### **Conclusion**

The research looks into the question of who was superior in the Hebron shooting incident: the army, the government, public opinion, traditional media, or social media. It is concluded that social media dominated the entire process and determined its outcome, while the other forces had to comply with the new reality structure by social media.

The incident characterizes the increasing fraught impact of social media on security issues. For many years, the army, the most prestigious and unifying organ in Jewish-Israeli society, was relatively immune from this kind of criticism. But the soldier became a popular hero, who “did the right thing”—killing a Palestinian who dared to challenge Israel’s control in the West Bank. The right wing saw it as just another sign of the army’s weakness towards the Palestinians. Yet despite this pressure, Ya’alon and the army did not back off and insisted on bringing Azaria to trial.

The case also highlights the impact of technology over security issues, since today soldiers can be held accountable for their actions and the world is aware of the inner workings and events in the military. With access to information and the pervasiveness of social media, the army needs to develop protocols and precedents to instruct within a different environment. Similarly, the case displays the fact that controversial issues are unable to be ignored anymore. With the increasing accessibility of the public to controversial events, these issues cannot be overlooked by the army and the government. Society and global media are no longer willing to allow these issues to be ignored. The Azaria case also shows that local events are being catapulted in to the global spotlight. As technology develops and the spread of information globally occurs instantaneously, these issues are able to become worldwide news events. This fact too, needs to be considered by governments and policy makers.

One further issue included within the Azaria case refers to the response of Israeli media and their role in the changing society. As information becomes accessible and nothing is hidden anymore, the media must analyze its changing role. Is this role to be pro-Israel and support the government and the army in all of their decisions or is it more important to present the facts as they are and open the events up to public scrutiny? Social media and developing technology have a huge impact on security issues and censorship. The Elor Azaria case exemplifies this completely and is an example of the new issues that governments face with the development of technology. New media is ever changing and it contains a strong influence. Politicians and governments are being forced to deal with political situations over more platforms than before, as ordinary people can interact with the media and generate new content with access to inexpensive communication technologies. What was unthinkable years ago is now taking place, as the ability for the masses to intervene in political stories with effectiveness. As the Azaria case demonstrates, anyone with a camera or phone and access to internet can be their own reporter, as was the case with the B'Tselem video.

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