

# Trapped in a vengeful machismo

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At one level, the fight between Hezbollah and Israel is guided by rational considerations of tactics, strategy, and politics. Israel hopes to restructure the Lebanese balance of power, while Hezbollah seeks to preserve influence and military prowess.

At a deeper level, however, the struggle is about wounded national and masculine pride. As the casualties mount, vengeful publics on both sides support redoubled efforts to physically pummel the other.

Fear of humiliation drives the conflict in multiple ways. Many Israelis feared the Hezbollah attacks, along with earlier attacks by Hamas, challenged their identity as proud, capable Jewish fighters, exposing them as wimps incapable of defending their borders.

Thus, the massively disproportionate Israeli barrage can be seen as a strange form of therapy. With each explosion north of the border, Jewish humiliation is mollified, if only until the next Hezbollah rocket strikes.

Many Palestinians and Lebanese are also enraged by these and previous attacks, motivating their support for attacks on Israeli civilians and cities. Given that Arabs have long suffered from Jewish bullets and shells, the ability of some Muslim fighters to blow up Jewish bodies must be gratifying to some.

Fascination with heroic images of warrior derring-do also played a role in the Hezbollah kidnapping of Israeli soldiers that sparked this latest round of war. The group's otherwise puzzling commitment to militancy six years after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon could also be usefully understood in this light.

Toxic macho urges lurk deep in the collective psyche of entire societies, nurtured by periodic displays of state-led pageantry, sober commentary on past heroism, and crudely sensationalist movies.

Although machismo and wounded pride may not trigger conflict on their own, they do help make it more likely when other conditions apply. For example, countries affected by particularly potent strains of machismo are more likely to overreact when challenged, as did the U.S. after 9/11.

Canada is not immune. As casualties mount in Afghanistan, the grim-lipped pseudo-heroism of our leaders easily lends itself to a culture of mindless militarism, allowing the size of our guns, planes, and armoured vehicles to assume centre stage in national debates.

Machismo is a sickness that strikes many young males — and some females — in their teens and early 20s. In peacetime, it expresses itself through hazing rituals, excessive interest in violent entertainment and an obsession with loud engines and competitive sports.

In politically tense regions, machismo can be expressed in more overtly violent ways, including the cult of the gun that has spread throughout much of the Middle East. Israeli settlers and soldiers march through occupied lands with their rifles at the ready; some young Palestinian males mimic their opponents, parading about with guns and explosive belts in deeply disturbing ways.

As we age, most of us leave the worst forms of machismo behind. Traces of the illness, however, linger in our psyches for years, emerging full-blown at times of perceived national crisis.

I know first-hand how deadly this sickness can be, since I was once ensnared in its grasp. As a young boy growing up in Israel during the late 1970s and early '80s, I learned that physical prowess was crucial to gaining peer respect. When drafted at the age of 18, my disgust with army life was tempered by secret delight at the unlimited access provided to the essential props of masculinity, including guns, explosives and large vehicles. Few of my peers enjoyed their three years of military life, but most took at least some pleasure in the opportunity to drive aggressively and make things go boom.

By some uncanny stroke of luck, I saw only limited combat in the mid-1980s, sandwiched as my time was between Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and the 1988 Palestinian uprising. Yet we constantly trained for violence, and every day was a new celebration of hyper-masculinity.

Small group dynamics in the military were toxic, including relentless hazing and stigmatization of some for wimpish behaviour. Dominant figures had more physical endurance and technical prowess, but compassion, tolerance, and maturity were in short supply.

I'm now approaching 40, and most of my North American age cohort has long lost interest in posturing and aggression. In war-torn regions such as the Middle East, however, a young male culture predominates, trapping even older and wiser folk in a deadly narrative of humiliation, rage, and revenge.

In the coming weeks, diplomats will probably engineer a ceasefire across the Lebanese-Israeli border. There will be no lasting peace, however, until these powerful sentiments are not calmed. More violence, no matter how proportionate or justified, will not help, but beyond that, the way forward remains obscure.

Personally, I have little hope that the country I left 13 years ago will change in my lifetime. The patterns of vengeful machismo, I fear, are too deeply engrained on all sides.

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