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"A room of one's own(?)" in battlespace – women soldiers in war rooms

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ABSTRACT

At present, women serve in a variety of combat roles and combat support positions in various militaries around the globe. In parallel, new technologies of warfare are transferring more and more soldiers, including women, from the sidelines into the heart of the battlespace. More women soldiers are thus becoming significant participants in war by virtue of their assignment to strategic war rooms. As one of the women soldiers interviewed in this study explained: 'In the war-room, you see everything. You see more than the soldiers in the field see; you see the whole picture'. Even though such women soldiers are not located physically in the battlefield, they do indeed participate in warfare by promoting 'security' for their countries and for their comrades in arms and by being responsible for injuring the 'other'. The stationing of women in war rooms located on the borders of conflict zones, which are equipped with the latest technologies that bring the reality of the warzone into the war room, may challenge traditional concepts of security, war, and gender roles. The narratives of women soldiers serving in such war rooms can thus provide critical insights into 'experiencing war' and 'making war' in battlespace. Personal interviews with 30 Israeli women whose mandatory military service was spent in war rooms revealed multiple narratives of war, including the intertwining of protection, security, and insecurity. The paper thus sheds new light on the role of women in the military by exploring women 'in a room of their own' in battlespace.

Women around the globe serve in a variety of combat roles and combat-support positions in the military establishments of their countries. Within these establishments, the ongoing introduction of new technologies of warfare is placing more and more women soldiers in influential positions, with many becoming significant participants in war by virtue of their assignment to strategic war rooms (also known as operations or situation rooms). The stationing of women combat-support soldiers in war rooms may thus challenge traditional concepts of security, war, and gender roles. The current article aims to explore the narratives of women soldiers who have served in war 'rooms of their own' (Woolf 1929/2015), with the dual purpose of learning about

their everyday experiences and the challenges they faced and of exploring new framings for analysis of the new war environment.

In modern warfare, a war room, being a command centre that serves as a point of coordination for military activities, may be located either in proximity to the battlefield or at a distance. Indeed, when one thinks of a war room, it is difficult not to recall the image of the US leadership watching the Bin-Laden capture in 2011. While Special Forces Units were operating in Pakistan, the leadership – ensconced in a secure situation room in Washington, DC – was watching a huge plasma screen with live images of Special Forces soldiers conducting their mission of capturing and killing their target. The current study does not deal with such distant safe command centres but focuses rather on the experiences of women soldiers in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in war rooms located in proximity to the battlefield – in this case, on Israel's various borders and in actual conflict zones. Such war rooms were eloquently described by Shiri, an operations officer interviewed in this study, in explaining her role in a war room located on the border between Israel and the West Bank:

Everything reaches the war room, from the smallest details, such as administrative matters, vehicles that are stuck [in enemy territory], or missing equipment etc., through issues of wounded soldiers, up to the larger events of an operation … shooting, fighting, etc. …. There are many routine ordinary things, but the core activity of war rooms is functioning during battles and emergency situations [on the border or inside enemy territory].

Michal, an operations sergeant, further explained the significance of military service in war rooms equipped with visual technologies and the contribution of these technologies to forces in the battlefield:

In the war room, you see everything. You see more than the soldiers in the field see; you see the whole picture …. When the men soldiers from my troop were 'in' [the battlefield] … they did not see terrorists coming toward them, but … I saw … I had to tell them to step back …. (quoted in Harel-Shalev & Daphna-Tekoah 2016b, 324)

Even though women such as Shiri and Michal are not positioned physically in the battlefield, their participation in war is significant, and it is this type of participation that raises questions regarding the status of women in the new battlespace (Manjikian 2010). To address such questions, this study analyses interviews with Israeli women soldiers who served in war rooms in or near conflict zones and were thus an indispensable part of a war effort. Analysis of the interviews reveals multiple narratives of war, including the intertwining of protection, security, and insecurity.

During the fieldwork, it was surprising to find that this aspect of war – women in war rooms – is understudied. While much has been written about the integration of women into the military (e.g. Sasson-Levy 2003; MacKenzie 2015; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016b) and about the use of new technologies in the wars of today (Masters 2005, 2008; Manjikian 2010), very few scholarly works have addressed women soldiers' experiences in strategic war rooms near the battlefield – experiences in which women soldiers have begun to take a leading role in 'managing war' and in 'achieving security'. In the context of the ever-growing knowledge on security, the narratives of women soldiers in war rooms can assist scholars to re-evaluate and explore different aspects of the concepts of security and war. Such narratives may challenge both the 'conventional-wisdom' definitions of war and the binary conceptualization of warfare as an explicitly gendered act in which soldiers (usually men) actively protect allegedly

passive and weak female subjects (Shepherd 2006; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016b).

Women soldiers should, however, not be regarded as a unified group. Experiences of women in the military are diverse and can vary markedly from one soldier to another, depending largely on the particular roles of the women during their military service. Lomsky-Feder and Sasson Levy (2018), for example, describe how the experiences of women soldiers serving in posts that are traditionally regarded as feminine, such as secretaries and administrators, are completely different from those of women in so-called masculine roles, such as combat soldiers or commanders. They also remind us that women serving in military intelligence posts experience yet another type of service, since brainpower, rather than physical capability, is the determining factor in awarding such posts to women and men alike (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson Levy 2018, 54). It is against this background that I sought to position women serving in war rooms on the continuum of military experiences and to investigate how these women soldiers perceive their service in gendered terms.

Today, war rooms form a substantial part of the newly framed battlespace. Although 'war room' is not a new term in war histories, war rooms on the front line may decentralize power structures and represent a relatively new form of battlespace. By examining the narratives of women soldiers serving in war rooms that are located, conceptually, on the border between the home front and the traditional battlefield, one can trace how these women take part in managing wars in the space between the home front and the battlefield. The current research thus aims to explore the experiences of Israeli women soldiers who served in strategic war rooms during their military service or reserve duty.

Warfare, gender, and knowledge about the new battlespace

Cynthia Enloe asks academics to look for what she terms 'silences' in international relations (IR; Enloe 1989/2014). She advises scholars to seek questions that are thus far unidentified and unasked in IR and to investigate issues that conventional commentators typically leave unexplored (Enloe 2015, 3). These spaces of query often remain unexplored because they are not considered interesting or sufficiently important. In these silences, she notes, you will often find politics (Enloe 2014; Manjikian 2014). Enloe (2015) further guides us to critically study how militaries are sustained, deployed, and utilized (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy 2016; Basham, Belkin, and Gifkins 2015; Baker et al. 2016). It was this call to arms that led me to pursue the current research about the unexplored issue of women soldiers in war rooms.

In modern times, the borders of war are blurred in both time and space: It is often quite difficult to pinpoint where a war starts and where it ends (Gregory 2011). In addition, in the wars of today, a shift from battlefield to battlespace is taking place (Garraway 2011; Dufort 2013; Rech et al. 2015; Perugini and Gordon 2017) and, likewise, the character of those who participate in war is changing. In battlespace, many more actors are involved, including civilians and insurgents, in addition to the traditional military (Perugini and Gordon 2017). In fact, in some instances, the players in warfare are changing (Dufort 2013; Garraway 2011) in the relatively new warfare of the battlespace. Moreover, in battlespace, many more actors, including women soldiers, can experience and be involved in 'the dirty work of war', without being physically present in the battlefield. The context for evaluating battlespaces no longer pertains

exclusively to one-on-one conflicts – a state versus a state or one state's military versus another state's military – but rather to any state that is involved in a military occupation or in any type of military intervention.

Military forces act in battlespaces through landscape and terrain (Rech et al. 2015). Today, terrain can be both seen and sensed in many ways by combatants in the battlefield, and thus issues of whether and how technological changes impact warfare are becoming crucial in debates centred on critical security studies. With the increased use of high-tech military methods (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2015, 184–5) and the growing importance of military intelligence and the visual elements of war (Mirzoeff 2012), the ongoing evolution of battlespace is giving rise to discussion as to whether or not smart technologies and smart weapons are changing the nature of warfare (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2015, 186). In parallel, the 'home front' of the new war is bursting with examples of 'visualities' and types of surveillance that are routinely deployed in battlespace (Amoore 2007). It would appear that the new technologies of warfare, such as unmanned weaponry and vehicles, could potentially alter both the conduct of warfare itself (McDonald 2013) and our understanding of war as a gendered activity (Manjikian 2014).

The consequences for gender relations of the entry of new technologies into the military arena are well documented in the literature. In the past, 'the signifier *soldier* was confined to combatants, in other words, men who actually engaged in physical battle. The fusion of technology and masculinity has significantly blurred this traditional distinction' (Masters 2005, 123). In other words, 'reducing the importance of the masculine warrior body as a hierarchal criterion creates conditions for blurring gender differences' (Lomsky-Feder and Sasson Levy 2018, 54). To complicate this gender blurring even further, new technologies of warfare are enabling more women to be positioned in 'protector' roles, without the need for substantial physical effort (Author 2016b, 326). According to Manjikian, the

harnessing of robotic technology … holds the promise that women soldiers may more successfully enter combat, since physical requirements are replaced by requirements for mental acuity and reflexes. Indeed, increased use of new technologies of this type might affect the gender makeup of the military. (Manjikian 2014, 55)

In this context, I address the concept of hegemonic masculinity in relation to the new war (Hutchings 2008b, 390) and the new battlespace. Hutchings (2008a, 40) cautions us that the

framing of contemporary international politics in terms of masculinity logic locks our social scientific imagination into a very familiar world in which we already understand how things work ontologically in terms of value hierarchies. But it also provides a massively efficient short cut for the cognitive tasks of categorization and analysis.

Hutchings also warns us away from using binary oppositions when discussing masculinity and femininity in war (Hutchings 2008a). Brown (2012, 4) further suggests that understanding how the flux in gender roles is affecting the military requires a more nuanced understanding of masculinity and femininity. In this spirit, I note that, in practice – as may be said of some intelligence roles – the binaries of femininity and masculinity are blurred in the war room, and therefore in this paper, I refrain from speaking about a single 'female experience' in war rooms.

The current article, therefore, belongs to a stream of scholarly research that looks at security from different aspects and examines changing definitions of war (e.g. Hudson

et al. 2009; Enloe 2000; Zalewski 2015). In that sense, it calls for an exploration of the issue of protection (Young 2003): 'In historical stories, women's need for protection causes wars, and men are expected to fight those wars as women's protectors and heroes. These stereotypes legitimate both the social dominance of masculinity and the institution of war' (Sjoberg 2006, 895–6). Additionally, Tickner (1992, 128) calls attention to inequalities in the military and claims that the relationships between protectors and protected deepens gender inequalities, since a militarized version of security privileges the masculine characteristics that elevate men's status.

Accordingly, theoretical discussions are continuing regarding how war has changed and is changing. For instance, Hutchings (2008b) claims: 'In different ways, all these accounts of the changing nature of modern warfare disrupt the substantive grounds on which the war–masculinity link has been made in both traditional war studies accounts and in the gender and war literature" To better understand these complex processes, Sylvester (2012) suggests that we seek 'insights, links and unexpected or ambiguous locations and types of war experience' (2012, 503). Specifically, feminists have theorized how the interface between technology and gendered bodies has had the effect of disturbing the constructs of femininity and masculinity. In this study, I explore the narratives of women soldiers who are not involved in direct combat but nonetheless occupy a substantial part of battlespace by virtue of their service in forward war rooms. Even though women in war rooms are usually not defined by the military as 'combatants', they most definitely do participate in war, promoting security, protecting other soldiers, and being responsible for inflicting injury on the 'other', while sometimes themselves being 'insecure'. In my analysis of the narratives, I sought insight both into the politics of war (Sylvester 2012; Dufort 2013) on the front line – beyond the war rooms of the high command – and into the manifestations of the new war being fought in forward war rooms. I therefore aim to extend the discussion of women in the military by analysing women's experiences in the war room and the significance of these experiences for the battlespaces of the present.

Method, design, and participants

Feminist scholars have gained empirical and theoretical insights from analysing various roles of women and gender in conflict and conflict resolution (Sjoberg 2016). I chose to study women serving in forward war rooms, due to the important and evolving role of these soldiers in battlespace. The inclusion criterion used in this research was therefore women who had served in the IDF in combat-support roles in war rooms on various borders and in conflict zones. The women participants in this study had served on Israel's borders with Syria, Lebanon, and/or Egypt, and/or the borders with the Occupied Territories (either the West Bank or the Gaza Strip). Some of them had served on more than one front.

In Israel, which may be described as a 'nation in arms', military service for women became mandatory soon after the creation of the state in 1948 (Ben-Eliezer 1995). Following other nations, such as Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain, and Sweden, in recent decades the IDF has created new opportunities for integrating women soldiers into combat and combat-support roles (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016b). Unlike conscription for men, women's

service in combat-related roles is voluntary and is thus considered far more prestigious than traditional 'feminine military roles' (Izraeli 2001; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2015; Golan 2015). Currently, only a few percent of women soldiers serve in combat roles, but the numbers are growing (Cohen 2015). Women serve as combatants in a variety of units and positions in the IDF, such as pilots, infantry soldiers, checkpoint commanders, checkpoint staff, border patrollers, combat paramedics, and sharpshooters. Combat-support roles in the IDF include managing war rooms, field intelligence, and other security-related and combat-related tasks.

The women participants in this study were identified through snowball sampling. All the participants were no longer on active military service at the time of the interviews, although some of them were still being called up for reserve duty. The participants had all been inducted into the IDF at the age of about 18 for two to seven years. Some of them served the minimum mandatory period of two years, while others signed up for additional periods of up to seven years. The data for this study were obtained through a series of personal interviews with 30 Israeli women between the ages of 21 and 33, such that the maximum time elapsing between the end of the military service or the release from reserve duty and the interviews was 10 years. The interviewees, who held different ranks, served in a variety of roles in different units (intelligence, infantry, and navy) during their military service. The factor common to the study participants was that they had all served in forward war rooms, irrespective of the exact nature of their roles: some served as lookouts, operations sergeants and officers, or radio supervisors; others were 'in charge' of various advanced intelligence tools; and yet others were responsible for operating unmanned intelligence-gathering vehicles from within a war room.

Procedure

After obtaining informed consent, the researcher and trained research assistants conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with each participant. To enable the interviewers to become acquainted with and reveal the experiences and the dilemmas of these combat-support women soldiers, the interviews lasted for approximately 1–2 hours each. They were held in Hebrew and, with the participants' consent, audio-taped and transcribed (and subsequently translated into English). Each interviewee was asked a series of questions, starting with: 'Please tell me about your military service'. This was followed by: 'Would you please share your military service experiences in the war room?' Follow-up questions were open ended to capture the women's own narration of their experiences. More specific questions were used to clarify the stories as the interviews proceeded. Each interviewee is identified by a pseudonym.

The method of narrative analysis is intended to enable researchers to appreciate nuances, to explore various narratives in parallel, and to be attentive to the way in which individuals make sense of their own experiences (Moss and Falconer Al-Hindi 2008; Wibben 2011; Shepherd 2012). Narrative analysis is indeed acknowledged to be an important tool in IR (Suganami 2008; Wibben 2011), and the analysis of a variety of narratives plays a crucial role in making sense of world politics (Suganami 2008, 329). I have found this approach to be particularly suitable for evaluating women's perspectives in conflict-ridden situations (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016a, 2016b).

Findings

Feminist research regarding making and fighting wars has urged scholars of security to broaden the definition of war and to explore women's multiple roles in conflict, while being attuned to the context of the complex relationships among gender, gender-based stereotypes, and political violence (Sjoberg 2016). The analysis of the interviews presented here revealed two major narratives, one of *experiencing war* and the other of *making war*, as discussed below. But before I delve into the main themes revealed by the narratives, the context of the study deserves some clarification, since young women in Israel experience a passage into adulthood that is affected by their mandatory military service, Israel's various wars and operations on several fronts, and the intractable Israeli–Palestinian conflict (Harel-Shalev 2010). As Reut described:

> You grow up, protected, with a silver spoon [in your mouth], until the age of 18. Until then, everybody is [devoted to] taking care of you, raising you …. Suddenly, for the first time in your life, you are in a system in which you don't have your mom to talk to the teacher, and it is merely you – as a person – being there. You get there [military service in Gaza] and hear BOOMs, shooting, and mortar bombs – this is not something I was used to hearing in my daily life. And you realize – I am not in my childhood neighbourhood anymore, I am located near the border … [but] I knew exactly what I was doing and what my role in the war room was. The pressure gave me the motivation and the adrenaline to keep on going …. You are in charge of 'incidents' …. Military service for me was an experience I cannot explain with words. It was a meaningful experience.

In this context, Sharon, a war room commander, stated:

> I have become a war room commander. In this role, I am actually in charge of the girls [women combat-support soldiers] inside the operations war room and … that means that I am the one taking command. Incidents in which I decide what to do, everything is on my shoulders. I am in charge … it is difficult, with a lot of stress … I am in charge of nine girls; the base is 1.5 km from the border; there is 'action'.

Sharon's narrative emphasizes her sense of responsibility and her understanding of her role in the military – indeed, hers is a narrative that may hint at a shake-up of gender roles in the military.

Another important aspect of the context of the interviewees' military service relates to the differences in the levels of intensity of the conflict on Israel's various borders. Vast differences were found regarding experiences of women soldiers in war rooms on the different fronts – Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. As Miriam, who was in charge of war rooms and intelligence-gathering visual systems, indicated:

> There are substantial differences between a 'peaceful border' and a 'war-border'. On the border with Egypt, it is a 'quiet' border because there is peace [between Israel and Egypt] … there is some smuggling and some illegal entries, but the tension levels are different. In Gaza, it is mostly terrorist activity, it is serious; and everybody is alert … it is a matter of life and death. It is completely different [from a peaceful border].

Lior further emphasized:

> I was sent to Gaza as an operations sergeant, and a year and a month later I was assigned to an officers' training course. After the course, I was sent to Ramallah, which was after I swore that I would never go back to Gaza again ….

Lior continued with a description of her reserve service as an operations officer in Lebanon:

> I know that Lebanon is a bad place; for decades it has been a bad place. And if Gaza is a bad place, then Lebanon is as twice as bad … and you know that soldiers are shot down there like flies. Suddenly I realized that … some of the people [soldiers] that I had seen less than an hour ago might not come back, because Lebanon is a bad place.

Experiencing war

The current study belongs to a research stream that aims to bring narrative analysis of war experiences into security studies (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016a; Wibben 2011; Shepherd 2012). There are different ways of engaging with and studying experiences in war, and multiple and contested possible conceptualizations of military experiences (Dyvik and Greenwood 2016) in battlespace. In their narratives about their service in war rooms, the women soldiers covered a variety of experiences and encounters with war. These women soldiers had experienced battlespace in many ways through seeing, sensing, and facing a variety of experiences of armed conflict. The soldiers described their roles in the war room and their experiences in great detail. For example, Michal said:

> I served on the border throughout my entire military service, at first as an operations sergeant and then as an operations officer. Those two years felt as if they were my entire life. There were some very intensive periods there … in which you stay in the base and spend many hours in the war room. It gets to the point where you know every stone in the area, every blind side. Every incident that happens in your area of operations becomes a part of you, everything becomes personal: every mistake, everything that could have been done differently, every soldier who has been killed, or every success, every successful incident, [or] prevention of an incident – everything becomes a part of you ….

It is generally held that practices of war involve training and disciplining through which the skills of men soldiers are built (McSorley 2013). This is also true for women combat-support soldiers serving in war rooms. Tiffani and Shiri explained how they were trained to function well during long and difficult shifts. Tiffany, an operations officer, stated:

> The encounter for the first time with alarms and missiles demands that you get a grip very fast and execute your role as best you can, even when you are terrified … there was a loud BOOM, you see 'fireworks' above your head, but you have to continue functioning as usual and manage the operation as if nothing has happened. Under my command, there were six or seven [male] operations sergeants … it brings great satisfaction, you become a professional, and a specialist … I served in a very masculine environment … I was a few metres from the border; there were many missiles and many intrusions ….

Shiri further stated:

> It is a matter of being awake during the night and functioning … it is actually not merely being awake, it is being alert …. A very challenging role, intensive, with lots of uncertainties about the schedule … with huge responsibility …. Placing girls in this role, it is not obvious. It is not a simple role …. Girls at the age of 18, 19, 20 who take huge responsibility …. It is not trivial that girls of that age are dealing with such responsibilities, not in our country and not abroad.

In their narratives, the women soldiers emphasized the skills that they had acquired in their encounters with violence and war. The visual element of the battlespace was dominant in their narratives. Indeed, research has dealt with the importance of the visual representation of war in various spheres (Guittet and Zevnik 2015). In war rooms, the visual elements of battlespace are crucial and complex, as can be identified in Ella's description. Her narrative of the death of one of her comrades in a battle, as seen in the war room, emphasizes the significance of the 'visuality' of battlespace (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016b):

> he sat right there, next to my body; a minute later he was gone …. Not only that, I saw with my own eyes how he was killed. You see it in slow motion …. You can see fear …. You see everything live on plasma screens in the war room.

Images of war (Guittet and Zevnik 2015; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2015) have indeed become a substantial part of battlespace, as was presented in the narrative of Moran, an operations sergeant, in describing her routine in the war room:

> even to see everything that is 'on camera' on these plasma screens or to hear the military radio … [is intense]. I was sitting in the war room during an operation, with the earphones. I heard them [the male combatants] from the battlefield, I saw them on camera, it felt like …. You hear 'we are being shot at', and this is really difficult … I was stressed out. The camera … it is so stressful to see them from the war room like that.

Sylvester recommends that to understand the essence of war as an experience of the body, one has 'to focus on less abstract and more people-centred elements of war' (2012, 502). The narratives of the interviewees were precisely that: the physical proximity to death, the surreal reality of war, and the devastating scenes were recurring themes in the interviewees' narratives of 'experiencing war'. Jana, an officer who served in the Gaza Strip before Israel's disengagement from Gaza, described in detail an event that she experienced:

> They drove on top of explosives. The explosives on the road triggered the explosives that were on the military vehicle, and the combatants exploded into tiny pieces. A day later, another heavy vehicle with explosives was shot at, and five soldiers evaporated. I remember that I felt that blast. It was so strong. The visual memories that are stuck in my head are the other soldiers crawling on the road, looking for body parts of dead soldiers … I remember that [when it happened] … I entered the war room and one of the women soldiers shouted out that the vehicle had evaporated. I remember saying to her: 'What do you mean?' She said – evaporated. One minute it was there, and the next minute it was gone. A shock … the brain cannot comprehend this event …. An entire military vehicle, with five soldiers in it, gone … evaporated … inconceivable.

Technology brings the reality of the war zone into the war room and thereby 'obliges' many more soldiers to experience war and its various aspects. Even when the combat-support soldiers were not physically in the battlefield, they were in physical danger, under extreme stress and burdened with many responsibilities. The findings of this study involve two seemingly separate aspects – visuality and gender. It is apparent that, in addition to women serving in combat positions, technology has enabled more women to see the wider picture, to be in charge of a situation, and to fulfill their potential outside the traditional gender roles in war. This interrelation will be discussed below.

In contrast to the distant war rooms of defence secretaries (Jose 2016) and of drone operators (Daggett 2015), the war rooms described in this article are located in proximity to the battlefield. Not only did the interviewees experience war and witness the death and injury of other soldiers via the visual systems in the war rooms, but they themselves were in danger. Ella, an operations sergeant – in describing a situation in which a missile landed inside the war room – emphasized how the war room was a part of the new battlespace and how it was not safe. Jana, too, described a surreal experience in a war room in which she was very close to being hit by a bullet that had ricocheted off the phone to hit the wall next to her. The narrative themes of experiencing war thus included huge responsibility, emotional burden, functioning under stress, exposure to combat and death, and striving for professionalism.

Making war on the backstage of war

I remember the helicopter that was shot down
I sat in the war room
I went outside for a second
I went back in, and I saw everyone's faces were as white as the wall…
I sat an entire week in a shelter [on the border with Lebanon]
I started managing the war room
I moved the forces here
I moved the forces there
I conducted [operational] blockades and everything
(Lior, an operations officer serving on the border with Lebanon)

The dominant discourse about war relates to men in combat as those who are 'making war'. Women are mentioned in scholarly research mainly as victims of war or as marginal actors in 'making war' (Daphna-Tekaoh and Harel-Shalev 2017a). Nonetheless, a debate is evolving over whether making war is safe for women (Shepherd 2016) and whether more women should be active participants in war (MacKenzie 2013; Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2015). The findings of this study reveal that women soldiers in war rooms are not merely 'experiencing war', and/or being affected by war, but they are – to a large extent – 'making war'. The narratives of the interviewees are interconnected in many ways in that the war rooms, the techno-logical devices, and the women soldiers who manage and control the war rooms are an indispensable part of the new battlespace. Tamara, an operations officer in the West Bank, explained:

There are those who are in the battlefield, and there are those who are behind the scenes. I feel that I did things, but this was always on 'the backstage of war' that is being conducted and managed behind the scenes. The operations sergeants are on the backstage of the war, the combatants are in front. But the combatants cannot function without us, the war rooms' teams. If there is no backup and assistance from the war room, there will be chaos …. [In the war rooms] you prioritize the incidents, you see what is happening, and then you prioritize the operations ….

Some years ago, Sjoberg (2006, 895–6) summed up the then-current thinking on male hegemony in the military: 'In historical stories, women's need for protection causes wars, and men are expected to fight those wars as women's protectors and heroes. These

stereotypes legitimate both the social dominance of masculinity and the institution of war'. The narratives of the women soldiers indicate how these ideas are changing: they repeatedly mentioned that although they are not considered combatants, war-room soldiers play a substantial role in 'making war'. The women repeatedly emphasized the crucial nature of their roles and how they protected the combatants, and they likewise resisted the notion that their role was marginalized. For example, Michal, an operations sergeant, refused to allow the women soldiers in the war room to be underestimated and emphasized that, at the end of the day, they save lives.

As mentioned above, the women interviewees served in various roles in forward war rooms. Each soldier had participated in 'making war' in a different manner. Shani explained the responsibilities of a lookout in the war room:

> [In the war room] there is no certainty what will happen next; you are fighting with yourself not to blink, not to close your eyes, even for a second. It is about human lives …. In a recent operation, a lookout spotted a terrorist squad …. This role serves as the 'eyes' of the entire state, and the entire army.

Advanced military technologies are cast as being superior in almost every way to the 'human male body' – superior in information and intelligence gathering, superior in 'remote sensing', faster, more responsive, and with greater staying power, such that the 'eyes' and 'ears' of the military are no longer susceptible to human error (Masters 2005, 122; 2010). The women soldiers who serve in war rooms as operators of visual technologies or unmanned vehicles are indeed serving as the 'eyes' and the 'ears' of the military and the state, while at the same time being *human* rather than a piece of computerized software. But what does it mean to be human in war? What does it mean to be a woman in war? What kind of dilemmas, ethical or otherwise, do the women in the war rooms face? In some sense, the stationing of women in forward war rooms positions them as major components of the battlespace, with the parallel potential to cause the militarization of their lives and to expose them to ethical dilemmas.

Roni served in a war room where she was in charge of operations and radio encrypting:

> When there is an operation in the battlefield, the war room team always guides and instructs the troops as to whether they should move forward or not. Once, the troops saw a donkey, and they informed the war room about the donkey … so the war room instructed 'Hold fire, don't shoot the donkey', and the donkey continued to approach them, and then it exploded near the troops. It was booby trapped. That was surreal …. Earlier, we had said in the war room, this is a donkey, why should we kill it now? I and the high-ranking officers were in shock.

She continued sharing her dilemmas during her service in the war room:

> They were so many dilemmas there [in the war room] …. There was a situation in which we had concrete information about the location of a 'wanted terrorist' and they wanted to take him down, but on the roof, there were three kids; they put them there to play soccer, and we saw them standing there, and we knew who was inside the building. I remember the brigade commander and the other officers holding their heads, and we had to cope with a serious dilemma … they didn't know what to do. It was the lives of three kids versus 'something' that could save many lives, but in the end, they didn't do it, they didn't shoot … I saw with it my own eyes …

In the war room, the operations officers see vividly via the advanced technological equipment both 'their side' and the 'enemy-other' – they see flesh and blood. However, in their narratives about their war experiences, the soldiers referred mainly to their 'own side' of the conflict. Some critical stances with regard to state policy were, however, evident.[1]

Technology can be regarded as a productive site of power/knowledge. If, in the past, only men who actually engaged in physical battle were a part of the hegemonic masculinity of the military (Masters 2010), the entry of technology into battlespace has changed the situation. Miriam, who served in a war room as a lookout and later as a visual systems intelligence officer, described:

> We were initiating operations. If it wasn't us, incidents were not being prevented and would have reached the border with Israel. You are providing time for the combat forces to get ready and prepare themselves for battle, you identify things before incidents occur, you collect intelligence, you feel that you are a part of something big. I wanted to serve as a combatant, but it didn't work out, so I said – if not a combatant, so at least I will serve in the most intense area of operations.

Tamara, an operations officer in the West Bank, shared not only how women soldiers were involved in decision making, but also how influential she herself had been in her area of operations:

> I remember that the deputy brigade commander called me and asked: 'Where do you think I should position the forces and what is the best location for each force?' I actually … demonstrated on the map where he should locate each force, 'Here you should position this force and there you position the other force'. He backed me up and implemented what I had suggested.

The narratives of Miriam and Tamara illustrate in different ways how knowledge and expertise are fundamental to various actors in battlespace. Their knowledge was garnered through the technological equipment and visual systems located in the war room, and they used this knowledge to assess safety and danger for their brothers in arms. Common to both Tamara's and Miriam's narratives, then, are the ways in which technology in the military may serve not only to reach beyond the borders but also to blur boundaries and gender roles. Edith further emphasized:

> I was directing the troops. I was directing them. This gave me a sense of satisfaction. There were [combat] forces that entered the war room before crossing the border and requested of us: 'Take good care of us'. It is encouraging and [morale] boosting.

One may indeed ask 'How might new technologies reconfigure the gendered aspects of warfare?' (Manjikian 2014). Manjikian (2014) concludes that the availability of additional war-fighting technology is unlikely to open up additional opportunities for women or to substantially alter the gender configuration of warfare. This view also appears in MacKenzie's research (2015) regarding the objection to the incorporation of women into masculine roles. Nonetheless, while men are still shaping today's militaries and wars, one can identify incremental progress in shaking up and reshaping gender roles through the significance of the war room in battlespace. Along with the traditional gender roles, which are still the norm, the entry of women into the strategic war room

enables women to position themselves as protectors and men to allow themselves to be protected by women, without a threat to their masculinity.

According to Brownson (2014), in some instances, combatants – women and men – unite in a what she terms a 'differentiated solidarity' that recognizes men and women as full group members, while at the same time accepting their differential contribution to combat effectiveness. This idea is reflected in the example of the request to 'Take good care of us'. That having been said, there were other instances in which the women soldiers were disregarded and marginalized. In some instances, gender hierarchy was deep-rooted. Edith reported such an incident:

> I was familiar with *my* area of operations …. Nevertheless, there were incidents in which I was disregarded …. Once I found an intruder. I went to conduct an inspection of a specific post. A [male] combatant was escorting me, and I saw someone passing by, it was completely dark, and I told him 'There is someone here'. He said 'Shut up, there is no one here. This is an operational task, just be quiet'. We kept on going and I saw a man standing in front of me. I quietly grabbed the hand of the combat soldier [to signal to him that the intruder was there] and he arrested him.

This example clearly emphasizes that male soldiers remain the primary definers of military culture, to which women have to accommodate themselves (King 2015). Therefore, although the women interviewees understood and interpreted their vital part in battlespace, they were particularly frustrated when men soldiers – and the system itself – did not acknowledge their significant contribution. During the 'making' of armed conflicts, some of the women soldiers indicated that they coped with additional challenges such as sexist remarks.

Another challenge facing women in war rooms is to take on the role as pioneers in certain positions. Lior mentioned that she was happy to be able to teach and bring up the next generation of women operations sergeants, despite the difficulties she had faced. Paving the way for the younger generation of women soldiers in the military in particular combat-related activities was, however, a substantial battle for some of the interviewees. Ronit, for example, served in war rooms and was the first woman soldier to be in charge of operating an unmanned vehicle. She described how she conducted a daily routine of mechanical maintenance of the unmanned vehicle, how she learned the route that the vehicle was required to follow, and how she risked her life many times while she fixed a mechanical problem on the vehicle when it was in enemy territory. She further explained:

> I was in charge of a vehicle with a camera that drives along the border. I controlled the vehicle, which drives on a dangerous route along which it is too risky for soldiers to travel. The cameras on the vehicle can cover blind spot areas …. The work included routine mechanical handling of the vehicle as well as shifts in the war room. These shifts included serving as a battlefield lookout. We drove the vehicle from the war room itself. You might think that I was playing a computer game, but I was actually driving [the vehicle]. I performed an innovative role … I think I contributed a lot … I was the first officer in this role; therefore, I actually established this function; I wrote the entire combat manual, and I have a lot of experience; the entire operation [of unmanned vehicles] is built on things that I created and experienced.

Operating unmanned vehicles enables women soldiers to conduct combat-related roles without substantial physical effort. The requirements for these roles are responsibility,

patience, acuity, and good reflexes (Manjikian 2014); in that sense, women are no less professional than men. Indeed, increased use of new technologies of this type through military service in war rooms could initiate a process that may affect the gender make-up of battlespaces.

Michal's description (mentioned in the introduction of the current paper) of herself as protecting, warning, and instructing men soldiers to abort their mission so as to avoid being harmed represents, to some extent, a shift in gendered constructs of protection: women who are not in the battlefield but are in battlespace – in strategic war rooms where they 'see' the wider combat picture – have the power to direct men soldiers away from harm (Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah 2016b). These women both experience war and make war. Enloe (1989/2014) indicates that, traditionally, men are supposed to 'protect women and children'. The reality of modern war rooms may challenge this concept. Women soldiers in the war room – as another set of eyes – have become the protectors of combatants in the battlefield.

Discussion and conclusions

War rooms are located, both physically and conceptually, between what is termed 'war proper' (Shepherd 2016; Sjoberg and Via 2010) – the traditional battlefield – and activities outside of 'war proper', which are included in battlespaces. In the context of the evolving knowledge about security and new wars, the narratives of women soldiers in war rooms can assist scholars to explore various aspects of new wars. The paper shows that narratives of women soldiers serving in forward war rooms may challenge both the traditional 'conventional-wisdom' definitions of war and the binary conceptualization of warfare as a gendered act in which soldiers (usually men) actively protect allegedly passive women (usually civilians). In the current research, the analysis of the narratives of women soldiers serving in war rooms reveals wider processes that are currently evolving in the militaries and battlespaces of today.

Harari (2005) indicates that

[t]he twentieth century has witnessed a revolution in the image of war and of soldiers. The age-old romantic image of war has been discredited; war has increasingly been interpreted as a disillusioning experience; and the soldier has been at least partly transformed from hero to victim.

Harari further argues that 'this revolution did not result from twentieth-century military or technological changes in the nature of war, but rather from cultural and mental changes in soldiers' self-perception and in their expectations of life, that occurred between 1600 and 1900' (Harari 2005, 43, 71). In terms of cultural and psychological changes, the participants in the current research served in the military and participated in wars in an era in which women are demanding equality in various spheres of life. In particular, these women's self-perceptions and expectations have been shaped during a time in which young Israeli women are struggling for equal participation in the military (Izraeli 2001) and are demanding that more roles in the IDF be opened to women. These socio-political processes, along with technological advances and their implementation in battlespace, therefore affect their narratives of war.

Harari further claims that 'twentieth-century veterans have produced a growing avalanche of war books, war poems, war paintings, war films, and academic war studies, all geared to tear away the romantic mask of war, and unmask war's "true face"' (Harari

2005, 44). Indeed, the war-room stories of the interviewees have the potential to expose war's 'true face'. This is not to claim that they are pushing the military to a more peaceful agenda; indeed, some of their stories are very much militarized. Many of the women narrated their experiences as if they were still 'on duty', and they did not avoid romantic recollections in their narratives about armed conflicts and war when describing how they 'experienced war' and how they 'made war'.

In parallel to the gradual entry of women into a variety of traditionally masculine roles in society in general and in the military in particular, women soldiers stationed in forward war rooms are taking a more active part in managing war and in instructing troops to how relocate themselves within the battlefield, if necessary. They are *de facto* 'making war' in a battlespace that lies – physically and conceptually – between the 'home front' and the 'battlefield'. Even though such women are not defined by the military or by society as 'combatants', they do indeed participate in war – promoting 'security', protecting 'their' soldiers, being exposed to physical danger, and being responsible for injuring the 'other'. Moreover, new technologies of warfare are, to some extent, enabling more women to be positioned in the 'protector' role, taking charge in both routine activities and emergency situations, as well as to fulfill their potential outside the traditional gender roles, without the need for substantial physical prowess.

Indeed, protection is a central theme in security studies (Young 2003; Eichler 2015). The reality of the war room changes the concept of protection in two main ways: (1) women soldiers serving in the war room can function as the 'eyes' and 'ears' of the military and the state and are therefore they are positioned as protectors of the state – while dichotomously being protected by combat soldiers; (2) in a different kind of protection, women combat-support soldiers protect combatants and guide them in the battlefield via the war room. Yet, in this context, the application of protection is nuanced: On the hand, motherly protection is evident in the women soldiers' attitudes to men soldiers, and, at the same time, their 'warrior' capabilities are demonstrated both by their actions in battlespace and by their own insistence that they are taking an active part in warfare. These aspects of protection call into question the meaning of hegemonic masculinity, a meaning that seems to be evolving in new wars and battlespaces. Looking at women serving in war rooms enables us to question the binary of masculinity and femininity while exploring the possible flux in gender roles and changes in the femininity/masculinity divide.

The use of advanced technology and various visual devices in war zones, which bring images of war and the reality of the war zone into the war room, is currently shaping the new battlespace. It affects how women in war rooms both 'experience war' and 'make war'. In 'experiencing war', women combat-support soldiers who are not present on the battlefield itself – and are not directly involved in combat – are being exposed to extreme violence. In 'managing and making war', these women soldiers are involved in monitoring the battle terrain and practising field craft by virtue of their use of technological devices (Rech et al. 2015).

An analysis of a variety of narratives – such as that presented in the current article – can play a crucial role in making sense of battlespace. The whole range of advanced high-tech weapons, alongside information and communication technologies, brings more women into battlespace and exposes more women soldiers to the surreal and devastating reality of war, while at the same time giving them the tools to make war, to hurt others, and to protect combatants. The women soldiers serving in war rooms

understood and internalized their vital roles in battlespace, yet they expressed their frustration at the fact that they did not always receive the requisite acknowledgement for their important work from men soldiers or from the military system at large. The women's desire for acknowledgment of their contribution to the military was evident in their narratives, as has been found in previous studies (Sasson-Levy 2003; Lomsky-Feder and Sasson-Levy 2016).

Fascinating themes that emerged from the analysis were the interviewees' level of involvement in the military, their dedication to the job, and their devotion to one another. At the same time, it was evident that most of the narratives did not include references to the 'other side' of the conflict or to the casualties of the 'other side'. This omission may be related to the fact that these conscripts had been granted the right to serve in combat-related positions in return for obedience and devotion to duty (Sasson-Levy 2003). Finally, one should remember that soldiers in conflicts and wars mostly tend to be attentive to their 'own side of the conflict' (Woodward and Jenkings 2013).

During my research and fieldwork, I was surprised to find that this important aspect of war – women in war rooms – is understudied. Masculinity still provides the interpretive reference point for the description and evaluation of contemporary developments in warfare (Hutchings 2008b, 390). Military service has strong historical ties to masculinity and the transformation of boys into men (Brown 2012, 3–17). What, then, is military service for women? How do women experience war and make war? These aspects of war are significant for the exploration and understanding of battlespace. It may be said that women who serve in war rooms are located on the backstage of war, which is allegedly the 'natural' place for women in war. However, the findings indicate that the place of these women is at the heart of the battlespace. Moreover, although objections to the incorporation of women into substantial roles in the military in various countries are still widespread (e.g. MacKenzie 2015), the experiences of women soldiers seem to be indicative of an incremental change in gender roles that is occurring in the military: women soldiers are actually *making war*, in every sense of the term.

Feminist scholars tend to conceptualize war and political violence in ideas that are broader than traditional notions (Sjoberg 2009). In the current article, I applied narrative analysis to broaden knowledge about women's experiences in combat-related activities, aiming to identify the experiences and dilemmas of women facing the challenging and unusual situations of combat and warfare. Through exploring the interviewees' narratives of their everyday experiences in war rooms – in rooms of their own (Woolf 1929/2015) – I trace how women soldiers in war rooms are shaping the new battlespace and are challenging the traditional concepts of security, war, and gender roles. These processes are occurring in parallel to the entry into battlespace of the advanced technology that brings the reality of the war zone into the war room. Taking a critical feminist approach to studying the military can thus contribute to generating a more realistic accounting of gender roles in the military (Enloe 2015, 3) and of the broader processes inherent in the creation of the new battlespace of the twenty-first century.

Note

1. I have referred to the criticism of the soldiers towards the government in different papers; see Daphna-Tekoah & Harel-Shalev (2017b) and Harel-Shalev and Daphna-Tekoah (2016a).

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