

Anxious Leviathan: The Powerful Vulnerability of Strong States

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Abstract

Why do strong countries implement narratives of vulnerability in their wartime public communication? This dissertation solves the puzzling practice of powerful actors pursuing identifications we commonly associate with weakness and political failure. It is the first systematic study analyzing vulnerability narratives as a practice of statecraft and warcraft. I compare the politics of vulnerability of Israel and the UK during two conflicts: Israel's 2014 Operation Protective Edge (OPE) and the UK's participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I combine the analysis of states' wartime public communication with in-depth interviews with 32 British and 38 Israeli officials. Using identity as an analytical starting point to theorise about the states' behaviour, I expose the rationale behind actors' vulnerability narratives. I show that both conflicts were a source of ontological insecurity and that actors presented themselves as insecure to avoid negative evaluations of fighting against the underdog. In the case of strong actors, vulnerability narratives have two functions. One, they reduce anxiety about the actor's identity. Warfare against a weaker opponent erodes positive self-perceptions of the powerful state. By self-identifying as vulnerable, the country's action gains a principled meaning which supports its ontological security. Second, vulnerability narratives provide the state with a special agency. By presenting itself as vulnerable, the state securitises a weaker opponent to justify offensive action. The dissertation contributes to socio-psychological studies of conflict by showing that vulnerability is a conflict-supportive identification not only for the collectives but also for the states. Validating previous experimental research conducted on an individual and group level, it provides empirical data that vulnerability self-identifications may also be a source of legitimacy on the state level. It is an innovative study of how states introduce vulnerability self-identifications to the collective. Israel and the UK have based their communication on a multiplicity of in/outgroup vulnerability narratives. This finding broadens socio-psychological scholarship on vulnerability by showing that states' try to evoke vulnerability self-perceptions not only by referring to the in-group's but also outgroup's standing.

The dissertation contributes to the ontological security studies. It lays out a new research avenue for the study of the resilience of identity. This approach recognizes that states adapt their autobiographies to their evolving behaviour and ideational needs. Furthermore, that the state's identity can be protected from criticisms of its actions. Applying the sociology of trust, I show that vulnerability narratives may be used as a trust-inducing mechanism. This allows us to read anew the political role of vulnerability where – contrary to the traditional approach – vulnerability may be a bulwark of ontological security. While it is broadly recognized that ontological security is a key

source of political agency, major studies focus on routines and inhibiting functions the identity has over the behaviour of states. The recognition of the resilience of Israel's and the UK's identity – in a time of controversial armed conflicts with much weaker opponents - allows us to decouple states' routines from states' agency by accounting for the ability to sustain their sense of self and adapt to change. The dissertation sheds new light on what constitutes a crisis of ontological security. While in the literature, states' behaviour was foremost studied from the perspective of external challenges to their identity, in both case studies it was the actions of states themselves that challenged their ontological security. The dissertation investigates the researcher's interpretation of the state's anxiety with the country's officials themselves. So far, no inquiries have employed interviews to study the role ontological security plays in state actions. Little attention has been also paid to the ways of establishing that a country is dealing with anxiety. Generally, such claims are based on discourse and historical analysis. By investigating how country officials pursued the safe identity of the state, this dissertation offers granular evidence of the ways through which actors seek ontological security. Furthermore, while the literature explains why conflicts may be supportive of ontological security, it abstracts from systematically analysing how states may support the safety of their identity while pursuing military confrontation. The study exposes the use of vulnerability narratives as such practice. Lastly, the dissertation contributes to the scholarship that links ontological security with securitisation by showing that securitisations can be used to protect identity from negative evaluations of state actions.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The puzzle: Why do strong states claim to be vulnerable?

At the heart of this dissertation is the surprising behaviour of strong states. Its point of departure¹ is instances of powerful actors using vulnerability narratives, a self-identification we commonly associate with weakness and political failure. This practice is most striking in the context of populist ‘strongman’ leaders. For example, why would the former president of the US, Donald Trump predicate both his presidential campaign and then his presidency on the vision of the US being an embattled actor that for decades have been taken advantage of by the whole world? During his 2019 New Hampshire Rally when speaking about European members of the NATO alliance he called them “delinquent” and accused them of purposefully hurting the US:

They kill us on trade. They have all sorts of barriers and everything else. The taxes are really unfair. The tariffs were ridiculous, what they do to us in Europe. And then we protect them” (Trump 2019).

While this strategy intuitively made sense during the elections – when Trump was looking for arguments to discredit his opponents – it seemed odd after the victory. After all, by presenting Washington as the ultimate victim of the world order – a state under the attack from China, Mexico, even the EU – Trump’s America looked even weaker than before.

But the politics of vulnerability are not solely a defining behaviour of populist leadership. They are not a point of reference reserved for a particular form of government or cultural region. Vulnerability narratives are a pervasive phenomenon of global politics. It is not a coincidence that in 2012 after Xi Jinping was elected Chinese president, the first time all seven members of the Chinese Politburo met publicly, was at the exhibition about the Century of Humiliation (China Org 2012). This carefully choreographed gesture of Xi was a

¹ More on the role of research puzzles in the social sciences inquiry see e.g. Gustafsson and Hagstrom 2018; George and Bennet 2005; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012.

manifestation of the defiance of the past when - in the national consciousness - “China was attacked, bullied, and torn asunder by imperialists” (Wang 2014: 7). Wang’s magisterial work on the national identity of China illustrates how even in times of the country’s unprecedented rise, the politics of the state are predicated on references to vulnerability and victimhood. The country’s fear of the past fuels the “suspicion syndrome” (2014: 184) and the ongoing strive to address its vulnerability to be hurt by the West. As summarised by the previous president Hu Jintao:

“History and reality tell us that backwardness incurs beatings by others (...) China was bullied by foreign powers in modern times. The main reason for that was that China was chronically poor and weak during that period. Since then, the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has become the unswerving goal that each Chinese generation has striven to realize” (2005).

Vulnerability echoes also in the politics of the Indian ruling party BJP. To mobilise their electorate, BJP and the PM Narendra Modi are increasingly sowing fear of the Muslim minority among the Hindu voters (e.g. Waikar 2018). When in 2019 BJP’s was asserting that the state will implement a highly controversial National Register of Citizens in West Bengal, the decision aggravated the fears of many. It was argued that the register is targeting minorities and leads to people becoming stateless. In the response to the critique, BJP’s general secretary Kailash Vijayvargiya argued that India is countering the Islamic threat:

“India is not a charity house that those who are the majority community in Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Pakistan (Muslims) can infiltrate, spread terror and take away the livelihood of our citizens” (The Indian Express 2019).

Likewise, Neo’s study of institutionalised sectarianism in Saudi Arabia points to the unique importance of politics of vulnerability within this wealthy state. It shows that its Sunni-Islamic monarchy cast the Shi’a minority as “a religious and social threat” to the future of the state (Neo 2020: 207). By presenting itself as vulnerable to internal and external enemies, it has “normalised the violence” targeting its Shi’a citizens (2020: 203) and gained greater freedom to act against Iran.

Importantly, the list of states that employ vulnerability in their self-presentations does not end here. For example, vulnerability narratives are also an important part of political discourse in Israel (e.g. Gordis 2010), the UK (e.g. Maronitis 2021), Russia (e.g. Skillen 2017), Serbia (Pratkanis 2009) and South Africa (Brkic 2021). Due to the deepening global socio-economic disparities, Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, it seems inevitable that this group will get only bigger.

While we know of multiple types of states vulnerability, I focus on the most intriguing one. Namely, on the claimed vulnerability of actors that physically are powerful², and who are engaged in military competition with a much weaker belligerent. This particular confluence of factors positions the strong state³ in a uniquely advantageous position. If – as argued by the realist readings of global politics, states are unprincipled power maximisers (e.g. Morgenthau 1997: 31) and war is nothing but a form “of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will” (Clausewitz 2006: Book I, Ch. I) – then why would a strong actor ever consider employing narratives of vulnerability in its public communication? After all, such identifications would only challenge the image and prestige of the state.

Turkey is a good example of such an actor. In the last years, Ankara has pursued one of the boldest campaigns to project its power abroad. It has organised a series of successful

² While the concept of power is a source of deep-seated debates in social sciences (see Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Carr 2016; Dahl 1957; Isaac 1987), for this dissertation I adopt an interactionist perspective on power. This means, that I understand power as a form of “transformative capacity harnessed to actors’ attempts to get others to comply with their wants” (Giddens 1979: 93). My approach is consciously focusing on material capacity of power and is abstaining from questions about the sources and effects of power (Guzzini 2005), its dimensions (e.g. Lukes 2005) or role in the broader social structures (e.g. Woodward 2003). Such perspective is pragmatic because it purposfully avoids “widening the concept of power” (Guzzini 1993: 477) and instead is focusing on one of its forms (Barnett and Duvall 2005: 44). This reflects the research orientation of the study which looks at conflicts between powerful and weak actors. Consequently, I treat material power of the strong actors as a form of ontological presupposition of the dissertation. It is precisely strong actor’s war-time exercise of their operational prowess that illustrated their transformative capacity to get the underdog to comply with their wishes.

³ Note about the concepts of strength and power. The project is using those two when referring to the states’ material capabilities. This speaks to my pragmatic approach to those two qualities. It reflects a commonsense understanding of strength and power which are often used interchangeably to describe country’s agency. Furthermore, it emphasizes that the dissertation’s conceptualisation of power is limited to the physical dimension, which in conversational vernacular is also described as strength (Macmillan 2021).

military offensives against the Kurds on Syrian territory, it supported Azerbaijan in a military victory against Armenia – effectively marginalising Russia’s influence in the region (e.g. Gall 2020), expanded Turkish presence in the gas-rich eastern Mediterranean and turned the direction of the war in Libya by sending military equipment to Tripoli (Tharoor 2020). Today the state uses the immigration crisis to effectively blackmail the whole EU block (e.g. BBC 2020). Despite the successes of this expansionist foreign policy, former PM and current president of Turkey Recep Erdogan defines the country as a victim (e.g. Al-Ghazzi 2021; Taş 2020). Turkey - a key NATO member state enforcing a uniquely autonomous strategy of power projection – is described by the ruling AKP party as a state fighting against multiple international conspiracies that challenge its sovereignty and endanger its very existence. The enemies of the state come from within (Kurds, secular Kemalists) and outside (Western imperialist powers, Zionists) (Taş 2020). When last year president Erdogan was speaking to the nation on the national August 30 Victory Day, he warned that the West is endangering the very future of the state:

“Turkey’s struggle for independence and future continues today as well. It is absolutely not a coincidence that those who seek to exclude us from the Eastern Mediterranean are the same invaders as the ones who attempted to invade our homeland a century ago” (Erdogan 2020).

The present study came about to decipher the perplexing vulnerability narratives of particularly powerful actors in international politics. It aimed to make knowable the motivations behind this unique mode of state- and warcraft.

This chapter first presents the research puzzle behind the dissertation. Second, I define the research questions addressed by the study. Third, I introduce the ontological security studies⁴ and explain why I use identity as an alternative currency to the realist-rationalist

⁴ Due to the growing number of International Relations studies employing the concept of ontological security in distinct ways (Steele 2017), in this dissertation I follow Steele’s practice of employing the term “ontological security studies” (e.g. 2021) in the descriptions of the diverse body of analytical and theoretical works on state identity processes.

readings of global politics. This is followed by the introduction of the securitisation concept which I use to trace how actors build on vulnerability narratives to gain special agency for offensive actions against the underdog. Fifth, I present my theoretical expectations about strong states war-time use of vulnerability narratives. Sixth, I explain the constructivist ontology of the dissertation. Seventh, I describe its interpretive methodology. Eighth, I discuss the role of dramaturgical analysis in the research. Then, I define the case selection and the comparative design of the study. Lastly, I outline the structure of the thesis.

1.2. Research questions

This dissertation aims to understand why secure and powerful actors employ narratives of vulnerability in their public communication at times of war?

The main research question is supplemented by secondary questions that were the key guiding force behind the process of collecting the evidence necessary to solve the dissertation's puzzle. I want to know: How do strong actors adopt vulnerability narratives during armed conflicts? Furthermore, to understand the role of context and the meaning-making processes (how specific human beings in particular times and locales make sense of their worlds)⁵ behind the strong state's claims of vulnerability, I ask how do political elites understand the role of state's vulnerability claims during armed conflicts?

The study stems from the observation that not only the weak but also strong participants of conflicts claim vulnerability in their self-descriptions. Which is the “potential for harm and trauma that can emerge in the absence of safety” (Beattie 2016: 229) a possibility of being “wounded, painfully transformed” (Hutchings 2013: 25). Why do powerful actors willingly aspire to a status that seemingly has negative consequences for its bearer? By claiming vulnerability, one is projecting a lack of agency, powerlessness (e.g.

⁵ Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 10.

Furedi 2006; McLaughlin 2012) and incapacity (Wisner et al. 2005: 11). Vulnerability is often associated with the state's weakness and inefficacy (Clark 2013: 35). Governments, when using this descriptor, 'admit' that they failed to provide their constituents with stability and security. This challenges their position as a security guarantor and violates the social contract that governmental power is organized upon.

Vulnerability is a universal human condition of all individuals. On the collective level, it is often associated with weakness and lack of agency (Wisner et al. 2005) and is considered to be an integral element of the sociopsychological infrastructure of the ethos of conflict (e.g. Bar-Tal, Halperin and de Rivera 2007; Elchereth 2006). However, the vulnerability in the political domain appears selectively and plays a peculiar role in statecraft. Its discursive presence in state identifications depends on and reflects the ongoing arbitration between the ideational and material realm. It has to balance both political and collective needs. Thus, often it does not accurately reflect the extent of the group's actual stress, uncertainty or victimization. In their implementation of vulnerability narratives, state actors are not simply reflecting the sentiment shared by their constituents.

Vulnerability is almost by definition an important identification for the weak and disenfranchised (Enns 2007, 2012). Vulnerable status plays a role in foreign affairs of poor, unstable and geopolitically precarious states (Kuperman and Crawford 2014). This practice does not come without costs. Elites, when using this descriptor, 'recognise' that they failed to provide their constituents with stability and security. This challenges their position as a security guarantor and undermines the state's status. Consequently, it is mostly the states that have 'no other choice' that include vulnerability in their narratives. If their operational capabilities are inadequate to deal with the challenge, the country may as well acknowledge its vulnerable status to try to capitalise from it. Since the collective's *modus vivendi* is defined by precarity, the weak actor can find it useful to recognise this identification and include it in

its *modus operandi*. After all vulnerability rhetoric has powerful meaning-making capabilities because it helps human beings to make sense of their world. Vulnerability provides society with explanations, moral justification, differentiation and superiority, it invigorates patriotism and international support. For a regime involved in an asymmetric conflict, a significantly weaker actor with limited tools at its disposal, vulnerability status may paradoxically be a useful attribute.

However, we know that the strong and powerful claim to be vulnerable too. Vulnerability and associated with it unpredictability, volatility, and precarity seem to be a form of identification incongruent with the standing of strong states. Why is it that the side that has the upper hand in the conflict implements narratives of the weak? How come the ones whose survival is not endangered behave in a way that can amplify the fears of their ingroup and decrease the morale of their soldiers?

We know multiple cases when it is the stronger side of the conflict that employs vulnerability or victim rhetoric (see Chapter 2). Nonetheless, this phenomenon, while being noticed by a broad range of scholars (e.g. Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Pratkanis 2009; Snyder 2010), have not been studied and conceptualized as a separate tool of statecraft. Namely, we lack knowledge of the role vulnerability narratives plays in strong states' governance. In particular, while we know that powerful states speak to a sense of collective vulnerability during armed conflicts, we do not know the motivations behind this practice. The conditions under which actors abstain or employ narratives of vulnerability have not been researched systematically and remain an uncharted practice of war-making.

Most importantly, the phenomenon of strong actors predicating their warcraft on vulnerability pronouncements is not only counterintuitive but foremost, cannot be accounted for by prominent theories of global politics. For realists, vulnerability means political failure and thus its employment by a strong and stable state ought to be treated as harmful behaviour

challenging the state's standing (e.g. Walt 1990). The practice also does not fit with deterrence theories (Schaub 2004), because vulnerability self-identifications challenge the very ability of the actor to restrain the enemy. While references to vulnerability may be beneficial for the state, they come also with significant costs (Clark 2013: 35). Consequently, they cannot be accounted for by rationalist and economic-based arguments. Lastly, this practice goes against the Needs-Based theory of conflict which generally ascribes expressions of vulnerability to the weaker belligerents (Shnabel and Nadler 2008; Shnabel et al. 2009; also: Herman 1992; Scheff 1994).

1.3. Ontological security

To better account for vulnerability self-identifications in interstate relations, I provide an alternative to largely instrumental readings of this phenomenon. Since such narratives are not simply employed by states to gain power, they have to be addressing the identity of the polity and its collective. The central claim of the dissertation is that powerful actors include vulnerability in their wartime public communication because it fulfils their need for ontological security. This argument reflects a broader theoretical assertion, that states' actions foremost fulfil their identity needs (e.g. Steele 2008; Mitzen 2006). The identity of a state is an unattainable goal, an aspiration to have a coherent story about the state and its environment (e.g. Abrams and Hogg 1990; Kinnval 2004: 748; see also Chapter 3). Consequently, states behaviour is not simply a calculating technique of power acquisition. Accentuating their vulnerability, strong actors poignantly illustrate, that physical security is not the only 'security' countries strive to have. In the constructivist framework of IR, ontological and physical securities are two distinct yet interrelated security needs of states (Huysmans 1998: 229). For Wendt, they are fundamental "basic interests" that motivate states for action (1994: 385).

The concept of ontological security has been used to account for actions states pursue in response to their identity needs (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005). Countries are highly social entities. They defend their positive self-perceptions (e.g. Mälksoo 2015) and aspire to be accepted by the international society (e.g. Steele 2007). They construct autobiographies that present their behaviour as coherent with their values (Subotić 2016). Thus, ontological security scholarship analyses states' anxieties about "their identities, about their status, and about their relationships with other international actors" (Subotić 2019: 10).

My understanding of ontological security is shaped by the sociology of trust (Misztal 2011, 2012). This perspective recognizes that vulnerability identifications do not necessarily have to lead to one's insecurity of self. Since constituents' fears and trust in the state are mediated by its strength, in the case of powerful actors, vulnerability narratives do not have to deteriorate public trust. Instead, vulnerability narratives are a source of trust since they reduce anxiety stemming from the conflict with a weaker opponent. They provide positive meaning and explanation to the offensive action. Paradoxically, by depicting structural uncertainty (Mitzen, Schweller, 2011) actor gains certitude for its operations.

1.4. Securitisation

Aside from the literature on ontological security, the theorising about powerful actors' vulnerability narrations is taking from the research on securitisation. Securitisation is of key interest to constructivist security studies and is understood as an action of the state to name certain issues security problems (Wæver 1995: 57-8). It is a form of politicisation through which threats are introduced, promoted and dismissed (1995). By designating a particular phenomenon as a source of threat, the state influences its constituents and aspires to gain authority to use its prerogatives against the challenge (1995: 54).

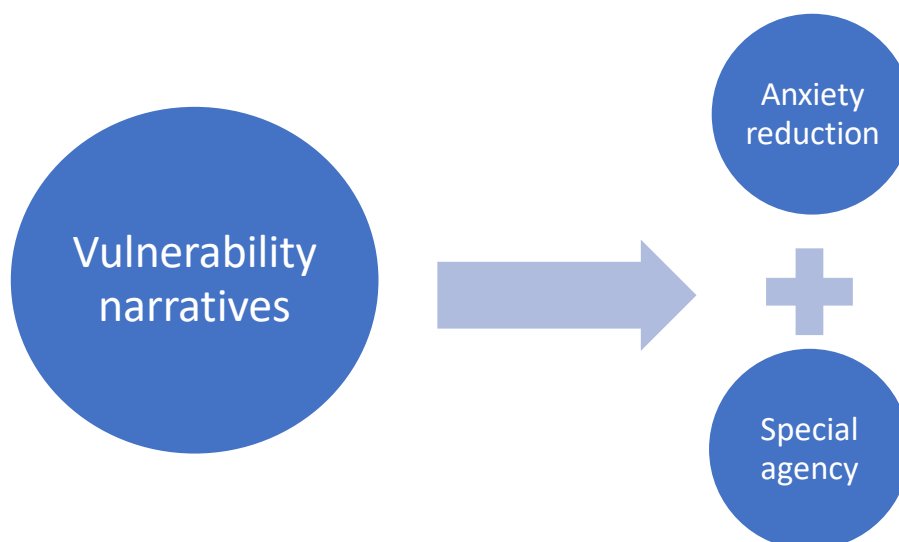
Reflecting the context of strong states' securitising use of vulnerability narratives, I employ Floyd's revised theory of securitisation (2007, 2010, 2016, 2019). This means that I

do not claim that the success of securitisation needs to be predicated on the audience accepting the state's security speech (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998: 25). Instead, securitisation happens when the actor changes its behaviour and justifies it by speaking about the threat (Floyd 2010: 53-53). My approach reflects the fact that the analysed 2014 OPE, and the 2003 invasion of Iraq are both cases of conspicuously successful securitisations. Meaning that by attacking, Israel and the UK did use "extraordinary measures" (e.g. Aradau 2004) and legitimised them by talking about their precarity, threat and vulnerability.

Secondly, I do not consider vulnerability narratives as a pragmatic, calculative tool of political enabling. Thus, I do not employ a negative normative reading of securitisation, which shapes critical security studies debates (e.g. Aradau and Van Munster 2007, 2009; Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998: 208-9; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2013). My approach simply reflects the character of the dissertation. Instead of seeking answers about the ethical status of this practice, I focus on understanding the reasons and functions it has for the state itself (see Chapter 3). I consider vulnerability-based securitisations as a form of identity claim. While vulnerability narratives have a clear instrumental dimension – the state derives from them agency – they speak to actor's collective self-perceptions. The threat is designated via the actor's own (real, fake or imagined) identification of vulnerability. Thus, I am deliberately abstaining from a priori interpreting it as a Hobbesian "political technology" (Bigo 2002: 65). Analysing the identity realm of state's politics, one has to be wary of making authoritative judgments about the morality or authenticity of their autobiographies (e.g. Lebow 2016). This research orientation allows me to uphold the constructivist character of the project and its interpretivist sensitivity.

1.5. The argument

I theorise that for the strong actors, war-time vulnerability narratives have two functions. One, they reduce anxiety about the actor's identity. Warfare against a weaker opponent erodes positive self-perceptions of the powerful state. By self-identifying as vulnerable, the country's action gains a principled meaning which supports its ontological security (security of identity). Second, vulnerability narratives provide the state with a special agency to do more. By presenting itself as vulnerable, the state securitises (designates as a source of threat) a weaker opponent to justify offensive action.



The functions of vulnerability narratives point out the resilience⁶ of identity. That state's ontological security does not have to be predicated on the status quo. But rather, that the safety of identity means foremost "the ability to cope with change" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 35).

⁶ The concept of resilience is increasingly employed across social sciences. While in ecology and economy it is most commonly used in reference to the structural capability to overcome change, I employ agent-based perspective which focuses on actor's ability to adapt to the changing environment in order to remain "fit for purpose" (Flockhart 2020: 216). This approach emphasizes the role of identity and actor's reflexivity about self in the processes supporting resilience of state.

1.6. The dissertation's theoretical foundations

Jackson warns social scientists not to put too tight theoretical shackles on their projects and perceiving social facts as a static given. He argues that: "... a good social-scientific account must preserve the role of human agency." Society is not an abstract concept external from individuals. Structures created by people are an ever-changing outcome of the social process, not a 'naturally occurring object' (Jackson 2006:14). The dissertation's theory meets Jackson suggestions. It does not take vulnerability as a societal given, but asks, what purpose vulnerability plays in society, and how it is implemented by the state.

The dissertation interlinks vulnerability with security studies. The ontological outlook of the study is grounded in a constructivist approach. Constructivism is not only one of the dominant schools of security research (Balzacq 2010), but most importantly, it is a theoretical perspective that most accurately illuminates and decodes vulnerability. Constructivism provides an invaluable toolbox, necessary to carve out a stand-alone theory of vulnerability. Further, it makes it possible to conceptualize vulnerability as a social identity used by states to convince the audience of its actions.

Wendt lists three core assumptions of constructivism. Firstly, states are an important unit of international relations research. Secondly, the social structures that animate the states are intersubjective and do not rely solely on material factors. Thirdly, social structures are responsible for the creation of state identities and interests. The role of collective identities for inter-state relations is perceived as more important than people's instincts, nature and ingroup aspirations (Wendt 1994: 385-386). For the purpose of the dissertation, I draw on the poststructuralist strand of constructivism. This approach is sceptical of positivist belief about the attainability of social science for objectivity and truth (Balzacq 2010: 58). McSweeney argues that to study the socio-political, we need to concentrate on the "production and reproduction of knowledge". This means that the primary goal of a researcher is not to

explain, but to understand (McSweeney 2004: 116). Consequently, the main focus of a constructivist should be the discourse. By studying it, we can try to understand how people produce and distribute meaning about actions (Balzacq 2010: 58). Lene Hansen concludes that poststructuralism means focus “...on the constitutive significance of representations of identity for formulating and debating foreign policies” (2006: 4). For Balzacq (2010) and McSweeney (2004), the growing interest in knowledge regimes marks a new sociological turn in the field of International Relations. However, putting aside the different epistemological debates within IR, and the accompanying labels, I implement a pragmatic approach to the research project. Since I conceptualize that vulnerability is a collective identity, I analyse the phenomenon through the sociological lens of social constructionism, which scrutinizes how groups and individuals establish and promote their self-image (McSweeney 2004: 69).

1.7. Methodology

While the dissertation’s focus on the role of vulnerability identifications in global politics reflects the author’s constructivist ontological outlook, to answer the study’s research question I use interpretive methodology. Since the phenomenon of strong states employing vulnerability narratives is surprising and counterintuitive, the key focus of the study was the meaning of this practice. I had to unpack what vulnerability narratives mean for Israel and the UK. Such research focus brought me to the interpretive research approach which looks at human meaning-making (Bevir and Blakely 2018: 9). Namely, the ways how actors make sense of their environment (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 10). Such research practice exposes constitutive causalities, meaning that it accounts for process through acquiring rich, contextual and trustworthy interpretation of practice (see Schwartz-Shea 2014). I particularly focus on performative qualities of vulnerability and thus in my work with constructivist

approaches to security I include dramaturgical analyses associated with symbolic interactionist sociology (see section Dramaturgy of vulnerability).

1.8. Case studies and research design

The dissertation looks at the British involvement in the Global War on Terror and the Israeli' conflict with the Palestinians. In the case of Israel, the study is based on the analysis of the 2014 OPE, a seven weeks long military conflict between Israel and the Hamas-ruled Gaza. Secondly, it investigates the UK's 2003 invasion of Iraq. Chosen actors despite being powerful, claimed vulnerability. Following the criteria of the interpretive epistemology (e.g. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014), I focused on appropriate information-rich cases in relation to the investigated phenomenon (Patton 2014). The choice of cases was systematic, contextualised and pragmatic. This strategy is systematic because it assumes comparing powerful actors involved in the same type of event (armed conflict) and sharing common qualities (both states being a parliamentary democracy, a highly globalised developed economy, having powerful military capabilities and identifying as members of "Western civilisation") (Porter 2018; Smootha 2002). Consequently, it examines whether the thesis' theoretical expectations⁷ hold across different cases (Sartori 1991). This allows me to investigate the politics of vulnerability in two separate settings and to explore how context influences the phenomenon. The systematic approach means also purposeful choice of cases - where the states are chosen based on their characteristics (e.g. Bevir and Blakely 2018; Patton 2014). This reflects my assumption that the political use of vulnerability narratives is context-dependent. That is why also I have limited the universe of potential cases to modern mediatized wars (see Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010). The selection of Israel's 2014 operation and the UK's 2003 invasion had also a pragmatic dimension – by limiting the comparison to

⁷ On the difference between interpretivist abductive development of theoretical expectations and positivist deductive hypothesizing see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 51; 101.

two cases I maximized the time needed to gain the access (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 69) to actors with local knowledge. Research purposefully limited to a detailed study of two conflicts allowed me to conduct prolonged fieldwork in both states and thus increased the trustworthiness of my findings (see Schwartz-Shea 2014: 131).

The interpretive research practice differed vis-a-vis the qualitative positivist inquiries. Instead of grounding my analysis on a set of *a priori* defined variables and deductively hypothesized relations, I followed the abductive mode of reasoning. This means that my theorising and concept development was happening also *in situ* - during the fieldwork. It was partially based on the observation and analysis of how the vulnerability narratives and practices associated with it, were actually present in the politics of Israel and the UK (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 49).

Public communication

The inquiry has been conducted over two overlapping research processes. To develop case-specific knowledge, I conducted an analysis of the actor's wartime public communication, secondary historical sources and audio-visual materials disseminated by states' authorities. The key part of the data corpus was 104 British and 131 Israeli texts that included state representative's communication.

The analysis of the war-time public communication has led to the provisional sense-making (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) about the strong states use of vulnerability narratives. It showed how and allowed me to theorise why vulnerability was self-identifying Israel and the UK.

First, I identified that both actors dramatized themselves as vulnerable. This finding translated into the framing of a key dissertation's theoretical expectation. Namely, that claiming vulnerability was necessary for Israel and the UK to legitimize the military confrontation with the weak enemy.

Secondly, the recognition of the performative dimension of strong states vulnerability narratives led to the development of a theory of this phenomenon (see The argument section). The fact that nuclear powers based their communication on vulnerability underlined the role of identity in this practice. Vulnerability narratives were not helping the states to address their operational shortcomings. Both Israel and the UK were technically capable of waging war against their much weaker opponents. However, their use of vulnerability narratives showed that actors aspired to dramatize themselves as insecure. This unique performance led me to theorise that politically, without claiming vulnerability these powerful actors could not go to war. It was a necessary ideational condition of their offensive policy. Analysis of public communication also exposed the security objectives behind the phenomenon. I theorised that vulnerability self-presentations allowed actors to pursue ontological security and to securitise the underdog. Lastly, it enabled me to do analytical groundwork into the resilience of identity.

Interviews

To examine my provisional sense-making and to develop the analysis further, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 38 Israeli and 32 British officials involved in crafting the state's depictions of the armed struggles. Their purpose was to investigate the meaning-making processes and the role of the context behind discourse 'production' in each case. Interviews were the dissertation's primary method of inquiry; their in-depth character enabled me to co-generate with the participants a nuanced, context-specific "thickly descriptive evidentiary data" (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 132; also Geertz 1973; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) of the processes leading to the employment of the vulnerability narratives by state actors. This allowed me to explore and assess in a 'bottom-up' manner the validity of its theoretical expectations. Namely, the evidence evaluating research anticipations is coming from the agents responsible for its construction.

- Provisional sense-making: analysis of public communication during 2014 Operation Protective Edge and the 2003 invasion of Iraq
- Tacit knowledge⁸: in-depth interviews with 70 state officials

In both cases, I paid attention to the states' self-representation during military conflicts but also in the weeks leading up to the wars.

This research design enabled me to make trustworthy knowledge claims (see Schwartz-Shea 2014) about the war-time employment of vulnerability narratives by the strong states. The study drew on different sources of data (a diverse group of Israeli/British officials, range of textual and audio-visual data), points of observation (two conflicts) and methods of data generation (interviews, documents). This allowed me to co-generate evidence that mapped the intertextuality of vulnerability narratives across various contexts (2014).

Dramaturgy of vulnerability

Note about the role the dramaturgical metaphor plays in my inquiry. The discovery of the importance of the performative dimension of vulnerability narratives came about through the analysis of Israel's and the UK's war-time public communication. This finding led me to use the metaphor of life as a theatre and look at the performative elements of the state's policies (Goffman 1978; Ringmar 2016, 2019). I contend that narratives of vulnerability are an element of a dialectical relationship between the actor (state) and social, cultural constraints (domestic and international audiences) on performative action. I assume that countries are performers playing for the audience (Alexander 2011; Schimmelfennig 2002).

⁸ See Polanyi 1966.

Their goal is to convey a particular impression to the audience and to safeguard the state's positive status.

The dissertation employs lenses of dramaturgical analysis to explore the role vulnerability narratives play in states' behaviour. Dramaturgy is an analytical marker. It supports the empirical inquiry of vulnerability politics by identifying what counts as the study's evidence. Namely, all forms of states' activity that are used to instil in others the impression about country's vulnerability.

Focusing on the state's presentation of self to empirically 'capture' state's vulnerability narratives, reflects also the dissertation's general focus on the role identity plays in states behaviour. It is not ruled out that states' actions are stemming from the identification of vulnerability. However, vulnerability is not theorised as the states' identity. While it is argued that vulnerability narratives fulfil the ideational needs of the group, the dissertation is not making claims about the accuracy of this self-identification. The thesis does not conclude whether the narratives are an accurate description of the reality but merely that they suit the ontological needs of states. Vulnerability narratives are conceptualised as a form of identity claim. They are subjective, self-referential expressions of desires, not 'objective' signifiers of true needs or perceptions.

Building on the dramaturgy allowed me to better understand the seeming divergence between strong states situatedness and their self-identification. Namely, that powerful nuclear weapon-wielding states, during the fight with much weaker enemy based their public communication on vulnerability narratives. Vulnerability narratives addressed Israel's and UK's ideational needs, thus they were much more than an exercise in autobiographical storytelling. As a performance, they were employed to shape how people perceive strong states' standing. This perspective allows recognizing the central role of the audience in strong states vulnerability self-identifications. It accentuates that narratives of vulnerability were not

solely “the process of communicating the story” (Shenhav 2015: 19) but a medium for justification of state actions.

The aspiration to instil an impression of vulnerability reflects also that claiming vulnerability was necessary for both strong states to legitimise the conflict with the underdog. Since Israel and the UK were so powerful, they had to dramatize their security. It was not enough for them to articulate vulnerability, they had to ‘play it out’ to try to change how they are defined (Goffman 1978: 6). Consequently, in the dissertation, the concept of ‘dramaturgy’ functions as a marker of the security objectives behind vulnerability narratives. It allows to signpost the fact that claims of vulnerability were addressing ideational (ontological security) and material realm (securitisation). Namely, that by dramatizing the state’s self-perception through vulnerability narratives, Israel and the UK were designating their weak enemies as a source of threat.

1.9. Thesis structure

The dissertation is divided into ten chapters. This chapter (1) serves as an introduction and a general outline of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the ongoing debates about the role vulnerability plays in society and state politics. It offers a rationale for the dissertation by showing that key theories of conflict are insufficient in answering the puzzle of strong states’ war-time vulnerability narratives. Chapter 3 gives a theoretical framework for the study of the strong state’s practice of war-time employment of vulnerability narratives. It discusses the role of identity as a key analytical concept behind the thesis. It explains the role of the concept of ontological security in the study of the state’s seemingly irrational behaviour. Drawing on the sociology of trust I propose that this practice allows reducing anxiety about the actor’s identity. Furthermore, employing the concept of securitisation I argue that it provides the actor with a special agency to designate the weaker

enemy as a source of threat. Lastly, I propose that the state's use of vulnerability narratives allows us to account for the resilience of identity. This research avenue recognizes that states adapt their autobiographies to their evolving behaviour and ideational needs. Furthermore, that the state's identity can be protected from criticisms of its actions. Chapter 4 discusses the role of interpretive methodology in the dissertation's research orientation. It outlines the comparative design and dissertation's casing. I introduce the two-part research design of the study and discuss how analysis of the state's public communication has been further studied through semi-structured in-depth interviews with states' officials. I explain the role of dramaturgical analysis in the empirical study of vulnerability narratives and ontological security. Lastly, I define the tools I use to analyse and organize the material. Chapters 5 to 7 form the centre of the thesis, the case studies of Israel's 2014 OPE and the UK's participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Each country is first profiled and then analysed following the research process established in chapter 4. Chapter 9 presents the findings, compares each case studies, provides a detailed outline of the thesis' contributions, discusses the limitations of the research and offers a conclusion to the study.

2. The politics of vulnerability

2.1. Introduction

- [The postmodern condition is] a radical acceptance of vulnerability – in 1990 Gayatri Spivak proclaimed during a discussion for the British Channel 4 Voices series (Spivak 1990: 18). Today her words seem even more fitting than three decades ago. Vulnerability (real or imagined) is a midwife of contemporary politics. It is a crucial reference for the president of the USA Donald Trump (“They’re taking your jobs”), the environmental activist Greta Thunberg (“I want you to panic”) and NATO’s secretary general Jens Stoltenberg (“China is coming ever closer to Europe’s doorstep”).⁹ Surprisingly, it is vulnerability – a concept describing material or symbolic (Spini, Elcheroth and Fasel 2008: 922) liability to harm (Clark 2013: 3) of an individual or a collective – that permeates speeches of populists, activists and liberal politicians alike. Talking about the pervasiveness of the politics of vulnerability, McLaughlin proposes: “Today a dominant political slogan could be said to be ‘Left and Right, Unite and Fright’” (2012: 112).

Our vulnerabilities are a common referent of states’ actions. They are used to advocate for new domestic and foreign policies. They may serve as a platform on which nations go to war. When in 2002 US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was trying to convince journalists that the Iraqi regime has weapons of mass destruction, he aimed directly at the American vulnerabilities by evoking the threat of the ‘unknown unknowns’ which are issues “we do not know we do not know”(Graham 2014).

In this chapter, I provide an outline of the processes that have led to the contemporary prominence of vulnerability and discuss the current state of knowledge of politics of vulnerability. I first talk about the challenge of employing vulnerability as a research concept

⁹ Blake 2014; Thunberg 2019; Deutsche Welle 2020.

and explain how I employ identity as an analytical concept allowing me to understand the vulnerability narratives of strong states. Second, I outline a common perspective that associates vulnerability with weakness. I suggest that the practice of strong states' employment of vulnerability self-identification challenges this view. Third, I discuss the historical currents that have led to the change of the role vulnerability plays in society. Fourth, I show that the practice of strong states identifying as vulnerable has been given little attention across social sciences. Drawing on social psychology, I present how vulnerability status can be a source of agency. This allows me to propose a novel analytical approach to vulnerability self-identifications that considers it as a unique tool of statecraft of particular importance during times of conflict. Fifth, I explain how in the political context, one's vulnerability needs external validation. I introduce narrative as a foundational practice allowing states to make their claims of vulnerability known. Sixth, I show that historically, war-time vulnerability narratives were – depending on the context – both used or avoided by strong and weak states. Consequently, I am arguing that it is hard to locate a simple mechanism behind the employment of this identification. Lastly, I suggest that the practice of strong states' war-time employment of vulnerability narratives goes against not only our intuition. I show that also prominent conflict studies' theories do not provide satisfactory answers about this puzzling practice.

2.2. Vulnerability, identity, and narratives

Vulnerability defined as the “potential for harm and trauma that can emerge in the absence of safety,” (Beattie 2016: 229) a possibility of being “wounded, painfully transformed” (Hutchings 2013: 25) is a broad category. Since the fragility of life predicates our inherent and universal vulnerability, being vulnerable is considered to be a core human condition (Clark 2013: 3). Today vulnerability seems to be an integral element of the lexicon

of modernity. Paradoxically, the omnipresence of the vulnerable subject, as well as an instinctive easiness with which we can identify our own vulnerabilities, makes us ‘take vulnerability for granted’. We too often brush over the socio-political implications of the vulnerable status. We rarely question the basis on which actors claim to be vulnerable. We treat vulnerability as a designation of virtue (Green 2007). Vulnerability and its politics seem to be so foundational to our daily experiences that we often do not even explicate what do we mean when we introduce this category.¹⁰ An illustrative example of such oversight is the case of “The Vulnerability of Empire” by Kupchan (1994). This voluminous study of the role of national vulnerability in state behaviour integrates a multiplicity of cognitive and systemic variables, and at the same time, it fails to provide any definition of vulnerability itself.

Since vulnerability is defined so broadly, it is challenging to rigorously use it in research. The situation is further complicated by the conflation of vulnerability with victimisation and victimhood in our vernacular.¹¹ In her seminal work on the role of vulnerability in social interactions, Brown talks about the trouble of delineating the contours of the concept. Using the grounded theory method (Glaser and Staruss 1967) in a large-scale in-depth interview study, she shows that for people vulnerability may for example mean

¹⁰ This problem is recognized by Alwang, Siegel and Jorgensen (2001); by Brooks (2003) and Villagrán De León (2006) who show that in the literature the term is used in various, sometimes unclear or inconsistent ways.

¹¹ Since we understand vulnerability as a form of “weakness, susceptibility to harm, and violability” (Cunniff Gilson 2016: 71), in our everyday communication vulnerability and victimisation/victimhood are often conflated. However, it is important to make a distinction between the two. While victimisation refers to an act of being victimised and victimhood describes a form of social belief of being a victim (e.g. Bar-Tal 1998), vulnerability is a condition (real or imagined) of contingency. Naturally, being susceptible to becoming victimised means that vulnerability is a closely related concept with the victimisation/victimhood. However, the contingency, namely the fact that something bad did not happen yet is what distinguishes one from another. After all, while all victims were vulnerable to harm, not all vulnerable actors will become victims. While there is a clear semantic distinction between victimised and vulnerable actor, in political debates those two are often used interchangeably. Victimhood or claims of victimhood (Markiewicz and Sharvit 2021) together with vulnerability are a common element of the same vernacular of politics of fear (Furedi 2004; 2007). The experience of being victimised in past is often used in political debates as a justification for nation’s vulnerable status. This overlap is visible in the public communication quoted in this dissertation and in the interviews with state officials. However, for the purpose of the thesis I decided to focus on vulnerability since it particularly well captures the character of the public communication I was analysing. Namely, warnings about the danger of being hurt in the future. Such identification – being a broader designate - can be much easier claimed by strong actors.

“Getting fired” as well as “Getting promoted and not knowing if I’m going to succeed” (Brown 2012: 35-37). In research, our understanding of vulnerability is affected by our philosophical views, theoretical underpinnings and methodological affiliations (not to mention our personal taste). This traditionally leads to two radically different understandings of vulnerability. On one hand, we may see it as a given, a “self-defining or objectively pre-existing” condition that constitutes individuals/collectives regardless of the broader social context (Clark 2013: 4). This approach is especially pervasive in social care, social work and criminology (e.g. Killias and Clerici 2000; McLaughlin 2012: 118-127). On the other hand, vulnerability is seen not as an empirical descriptive but as a construct that reflects our social context (Clark 2013: 6). Such understanding is important for poststructural tradition (see Furedi 2004).

This dissertation does not take a part in this ‘grand debate’. Focusing on the political employment of vulnerability, I have no ambition to arbitrate the constitutive essence of the concept. Vulnerability in the context of state actions and global politics is considered to be an element of the ongoing process of the collective identification of the group.¹² This research does not make truth claims but knowledge claims (see Yanow 2014). I avoid assuming whether the vulnerability of nations is real or not, shared, produced, manipulated or stemming from the core of the collective identifications.

To theorise about states’ employment of vulnerability, the dissertation uses the concept of identity. Identity is the crucial analytical concept of the thesis and a category that locates it within the constructivist approach to the study of International Relations (IR). Vulnerability is understood as an integral element of the ongoing processes of the construction of political identifications.¹³ Its usage cannot be understood via the realist-

¹² Links between vulnerability and identity in international politics are also pointed out by Steele (2013), Gammon (2013) and Nakano (2013).

¹³ More on the link between vulnerability, identity and global politics see Beattie and Schick (2013: 11-12) and Nakano (2013).

rational theories of IR. As such this identification is not solely a strategic or manipulative technique employed by the state pragmatically to achieve its goals or maximise its power. It is rather a construct of society, an everchanging process in the making (Wendt 1994).

The dissertation steps away from IR perspectives that see national and collective identities as coherent ‘units’ that explain states’ actions (e.g. Kier 1997). Instead of understanding them as the unifying “capacity to keep a particular narrative going” (Giddens 1991: 54), a behavioural compass (Erikson 1959, 1968) or a constructed “we-ness” of a state (Williams 2003: 518), the dissertation conceptualizes states’ identity as a declarative process, a goal, an aspiration to build a coherent narrative about state and its surroundings. Identities are porous, fragmented, and ever-changing (e.g. McSweeney 2004; Lebow 2013, 2012, 2016; Wendt 1994). Consequently, the dissertation draws on Tajfel and Turner work (1979, 1986) on collective/social identity¹⁴ and accentuates the contextual, intersubjective and performative characteristics of collective identifications.

The study differs from many constructivist analyses of identity, where the researcher takes identity as a main explanatory concept of state behaviours. Instead, the dissertation is first looking at behaviour – employment of vulnerability in public communication - and 'goes back' to the identity by trying to understand why and how vulnerability may perpetuate the identity of the state. Since identifications are constantly in the making, the research is looking at how people are ‘invited to identify’¹⁵ with vulnerability by the state. The thesis focuses on vulnerability narratives which are a rhetorical device that describes the state as a vulnerable actor. Vulnerability narratives are conceptualised as an identity claim. They are one of many competing visions of who we are (Lebow 2012). Vulnerability narratives are constantly contested, and cannot be taken as an objective epistemological artefact. Thus, they cannot be

¹⁴ Terms ‘collective identity’ and ‘social identity’ in literature are often used interchangeably (e.g. Wendt 1994).

¹⁵ Expression taken from Enns (2007: 2).

treated as a unifying stable collective 'oneness' of the state. Consequently, the dissertation does not try to answer whether societies identify as vulnerable. It avoids assuming that particular behaviours or narratives of states stem from their identity. Instead, it asks what the consequences of those narratives are, and what are their ideational and material functions?

2.3. Vulnerability as weakness

What seems a dominating approach in popular culture, media, as well as in academia is the belief that vulnerability is something bad (e.g. Furedi 2004), a synonym to weakness (Brown 2012; Gilson 2014). Shildrick claims that the whole tradition of Western epistemology shares a disdain for the vulnerable:

“vulnerability is figured as a shortcoming, an impending failure both of form and function (...) usually vulnerability is feared as a condition of both mind and body, an ontological as well as physical state, an embodied being in which those familiar mind/body distinctions enacted by post-Enlightenment thought are suspended” (2000: 217).

For Takacs, popular culture, especially TV shows, are a form of therapy or cognitive distancing from our daily vulnerability (2015: 54). Hagelin argues that American iconography equates vulnerability with negative perceptions of femininity (2013). Russell-Beattie and Schick see Enlightenment and Rationalism as epistemics that reduced vulnerability to a societal plight, a problem that needs to be systematically eradicated (2013). Nussbaum traces our modern disdain for the vulnerable to Platonic thought and the Stoics (2001).

This understanding of the vulnerable subject makes it harder to account for the political function of this identification. Disciplines of social sciences that traditionally were more interested in accounting for the vulnerable – social work and criminology (e.g. Hale 1996; Killias 1990; Killias and Clerici 2000), gender (e.g. MacKenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2013) and environmental studies (e.g. Frumkin et al. 2008; Gemenne et al. 2014) – are not

particularly interested in the vulnerability of strong and powerful. Reflecting their disciplinary positions, normative and ethical values, vulnerability is foremost understood as a condition of a group or individual that ought to be mitigated.

Also, the field of International Relations does not offer clear answers to why would strong political actors aspire to be seen as vulnerable. Vulnerability in the study of global politics is largely contrasted with power, strength and agency. In neoliberal as well as constructivist approaches, vulnerability is considered to be a sign of political interdependence (Keohane and Nye 1977; Wendt 1999). In the structuralist paradigm, vulnerability can only be understood as an obstacle to the collective's need for stability and predictability (e.g. Walt 1990) that leads to the state's imprudent and catastrophic behaviour (Kupchan 1994). Drawing on Carr, Bull, Morghentau and Waltzer; Clark concludes that the studies of global politics are based on an implicit assumption that: "vulnerability is inherently associated with weakness, or lack of capability" (2013: 35).

Consequently, it can be concluded that vulnerability has been predominantly studied as a condition, a social ill or a political problem that ought to be addressed. This scholarship often had a normative or problem-solving dimension. While it offered an invaluable and diverse contribution to the study of vulnerability, it did not conceptualise vulnerability as a practice for political agency. At the same time, today the identifications of vulnerability are omnipresent and ought to not be treated as a referent used only by weak and precarious actors.

There is a need to acknowledge that over the last decades, our understanding of the vulnerable subject has significantly shifted. Vulnerability received significant attention and cultural gravitas. This speaks to its gradual proliferation into the public sphere. The fact that vulnerability – as a form of identification – is now employed by powerful states is an ultimate confirmation that vulnerability must serve some important function in our political climate. If

the strong and mighty wilfully base their identifications on vulnerability, scholars of international relations have to ask why?

2.4. Vulnerable times

Like any far-reaching referent, vulnerability is a construct constantly redefined by society. Vulnerability is context-dependent, subjective and controversial. As a form of social status, it is political and divisive. There is no vulnerable subject in the realm of the public without external validation. Individuals suffering from the same ills not always are equally treated. No vulnerable actor was ever ‘universally’ recognized, equally embraced by everyone and pitied. However, in the last few decades, one thing about vulnerable subjects have changed. Their existence and importance became broadly accepted. Before trying to understand why strong states fund their wartime identity on vulnerability, it is important to take a broader perspective on the role vulnerability plays in our times. In the passages that follow, I will discuss the historicity of the politics of vulnerability. This will allow us to better understand the current socio-cultural context of states’ behaviour and recognise their acts not only as a response to ideational needs of the collective but also as a phenomenon reflecting wider changes in the global society.

According to McLaughlin, we live in an era of inherent vulnerability which has eroded the optimistic outlook of the West. We stopped expecting that better times are coming: “Present day society is no longer primarily concerned with attaining something good but with preventing the worst” (2012: 112). Visions of the bitter end are omnipresent. For the first time since the end of the Cold War dystopian, pessimistic prognosis, a predilection for the unease, fascination with the aesthetics of apocalypse, are entering the mainstream as a key motif of pop-culture and politics (e.g. Demers 2015). Our despairing mindset expresses itself in the resurgence of the illiberal policies (Elchardus and Spruyt 2016), minimalistic music

(Jones2014), ‘banksy’esque’ street art, alarmistic environmental activism (Nugent 2019), idealisation of the past (Bauman 2017), the come-back of the antiutopian visions of the future (McSweeney and Joy 2019), the growing popularity of post-structuralist interpretations of modernity (Dean and Villadsen 2016), campus culture wars (Campbell and Manning 2014, 2016, 2018) etc. While this zeitgeist is reflecting processes and events that are relatively new – such as global warming, the financial crisis of 2008, 9/11 attacks, austerity policies, Covid pandemic – its roots are deep-seated.

The fact that today we spend so much time and resources to redress past and prevent future victimisation (Enns 2012), is in itself a sign of proliferation in empathetic feeling (Singer 1983). Pinker sees the root of this process in ‘humanitarian revolution’ – a process of a gradual decline of violence since the 18th century (2011). For Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, recognition of the vulnerable subject gained momentum after the Holocaust (2009). With the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “The international community began creating covenants that would protect and advance people’s rights and shield them from victimization”(Elias 1986: 18).

Post-WWII humanitarianism brought to the public realm influential advocates for the different disenfranchised groups. The civil rights movement opened our eyes to the problem of racial discrimination, second-wave feminists defended women’s right to pursue their dreams,¹⁶ the LGBT activists fought back against discrimination, and the children rights movement revolutionized the way we take care of our offspring. And while these developments gradually decreased discrimination and intergroup inequality, simultaneously they elevated societal sensitivity towards the remaining maltreatment (Campbell and Manning 2014, 2018).

¹⁶ Not only basic equality and recognition as their predecessors.

With the growing popularity of psychology, the vulnerability was not only applied along the inter-group lines but became a key theme of our own self-reflective analysis. Illouz (2008) and Furedi (Fear 2004, 2007) believe that vulnerability dominated our notions of identity via therapeutic culture. Fassin and Rechtman echo this, arguing that the “Civil Rights Revolution” was built on the acceptance of trauma as a respectable moral category (2009). With the understanding of the lasting role of negative experiences, we gained an insight into the disturbing fragility of our emotional wellbeing. It is somewhat paradoxical, but with the gradual recognition of different forms of oppression, society not only elevated the vulnerable but also its own anxieties regarding the vulnerability of existence: “Until recent times, Western cultures were preoccupied with the threat of nuclear war. Today we are simply encouraged to regard fear as our default response to life itself” (Furedi 2006: ix).

Modern life and the postmodern self

Vulnerability is a key descriptor of our times. Its predominance captures the inherent contradictions and distortions generated by two orders: the modern comforts of life and the postmodern understanding of self.

Prediction and control are crucial elements of the modern era (Borgmann 1992). Our urge to regulate is led by a false belief that we have obtained tools that can measure uncertainty (Taleb 2007 loc: 385). Our discourse about the future revolves around “the vocables of prognoses, projections, extrapolations, scenarios, models, programs, stimulations, and incentives” (Borgmann 1992: 2). The industrial and digital revolution, miracles of modern medicine - all helped us to minimize threats, to control and even re-shape our environment. We live longer and in better conditions than any of our ancestors. We distance ourselves from the surroundings and try to analyse the world through the prism of rationality and objectivity. We invested vast resources to banish the risk of ever again becoming

vulnerable. All to no avail. Since vulnerability still undermines our controllable and compartmentalized ‘predictability’, it became the biggest enemy of modernity. Wars, terrorism, natural disasters, sickness, cannot be foreseen. They shatter our plans and undermine the vision of a calculated world (Furedi 2007).

Vulnerability is fostered by our fixation with unattainable predictability, but it would never become so central without the postmodern triumph of individualism. Enns rightfully points out that one of the major themes of poststructural and postmodern philosophy is its critique of the totalitarian and the embrace of the individual. In this perspective, the spectre of foundationalism is perceived as posing danger to everything that is different (2012: 21-22). To prevent the elimination of individuality, the “other” was idealized and embraced by intellectuals. Vulnerability became one of the central objects of research for academics. Gender studies, feminism, colonial studies, culture studies, but also influential schools within political science and law, all focused their attention on the disenfranchised.

According to Campbell and Manning, individualism, expanding definitions of harm and the fixation on vulnerability (to name a few) are leading to an emergence of a new social code of conduct (2014, 2016, 2018). We are changing the way we handle grievances. Nowadays, when we find ourselves in a precarious state, to address the problem we seldom rely solely on our family, ethnic group or neighbours. Before, communities often addressed the source of the trouble in a confrontational mode. Today we instead look for solutions at external institutions. We address our predicament through administrative authority, police, NGOs, media or courts. The mood of our times is shifting towards the Culture of Victimhood: “People are intolerant of insults, even if unintentional (...) Domination is the main form of deviance, and victimization main form of attracting sympathy, so rather than emphasize either their strength or inner worth, the aggrieved emphasize their oppression and social marginalization” (Campbell and Manning 2014: 715).

The postmodern dogma states that vulnerability is based on one's own perception of being threatened. This outlook has partially freed the term of external evaluation. Consequently, this has led to a perverse appropriation of vulnerability. Without clear referential, vulnerability is often used unjustifiably. But the matter is more intricate – as Baudrillard points out: “Someone who simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms”. Such simulated vulnerability “threatens the difference between "true" and "false", between "real" and "imaginary" (1988: 168).

2.5. The politics of vulnerability

The ongoing march of vulnerability translates into a new socio-political currency. Today, thanks to membership in the vulnerable class people win judicial fights, family quarrels and gain political support. In his foundational work on the epistemology of history, Koselleck (2002) links the experience and heritage of vulnerability and victimisation with political strength, innovativeness and civilizational tenacity. The vulnerable of our era is not a passive character from a Greek tragedy governed by “The ills given by the Gods” and the “necessity that cannot be resisted” (Agard 1933:117). Thanks to the broad social recognition of the vulnerable status, today it can be used as a tool of political advancement.

The concept of the vulnerable is embedded in dichotomy. Partiality is the kernel of vulnerable relations. If there is a vulnerable actor, there must be an offender. The high status of the vulnerable, surely lowers the position of the actors responsible for this unease. This particularity makes vulnerability so useful in the political realm. Politics understood as a distribution of power (Dahl 1976) inevitably rests upon “ultimate distinctions” of friend/enemy relations (Schmitt 2007: 26). The vulnerability can serve as an antecedent that unveils or stimulates this divisiveness. Manichaeic narratives depicting the ingroup as

endangered by external factors are purposely incorporated by the politicians to galvanize society.

The vulnerability was always important for statecraft. One of the first to link the existential unease with the political was Plato. He perceived it as a threat to the stability of society and wanted to cast it out. He postulated to ban poets from the Republic due to the fact they were responsible for fearmongering, disruption and posed a challenge to the public authority (Butler 2009: 40). Thomas Hobbes turned Plato's argument on its head and described vulnerability, fear and anxiety of people as a decisive tool for state officials: "The less they dare (...) the better it is both for the commonwealth and for themselves (1969: 45)." Similarly, Mencken saw vulnerability as a useful political technique: "The whole aim of practical politics is to keep the population alarmed (...) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins" (1998: 19).

Today it seems that it is impossible to win elections without addressing voter's vulnerability. A case in point was the 2016 presidential campaign in the USA. Donald Trump, the Republican's party candidate incorporated vulnerability as a crucial motivating frame of his agenda (see e.g. Rucker 2019). To alarm and soothe Americans he effectively employed dichotomous framings of vulnerability. Firstly, he underlined how his presidency would bring stability and safety to American citizens. Trump vowed to destroy ISIS, "ease tensions in the world" and "achieve a stable, peaceful world with less conflict and more common ground." At the same time, he stoked voters' fears and made them the kernel of his argument:

"The attacks on our police, and the terrorism in our cities, threaten our very way of life. Any politician who does not grasp this danger is not fit to lead our country. Americans watching this address tonight have seen the recent images of violence in our streets and the chaos in our communities. Many have witnessed this violence personally; some have even been its victims" (Trump 2016a).

Trump's America was a vulnerable underdog. Torn apart by internal instabilities, but most importantly, endangered by external forces such as immigration, Iran's nuclear program or China's growing economy. In order to address the threats, Trump promised to isolate the country from the rest of the world. His main campaign proposition was stopping the wave of immigration by building an "impenetrable physical wall on the southern border" (Trump 2016b). The subsequent election of Trump for the presidency proved that gloom and doom warnings can be used as a powerful electoral motivator (Ball 2016; Enders and Armaly 2021).

Reinterpreting vulnerability

Across disciplinary boundaries, social scientists started recognising the new role vulnerability plays in society. On one hand, there is a robust stream of scholarship (mostly feminist philosophy) that tries to destigmatize vulnerability. It is argued that acceptance of vulnerability as a key constitutive foundation of our existence has generative consequences. In these readings, vulnerability ought to be reconceptualised as a source of emancipation and political resistance (Butler et al. 2016), Glison links it with empathy (2014) and Fineman and Gearar consider it as a chance for a new ethical foundation of politics (2013).

On the other hand, a growing number of scholars warn us against the idealisation of the politics of vulnerability. Cole believes that we should be more careful when assessing the role vulnerability plays in modern society (2016). Illouz's sociological inquiry into the media empire of Oprah Winfrey talks about the commodification of suffering in popular culture (2003). Enns' important study of victimhood, warns that we too rarely question moral authority we grant to the groups expressing their precarity (2012). Furthermore, we rarely consider the possibility that the 'underdog' is also capable of oppression and manipulation for its own good (2021: 23-24). Also, Nussbaum is wary of the retributive use of trauma and victimisation (2016, 2020). Žižek reasons that human suffering and precarity may be

monetized by the powerful actors as a pretext for use of force (2010). Schulman goes even further and sees the ‘inflated’ accusations of harm as a universal tool of oppression used by the powerful political (e.g. Israel) and social actors (e.g. bullies) to avoid accountability (2016).

Vulnerability, agency and statecraft

Recently also the discipline of International Relations has offered innovative readings of the politics of vulnerability. Clark’s work exposes international society’s role in both – causing and also politicising - vulnerabilities. He argues that since “we cannot regard vulnerability entirely as some empirically pre-existing state of affairs, abstracted from society’s norms and rule” (2013: 23) it is our global responsibility to deal with people’s vulnerabilities. In a similar vein, Russell-Beattie’s and Schick’s seminal volume accentuates the socially constructed nature of vulnerability. The authors claim that the studies of global politics have marginalised the importance of vulnerability for the political. They see a possibility of change in global politics through the emancipation of the precarious (2013: 3). Some of its contributors (e.g. Hutchings 2013; Michel 2013; Schick 2013) - in line with feminist readings of vulnerability – consider positive outcomes stemming from the recognition of vulnerability.

My work speaks to and contributes to the new constructivist readings of this concept within the field of International Relations. It responds to Russell-Beattie and Schick’s call to provide meaningful ways of engagement (in both international relations and political studies) with vulnerability and insecurity (2013: 18). Namely, a treatment of contingency and human suffering that does not lead to a “reductivist approach to international ethics that adheres to one-dimensional stories about suffering, security and the good life” (2013: 9) but instead accounts for the possibility of “reconfigured vulnerability (...) as an inalienable condition of

becoming.” (Shildrick 2000: 226). It helps us to step back from simplifying binaries “that set health against illness, conformity against disparity, the perfect against the imperfect, the self against the other” (Shildrick 2000: 223) and recognize that vulnerability can be used as a tool of critical redrawing of the political.

At the same time, I am not using vulnerability as a tool of moral evaluation of politics. While this new scholarship has salient normative implications for the study of international relations, it does not account for the Janus-faced political functions of vulnerability. Abstracting from the ethical dimension of the vulnerable condition, vulnerability as a form of identification may be a form of statecraft. This departure in research focus draws from sociopsychological debates on individual and group-level functions of vulnerability self-identifications. I use this scholarship as a foundation for a nuanced reading of the politics of vulnerability. It allows me to interpret vulnerability narratives of strong states as a unique tool of statecraft.

Experimental psychology shows that in the interpersonal context vulnerability identification is double-sided. On one hand, it confirms our instinctive fear of vulnerability. People generally avoid and dislike exposing their vulnerability (Gromet and Pronin 2009). Exposing our vulnerability to others may lead to negative evaluations of our character and competence (Caughlin et al. 2005; Rosenfeld 1979). In this context, the vulnerability can have negative material as well as emotional ramifications:

“Because showing vulnerability is, by definition, a risky endeavor, it can, of course, come at a cost—literally, in some cases. For instance, individuals might fear that admitting a mistake to their boss might cost them a promotion or even result in termination of their contract” (Bruck, Scholl and Bless 2018: 193).

On the other hand, while claiming vulnerability may at times be detrimental, its societal role is actually more complex. As an identification, it may be beneficial. Sociopsychological studies indicate that people may find vulnerability admirable. Brown argues that claiming vulnerability improves our interpersonal relationships. In her opinion, it

is a common mistake to associate vulnerability with weakness (2012). Recognition of one's transgressions can help the offender to be accepted, forgiven and more positively evaluated (Bachman and Guerrero 2006; Ohbuchi, Kameda and Agarie 1989; Scher and Darley 1997). A series of studies conducted by Bruk, Scholl and Bless (2018) question the popular fear of showing one's vulnerability. They indicate that vulnerability does not necessarily have to be interpreted by others as a weakness. Instead, it may be intentionally used by the actor to improve their standing.

Importantly, the reception of vulnerability is contextual. Aronson's experiment (1966) shows that people's reception of others' vulnerability is dependent on our broader views about the person. Participants of the study had to listen to recordings of contestants for the student quiz show. Some contestants were poised for victory. They correctly answered most of the asked questions. The others answered only a few questions. At the end of the recording, all contestants were apologizing for spilling coffee. The blunder of the contestants was interpreted in two ways. The perception of victorious and confident contestants was improved by their 'humanizing' vulnerability, while the mediocre competitors' attractiveness suffered from their 'embarrassing' vulnerability. This brings up to our attention the fact that vulnerability is a double-edged sword. While we do associate it with a debilitating condition, lack of agency and precarity, vulnerability – depending on the context, and the standing of the actor that claims it - may be used as a transformative tool. Actors that claim their vulnerability via vulnerability narratives may improve their image, boost support for their aims as well as enhance their attractiveness.

The political agency of vulnerability identifications is particularly well portrayed by its prominence in conflicts. Both conflict studies, as well as social psychology, consider vulnerability as an important referent used by belligerents. After all, it is loss aversion that is the primary motivator of our behaviour (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and perceived

threats are a key motivator of inter-group relations (e.g. Huddy et al. 2005; Jacobson and Bar-Tal 1995). Consequently, vulnerability worldviews may play a key conflict-supportive role (Elceroth 2006; Spini et al. 2008). Eidelson and Eidelson consider vulnerability as one of five core beliefs driving conflicts and argue that perceptions of vulnerability may lead to anxiety and social mobilisation since: “individuals governed by an exaggerated sense of their own vulnerability often tend to overestimate the risks they are facing” (2003: 186). For Lake and Rothchild vulnerability is an important driving force behind separatisms, and intergroup rivalry (1998).

As shown in a series of experiments, underdog status is today a major source of legitimacy, support and sympathy of third parties (e.g. Belavadi and Hogg 2018). This is particularly important for actors involved in conflicts. In such situations, parties often compete for the victim status (e.g. McNeil, Pehrson and Stevenson 2017; Shnabel, Halabi and Noor 2013). All because being seen as vulnerable and hurt, boosts the actor’s standing: “The mere disparity in power may be enough to activate moral judgments, even for initially neutral, non-partisan third parties” (Vandello et al. 2011: 1177). The vulnerability status (Vandello et al. 2007) or fear of being hurt (Markiewicz and Sharvit 2021) can be used as a license to use violence.

The agency of vulnerability speaks to the expansion of our circle of empathy (Singer 1983). States’ practices also reflect the changing sensitivity and public perceptions. Not only individuals (McLaughlin 2012) but also countries incorporate vulnerability narratives to provide meaning for their actions. This practice can give new impetus to progress, since: “An appreciation of human physical needs and the wrongness of exploiting the vulnerabilities generated by such needs underlies the most powerful arguments against social, economic, and political oppression” (Meister 2002: 125). However, as some scholars of global politics argue, the underdog is often used by powerful actors to gain legitimacy for use of force. Both

Meister (2002) and Cunliffe (2020) warn that humanitarian intervention and international peacekeeping often served as leverage allowing strong states to breach other actors' sovereignty. This practice has led to the further destabilisation of conflict zones. That is why we ought to be cautious whenever states use one's precarity as reasoning for war: "we would be naïve not to be at least initially sceptical when we hear the powerful, the great and the good declaiming for the rights of the powerless" (Cunliffe 2010: 92).

The importance of vulnerability for the warfare was recognised by Clausewitz who considered dread of defeat as having a greater impact on actor's behaviour than even the vision of victory, since: "the vanquished sinks much further below the original line of equilibrium than the conqueror raises himself above it" (2006: Book IV, Ch. X).

Unfortunately, contemporary conflict studies gave relatively little attention to exposing the role perceptions of precarity play in warfare. They also do not treat references to vulnerability as a stand-alone practice of political agency.

Notable few exceptions that expose the effects of belligerent's vulnerability, focused on weak actors that by definition were the underdog. Of particular importance is a series of publications by Kuperman and Crawford on 'suicidal rebellions'. Looking at cases of Bosnia, Kosovo (Crawford and Kuperman 2006) and Darfur (Kuperman 2009) they argue that weak actors may "engage in risky rebellions because they expect to benefit from international intervention if the state retaliates" (Crawford and Kuperman 2005). This means they may even want to "provoke genocidal retaliation against their own group because of the expectation of humanitarian intervention" (Crawford and Kuperman 2006: vii). Honig and Reichard's research traced how weak actors propagandize their precarity and victimisation to delegitimise the enemy (2018). However, these studies did not consider the identifications of the vulnerability of powerful and relatively safe entities. Furthermore, they did not see

vulnerability narratives as a distinct form of statecraft. Consequently, they do not provide answers to the dissertation's puzzle.

2.6. States and vulnerability

Making vulnerability known

In the political context, socially recognised vulnerability is a form of privilege. From the communal perspective, external validation of vulnerable status is an essential condition for recognition of the vulnerable. Without it, one's vulnerability will not be addressed and understood as an 'existing' problem. Consequently, on the group and state level, identifications of vulnerability are introduced through narratives. This practice reflects the fact that people's fundamental cognitive processes arrange our experience in stories (e.g. Kahneman 2011). Sarbin famously argued that narrative is a 'root metaphor' for psychology since: "human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (1986: 8). Narratives are what binds people into collectives (e.g. Oren Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal 2015; Subotić 2013). Furthermore, empirical studies show that narratives are a key conflict-supportive practice (e.g. Bar-Tal, Oren and Nets-Zehngut 2014; Božic-Roberson 2004).

Since the nature of conflicts is competitive (e.g. Blumer 1958; Schopler et al. 2001; Sherif 1966), collectives fight over psychological and material resources (Kelman 2008). Of particular importance is their identity and how it will be seen by third parties. For example, "groups are strongly motivated to establish that their ingroup has been subjected to more injustice and suffering at the hands of the outgroup than the other way round" (Shnabel, Halabi and Noor 2013: 867; also Noor et al. 2012).

Today, due to the socio-cultural (e.g. humanitarian revolution) as well as political changes (e.g. globalisation, the rise of international institutions) narratives of vulnerability

became a particularly effective source of legitimacy and support. However, in order to make their self-identification ‘known’, actors need to externalize it. Across different societal contexts, we see a new “tendency to handle conflicts through appeals to third parties” (Campbell and Manning 2018: 17). Consequently, vulnerability identifications are increasingly more communal and intertextual. One’s vulnerability status is dependent on external sources of authority and relies on effective story-telling.

Interestingly, the use of vulnerability narratives by states during conflicts is not uniform. Namely, it is not contingent on a particular set of fixed characteristics. In the following sections, I show that vulnerability narratives were used by both weak as well as powerful states. Furthermore, at times states did not use this identification.

Weak and vulnerable

In conflicts, vulnerability is the key element of the underdog’s identity. It is employed by the Tutsi survivors of the genocide in Rwanda (Hintjens 2008). It was used by the child soldiers from Sierra Leone (Enns 2012: 129) and the Darfur’s rebels (Kuperman 2009). It is present in the narratives of Palestinians who often compare their contemporary situation to that of the interwar European Jewry. As Azmi Bishara, ex Knesset member and writer argue: “I am a Palestinian Arab. This Israeli victory [in the 1948 war of Independence] is my Holocaust” (Caplan 2012). Vulnerability narratives were implemented by Georgia during the Russo-Georgian war (Toal 2017). While the conflict was started by Tbilisi on the 9th of October 2008 by unlawful shelling of the South Ossetian capital (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia 2009), two days after its outbreak, president Mikheil Saakashvili argued that:

“This is 100%, unprovoked brutal Russian invasion. This is about annihilation of a democracy on their borders. We on our own cannot fight with Russia. We want an immediate ceasefire, immediate cessation of hostilities, separation of Russia and Georgia and international mediation” (Saakashvili 2008).

The vulnerability was the kernel argument for Kuwait's advocacy during the Gulf War. Pratkanis points out that the state hired a PR firm and attempted to present itself as a vulnerable victim of Saddam Hussein's aggression, a vicious Iraqi dictator. The country's information strategy was heavily based on the dissemination of fake stories about the atrocities of Iraqi soldiers such as the removal of Kuwaiti babies from hospital incubators. This was juxtaposed with a positive image of Kuwait as a uniquely democratic state that embraces women rights (Pratkanis 2009).

Vulnerability played an important role during the 2014 Ukrainian revolution (Sakwa 2014: 126), and with the outbreak of the War in Donbas against Russian-supported separatists, it became an important element of the state's rhetoric. Toal names Ukraine diplomatic efforts during president Petro Poroshenko 2014 trip to the USA "project victimhood" (2017: 294). The country's politicians were requesting financial, military and political support of the state in its struggle against Russian-supported separatists. During Poroshenko's address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, Ukrainian compared his country's situation to that of Israel. He accentuated that the annexation of Crimea was "one of the most cynical acts of treachery in modern history" and argued that the country was "stabbed in the back" by the global community. The president focused on the fragility of Ukraine and argued that the war in the East is posing a threat to the future of the country, as well as "to global security everywhere":

"The outcome of today's war will determine whether we will be forced to accept the reality of a dark, torn, and bitter Europe as part of a new world order. ... Ukrainian army, these young boys (underequipped, and often unappreciated by the world) are the only thing that now stands between the reality of peaceful coexistence and the nightmare of a full relapse into the previous century and a new cold war" (Poroshenko 2014).

Throughout the Yugoslav wars, Kosovo, Croatia and Bosnia – all argued that they were vulnerable victims of Serbian aggression (Kuperman 2005). Their actions were not solely limited to diplomacy and political rhetoric. In the hopes of provoking a foreign

military intervention or receiving aid, the vulnerability was sometimes actively ‘pursued’ by the military commanders. For example, during the Bosnian civil war Muslims continued the futile fight in hope of receiving foreign military assistance necessary to win with Serbs:

“the weaker, Muslim side repeatedly rejected ceasefires based on an expectation that if they ‘attacked and lost, the resulting images of war and suffering guaranteed support in the West for the ‘victim state’” (Kuperman 2005: 159).

Strong and vulnerable

However, the strong and powerful claim to be vulnerable too. We know of multiple cases where not only David but also Goliath presents himself as being vulnerable belligerent. Vulnerability narratives were used by NATO during the Kosovo War, by the US during the Vietnam war (Fassin and Rechtman 2009) and throughout the intervention in Iraq (e.g. Isikoff and Corn 2007), in Serbia during the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Pratkanis 2009: 135). For France, they served as a justification of its military intervention in northern Mali in 2013. Before the intervention, Francois Holland, at that time president of the Republic repeatedly “stated that France had no alternative but to intervene and prevent the emergence of a terrorist state that would have serious security repercussions for France and the West” (Francis 2013; also Hollande 2012). Vulnerability played a crucial role for the Hutu during the Rwandan genocide (Mamdani 2002). Research by Buckley-Zistel exposed that a significant portion of the Hutu felt victimised by the 1994 Rwandan Genocide organized by the Hutu militias (2006). The vulnerability card became a key identification used by Israel during its confrontations with Palestinians (Peleg 2019). For example, during the 2008 Gaza war, Gabriela Shalev, Israeli Ambassador to the UN justified IDF’s airstrikes on Gaza territory:

“No sovereign state would allow its citizens to become the target of thousands of rockets and mortar shells. A mother sending her children to school must know that they will come back safely. No person should fear leaving his house because he may have to scramble for cover. No construction worker should fear dying while earning his living, as we have witnessed just two days ago. (Shalev 2008).

Vulnerability narratives were implemented in the Kremlin propaganda leading to the annexation of Crimea and the war in Western Ukraine (Skillen 2017: 387). Protecting Russia against Western threats is one of the major discursive frameworks used by president Vladimir Putin. Kasparov contends that Putin builds a model of vulnerability based on a false presumption that West schemes to humiliate Moscow (2015: 29). The country is portrayed as encircled by treacherous enemies who endanger its vital interests. In 2015, during the 19th St Petersburg International Economic Forum, Putin was asked about its “aggressive” foreign policies and Russian activity in the Baltic region, Ukraine and the Middle East, he argued that the state’s behaviour reflects the fact that the country is a victim put up against a wall:

“I did not like you using the term ‘aggressive’ – we have become more persistent in asserting our interests. For a long time, you could say for decades, we had been calmly and quietly proposing various elements of cooperation, but we were constantly pushed back until we reached a line we cannot cross” (Putin 2015).

Probably the most famous case of war-time self-identifications of vulnerability was Nazi Germany (see Confino 2005). Hitler has risen to power arguing that Jews and Marxists were the real reason behind the Germans loss in WWI (Kolb 2004: 140). During WWII, Third Reich propaganda often presented itself as a victim hurt by the Jews:

“Soldiers tended to ascribe massacres perpetrated by their own units to Jewish criminality, even when the actual victims of such atrocities were Jews, and civilians in the rear similarly attributed the destruction of cities by aerial bombing to Jewish thirst for revenge” (Bartov 1998: 784).

The history of warfare shows that vulnerability leads to a perception of injustice and precarity. This is used by statesmen as a legitimization for aggressive policies. Pratkanis points out that before the genocide in Rwanda, Hutus were accusing Tutsis of perpetrating crimes. That Serbian propaganda during the Yugoslav wars was based on the dissemination of descriptions of past Serbian victimization. That Russian aggression leading to the Crimean War was triggered by Ottoman Turkey’s refusal to protect the Orthodox population of the empire and the Christian holy shrines in Palestine. Pratkanis further underlines that the

Japanese attack on Manchuria was supposedly a reaction to the Chinese violations of agreements. Austria's invasion of Serbia that led to WWI, was justified by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. The American war on terror, which resulted in the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, was defended as a proportionate response to 9/11 (Pratkanis 2009).

Absence of vulnerability

Vulnerability is used by both weak and strong states. It is a common narrative employed in conflicts to legitimize and give meaning to a country's policies. However, it is important to underline that vulnerability is not an essential rhetorical theme used by the authorities during wars. Especially, we should not take for granted that strong states employ vulnerability in their self-identifications.

An iconic example of a strong regime that instead of operating under the cloak of vulnerability, focused on power projection was Athens during the Siege of Melos¹⁷ (416 BC). In Thucydides' depiction of the negotiations between emissaries of Athenians and Melians, Athens focused on maximising their power. Athenian invaders requested a tribute and surrender from Spartan colonists. They underlined that Melians are "practical people", and pointing out to Athens' military supremacy, argued that:

"the standard of justice depends on the equality of power to compel and that in fact the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept" (Thucydides 1972: 5.84–116).

Athenians admitted that there are no noble higher causes of their action and that they targeted Melians due to pragmatic calculation. The islanders were particularly weak and represented an easy target for Athens's military: "We rule the sea and you are islanders, and weaker islanders too than the others; it is therefore particularly important that you should not escape"

¹⁷ Melos - one of Sparta colonies destroyed by Athens during Peloponnesian Wars.

(1972). Athens does not shy away from presenting its forces as aggressors. Its plans, the logic behind its actions and motives are simple:

“Athenians: You, by giving in, would save yourselves from disaster; we, by not destroying you, would be able to profit from you. (...) Our opinion of the gods and our knowledge of men lead us to conclude that it is a general and necessary law of nature to rule whatever one can” (1972).

At particular stages of WWII Japan and Germany also abstained from the vulnerability frame. German propaganda was focused on “spreading good news and setting an example of indomitable confidence in final victory” (Bytwerk 2010: 100). Consequently, state media was significantly limited in how it covered the loss and sacrifice experienced by the Germans (Bytwerk: 108-109). The Japanese propaganda went even further. The government did not permit the presentation of any American success on the Pacific front (Szasz 2009: 534-535). Hillenbrand shows how state officials lied to prisoners of war held by the state. They presented the on-front situations not only omitting the facts but also inventing highly implausible events, some of which were simple lies, as in the situation when the Japanese stated that they “had shot Abraham Lincoln and torpedoed Washington D.C.” (Hillenbrand 2010: 204-205). To conclude, vulnerability is a common but not a necessary tool of war-time rhetoric by states.

2.7. Problematising the vulnerability of strong states

As has been discussed in the previous sections, the fact that strong states would present themselves during times of conflict as vulnerable has been given little attention in social sciences. This phenomenon not only have not been systematically accounted for but interestingly, seems to be incompatible with a set of highly generative theoretical perspectives on conflict.

Consequently, this practice goes against our intuition and it problematizes the established understandings of politics of vulnerability by exposing what we do not know

(Foucault 2010). In the next section, I employ realist and rationalist approaches, deterrence theory, reconciliatory school/needs-based theory of conflict to see whether alternative arguments provide understanding to the dissertation's puzzle.

Insufficient explanations

Firstly, the phenomenon of strong states' using vulnerability identification cannot be explained by the realist school of International Relations. Realists recognise the role of vulnerability in state-making. However, for them it is a humiliating referent that is used externally to discredit the enemy and to provide reasoning for aggression:

"Theories designed to discredit an enemy or potential enemy are one of the commonest forms of purposeful thinking. To depict one's enemies or one's prospective victims as inferior beings in the sight of God has been a familiar technique at any rate since the days of the Old Testament" (Carr 2016: 68).

In the realist tradition, the state refers to the weak and disenfranchised in order to juxtapose them with the ingroup (Schmitt 2007). The vulnerability of others can be a source of identification and pride of the state actor. Such is the case of the North Korean regime which follows its military-first principle. Namely treats its army as the centre of the state, its key source of honour and prestige abroad (e.g. Kim 2015). The state's broadly publicised military parades and ballistic missiles tests are used to derive profits from the vulnerability of South Korea, Japan the US.

The willingness of strong actors to make vulnerability claims a crucial point of their ideational 'curriculum' challenges realist theories' assumption that states' main goal is survival. Realists' approach to global politics sees "the military power of the state" as the only available political currency that can provide security (Smith 2005: 31). By claiming vulnerability, one is projecting a lack of agency, powerlessness, victimhood (Enns 2012). A vulnerable status is associated with the state's weakness and inefficacy. Elites, when using this descriptor, 'admit' that they have failed to provide their constituents with stability and

security. This challenges their position as a security guarantor. Vulnerability – from the realist standpoint – is counterintuitive, dangerous and unpragmatic technique.

Furthermore, as discussed before, the presence of vulnerability is not determined by the state's military strength. Geostrategic standing, logistic capabilities and technological might not directly determine whether the state uses vulnerability narratives.¹⁸ Vulnerability is present in the identities of different collectives involved in conflicts. It is shared by weak *and* strong belligerents. Consequently, it cannot be simply treated as an 'objectivist' category reflecting the inter-state power relations, or a bargaining chip used by the states in particular circumstances.

Naturally, for realists, the wartime presence of vulnerability claims is particularly puzzling in the case of strong actors. A powerful state that promotes vulnerability narratives within the ingroup, is not a protective Hobbesian Leviathan. Vulnerability in terms of fear management is for the collective what a fox is for the henhouse. For realists, a state that uses the vulnerable card causes a disturbance and undermines itself.

Secondly, the practice of states pronouncing their vulnerability is going against deterrence theories. This formerly "most influential school of thought in the American study of international relations" (Jervis 1979: 289) exposes how "threats motivate the adversary to comply with a coercer's demands" (Schaub 2004: 389). States emphasize their capabilities in order to prevent or restrain the enemy. Vulnerability narratives cannot be treated as a tool of the opponent's discouragement. After all, it may be interpreted by other actors as highly sensitive information that discredits the 'vulnerable' actors' standing, disrupts the balance of power and even leads to new military competition or breakdown of alliances.

¹⁸ I recognise that state's standing influences *how* state uses vulnerability, but I do not make claims that basing on sheer military capabilities of the actor, we can gain any predictive insight into vulnerability's presence/absence in state's discourse.

Thirdly, the ‘vulnerability’ of strong states is incompatible with the rationalist approach to international relations. In line with the positivist account of science, rationalists employ rational choice theory which perceives states as utility maximisers (Keohane 1988). Since vulnerability as a form of identification is a double edge sword that is simultaneously advantageous and disadvantageous, it is impossible to reduce its explanatory role to a simple instrumental tool states use to rationally maximize their gains.¹⁹ Strong states practice of drawing on their own declared vulnerability cannot be understood as a form of strategic posturing. After all, vulnerability by definition cannot be treated as a category conducive to the actor projecting its strength. Furthermore, since vulnerability is adopted/avoided by both strong and weak belligerents, it is hard to treat it as a form of bargaining, an explanatory factor in quantitative models of state behaviour.

Economic-based arguments are indeterminate in singlehandedly explaining the phenomenon. While it is true that a state’s reference to vulnerability may be beneficial – for example, it may boost international support, galvanize the community or discredit enemies. There are serious economic-based counterarguments that may be employed to question the predictive capability of this approach. Vulnerability narratives can motivate people to be generous and supportive – like in an aftermath of the 1941-1944 Continuation War when Finland’s weakness was used by the political class as reasoning for hefty war reparations to the Soviet Union (Diamond 2019). However, the recognition of a state’s vulnerability may also be a threat to the survival of the nation, as during the Yom Kippur War when the panic of Moshe Dayan - then Minister of Defence of Israel - scared country’s journalists so much that they were unwilling to warn Israelis about the dire situation on the front. One of the editors of daily Ha’aretz warned Dayan:

¹⁹ For a detailed critical reading of the rational choice theory in the IR, see Rathbun 2019.

“If you say on television tonight what you have told us, that will be like an earthquake for the consciousness of the Israeli nation, the Jewish people, and the Arab nations” (Burkett 2008: 326).

Consequently, while there are economic motives for states’ attempting to gain vulnerability status, there are also economic-based counterarguments that question the explanatory capability of this perspective. Vulnerability attracts external support, but it may come at a cost of growing mistrust of the ingroup, as well as panic of local financial market. It could be argued that for weak states, implementation of vulnerability narratives – due to the more limited scope of attainable war-time actions – can still be attractive despite the negative consequences. Especially since the weaker belligerent’s image has less to lose by embracing vulnerability. Nevertheless, the application of such a volatile identification by strong states cannot be explained by purely rational micro-foundations. After all, their economic standing is rarely hinging on the goodwill of the global community. Consequently, the economic support of the international community ought to play a negligible role in ‘calculations’ pertaining to the pronouncements of vulnerability. A strong state has at its disposal a broad range of constructive actions and policies that do not question its status. By introducing vulnerability claims, the state undermines its positionality – something that Renshon defines as a “standing or rank within a given status community” (in this case international community) (2017: 33). Consequently, how vulnerability narratives emerge in the political, backs up claims that “states desire something more than the survival in international politics (Steele 2008: 1).”

Lastly, the strong states’ behaviour goes against the influential Needs Based theory of conflict (Nadler and Shnabel 2008; Shnabel and Nadler 2008). This psychological model is used to look at the intergroup relations between conflicted communities. It is based on an assumption that participants of conflict are driven by different emotional needs that reflect their experience and position. The model predicts that belligerents’ identities reflect their

social power and needs for acceptance. It dichotomizes between victims and perpetrators. According to the model, it is the weaker side that is expressing powerlessness, loss of status and lack of agency (Herman 1992; Scheff 1994). On the other hand, the stronger community would be expressing its moral value and seeking empathy for its situation (Nadler and Shnabel 2008; Nadler and Liviatan 2006). While the model is uniquely effective in capturing the interpersonal dynamics of victim-perpetrator relations, in the context of inter-state behaviour it is insufficient/off the mark. The adoption of vulnerability narratives by strong actors goes across the binary victim-perpetrator division. While it may be interpreted as a practice improving the state's moral image (perpetrator), it also responds to the victim's need of gaining social power and responding to its loss of control. Thus, the vulnerability status cannot be reduced to a utility maximising toll.

2.8. Conclusion

In this section, I have offered a review of the ongoing debates about the role vulnerability plays in contemporary society. I made a series of arguments important for the study of strong states' war-time employment of vulnerability self-identifications. I explained the reasoning behind applying the concept of identity in the study of states' behaviour. I have argued that the fact that powerful actors identify as vulnerable problematizes our intuitive understanding of vulnerability as a sign of weakness. I explained the growing historical prominence of vulnerability in the political sphere. Later I pointed out that across social sciences the employment of identifications of vulnerability by powerful actors has been generally overlooked and have not been systematically researched. I proposed that vulnerability identifications can be a source of agency and a unique tool of statecraft of particular war-time importance. This novel approach to the politics of vulnerability allows us to account for the possibility of states wilfully seeking the status of vulnerable actor. Later, I explained that narratives are a key practice allowing states to validate and thus establish their

vulnerability status. Further, I showed that historically strong and weak states both – abstained and drew on vulnerability narratives during times of conflict. Consequently, it is impossible to argue that the employment of this theme is mechanistically predicated on the materialistic conditions of the actor. Lastly, I show how key theories of conflict are insufficient in answering the puzzle of strong states’ war-time vulnerability narratives.

The chapter located the dissertation within the ongoing debates about the role vulnerability plays in society and politics. It provided a rationale for the study and laid the grounds for a new theoretical reading of vulnerability narratives of powerful belligerents.

3. Theorising the war-time vulnerability narratives of strong states

3.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I return to the starting point of the dissertation. Namely the practice of strong states incorporating narratives associated with actors that are weak and defenceless. This puzzling discovery was the inspiration that abductively (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012 and “Methodology” chapter) guided the study. In order to answer why strong countries employ narratives of vulnerability in their war-time public communication, I theorise about the role self-identifications of vulnerability play in the security practices of strong countries. To solve the puzzle and understand the perplexing practice of powerful actors wilfully pursuing identifications we commonly associate with weakness and political failure (e.g. Gromet and Pronin 2007; Nussbaum 2001; Kupchan 1994), I employ the concept of identity. The research into the role identifications play in international relations is guided by the ontological security studies. My thinking about ontological security is shaped by the sociology of trust. Overall, the theoretical framework devised for the study brings together a sociological focus on interactionism and critical security studies interest in the practices leading to the designation of threats.

The chapter is separated into four sections. First, I explain the rationale behind employing identity as a central analytical concept of the dissertation. Secondly, I introduce the concept of ontological security and demonstrate how it has been utilised in the study of identity and the state. In the third section, I theorise about the functions that war-time vulnerability narratives may serve for strong states. I propose that this practice allows the actor to reduce anxiety about its identity and that it provides a special agency to securitise the weaker enemy. Fourthly, drawing on ontological security studies I conceptualise ontological

security foremost as a state's capacity to deal with change. Based on the strong states war-time employment of vulnerability narrative, I account for the resilience of identity. This new research avenue reflects the fact that countries have a capacity to flexibly reflect in their autobiographies changes in state's policies and ideational needs. Furthermore, that they engage in practices that protect their identity from critique.

3.2. Identity as a tool of analysis

In the previous chapter, I employed - realist and rationalist approaches to international relations, as well as deterrence theory, Needs Based theory of conflict, as well as economic-based arguments about global politics - to illustrate that the practice of strong states using vulnerability narratives cannot be understood as instrumental materially. When a state of significant military and economic means self-identifies as vulnerable, it does it not because of the strategic necessity. Nor is it due to the environmental constraints that precondition its action. After all, a strong state's power is a guarantor of its relative freedom of conduct. The fact that this behaviour is uncanny, is precisely why we should not treat it as a simple utility maximising tool. Since vulnerability narratives are not employed by states to gain power, they have to be addressing the identity needs of the polity and its collective.

In the field of International Relations, identity is increasingly used as a key alternative to materialistic accounts of state actions (e.g. Hansen 2006; Jackson 2006; Lapid and Kratochwil 1996; McSweeney 2004; Milliken 2001; Wendt 1999). Jacoby argues that the discipline could be "best seen as a continuous political and normative debate over identity" and the state (2015). However, identity as a concept is broadly contested (e.g. Bucher and Jasper 2017; Lebow 2008, 2012, 2016).

On one hand, some perceive state identity as a unifying superstructure, a "we-ness" of a state (Williams 2003: 518). This approach is rooted in Erikson's understanding of identity as a coherent, stabilizing self-narrative that guides people's behaviour and self-perception

(Erikson 1959: 22 also 1968). In the constructivist assemblage of global politics, the state aspires to act coherently vis-à-vis its identity. On the other hand, some reject the unitary character of the state's identity. According to Lebow, there is no single 'I' in a state "but multiple, labile, and often conflicting identifications" (2016: 33) which are imposed by politicians, media, foreign actors etc. (2016: 18). Jacoby points out that: "...identity is a complicated and contested phenomenon, fractured, plural and never complete" (2015: 516).

While I agree with critics questioning the more static perspectives of state identity, I disagree that this should lead to *en masse* rejection of state identity as a concept. Identity and identifications are intertwined with what the state does, and vice versa: "foreign policies rely upon representations of identity, but it is also through the formulation of foreign policy that identities are produced and reproduced" (Hansen 2006: 1). Consequently, identities are salient for policies with which they are in a constitutive relationship. Both realms simultaneously influence each other. The ideational is intertwined with the political (2006: 15) and state behaviour is to a significant degree, an outcome of state identity (Rousseau and Garcia-Retamero 2007).

For the purpose of the study, I am drawing on social psychology research on collective and social identity (Rousseau 2006; Tajfel and Turner 1979)²⁰. I perceive identity as a 'construction in the making' (Lebow 2013). An outcome of a dialectical process that is constantly evolving (Wendt 1994; Kinnval 2004: 748). Consequently, I argue that state identity is a declarative process, a goal, an aspiration to build a coherent narrative about the state and its surroundings. It is declarative, precisely because it concerns identifications of the collective. These are everchanging, plural and non-unitary (Abrams and Hogg 1990).

²⁰ Terms 'collective identity' and 'social identity' in literature are often used interchangeably (e.g. Wendt 1994).

Consequently, identity is a goal that cannot be fully attained.²¹ That is why it should be understood as a representational façade, which – while promises to be a coherent story about the state’s self – is one of the visions about it. Identity is a concept that depicts an ongoing process of a multiplicity of identifications competing for primacy over official state narratives.

While I do not resolve major theoretical debates over the role of identity in state politics; I use a conceptualisation of identity that is compatible with empirically validated psychological literature on collective and national identifications (e.g. Brown 2000; Greene 2004; McKeown, Haji and Ferguson 2016). Furthermore, I theorise in line with constructivist world perceptions that accentuate intersubjective, processual and discursive aspects of social life (e.g. Fierke and Jorgensen 2001; Milliken 1999; Wendt 1992). It is not an exhaustive attempt to understand a complex, multi-layered phenomenon. State’s identity is comprised of a myriad of ever-changing identifications that compete against each other, and that can be incongruent, or contradictory. This complexity means that identity is an everchanging process ‘in the making’. Its goal is to reach unreachable – a stable narrative foundation that answers questions such as: who we are? where do we go? Processual character of the phenomenon is the culprit behind challenges of understanding identity formations.

3.3. International Relations of ontological security

Identity and ontological security

To study the impact of identity on world politics, researchers employ the concept of ontological security. In the constructivist framework of International Relations, ontological and physical securities are two distinct yet interrelated security needs of states (Huysmans

²¹ Similar understanding of identity can be also seen in new psychoanalytical readings of ontological security which employ Lacanian tradition (1977) to emphasize the aspirational and ever-incomplete character of one’s self (e.g. Eberle 2019; Hagström 2021; Vieira 2018).

1998: 229). For Wendt, they are fundamental “basic interests” that motivate states for action (1994: 385). As in the case of physical security, the need for ontological security stems from our individual needs (McSweeney 2004: 153-4).

People have a natural proclivity to think of themselves as a member of a group (Tajfel and Turner 1979). States as an institutionalised form of collective are the key sphere of the interplay between the social and individual identities. While the individual cannot be equated with the collective, states practices correspond with the perceptions and needs of the people (Wendt 2004). The state is a form of a social group and does not operate independently of the social identities of its members (Kalin and Sambanis 2018): “Policy leaders (...) are constrained by the identities not just of themselves but of their country as well” (Steele 2005: 529). Consequently, states have commitments to their constituents and the country’s past policies (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005, 2008; Zarakol 2010). This naturally does not mean that they reflect identifications of different groups equally. Actors often discriminate against the social identities of minorities (e.g. Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013). Nevertheless, the apparatus of the state is the most powerful source of superordinate identity (e.g. Gaertner et al. 2000) since it incorporates, scales-up and addresses constituents’ needs. States respond to their identity commitments by behaving in a way familiar to the constituents (e.g. Mitzen 2006), by employing narratives (e.g. Subotić 2016), foreign (e.g. Steele 2007) and domestic policies (e.g. Lupovici 2012) that are in line with collective outlook.

While physical security means survival, ontological security is about the ‘security as being’ (2004: 157). Namely, a belief in being in control of the environment, of understanding the causes of and reasons for our actions. “Ontological security is security not of the body but of the self,” it reflects who we think we are, and shapes our decisions (Mitzen 2006: 344). Ontological security is the security of identity. It provides a sense of continuity, cohesion and stability for the state by offering “a linear narrative through which (...) [the actor] can answer

questions about doing, acting, and being” (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 246). In contrast, when the state is ontologically insecure, its understanding of the surroundings and the role it plays is shaken (e.g. Kinnvall 2004; Volkan 1997). For Mitzen, identity is a scale that assesses whether an action’s outcome is in line with the actor’s self-perceptions. Thus, ontological security is based on a process of identity construction: “The consequences of action will always either reproduce or contradict identities, and since identity motivates action its stability over time depends on it being supported in practice” (2006 344).

Ontological security was pioneered in psychologists’ studies of Laing (2010) and Erikson (1963). It entered the IR and political science debates through Giddens’ work on the theory of structuration (1991). He defines ontological security as a “person’s fundamental sense of safety in the world”. To feel safe, one has to gain trust in other people and their surroundings: “Obtaining such trust becomes necessary in order for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety (1991: 38-39).” The Giddensian actor is driven by anxiety urging him to follow behavioural patterns and perceptions of the socio-cultural environment that build confidence (1991: 13). Through routinized interactions with the world, he develops an understanding of the environment and forges a security system that protects his identity and feeling of self-agency (Lebow 2016: 25). Routines are responsible for maintaining a “consistent biographical narrative” (Giddens 1991: 37). Without the predictability of life, actors lose the understanding of the consequences of their actions.

The importance of ontological security studies within the discipline of International Relations is steadily growing. In the 1990s ontological security was introduced to the global politics scholarship by a series of theoretical articles (Wendt 1994; Huysmans 1998; McSweeney 2004). This “first wave” of the ontological security scholarship (Ejdus 2017: 4) was later systematically developed and empirically explored in different contexts (e.g.

Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Flockhart 2016; Innes and Steele 2014; Johansson-Nogués 2018; Krahmann 2017; Mitzen 2006; Mälksoo 2015; Rumelili 2015a; Steele 2005, 2007; Homolar and Scholz 2019).

With the help of ontological security, the inherently constructivist concept of identity became the main alternative currency to the realist-rationalist deliberations (e.g. Bucher and Jasper 2017). The innovative toolbox of ontological security studies was (among many things) used to understand the collective anxieties stemming from globalisation (Kinnvall 2004; 2017), to account for states' denials of past crimes (Zarakol 2010) and to trace the narrative practices that justify policy changes (Subotić 2016).

Security of the self

Ontological security scholarship offers innovative research on practices states employ to protect their identity. The literature discusses several different mechanisms that help states to support their ideational 'scaffolding'. It provides answers to how political decision-making is influenced by threats to identity (Steele 2005: 520). Firstly, it is argued that states try to achieve "biographical continuity" (Berenskoetter 2014; Giddens 1991; Huysmans 1998). They build stories to provide meaning to their actions, to link their present with their past (e.g. Innes and Steele 2014). Biographical narratives bind state actions with their identifications (Steele 2008). In order to do so, states "maintain their self-reflexive narratives, their positive views of the self, at times of crisis" (Subotić 2016: 614). The consistency of narratives is seen as the foundation of political actors' engagement with the environment (Steele 2005; Solomon 2018). If state actions are inconsistent with its self-identifications, the biographical continuity is threatened by anxiety "about the adequacy of the narrative" (Giddens 1991: 65). This situation can generate shame and a feeling of ontological insecurity (Steele 2008: 13).

Secondly, it is demonstrated that political actors need to feel good about themselves (e.g. Steele 2007; Tillich 2000; Zarakol 2010). States claim to act morally to reinforce their identity. Consequently, ontological security is often understood as a self-help behaviour (Ejdus 2017; Steele 2005). Like individuals, states “bracket out” their anxieties (Giddens 1991: 37; also Krolkowski 2008) and try to present their history in a positive light “in order to continue to function in international society” (Subotić 2016: 614) and to avoid shame and condemnation (Steele 2008).

Thirdly, since states need to “make the world knowable” (Mitzen 2006: 354), over time they establish a set of behavioural and interpretive routines that build their standing in their environment and help them to deal with uncertainties. Everyday routines help political actors to position themselves to give meaning to their actions and to deal with changes (e.g. Browning 2018a). Through the repetition of particular actions and by employing the same narratives, states gain symbolic control over their self. They make their surroundings familiar. However, from normative or realist perspectives, those routines may lead to negative or irrational outcomes: “in many instances, parties who might think of themselves as security-seekers seem to act as if they want conflict: rejecting overtures, missing opportunities, exploiting the other” (Mitzen 2006: 354). Paradoxically, destructive and costly inter-group conflicts may reduce the state’s anxieties by providing captivating identifications and behavioural routines based on an entrenched division between us and them (e.g. Bar-Tal 1998). The ontological security literature shows that the intractability of many protracted conflicts stems from biographical narratives that provide an understanding of states’ existence. External stressors accompanying a given competition may be a source of ontological security (Mitzen 2006). For example, the persistent threat of the Soviet Union was a key source of meaning for the West. Thus “When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the very idea of ‘the free world’ saw the same fate” (Ejdus 2017: 890).

In search of stability

It can be argued that a considerable amount of ontological security International Relations literature has concentrated on exposing the stabilising functionality of ontological security.²² Namely, the ways how states “uphold stability and defend the prevailing state of affairs” (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 35). Solomon believes that the dominating perspectives put unnecessary limits on how we approach the security of being by considering it as dependable on a “stable cognitive environment” (2018: 939). Along those lines, ontological security is not only the security of identity but also a force of identity preservation (Chernobrov 2016: 593).

In research practice, mechanisms mentioned in the previous section, often lead to the treatment of ontological security as a phenomenon buttressing the identity-related *status quo*. Since ontological security is dependent on states sustaining (1) biographical continuity, (2) shame avoidance, and (3) everyday routines, the most common empirical applications of ontological security treat change as a danger to a state’s self-perceptions. Transformations of the environment (especially the ones that profoundly distort states’ perceptions) may force actors to adjust their behaviour. They question the consistent ‘I’ of the state and can have traumatic effects leading to ontological insecurity (Bolton 2021; Innes and Steele 2014), violence and conflict (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017: 4).

For example, the strand of research concentrating on the discursive analysis of ontological security perceives narratives as the building blocks of states’ biographical continuity (Berenskoetter 2014). Narratives are adjusted to deal with moments of crisis and to support the safety of identity (Subotić 2016). They provide an understanding of changes, create coherent biographical storytelling and help to situate the actor within the new context (Innes and Steele 2014; Steele 2008).

²² Recently Hagström problematised this approach by pointing out the possibility of states pursuing ontological security through inconsistent autobiographical narratives (2021).

Research on ontological insecurity and critical situations also contributed to exposing the stabilising function of ontological security. Ejodus defines a critical situation as a “radical and unpredictable disjuncture” that challenges or destroys the state’s routinised certainty (2017: 887). This leads to the state’s disorientation, overwhelming anxiety (Ejodus 2017: 888) and feelings of loss (Rumelili 2015b). Critical situations force actors to react to the changing environment in order to protect their ontological security. Anxiety, if not tackled may undermine the standing of political leadership and lead “to seemingly regressive, hysterical or schizophrenic behaviour” (Ejodus 2017: 893) e.g. Turkey’s insistent denial of the Armenian genocide (Zarakol 2010).

Similarly, work on state’s shame avoidance indicates the stabilising role of ontological security. Steele argues that: “States are haunted by those situations in the past where they obviously failed to live up to their standards of self-integrity, what we might term ‘sources of shame.’” (2007: 907). Analysing the case of the US response to the Asian tsunami in 2004 he shows how after being accused of being “stingy” with its aid by the UN, the USA increased its help twentyfold. Consequently, the US adjusted its policy in order to preserve the positive self-identity of Washington.

The protective cocoon

It is telling that ontological security is often described through a metaphor of a “protective cocoon” (e.g. Chernobrov 2016; Croft 2012; Flockhart 2016; Johansson-Nogues 2018; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). This framing was first used by Giddens (1991) and reflects Erikson’s (1963) work on identity. The Giddensian approach permeated the ontological security studies and led to the interpretation that: “A self seeks stability of meaning and behaviour and avoids uncertainty at all costs” (Chernobrov 2016: 583). The popularity of the cocoon metaphor captures the primacy of perspectives that interpret ontological security as a

protective cognitive environment that is predicated on stability. The role of this ideational construct is to shield the actor from the surroundings, “to protect and filter out dangers to the self” (Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017: 15) and to provide a sense of “unreality” (Flockhart 2016: 803). The ontological cocoon is largely immovable. It is a cushion, a barrier that moderates the influence of external stressors.

In research practise, this sometimes leads to treating states’ autobiography as a reactive matrix that adapts to the changes in the environment. This had clear consequences for the type of empirical investigations that draw on ontological security scholarship. The ontological security concept was mostly used to understand an actor’s behaviour in the context of external challenges to its identity (e.g. Ejodus 2017; Johansson-Nogués 2018; Lupovici 2012; Mitzen 2018; Steele 2005, 2007, 2008; Subotić 2016; Zarakol 2010). This means focus on fissures that – regardless of whether they were coming from within or outside of the state (Solomon 2018: 938) – are beyond its direct control. For example, Subotić analyses how Western European remembrance of the Holocaust has created identity insecurities in Eastern Europe (2019); while Alkopher and Blanc show that the identity-instability of the Schengen area stems from immigration (2017). The literature has mostly exposed and analysed states’ reactive attempts to keep their cocoon and supporting routines intact. Authors concentrate on showing how anxiety avoidance and routines-attachment guides them to a historical denial (Zarakol 2010), reactivation of conflicts (Rumelili 2015a), stigmatized relations with others (Zarakol 2011), avoidance (Lupovici 2012) or a selective story-telling (Subotić 2016).

Often, the relation between the state’s ontological security and the environment is treated as a one-sided feedback loop. Namely, the need for ontological security guides the state’s reaction to changes in the environment. For example, Browning’s study considers the phenomenon of nation branding as a process enhancing states’ ontological security. In his

view, branding strategies are a form of “realignment” (2015: 211) to the growing importance of neoliberalism and globalisation. They are “a specific response to emergent conditions of ‘late modernity’” (2015: 196).

The need for ontological security - in the most agential conceptualisation - adjusts state routines (Ejdus 2017) or narratives (Steele 2007) to deal with the emerging anxieties (for example through securitisation – de Raismes Combes 2017). For example, while Subotić perceives practices of states as more agential, she also sees ontological security as an autobiographical “straitjacket” that largely limits the actor. Analysing Serbia’s foreign policy behaviour regarding the secession of Kosovo, she explains that political actors may deal with the change by accentuating particular elements of the broader master narrative (2016):

“narratives are selectively activated to provide a cognitive bridge between policy change that resolves the physical security challenge (...) while also preserving state ontological security through providing autobiographical continuity, a sense of routine, familiarity, and calm” (2016: 611).

That is why in the last years Belgrade has both – gradually curtailed its claims to Kosovo’s territory, while retaining its insistence on never recognizing Kosovo’s independence (Subotić 2016: 622).

States’ anxiety is often understood as a motivating emotion leading to actions helping “to preserve a stable identity and transform uncertainty and discontinuity into a recognized routine” (Chernobrov 2016: 593). Along these lines, ontological security is a delineating force that is studied from the perspective of how it constricts a state’s behaviour. These interpretations echo Mitzen’s seminal claim associating routines with the agency. Fixed behaviours serve as a foundation of ontological security thus states are reluctant to change them: “Because routines sustain identity, actors become attached to them (...) Letting go of routines would amount to sacrificing that sense of agency, which is hard to do” (2006: 347).

To be clear, I do not question the validity of those findings and I am not suggesting that the discussed scholarship is wrong. I argue instead that such a perspective does not fully

capture the multifaceted nature of the need for ontological security. It accounts for a fragment of the repertoire of ontological security and risks reducing the safety of being to a behavioural compass state tries to follow at any costs. This may lead to treating ontological security as a corset that precludes a country's ability to act also in times of chaos. Such a research focus may have problematic consequences. It may inadvertently constrict our understanding of states' agency by considering the actor's pursuit of secure self foremost as a reaction to the changes in the environment. We risk reducing our accounts of identity-driven behaviour to predetermined arrangements and compensation mechanisms.

3.4. Vulnerability and the ontological security studies

Since the ontological security of states is considered to be predicated on "a sense of stability about the world" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 35), the concept of vulnerability seems to be inherently incompatible with the safety of identity. After all, "the world does become more dangerous when the self is perceived to be uniquely powerless and vulnerable" (Furedi 2004: 133). One's vulnerability alludes to change, not stability. Misztal, in her analysis of the definitions of vulnerability, points out that it is commonly associated with: "human capability of being wounded, (...) being mistreated, exploited, (...) weakness, defencelessness, helplessness, openness, exposure and liability" (Misztal 2012: 217). Drawing on Erikson (1959), Giddens links anxiety with vulnerability and argues that "invulnerability (...) blocks off negative possibilities in favour of a generalised attitude of hope" (1991: 40). For him, vulnerability poses a threat to the protective cocoon of ontological security because it erodes trust in the world. While the vulnerability is not systematically used in the ontological security literature, it is at times associated with ontological insecurity (e.g. Bolton 2021; Krolkowski 2018: 915; Rumelili and Celik 2017: 14; Steele 2008: 170).

The phenomenon of strong states employing vulnerability narratives during wars deviates from the readings of the states' pursuit of ontological security that predicate it on the

stability of identity and the environment. Strong states by identifying themselves as vulnerable, accentuate threats to their way of being and the precarity of their surroundings. For instance, George W. Bush justified the 2003 Invasion of Iraq by talking about the chaos that Bagdad would unleash on the streets of the US cities. He warned that without a sweep military action, the foreign threat will come to “the streets of our cities” (Bush 2003). Furthermore, the US invasion of Iraq was not a reaction to an independent change to the environment in which Washington was operating. In this regard, the state was not following a fixed behaviour which would be interpreted as a strategy supportive of its ontological security. In spite of repeated claims to the contrary, the invasion of 2003 reflected rather American ambitions to redraw the political realities of the Middle East (Isikoff and Corn 2007), than was a war of self-defence. Moreover, the US of 2003 was no Belgium of 1914 (Steele 2008), nor post Second Intifada Israel (Lupovici 2012) where both actors were responding to watershed shifts in their surroundings. Consequently, the war was a source of controversies and an object of ardent national and international critique. The decision to deploy thousands of military personnel to the battlefield could hardly be interpreted as a source of certitude for the state. Thus, for the state, it was rather a poignant illustration of “dangers that could threaten [its] bodily or psychological integrity” (Flockhart 2016: 803) instead of a source of ontological security.

From this perspective, the practice of strong states employing vulnerability narratives in their war-time public communication appears to be destabilising their ontological security. By self-identifying as vulnerable, the actor not only recognizes its failure to maintain physical security but also pierces the protective cocoon of the ‘stable I’. This ought to lead to an increase in the collective’s anxiety and growth of mistrust vis-à-vis the state. However, this does not have to be the case. Since the strong states’ employment of vulnerability narratives cannot be understood under the auspices of materialistic accounts of International Relations,

this suggests a need to reconsider the possibility of how self-identifications of vulnerability might answer a countries' ideational needs.

3.5. The argument

I theorise that in the case of strong actors, vulnerability narratives have two functions. One, they reduce anxiety about an actor's identity (see next section "Anxiety reduction through narratives of vulnerability"). Warfare against a weaker opponent erodes positive self-perceptions of the powerful state. By self-identifying as vulnerable, a country's action gains a new principled meaning which supports its ontological security. Second, that vulnerability narratives provide the state with the special agency to do more (see section "Special agency through vulnerability narratives" in this chapter). By presenting itself as vulnerable, the state securitises (presents as a threat) a weaker opponent in order to justify offensive action.

These functions of vulnerability narratives accentuate the resilience of identity (see section Resilience of identity). That countries ontological security does not have to be predicated on the stability of the state of affairs. But rather, that safety of self means foremost "the ability to cope with change" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 35).

Function 1. Anxiety reduction through narratives of vulnerability

To better understand the role vulnerability narratives play for the safety of identity of strong belligerents, I employ Misztal's work on the sociology of trust which links ontological security with vulnerability (2011, 2012). In the literature on ontological security, trust is understood as the key building block of ontological security (McSweeney 2004: 155; Steele 2008: 52). For Giddens "trust is directly linked to achieving an early sense of ontological security". It inoculates actors from anxiety about the world (1991: 3). On the other hand, vulnerability is considered to be a source of mistrust about the world and thus leading to the

actor's anxiety and ontological insecurity. This means that the sense of 'vulnerability' is ontological insecurity (1991: 40; also Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 242-243).

In her work, Misztal shares the Giddensian view that trust is "invaluable for overcoming the vulnerability rooted in the unpredictability of experience" (2011: 168). However, she points out that one's perceptions of vulnerability do not have to lead to erosion of trust and thus deterioration of ontological security (also Michel 2013).

Drawing on Beck (1992) and Luhmann (1988), Misztal builds a nuanced sociological reading of the politics of vulnerability. She argues that the meaning of vulnerability-related events depends on actors' personal capabilities and the broader environment. Furthermore, she argues that an actor's identity may be resilient to vulnerability. If they "can be explained within familiar interpretative frameworks" (2011: 123), such events do not have to lead to ontological insecurity. Misztal believes that experiencing vulnerability events is mediated by the actor's broader standing in the "global risk society" (2012: 213). As pointed out by Bauman, vulnerability "depends more on a lack of trust in the defences available than on the volume or nature of actual threats" (2006: 6). Consequently, while vulnerability events and narratives point out to the inherent precarity of life – the very quality that is being traditionally considered to be the disruptor of ontological security – they need not be necessarily equated with ontological insecurity (see Shildrick 2000).

Misztal's approach to vulnerability is interactionist. She points out that "we are all vulnerable because we are dependent on others" (2012: 218). Consequently, in the social context, our vulnerability is dependent on 'trustees' behaviour – namely the ones who are responsible for our wellbeing (Gilbert 2006; Misztal 2011, 2012). Applying Misztal's work to the context of state-collective relations, the key source of people's trust - and the agent responding to their vulnerabilities - is the state.

Misztal's work allows me to emphasize that in case of the strong actor, vulnerability events, narratives and self-identifications do not automatically translate into people's deterioration of trust in states' capabilities to address the vulnerabilities stemming from the environment. The collective reception of the state's vulnerability narratives is mediated by the actual agency and operational capabilities of the actor. The same event may be interpreted as a source of grave danger undermining people's trust in the state and their environment, or be seen as lesser adversity. A cholera outbreak can be perceived as an existential threat to a Sub-Saharan developing state, and a solvable unfortune for a rich member state of the OECD.

This is of key importance for understanding the role vulnerability self-identifications and narratives play in the politics of strong states. The relationship between vulnerability and ontological security is two-directional. In situations where the actor understands its situation as highly risky, vulnerability "increases the probability of distrust" and thus leads to the growth of anxiety and ontological insecurity. On the other hand, one's vulnerability identifications can create "an opportunity to trust" (Misztal 2012: 212), decrease anxieties and support ontological security.

At the heart of this distinction is the role of fear about the physical security of the collective. Threats do not directly construct fears (Furedi 2007: 98). It is our standing and sense-making that decides whether we are vulnerable to particular threats. For the weak state, vulnerability narratives more easily evoke collective's corporeal fears which – especially in the case of existential fears – may lead to cognitive anxieties. This means they often erode public trust. In the case of powerful states, vulnerability narratives have a different function for the population. While their use of vulnerability narratives evokes people's fears about the future of the state, a strong actor by definition is a trustee with significant means allowing it to shield its constituents from physical forms of vulnerabilities. Consequently, while this

form of self-identification may be calling into question the fundamental security of the collective, it rarely brings mistrust in the state's ability to respond to danger.

For the strong state, vulnerability narratives may respond not to corporeal but ontological insecurity. Especially in the case of military confrontations with weaker opponents, strong actor suffers from deficits of ontological security. This phenomenon reflects broader historical changes (see the previous chapter). With the global expansion of the circle of empathy (Singer 1983), emerged new public perceptions that ascribe positive moral values to the precarious actors (e.g. Enns 2012). Wars with underdogs are inherently controversial. Internally they elicit fissures and social unrest. Abroad, they bring international condemnation and - since bystanders tend to sympathize with the weaker party (e.g. Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards 2007; Vandello, Michniewicz and Goldschmied 2011; Belavadi and Hogg 2018) - question the positive image of the state. Research shows that states may be aware of those negative outcomes and offset them by self-identifying as victims (Markiewicz and Sharvit 2021). In such a context, warfare with weak actors is a challenge to the positive self-perceptions of a powerful country. They bring to the fore questions about the state itself. Since the state wants to be seen as a moral agent (e.g. Steele 2007, 2008; Tillich 2000; Zarakol 2010), its actions are a source of anxiety and 'ontological crisis' (see Ejodus 2017; Innes and Steele 2014). Vulnerability narratives address those deficits.

In line with the ontological security studies, the anxiety of the powerful actor caused by war with a weaker opponent ought to be particularly problematic to the safety of its identity. All because the disruption of its self-identity needs (Steele 2005, 2007) is not coming from outside (e.g. Ejodus 2017; Johansson-Nogués 2018; Mitzen 2018; Steele 2005, 2007, 2008; Subotić 2016, Zarakol 2010), but stems from its own decision to use military force. The challenge to its identity comes directly from its own agency allowing it to more freely decide about its mode of action. For domestic and international public opinion, with

greater agency comes greater accountability and responsibility. Due to its unquestionable upper-hand, it is particularly hard for the strong actor to present the conflict as a threat that is independent, separate and completely out of control of its own political decisions. After all, a state with significant military, economic and political means, by its very nature struggles to present foreign military operations as an inevitability. Consequently, the source of deficits of ontological security comes from within. It is the state itself that is the primary source of the state's anxiety.

Vulnerability narratives function as a source of trust that reduces anxiety stemming from armed confrontation with a weaker opponent. This way, they support the actor's ontological security. They are a trust-building mechanism because they provide positive meaning to a strong state's actions. - All states justify their actions, even when such actions compromise existing international principles – argues Steele (2008: 10). Vulnerability narratives are a form of justification that challenges the binary and moralistic perspectives on the military confrontation where the weak is the good David and the powerful state is the evil Goliath. By presenting itself as vulnerable the state offers better reasoning and stronger ethical grounds for its offensive actions. This makes the conflict “knowable” to the public (Mitzen 2006: 354). It secures states' "healthy", positive “sense of self” (Steele 2007: 904).

Furthermore, vulnerability self-identification provides the strong state's collective with a concrete challenge. In his work on the sociopsychological foundations of conflicts, Bar-Tal considers vulnerability as one of the key sources that unify collectives (2007: 1441). Vulnerability narratives allow the actor to provide an explanation for its actions. That is why, paradoxically, by referring to structural uncertainty (Mitzen and Schweller 2011) the state gains certitude for offensive actions. By presenting itself as vulnerable, the state is building public trust that its actions are proportionate, legitimate and justified. Bringing references to the precarity of life mobilizes and unifies collectives, immunizes the ingroup from the stress

caused by its actions and boosts international support (see research on victimhood, e.g. Bar-Tal et al. 2009). While vulnerability narratives point out the threats the state is facing, this practice may provide security to the state's identity. This phenomenon is supported by the studies that link ontological security with the process of designation of threats (see Agius 2017; Kinnvall 2004, 2017; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2013; Steele 2017). There is a growing interest in the processes of how cognitive anxieties and corporeal fears speak to one another.²³ It is argued that existential anxieties are dealt with through warnings about tangible dangers (Croft 2012; Rumelili 2015b). In order to deal with the emerging anxieties, the state may stabilize its identity by altering the attention of the collective. It counteracts the self-reflective, critical evaluations of one's own flawed biography by pointing out the external physical threats. Self-doubt, identity inconsistencies and historical shortcomings are defied by blaming the enemy (e.g. Mälksoo 2015).

To better outline how vulnerability narratives allow strong states to maintain their identity, I distinguish two mechanisms that support the reduction of anxiety. This allows me to examine in a more structured way the functions behind this self-identification. I argue that vulnerability narratives lead to *compartmentalisation* and *rationalisation* of military operations.

Compartmentalisation

Compartmentalisation is a form of evasion. Actors use vulnerability narratives in an attempt to separate themselves from the unequal nature of the fight. This form of self-identification makes it easier for the state to disregard problematic information that could lead to cognitive dissonance and disruption of ontological security (see Lupovici 2012; Steele 2005). Vulnerability self-identifications allow the actor to focus on their own difficulties and

²³ More on the practice of the securitisation (designation of physical dangers) in the context of ontological anxieties see Huysmans 1998: 242; Steele 2008: 64.

thus support circumventing the critique and negative perceptions of the conflict. This helps the actor to better cope with the stress caused by the fight.

Rationalisation

Rationalisation is a form of justification. Vulnerability narratives offer strong actors legitimising meaning to their military operations against the underdog. They are a repository of reasons buttressing the ontological security of the state. By bringing this self-identification, the state provides a sense of urgency and importance to its offensive actions. Accentuating its precarity helps to better explain and rationalise the use of the state's resources. Vulnerability narratives are a sense-making practice because they offer a positive view (Steele 2007; 2008) on controversial action. One that is cohering present with "the 'good past'" (Subotić 2016: 614) by offering a "comprehensive understanding of the conflict" (Bar-Tal et al. 2009: 243).

By evading (compartmentalisation) and justifying (rationalisation) its war against a weak opponent, strong state brackets out' fundamental anxieties (Giddens 1991: 44) about inherently contentious policy.

In order to empirically investigate the mechanisms of compartmentalisation as well as rationalisation, I argue that:

- Compartmentalisation

Vulnerability narratives will be accompanying discourse about the state's offensive actions, the enemy's causalities and other material that disrupts positive views of the state's self.

- Rationalisation

Vulnerability narratives will be used along with arguments presenting the state's actions as an inevitability. Furthermore, they will be discursively accompanied by positive depictions of the state.

Function 2. Special agency through vulnerability narratives

While vulnerability narratives respond to ideational anxieties (see above), they also designate physical threats. I propose that by referring to vulnerability, strong actors gain special agency. Vulnerability narratives underscore the image of the country's precarious physical situatedness – by warning against threats. While – as argued in the previous section – due to the standing of the powerful actor, they rarely lead to erosion of public trust and emergence of pervasive existential dread, this theme is used to speak to constituents' fears and concerns. Consequently, vulnerability narratives serve as leverage supporting strong actor's military engagement against the underdog. To better understand this practice, I employ the theory of securitisation. I argue that vulnerability narratives allow a strong state to securitise its weak enemy. This means that they hand it over a right to do more.

Vulnerability narratives can be simultaneously used in the political spheres to soothe and to worry. We are most used to the first form of political vulnerability. States constantly point out how they protect us against vulnerabilities. Health systems give us lifesaving treatments. The police fight against crime on our streets. The judicial system defends us against unfair treatment. However, political actors use vulnerability also to increase our unease. This helps authorities to shift our attention and promote its policies (Elias 1986: 45).

Securitisation is understood as an action of the state to name certain issues security problems (Wæver 1995: 57-8). It is a tool used to influence constituents and to include policies into the governmental agenda. By calling something a security problem, decision-makers gain a "special right" (1995: 54), a license to implement policies to deal with the challenge. Consequently, securitisation acts are essentially political enablers. By convincing a collective that it should be aware of a particular threat (Van Rythoven 2015), states do try to secure support for their initiatives that declaratively deal with the problem (e.g. Huysmans 1998).

The concept is a key focal point for Copenhagen School and constructivist security studies. The focal interest of researchers looking at securitisation is to analyse how security problems are introduced, promoted and dismissed (1995). However, to reflect the context of strong states vulnerability-based securitisations, I am using Floyd's revision of this securitisation theory. While Copenhagen School traditionally defines securitisations successful only when they have been accepted by the audience, I consider securitisation as successful when the designation of threat is entwined with the actor's change in behaviour (Floyd 2010: 5)

Securitisation is constituted through language²⁴ and reflected in a speech act (e.g. Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998; McSweeney 1996; for a critique see e.g. Mirow 2016: 40; Williams 2003). Securitisation is interpreted as a distinct discursive formation, a linguistic signifier that can change social order (Huysmans 1998: 232) and manage politics (Dillon 1996).

Since vulnerability narratives refer to our liability to being harmed (Misztal 2011: 1), for the state they are a key component evoking threats and thus a crucial referent of securitisations. Vulnerability narratives are discursively coupled with securitisations. Democratic regimes seek legitimacy for securitisations by tying them with vulnerability to try to gain their audience's (at least partial) acceptance that securitisation is dealing with the collective insecurities. – I have stuff stolen. (...) I have seen boats full of guys. I had to sit out there with my BB gun, so they do not come across (...) Build that wall. Go ahead – it is voices and beliefs like those of Andres Montemayor, a retired policeman from Texas, that gave the former US president Donald Trump the idea to erect a wall along the border with Mexico, a much-needed justification. One cannot understand his electoral success in 2016,

²⁴ For a critique of the language-focused conceptualisations of securitisation see Balzacq 2010.

and securitisation of Muslim communities and immigrants, without considering his references to the unease of blue-collar America (Enders and Armaly 2021).

In political practice, vulnerability narratives are almost always tied by states with identifications of threats. After all, there is no political capital to be gained from insecurities that cannot be addressed by the polity. Dangers that cannot be confronted by the state, question its credibility. Consequently, especially powerful actors, may present particular phenomena as threatening to gain a special right to employ their resources and securitise the issue. It is a common practice of statecraft to raise an issue of vulnerability to do something about (constructively or not) what will be designated as a source of this state. As argued by Hansen: “policy discourse is (...) relying upon particular constructions of problems” (2006: 15).

Empirically we can trace this process by looking at the broader narrative constructs that surround states’ securitisation. The analysis of security practices shows that threat-related speech acts are often embedded in/or coupled with broader narratives of vulnerability. Securitisations are argumentatively accompanied by vulnerability narrations. This issue is particularly visible in the case of strong states who at times have to justify using force against weak opponents. For example, when on 14th of November 2012, former president of Israel Shimon Peres, was talking about the airstrike that killed Ahmed Jabari, head of the Gaza military wing of Hamas (leading to the Operation Pillar of Defense), he coupled the decision to securitise Hamas with the description of the troubles and distress of border communities:

“Our intention is not to raise the flames, but already for days, day and night, they are shooting rockets at Israel. Women and children cannot sleep at night. I visited Sderot this morning and saw with my own eyes the pain of these mothers and children, and the difficulty the South is facing. You know, there are limits. So, I want you to know and I wanted to explain our motives” (Peres 2012).

The vulnerability narrative is a socially embedded discursive theme that animates the security act. To employ Abulof’s expression, this is what makes “a securitising train” leave

“the rhetorical platform” (2014: 402). Securitisation to be more socially acceptable, must refer to and build on collective vulnerabilities (real or imagined). While I am not making claims about the actual societal resonance of strong state vulnerability-based securitisations (see the following section), vulnerability narratives play a key role in the state’s practice of trying to convince people about the saliency of threats.

Furthermore, the vulnerability narrative is a foundation of securitisation. It functions as a justification (see Floyd 2010: 5-6) for the right to do more. Something is being securitised (e.g. Hamas) to protect the vulnerable (e.g. mothers and children of Sderot). By tying in the securitisation with vulnerability self-identifications, a strong actor gives meaning to its military action against the underdog. While I do not claim that securitisations have to be justified by the state (see Floyd 2016) or predicated on vulnerability references, the war-time practice of strong states employing vulnerability narratives shows that vulnerability narratives are being used as a justification for the special agency.²⁵

To better outline how vulnerability narratives allow strong states to securitise weaker opponents, I distinguish two mechanisms that support this special agency for offensive action. This allows me to examine in a more structured way functions behind this self-identification. I argue that this function has two components.

Weakness

I anticipate that by narrating their vulnerability, strong states gain a tool that allows them to question their superior status. I expect that vulnerability narratives will be discursively accompanied with depictions rendering, underscoring the scale of external threats and/or ingroup’s victimhood. Strong states employ vulnerability narratives to present

²⁵ This practice is of great importance, since for democracies warfare almost always comes hand-in-hand with securitisation. After all, the use of extraordinary emergency measures ought to be somehow justified. Consequently, aside from some low-intensity military clashes, the opponent ought to be presented as a source of existential threat to deem the war legitimate.

the enemy as a source of threat. This allows presenting military operations against the underdog as an inevitability, a logical outcome of their precarious situation. By tying in vulnerability self-identifications with designations of threats the state contextualises its actions and presents them as a response to injustice (“we are hitting back”). Portraying itself as endangered serves as a foundation for following its mobilization of support to attack the enemy.

Strength

Secondly, I anticipate that the strong states use narratives of vulnerability to mobilise their constituents. Weakness was a foundation for strength, a source of agency. Actors are referring to physical threats and tie this with motivating calls, descriptions of solutions to the problem.

In order to empirically investigate the mechanisms of weakness and following it strength, I anticipate that:

- Weakness

Vulnerability narratives will be discursively accompanied with warnings about the enemy and depictions underscoring the ingroup’s insecurity.

- Strength

Vulnerability narratives will be discursively accompanied with depictions of the state’s response to the threat.

Revised securitisation

It is important to note that my understanding of securitisation differs in two aspects from the ‘traditional’ readings of this concept. First, I am not considering audience acceptance as a necessary foundation of successful securitisation. This revision reflects the specific character of the phenomenon under review, which by its very nature is a successful

securitisation. My theorisation abstracts from evaluating the causal importance of the audience, since the study focuses on a universe of cases where the (vulnerability-based) securitisation is sanctioning an ongoing use of “extraordinary defensive moves” (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998: 204). Namely, vulnerability narratives have already provided the strong state with the special agency to employ military means against the underdog.

While the Copenhagen School is based on a claim that successful securitisations allow states to act (e.g. Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998) it does not answer the question of what actually constitutes successful securitisation (see Guzzini 2011: 331; Watson 2012: 298). While originally the literature stipulated the importance of external validation of the security act: “the issue is securitised only if and when the audience accepts it as such” (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998: 25), almost twenty years later the issue still remains largely undertheorized (Baele and Thomson 2017: 651) and needs to be further tested empirically (for experimental studies see Baele et al. 2019). The debate about this issue continues providing new perspectives and approaches to the politics of securitisation (e.g. Abulof 2014; Balzacq, Léonard and Ruzicka 2016; Floyd 2010, 2007, 2016; McDonald 2008).

Due to the character of strong states securitisations, the dissertation draws on a revised securitisation theory developed by Floyd (2007, 2010, 2016, 2019). Her studies show that the acceptance of the audience is not a necessary condition for securitisation. Instead, the designation of threats by the state “is successful simply when it is brought into existence” (2010: 54). This means situations when the state amended its policy based on the designation of threat (2010: 5). The case of strong states war-time vulnerability narratives is a telling example of this phenomenon. After all, the actor’s use of the military against the underdog is an outcome of (vulnerability-based) securitisation of the enemy. While throughout the conflict the state often continuously raises the issue of its vulnerability and the looming threats – providing justification for its action - the ongoing combat operations are a “security

practice” on its own (2010: 5). My understanding of securitisation is not dismissing the important role constituents may play in securitisation practices. However, this dissertation does not need to determine the extent to which the public is behind the success of vulnerability narratives’ securitisations. The case of strong states using vulnerability as a warning against the underdog - at a time when they are involved in combat against this ‘threat’ – is a conspicuously successful securitisation.

Secondly, in my work, I am not employing critical security studies normative approach to securitisation which is “traditionally concerned with the negative effects” of this practice (Floyd 2019: 2). This decision speaks to the type of questions I am asking about the vulnerability-based securitisation of strong states. This study does not seek to provide answers to the moral status or the ethical consequences of securitisation. Instead, it is looking for the reasons and functions of this practice. Furthermore, it reflects the underlying theoretical foundation of the whole dissertation which approaches states vulnerability narratives foremost from the ideational perspective.

Securitisation is increasingly defined as a Machiavellian tool, a manipulative *modus operandi* and a divisive strategy that elites employ for their profit. This approach presents securitisation as leverage of strong entities that pragmatically use people’s worries. Writing about the deterioration of the rule of law across the EU, an Amnesty International report on national security concluded that since 2014 politics of securitisation have established “a world in which fear, alienation and prejudice are steadily chipping away at the cornerstones of the EU: fairness, equality and non-discrimination” (Amnesty International 2017: 6). Securitisation is linked with othering (Hellberg 2011) and with processes instigating sectarianisms and divisions (Darwich and Fakhoury 2016). Buzan, Wæver and Wilde perceive it as a tool of regime continuation, a process that can lead to destabilization of economy, social coherence and freedoms of civil society. They associate it with authoritarian,

anti-liberal forces seeking legitimization of their goals (1998: 208-9). Hussain and Bagguley go further and equate security acts with moral panic (2012: 718). Liberal democracies are accused of using securitisation as a tool arbitrarily imposing threats and undermining human rights and democratic values (e.g. Aradau and Van Munster 2007, 2009). Security is treated as a method that is used *ad hoc* to solve political actor's problems. It is "quality actors inject into issues" and "stage them in political arena" (Buzan, Wæver and Wilde 1998: 204).

The perception of securitisation as a pragmatic, calculated tool of political enabling stems from the normative character of Copenhagen School. It advocates against securitisation, associates it with illiberal, undemocratic currents that undermine human rights and freedoms through the promotion of fear. It calls for the desecuritisation of societies, and as a panacea for securitisation ills, suggests societal self-emancipation. Buzan, Wæver and Wilde couple progress with limiting "claims to security" and equate securitisation with socio-political failure (1998: 29; 209), Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking (2013) call for communal resistance against the securitised order. Aradau (2004: 390) argues that desecuritisation can be used in a fight for emancipation, "universality and recognition", Jutila proposes measures that could help us to oppose the securitisation of history and national projects (2015). Writing about the construction of identity of the European Union, Hellberg argues that securitisation is a new continental strategy of exclusion (2011: 10).

While for the Copenhagen School "it is the duty of the securitisation analyst to point to the importance of desecuritization" (Wæver in Floyd 2019: 4), due to the character of the study, I act foremost as an analyst of identity. While the evaluations of security studies may ethically be right, in the context of vulnerability-based securitisations, I recognize I cannot treat them as a governmental "political technology" (Bigo 2002: 65) that brings exclusionary measures. In my theory about strong states' war-time use of vulnerability narratives (see "Identity as a tool of analysis" section in this chapter), securitisation is a function of

vulnerability self-identifications of countries. Vulnerabilities are not a simple utility maximising tool and are used by the actor to foremost address the identity needs of the polity and its collective. Consequently, I avoid making authoritative judgments about the moral nature of this practice. To do so, in the case of the dissertation, I would have to know whether the vulnerability narratives used by the state reflect its true vulnerability. The task of answering whether a particular self-identification of the state was real or fabricated would directly question the constructivist character of the dissertation. Since I am looking at the universe of cases where the threat is designated by tying it with the actor's own vulnerability self-identification (real, fake or imagined), this form of securitisation has a clear ideational dimension. Vulnerability narratives speak to state – and collective – identity needs. The securitisations I am researching were brought to life on references to nations precarity. Thus, they are not an 'ingredient' that Hobbesian Leviathan incorporates/withdraws at will, all because the inclusion of securitisation constructs the identity of the actor itself. Vulnerabilities are not only the descriptor of the surrounding conditions of the securitizer. They have a profound constitutive effect on the actor's identity. They mediate between "life and death" (Huysmans 1998: 226). If the state points out it is threatened by the danger, it recognizes its vulnerability. This affects its position, identification, and image.

The predication of security on vulnerability exposes the constitutive dimension of securitisation. While security acts can change the horizon of acceptable state policies, they speak to actors' self-identifications. Consequently, they function as a reductive-enabler – a figure that simultaneously opens up, and limits possibilities of statecraft. Securitisation partially undermines the actor's image: by acting weak, states make themselves look weak. Naturally, in the process, they 'appeal' for new prerogatives, but by doing so, they bring attention to the actors' own incapacity. This double-track was captured in the anti-immigration rhetoric of Hungary PM Viktor Orban. In 2015, to gain support for the new

methods of border policing, Orban pictured a state in profound distress: “They [immigrants] are overrunning us. They're not just banging on the door, they're breaking the doors down on top of us. Our borders are under threat. Hungary is under threat” (Orban 2015). Shortly after his speech, the Hungarian parliament voted for broadening the powers of the army.

The presented research perspective does not exclude the possibility of manipulative intentions behind securitisations. As it is well captured by the Copenhagen School scholarship, securitisation can distort the factual, substantiated reasoning. Furthermore, vulnerability narratives of a strong state have a clear instrumental dimension. They are tied by the state with designations of threat precisely to increase its agency in fighting against the underdog. Importantly, strong states’ willingness to gain vulnerability status during conflicts points out the benefits that come with this image.

However, my research orientation accounts for the context and processual character of vulnerability-based security acts. Research on security practices ought to pay attention to the references of securitisations. It “must take into account not only structural securitising moves justified through a politics of exception and fear, but also the vulnerabilities that make such a politics possible” (Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2013). While I recognize that security issues can be brought to the political agenda due to the ambitions of the ruling class, I show that in order to refer to the threat, political actors predicate securitisations on identifications. While I agree with Buzan, Wæver and Wilde that political actors “stage” security acts on the “political arena” (1998: 204), I dispute the illocutionary nature of securitisation (see Floyd 2010: 52-53). In this perspective actors implant security.

To further develop Buzan’s play metaphor, one would say, that by placing security on the platform of the political theatre, the actor is changing not only “the pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts” (Goffman 1978: 5) its playing out to the audience, but that it is changing the play itself. By behaving as it is threatened, he enacts a vulnerable role. He acts out a role that

is predicated on the “potential for harm and trauma that can emerge in the absence of safety” (Beattie 2016: 229). This has a far-reaching consequence for the actor and determines the dramaturgical character of the subsequent performance. Consequently, vulnerability-based securitisation should not be analysed as a strategy of impression management (while it may be treated this way by some agents). It is a performance and an ideational process that defines the role played out by the actor.

3.6. List of functions

In this section, I present an outline of theorised functions of war-time vulnerability narratives of strong states. Each function is accompanied by the description of the empirically observable theoretical expectation.

1. Anxiety reduction. A strong state’s employment of narratives of vulnerability reduces anxiety about the actor’s identity. It fulfils ideational, ‘ontological’ needs of the state involved in conflict by offering positive self-perceptions and understanding of the warfare against a weaker opponent.

- **Compartmentalisation.** The state’s employment of vulnerability narratives helps to evade discomfort caused by an actor’s fight with a weaker opponent.

Vulnerability narratives will be accompanying discourse about the state’s offensive actions, the enemy’s causalities and other material that disrupts positive views of the state’s self.

- **Rationalisation.** State’s employment of vulnerability narratives provides a justification for military operations against the underdog.

Vulnerability narratives will be used alongside discourse presenting the state's actions as an inevitability. Furthermore, they will be discursively accompanied by positive depictions of the state.

2. Special agency. Strong state's employment of narratives of vulnerability securitizes weaker opponent. This allows the strong actor to operate more freely against its enemy. State simultaneously points out a threat and a solution mobilizing its constituents.

- **Weakness.** The state's employment of narratives of vulnerability challenges its superior status.

Vulnerability narratives will be discursively accompanied with warnings about the enemy and depictions underscoring the ingroup's insecurity.

- **Strength.** The state's employment of narratives of vulnerability serves as a reason to act against the threat.

Vulnerability narratives will be discursively accompanied with depictions of the state's response to the threat.

3.7. Resilience of identity

The thesis contributes to the ontological security studies by pointing out a new research avenue for the investigations of the resilience of identity. The functions vulnerability narratives play for strong states suggest that a country's understanding of self does not have to be predicated on the stability of the state of affairs. But rather, that the safety of the self means foremost resilience, which is the "actor's capacity to cope with uncertainty and change" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 35).

The employment of vulnerability narratives by strong actors is an example of the resilience of identity. This is a practice that supports states' biographical consistency in times

of crisis. The phenomenon of powerful actors use of military might against the underdog shows that states can retain ontological security while acting and identifying in a novel way; or even while engaging in actions that disrupt their sense of self.

In the following sections, I describe the resilience of identity. This perspective shows that states adapt their autobiographies to their evolving behaviour and ideational needs. Furthermore, the state's identity can be protected from a critique of its actions. I conceptualise two possible pathways leading to the resilience of self. First, actors present their actions as reflecting state identifications. Secondly, they innovate their storytelling while keeping it in line with the core autobiographical apparatus of the actor.

Importantly, I do not rule out other avenues leading to the resilience of identity²⁶. The recognition of the resilience of identity came about through observation of strong states employment of vulnerability narratives (see Chapter 4). The dramaturgical dimension of this practice illustrated that ontological security is not only an identity preservation process but foremost an ability to cope with change. In the context of the dissertation, this observation had the status of analytical groundwork, rather than a fixed theoretical argument. It shaped my theorisation about the role ontological security plays in a state's behaviour. I was developing it while I was investigating the reasons behind Israel's and the UK's use of vulnerability narratives (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2009).

In order to present the compatibility of my approach with the core tenets of the concept of ontological security, I start by discussing the role of change in the ontological security scholarship.

²⁶ Alternative reading of actors with a de facto resilient identity was captured in Hagström's (2021) recent study of great powers. However, his understanding of this phenomenon differs from mine since he assumes that states ontological security may be unchallenged by the new developments due to actor's narcissistic self-absorption that ignores external critique. This dissertation's empirical field work problematizes this view, since both Israel's and the UK's narratives showed a deep influence of self-reflexivity on their self-identifications.

Ontological security: a force for change

The primary theoretical concern and one of the biggest empirical contributions of ontological security studies is the examination of measures states employ to protect their identity. The ontological security research project gives primacy to states' ideational goals over the physical world (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005). The concept nuances our understanding of the motives behind state actions. It brings to our attention cases of state behaviour that is addressing self-identity needs that may be non-strategic. Research on ontological security explains that states may pursue costly actions because they fulfil their self-identity needs. That their actions may be driven by moral, humanitarian and honour considerations (Steele 2008). It has conclusively been theorized and illustrated that states employ a vast array of practices²⁷ that are used to protect the stability of state identifications, and bring about "a stable narrative" (Zarakol 2010: 7; also Kinnval 2004). Drawing on interpretive analysis of the case of British neutrality during the American Civil War, the 1914 "Rape of Belgium" and the 1999 NATO Kosovo operation – Steele (2008) claims that states' actions firstly fulfil their self-identity needs. Challenging the rationalist perspectives that the main goal of state actors is self-preservation; he shows that identity can be a guiding force that may make states willing to even "compromise their physical existence" (2008: 2). For instance, in 1914 Belgium decided to not grant Germany access to its territory. Consequently, its honour and prestige were more important than its security.

Ontological security studies have contributed to our understanding of states' behaviour and the intractability of conflicts. It has provided a toolbox for solving the puzzle of states' seemingly irrational political behaviours such as state's involvement in hopeless military operations (Steele 2008), long-lasting involvement in conflicts of non-strategic importance (Subotić 2016), expenditures on humanitarian aid (Steele 2007), attachment to

²⁷ Browning (2018b: 338) calls such mechanisms 'ontological security enhancements'.

lost territories (Ejdus 2017) and protracted conflicts (Mitzen 2006). They showed how ontological security can be destabilised by foreign actors manipulating a state's internal affairs (Bolton 2021), how ontological security may support unwarranted certainty of statesman and can lead to flawed decision making (Mitzen and Schweller 2011), or that lack of certainty can exacerbate competition (Delehanty and Steele 2009; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2011). The concept of ontological security helps us to account for the role of identifications, prestige, collective memory in a state's behaviour.

While these findings are very important, they do not reflect the full spectrum of the possible outcomes of the pursuit of ontological security. Especially change or innovation in states' self-identifications and behaviour. Previous research concentrated on exposing the constraining role of ontological security in statecraft. This focus is understandable when we consider the main 'contender' of the constructivist foundations of the ontological security concept. Namely the realist approach to security. For realists, states are rational actors. They are 'self-help' driven safety seekers perennially involved in a search for relative gains vis-à-vis other state actors (e.g. Waltz 1979). The main driving force behind their behaviour is a strive to acquire power: "International politics, like all politics, is a struggle for power. Whatever the ultimate aims of international politics, power is always the immediate aim" (Morgenthau 1997: 25).

Consequently, the primary goal for the ontological security theorists was to challenge the power-oriented approaches to the IR. Seminal works by Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008) has shown that states' behaviour can have detrimental effects on their ability to project power and that their decisions are primarily guided not by rational calculations but by self-identity needs. They laid the foundations for novel research on the role of identity in politics. Following publications mostly focused on exposing how identity can curb a country's agency (e.g. Johansson-Nogués 2018; Lupovici 2012; Rumelili and Çelik 2017). To illustrate,

Subotić and Zarakol (2012) studied the effects of criticism by international actors on the state's behaviour and perceptions. They described how loss of international legitimacy and acceptance leads to feelings of guilt and shame and consequently guides states' self-identifications. Mitzen showed how the EU's identity suppresses liberalisation of migration governance and precludes the Union from establishing cohesive measures promoting "political creativity" (Mitzen 2018). Looking at the process of the 2000s use of torture by the CIA, Steele (2017) implied that routines and identities of the institutions of the state can be determined not by the interest of the state but by the changes in the public opinion.

While the ideational forces often limit and shape states' behaviour, they should not be interpreted as containment of statecraft. It is true that the need for ontological security has restrictive capabilities however, it also provides opportunities for change or innovation in states' self-identifications. Thus, it can be a foundation for behavioural novelty. The internal logic of the theory of ontological security is predicated on the recognition of this possibility. Quest for ontological security is not only a way of keeping identity stable but also is a foundation of ideational and operational change.

Giddens explains that "day-to-day routines" bracket out the anxieties (1991: 38) and shows that actors follow meaning-making habits and prefer to repeat previously successful behaviours. At the same time, he warns that the preference for what is known and tested does not mean that actors only reproduce conventions. He warns about the 'deep-lying ambivalences' of routines and argues that: "Routine activities, as Wittgenstein made clear, are never just carried out automatically. In respect of control of the body and discourse, the actor must maintain constant vigilance to be able to 'go on' in social life" (1991: 40). Actors do revise their behaviour in order to support their agency. The safety as being not only enables them to function and limit anxieties. Ontological security may be a key ingredient of change. Thanks to it actor "can live out into the world and met others" (Laing 2010: 3). Laing

ties ontological security with agency and points out that, the feeling of “presence in the world as a real, alive, whole” helps the actor to get engage in the “hazards of life” (2010: 3). Also, Mitzen notices that ontological security does not mean simple behavioural rigidity and argues that actors may act reflexively (2006). Mitzen (2006), Browning and Joenniemi (2017), as well as Giddens (1991), use Erikson’s (1963) basic trust term to show that actors have an ability to change their routines and “take a critical distance toward them” (Mitzen 2006: 350). Giddens also links creativity and innovation with ontological security and argues that without it, the actor will not be able to ‘leap into the unknown’ and ‘embrace novel experiences (1991: 42). Mitzen (2006) underlines that routines are not ends in themselves and recognizes that actors do have an ability to modify their policies while retaining their OS.²⁸

Identity and resilience

The critique offered here does not argue that the ontological security studies are flawed. I am not questioning the validity of the core assumptions present in the literature.²⁹ Instead, my aim is to draw attention to the fact that the state’s search for secure identity does not necessarily have to be predicated on the sense of stability of the actor and its surroundings. Instead, I focus on the resilience of identity and alternative mechanisms that support states’ self. I respond to calls by Solomon (2018), Browning and Joenniemi (2017) for a more open understanding of ontological security. They argue that the safety of being does not have to be predicated on cognitive stability. Drawing on empirical evidence from the Arab spring, Solomon shows that ontological security can be enhanced in precisely unstable, uncertain circumstances. He suggests that collectives can actually derive ontological certainty from common precarious experiences such as political turmoil (2018). This thesis is speaking to their work by advocating for alternative readings of ontological security. While it does not

²⁸ While she associates these innovative capabilities of states with reflective and positive security seeking action, I believe that feeling of being OS can support innovation in other contexts.

²⁹ For a critical appraisal of the role OS plays in the study of international relations see Lebow 2016.

share the same ontological assumptions, it also echoes new psychoanalytical readings of ontological security which employ Lacanian (1977) tradition to emphasize the aspirational character of the pursuit of ontological security (Eberle 2019; Hagström 2021; Vieira 2018).

For ontological security studies, the ontological self has primacy over the physical world. Indeed, states often support identity by following routines, even in the face of great challenges. For example, Serbia even after accepting the authority of the Kosovo government in 2013 still based its identifications on the same “narrative tropes” which perceived the region as a Serbian cradle (Subotić 2016: 424). Japan and Turkey continue to dismiss their historical crimes - despite being directly challenged by their neighbours (Zarakol 2010). However, states may pursue policies that challenge their ontological security. Such practice is well illustrated in the case of strong state’s engaging in the war with the underdog. For example, this phenomenon is captured in the case of increasingly controversial Turkish regional policies. Over the last years country’s costly military incursions into the Syrian and Iraqi territories were a direct challenge to President Tayyip Erdogan’s identification of the state. Under his rule, Ankara has been building its self-perceptions by identifying as an embattled victim of powerful forces (Al-Ghazzi 2012; Yilmaz 2017), a “vanguard of the Muslim world” (Taş 2020: 10). However, operations such as the 2019 Turkish offensive into north-eastern Syria have brought international condemnation and significantly deteriorated the country’s relations with the Muslim world (Reuters 2019). Repeated successful use of the Turkish military undermined its victim status. It showed that the geopolitical issues – such as tackling the problem of Syrian refugees as well as the Kurdistan Workers Party – may have primacy over the positive self-perceptions of the state. In response to diverging views about these actions, after the 2019 operation, Erdogan dramatized the state’s use of power by presenting it as a “struggle similar to our Independence War”. He employed conspiratorial

tones warning about the state being “under multi-faceted attacks” endangering its future sovereignty (Erdogan 2019).

Furthermore, the fact that states are driven by anxiety-avoidance, does not mean that anxiety cannot be put to work. While “our inner Selves are an environment of their own” (Steele 2008: 34), they cannot be interpreted as a realm altogether separated from our surroundings (see Solomon 2018). Neither can they be reduced to a protective cocoon stabilising the state’s identity from external stressors. Ontological security “also requires flexibility and adaptability” (Browning and Joenniemi 2017: 44) and may be utilised not only as a force protective (ideationally) but also proactive (physically). While states do things to protect their ontological security, ontological anxieties are also used as an enabler to states’ actions. When in September 2001 President George Bush was pointing out to a joint session of Congress:

“Be ready. I’ve called the Armed Forces to alert, and there is a reason. The hour is coming when America will act, and you will make us proud. This is not, however, just America’s fight. And what is at stake is not just America’s freedom. This is the world’s fight. This is civilization’s fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom” (Bush 2001).

He was not only supporting the ontological security of the state. While the speech was providing cohesion and stability to anxious Americans, its purpose was clearly enabling. American identity and American self-perceptions were animated through Bush’s perlocutionary act. The need for ontological security was employed as an ideational motivation for the US’ coming invasion of Afghanistan.

Lastly, ontological security-seeking can promote resilience of identity. Since states – as their constituents – are self-reflexive (Giddens 1991; Steele 2005), they avoid shame and strive for respect (Subotić and Zarakol 2013) they may pursue policies and identifications that will protect them from critique. The fact that powerful states such as Turkey, the US or Russia, when they are involved in more controversial foreign policies, often gravitate towards

vulnerability-based identifications is a poignant illustration of this phenomenon. It is not a coincidence that when in 2014 Russia decided to annex Crimea, president Putin presented Ukrainian politicians as a critical security threat and a group of dangerous “Nationalists, neo-Nazis, Russophobes and anti-Semites” (Putin 2014).

Two pathways of resilience

I contend that states follow two pathways supporting ideational resilience. First, they present their actions as consistent with state identifications. Secondly, they innovate their biographical storytelling. Both pathways have dramaturgical qualities because they are aimed at impressing the audience in order to gain their support for the state’s actions.

The first pathway enables the actors to act freely. It provides a tool to deal with the potential critique of behavioural inconsistency, while also supporting the maintenance of a coherent image. Such was the case of the Soviet Union which during the Great Purge still declaratively embraced the Leninist principle of national self-determination while actively persecuting ethnic minorities – under the guise of the fight with the ‘fifth column’ (Snyder 2010).

States have significant freedom in how they follow their ideational self-perceptions. For example, Great Britain claims it plays a pivotal role in “making a constructive difference in the Middle East” (Hunt: 2019). It presents itself as a champion of the humanitarian support of war-torn Yemen. Its close ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are portrayed as a crucial leverage state is capitalising on to push for a multilateral peace deal. At the same time both states - which are accused of human rights abuses and war crimes in Yemen - are one of the UK’s biggest arms recipients. The foreign secretary Jeremy Hunt portrays the country’s policy as supporting British moral high ground:

“We could halt our military exports and sever the ties that British governments of all parties have carefully preserved for decades, as critics are urging. But in doing so we would also surrender our influence and make ourselves irrelevant to the course of events in Yemen. Our policy would be simply to leave the parties to fight it out while denouncing them impotently from the sidelines. That would be morally bankrupt and the people of Yemen would be the biggest losers” (Hunt: 2019).

Employing the theatrical metaphor of international relations (Schimmelfennig 2002), Hunt’s performance is bridging the state’s acts with the state’s identifications. The actor plays to the audience – especially British citizens - by claiming that the state actions are in line with its role. The actor keeps a narrative and performative façade that supports its ontological security. The case of the UK shows that countries can have a significant agency in interpreting the role prescribed to them by their self-perceptions. While the UK is involved in activities that may be perceived as destabilising the Middle East, its representatives are involved in performative actions (for details see Methodology chapter) positioning the state as an ethical party e.g., by accentuating that the state is contributing to humanitarian aid in Yemen (Hunt: 2019). The country’s policies are presented as supporting its ideals and thus reinforce ontological security.

However, the UK is employing its identifications not only to feel good about itself or to avoid shame (e.g. Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010). Its presentation of self helps the state to gain agency to act freely in the Middle East while playing out the principled role the state is self-identifying with. The UK’s case shows that state actors can keep the safety of being even in challenging circumstances. While each of the identifications influences and limits the scope of ontologically acceptable behaviours, they do not exclude the state’s agency to apply different course of actions that support (or at least not dismiss) the biographical story-telling. The same identification can be interpreted and acted out in different ways. Furthermore, by supporting ontological security and thus its self-perception of Britain as a principled actor, the state gains the freedom to do more. Namely to keep its ties with authoritarian regimes. Paradoxically then, the demand for a coherent ‘self’ is utilized in the state’s rationalisations

about its new form of action. British society's ongoing search for meaning and understanding of nation-self is utilised by the very same state which presents its seemingly incompatible actions as a logical consequence of its values.

By presenting their actions as compatible with collective identifications, actors try to legitimize behaviour that may have been interpreted as disruptive to the state's self-perceptions. This way, they respond to but also try to prevent the rise of anxiety. Arguing for the ideational consistency of actions helps the state to be proactive and to broaden its behavioural repertoire. This resilient pathway suggests a link between ontological security and defence mechanisms aimed at reducing cognitive dissonances (Festinger 1957). As a political practice, it may be compared to the psychological defence mechanism of denial, where the actor refuses to accept external criticism of its actions (Gosling, Denizeau and Oberlé 2006). Similarly, to avoid recognising the discrepancy between their claims and actions, individuals deny wrongdoing by presenting their actions as being in line with their biographical aspirations.

The second resilient pathway of ontological security is based on innovative biographical storytelling. It helps the actor to lay the ground for the new behavioural patterns without disrupting the foundational identifications of the collective. In his study of the processes of discursive legitimation, Jackson portrays how after World War II the US political elites promoted a new vision of what is 'the West' and 'Western Civilization' (2006). He argues that in order to support the reconstruction of Germany, the country was rhetorically included in Western Europe and the broader Atlantic Community. His work offers a detailed analysis of how American (and German) political debates created a discursive 'occidentalist commonplace' where Germany was no longer described as an enemy of the West, but an integral part and a bulwark of the Western civilisation (2006: 72). As pointed out on 4 December 1945 by the US Senator James Eastland:

“Germany has served both as a neutralizing agent and as a barrier between the Oriental hordes and a western civilization 2,000 years old (...) and the time has come for the American people to be told what it would mean if Germany, the most highly industrialized country in Europe, were to be incorporated into a totalitarian tyranny (...) of totalitarian Communists who have preached openly throughout the world the doctrine that there is nothing left in western civilization worth preserving, and who have been and are the greatest persecutors of the Christian Church since the Mohammedan invasion of Spain” (Jackson 2006: 134).

American elites broadened the meaning of Western civilisation to support robust anti-Soviet policies, their military presence in Europe and reconstruction efforts. At the same time, their identifications did not challenge the core of American ontological self-description. By using a well-known identification of the US as a defender of the liberal values and the ‘free world’, and by pointing out the importance of the close cultural and religious ties between then ‘new’ and the ‘old continent’, they were drawing on a set of identity tropes essential to nation’s ontological security. The occidentalist argument was an innovative method of storytelling that not only helped to legitimise new policies but importantly, did not challenge the American biography. In January 1948, when the US Secretary of State George Marshall was arguing for the European Recovery Program, he underlined that economic aid to Europe is necessary for the survival of the Western world. He linked European and German freedom with the sustenance of *Libertas Americana* (Jackson 2006: 61). In defence of the American presence in Europe, the influential journalist and intellectual Walter Lipmann argued that Europe is the US’ natural ally since both are members of the Atlantic community:

“The boundaries of the Atlantic community are not sharp and distinct, particularly in the case of the Germans and the Western Slavs (...) But the nucleus of the Atlantic community is distinct and unmistakable, and among the nations that are indisputably members of the Atlantic community there exists a vital connection founded upon their military and political geography, the common traditions of western Christendom, and their economic, political, legal, and moral institutions which, with all their variations and differences, have a common origin and have been shaped by much the same historic experience” (Jackson 2006: 154).

These rhetorical practices innovate the processes of a country’s biographical storytelling, they provide a foundation for a new policy, while portraying it as compatible

with the state's identifications. By accounting for pathways of resilience we recognize states' agency in acting out the role prescribed by their identity. Actors do have an ability to actively examine their self-perceptions and to change their course of action (Steele 2008: 34) while not threatening their safety of being. While each of the identifications influences and limits the scope of ontologically acceptable behaviours, they do not exclude the state's agency to apply different course of actions that support (or at least not dismiss) the biographical storytelling. The same identification can be interpreted and acted out in different ways. Furthermore, identifications may be used to claim special rights to do more. Thanks to the new re-interpretation of the West, the US made the support of Germany a cause ontologically coherent with the American 'Self'.

Below, I present an outline of the possible pathways of resilient identity. Each pathway is accompanied by a hypothetical example illustrating how actors may change their behaviour and/or storytelling in order to uphold the security of their self-identity.

Possible pathways of resilient identity:

- State's modified behaviour is presented as consistent with its identity.

Country X shifts its longstanding policy of sanctioning country Y which has been accused of human rights violations. The removal of sanctions is presented to be reflecting X's strive for supporting Y's civil society and an effort of upholding the "global dialogue" about "contemporary humanitarian challenges".

- State innovates its storytelling and keeps it in line with the core of its autobiography.

Country A starts describing itself as endangered by the threat of terrorism. On that basis, it imposes law radically broadening its domestic surveillance prerogatives. The new measure is presented as an embodiment of the nation's ongoing fight with intolerance, extremism and violence targeting civilians.

3.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have drawn on the concept of ontological security to understand the role of identity in strong states employment of war-time vulnerability narratives. The chapter first has discussed the growing importance of scholarship that approaches international relations employing identity as its main analytical concept. I outlined ontological security scholarship contributions in understanding seemingly irrational states behaviour. I proposed two functions vulnerability narratives play for a strong state involved in conflict with the underdog. One, I argued that they reduce the anxiety of the actor caused by the conflict with the weak enemy. Two, they provide a special agency to securitize – designate as a source of threat – the weaker enemy. Lastly, drawing on ontological security studies, I showed that the state's pursuit of safety of identity means foremost the ability to change. States build their ontological security not only through adjusting to the environment but by actively negotiating their role in it. I argued that this resilience illustrates countries' adaptability of autobiographies to their evolving behaviour and ideational needs. Furthermore, that it displays their ability to sustain a critique of their actions. I conceptualise two possible key pathways that make identity resilient. First, actors present their actions as reflecting state identifications. Secondly, they innovate their storytelling while keeping it in line with the core autobiographical apparatus of the actor.

The two functions of vulnerability narratives, as well as the resilience of identity, together form the theoretical framework of the dissertation. The functions offer an

understanding of this self-identification of a strong state, while the practices leading to the shielding of identity outlines a new research avenue that guides my understanding of the agential role of the state's autobiographies and ontological security.

4. Methodology

4.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to outline how the dissertation was planned and undertaken. It serves as a blueprint explaining the underlying methodology of the dissertation, the general design attitude and methods used to answer the study's research question.

This chapter progresses over three sections. The first section explains the use of the interpretive methodology in the process of seeking answers to the dissertation's research question. I explain the study's research orientation which focuses on questions of meaning, the importance of context and the role of constitutive causality in accounting for changes in the social world. I define the abductive logic of inquiry behind the research practice. Later, I explain the use of comparative case study research design and outline the logic behind the selection of Israel (2014 Operation Protective Edge) and the UK (2003 invasion of Iraq). Lastly, I explain that the inquiry has been conducted over two overlapping research processes. First, the analysis of secondary and primary sources, and second, in-depth semi-structured interviews with state officials.

In the second section, I focus on presenting the types of textual, as well as audio-visual sources used to study both conflicts. I refer to this practice as "provisional sense-making" to emphasize that it allowed me to build case-specific knowledge by confronting my prior understanding of vulnerability narratives with the states' behaviour (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). This phase of analysis has provided an answer as to how strong states use vulnerability narratives. Namely, that their behaviour has an important dramaturgic aspect. It

has also led to the development of theoretical expectations by tying the strong state's use of vulnerability narratives with ontological security and securitisation theories.

The observation of states' practices, led to the decision to employ a dramaturgical lense to explore the role ontological security and vulnerability narratives play in states' behaviour. I employ Goffman's metaphor of life as theatre and look at the performative elements of the state's policies. Building on the drama matrix allowed me to pinpoint the central role self-presentation played in strong states vulnerability pronouncements. It helped to emphasize that for Israel and the UK dramatization of their standing was necessary to politically be able to wage war against a weak enemy. It captured both the performative practice as well as the security objectives behind strong states employment of vulnerability narratives.

In the third section, I explain the use of in-depth interviewing of Israel and the UK state officials. It is a method of inquiry that advances the study's reasoning about vulnerability narratives from provisional interpretation to explanations rooted in the local knowledge of the state actors. I first use the concept of social identity to justify the method of elite interviews as a valuable source of knowledge about the state. Then, I explain the process of participants selection as well as the interviewing technique based on the use of vignettes. Lastly, I answer how I employ narrative analysis to study and organize the collected material.

4.2. Interpreting the vulnerability of strong states

While the dissertation's focus on the role of vulnerability identifications in global politics reflects my constructivist ontological outlook, the research practice draws on the interpretive turn. To answer the study's research question – why strong countries implement narratives of vulnerability in their war-time public communication – I employ an interpretive methodology.

The interpretive approach was a natural response to the research puzzle that was the original impulse behind the dissertation. Key for the study were questions of meaning. To understand why powerful states are somewhat counterintuitively employing self-identifications we associate with weakness and lack of agency, I had to unpack what vulnerability narratives mean for those states. This research orientation brought me to the interpretive research approach which focuses on meaning-making. This means that “its very purpose is to understand how specific human beings in particular times and locales make sense of their worlds” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 10).

All following research steps were aimed at ultimately trying to understand why strong states employ vulnerability narratives. Thus, at the heart of the dissertation was a surprising political practice, an unaccounted dimension of state behaviour that abductively led the inquiry of the researcher (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2009). An abductive research design is built around a perplexing practice that a researcher tries to explain in ways that “would render the surprise less surprising” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 28), less “bizarre and unintelligible” (Becker 1998: 28). As mentioned by Taylor: “We make sense of action when there is a coherence between the actions of the agent and the meaning of his situation for him. We find his action puzzling until we find such a coherence” (1971: 13-14). This design attitude reflects also Milliken’s argument that the deductive modes of reasoning are incompatible with a constructivist understanding of the state: “to account for the way in which a certain group of states in a certain historical period did (...) identify and relate action phenomena so as to ‘know how to go on’ in their interaction (...) a scholar cannot supply this explanation *a priori*”. She believes that such approach “misses the point of theorising state conflicts as they are constituted by participants within their socio-historical context”. Thus, in order to make sense of state action, we have to first account for “how the subjects in question constructed understandings of their interactions” (2001:14).

To make sense of the social act of strong states employing narratives of vulnerability, the (interpretivist) researcher needs to focus on the meaning this identification has for the actor. The interpretive inquiry seeks explanations to empirical phenomena by looking “into the meanings that people give to particular forms of social action and the social worlds and cultural forms these actions help to constitute” (Fuji 2018: 2). The basis for understanding the social world interpretively is to investigate “how meaning is developed, expressed and communicated” (Yanow 2014: 12). The interpretive turn pays particular attention to the language which is considered to be “at the nexus of meaning, context, and action” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 46). The same action can have multiple meanings (see Fuji 2018: 76; Soss 2014). Consequently, the interpretivist is trying to make sense by understanding the context of the practice. Without accounting for the contextuality of the “strange talk”, to employ Becker’s expression (Becker 1998: 151), the strangeness of the action will stay unintelligible for the researcher. Consequently, interpretivists are motivated not by the generalisability of their findings (Bode 2020) but by acquiring rich, contextual and trustworthy interpretation of practice (see Schwartz-Shea 2014).

While this dissertation is not exposing ‘mechanistic’ causality, it is not abandoning the term completely. The dissertation uses the constitutive causality to account for the fact that it is the meaning-making and the context that constitute changes in the social world. Constitutive causality explains “events in terms of actors’ understandings of their own contexts” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 52) and how those understandings have a causal effect (Jackson 2006). By subscribing to this perspective, I pursue the goal of seeking explanations to the state’s use of vulnerability narratives that are grounded in the context and identifications of the actor (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 52). This practice reflects the fact that states are social actors constituted on a multiplicity of identities (e.g. Wendt 1992, 1994). Such a constructivist approach does not see states as simple utility maximisers (e.g.

Jepperson, Wendt and Katzenstein 1996). Thus, their behaviour is an effect of not only material but also intersubjective factors. With these assumptions in mind, world politics can rarely be captured by causal mechanisms where a complex social phenomenon (state actions) is explained by making “links between inputs and outcomes” (Falleti and Lynch 2009: 1146). My understanding of the processes behind state behaviour cannot be captured by linear pathways. Since I theorise that vulnerability narratives perpetuate the identity of strong countries, it was necessary to seek answers to how states “conceive of their worlds” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 52). This meant accounting for constitutive processes behind social actions which are multifaceted and thus cannot be subsumed under the billiard ball causations.

Choice of cases and analysis

The dissertation is a comparative study of two cases, the British involvement in the Global War on Terror and the Israeli’ conflict with the Palestinians. In the case of Israel, the dissertation is based on the analysis of the 2014 OPE. Secondly, it investigates the UK’s 2003 invasion of Iraq. The actors were chosen³⁰ based on their common characteristics. They share analogous institutional (parliamentary democracy), army (nuclear arsenal, advanced equipment, well-trained forces, indigenous military technology) and economic profile (developed states, highly-globalised, robust high-tech, financial and academic sectors). Both identify as being a part of Western civilisation (Porter 2018; Smootha 2002) and have an experience of fighting with guerrilla insurgencies on their territory. Furthermore, they have a close relationship with the US and after the Cold War were participants in the peace talks supervised by the White House. Importantly, Israel and the UK both are strong states. Of

³⁰ On the differences between the language of interpretive choice of cases and positivist case selection see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 69.

particular importance for this claim are their nuclear arms arsenals which ought to be considered as an ultimate guarantee of political independence.

Israel and the UK are also particularly important with respect to the ontological security studies. Their future geopolitical shape, ethnonational make-up and international status are unclear. In the case of London, the sources of instability are internal national separatisms (especially Scottish and Irish). For Tel Aviv, the precarity stems from the intractable conflict with the Palestinians. The debate about the mere existence of Israeli (Lewin-Epstein and Cohen 2018) or British nationality is ever-present (Kiss and Park 2014), thus underlying the central role of identity-related insecurities in both states.

The preliminary choice of cases was careful and purposeful (see Bevir and Blakely 2018: 100-102). It considered actors that are highly relevant to the dissertation's research question. Consequently, I focused on military confrontations with belligerents of vastly different operational potential, where the strong actor was employing vulnerability narratives. Such strategy assumed looking for contemporary conflicts and states sharing common institutional qualities. This reflects my general contention that usage of vulnerability self-identifications is context-driven. The logic behind their implementation may differ depending on the historical period. Thus, I have excluded conflicts pre 1990 and focused on modern "mediatized wars" (see Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010). The universe of possible cases was further limited to democratic actors. This reflects the fact that the claims of vulnerability, as a tool of meaning-making, may be treated differently by dictatorships, absolute monarchies or authoritarian façade democracies.

On the list of possible cases, I included wars in which the US participated (e.g. 1991 Gulf war, 2001 War in Afghanistan, 2003 Iraq War), Israel (e.g. 2008 Operation Cast Lead, 2012 Operation Pillar of Defense, 2014 Operation Protective Edge), the UK (e.g. 2001 War

in Afghanistan, 2003 Iraq War), France (Libyan Civil War, 2011, Northern Mali Conflict, 2012) and Serbia (1992 Bosnian War, 1999 Kosovo War).

The final choice of cases was pragmatic. I opted for a comparison of two conflicts due to time constraint and because this allowed me to devote more time to each case to maximize the “exposure to different understandings of what is being studied” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 85). Furthermore, the Israeli and the UK cases were chosen because they were relatively well suited for prolonged fieldwork. During the research, I resided in the UK. I also had the experience of studying and living in Israel. The knowledge of both states facilitated more effective work on the ground and deemed them more accessible (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 70).

In mind with the requirements of the interpretive epistemology (e.g. Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014), the dissertation’s comparison is systematic (e.g. Schwartz-Shea 2014) and contextualised. First, the comparison is systematic which means that the same research question is applied to both chosen cases, that the same type of event is being compared (armed conflict), and that the chosen cases are selected due to their institutional similarities (parliamentary democracies, nuclear powers, developed states, Western values). Secondly, the method is contextualised which means that I focus on studying particular phenomenon of the examined case (vulnerability narratives).

The comparative method used for the dissertation differs from positivist case studies. Instead of arranging its analysis around variables (George and Bennett 2005: 70) “experience distant concepts” and hypothesizing, the investigation wants “to understand how concepts, roles, and so forth are used in the field.” Instead of *testing* variables, it is *investigating* concepts and practices *in situ* (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 113). Namely, understanding them by looking at how are they “shaped by their situational use and by the lived experience of those ‘naturally’ working (...) in the study setting” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 18).

Design attitude and Data Collection

The study can be separated into two research processes. One, I conducted a close reading (Culler 2010; Milliken 2001) of secondary and primary sources on both of the conflicts. Two, I conducted a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews with British and Israeli state officials.

However, it is important to underline that the dissertation is not following a linear two-step research design. Instead, the boundaries between both research practices are porous and overlap each other. The interpretive research process is iterative and follows a hermeneutic circular-spiral pattern (Gadamer 1976) where “the same logic of inquiry is repeated over and over again”. It is recursive in that we perform abduction within abduction within abduction, as one “discovery” leads to another” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 32). After all, “serious researchers repeatedly move back and forth” (Becker 1998: 9).

4.3. Provisional sense-making

Direct experience of political processes is a rare privilege. Most of the time “Our knowledge of contemporary society is to a large extent mediated to us by documents of various kinds” (Smith 1974). The dissertation’s investigation of Israel’s 2014 OPE and the UK’s 2003 invasion of Iraq started with the close reading of media coverage of those conflicts. The central focus of the analysis was Israel’s and the UK’s public communication. I studied governmental statements, political speeches, interviews, commentaries and other materials from state representatives.³¹ These materials were the main source of knowledge about the state’s vulnerability narratives. In both cases, I paid particular attention to the states’ self-representations during the confrontations but I also analysed the weeks leading up

³¹ For more details about the gathered data about each of the case studies, see chapters “8. United Kingdom: The Anxious Invader” and “6. Israel: The Strongest Weaking”.

to the wars. This allowed me to follow the key debates about the reasons for the operations as well as account for the processes of justification of the conflict. Overall, I have located and analysed 104 British and 131 Israeli texts that included state representatives' communication (ranging from short remarks to full transcripts of conferences).

The analysis was enriched by books, articles, governmental webpages and reports dealing with the subject of the 2014 OPE/Israeli conflict with Palestinians and the UK's 2003 invasion of Iraq/ British involvement in the Global War on Terror. States are "very verbal entities" (Hansen 2006: 21). However, in my approach to states narratives, I was also accounting for non-textual communication thus my search for vulnerability narratives was not limited to written text. I sought examples of vulnerability narratives also in state's videos and military photography.

The process helped to establish case-specific knowledge. It allowed for investigation of the state's war-time actions, self-identifications and practices. The researcher's prior knowledge and expectations about vulnerability politics were confronted with the actual in-field practices. This provisional sense-making enabled the researcher to understand and examine the "very existence of concepts that are key to a particular setting or situation", it allowed for the concept of vulnerability narratives to 'emerge from the field'" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 18). The analysis of materials on both conflicts was crucial in the development of the research expectations. It first led to the discovery of how strong states employed vulnerability narratives. Namely, that they dramatized their standing through vulnerability pronouncements. Recognition of the unique character of a strong state's self-identification shed the light on the reasons for this behaviour. It allowed me to design a theoretical approach useful in understanding the phenomenon of the vulnerability of strong states by tying the puzzling behaviour with ontological security and securitisation theories. Also, it enabled me to do analytical groundwork into the resilience of identity.

Dramaturgy of vulnerability

By tapping into the context-specific characteristics of both conflicts and mapping Israel's and the UK's practices, I developed a research focus suited to capturing strong states' use of vulnerability narratives. This led to the discovery of the dramaturgical dimension of this phenomenon. Namely, that both states identify as vulnerable to be seen as insecure and precarious. Actors refer to vulnerability to instil into others this understanding of a strong state's situatedness. This performative practice is distributed through vulnerability narratives. The powerful actor attempts to question the view that it is a dominant and unchallenged party involved in the conflict. Vulnerability narratives are understood as a form of self-identification which both, supports the state's ontological security and securitizes the enemy.

The state's use of vulnerability narratives to dramatize³² itself as insecure is a unique socio-political practice that cannot be explained by rationalist approaches to security. It is a form of presentation of self used by powerful actors to influence ingroup views about the country's position in a conflict. The analysis of Israel's and the UK's public communication showed that vulnerability narratives are used to question the notion that a strong state is a dominant and unchallenged party in the conflict. It aims to influence how society interprets, order and choose information to understand the hostilities. In order to do that, the actor creates messages for the audience that can be a truth projection, but also may combine manipulations, deceptions and lies (Gortney 2010). This self-presentation does not have to reflect reality and is often "replacing the factual by the representational" (Szondi 2009: 308). It questions the security of the collective, displays or even inflates the external dangers and

³² While in the political vernacular the word 'dramatization' suggests something that has been exaggerated, I avoid making such truth-claims. Instead, I define dramatization more broadly as an action that focuses people's attention on particular issue. In this case, strong states claim of vulnerability. This approach reflects my understanding of vulnerability narratives as a form of identity claim. For details see Chapter 2.

presents the country's opponent as a perpetrator and grave danger to the group's welfare. It is a performative process that is distributed through vulnerability narratives.³³

While vulnerability narratives are not administration policies, economic reforms or military movements – i.e. they are not a physical emanation of the state – they are a crucial constitutive component of the state's broader goals. Their role is essential for statesmanship. For Steele: “narration is the most political of acts a state agent can execute, in that it organizes what is ‘the state’” (2008: 72). Like all the other group's identifications, vulnerability is shared through narratives such as texts, monuments or discourses that have the power to build or continue collective memory (Lebow 2016: 21). Vulnerability narratives influence how the conflict is defined by the administration, media, and understood by the audience. The actor interprets the events in a way that induces vulnerability in the collective.

Naturally, many forms of states' speech are aimed at influencing audiences. Nevertheless, vulnerability narratives of powerful states - states armed with a nuclear arsenal and modern military equipment - are a particularly evocative form of self-presentation. By referring to ‘performance’, ‘dramaturgy’ and other metaphors of a theatre in this dissertation, I am qualifying the unique situatedness of such agential actors (Goffman 1978). The move from the discursive to the performative realm reflects also the dissertation's general focus on the role identity plays in states behaviour (see Chapter 2). Since I theorise that vulnerability narratives address the ideational needs of Israel and the UK, the focus on performance allows me to accentuate that vulnerability narratives may be a foundation for the coming exercise of agency. Strong states claim to be vulnerable to do much more than tell an autobiographical

³³ While I see performance as a key practice through which meaning is negotiated by the states (Alexander 2011), I abstract from making ontological claims about the role presentation of self has for “what the actors are” (Ringmar 2019: 901). This means that in my approach I share Ringmar's argument about the centrality of the performance for international relations. After all: “The world is a stage and it is only by appearing on this world stage that the state becomes real” (2016: 101). However, I do not attempt to use dramaturgical perspective to expose the nature of the social ontology of the actor. This approach reflects my conceptualisation of state identity as a declarative process. While all political actors try to influence the impression they make on the audience, I do not try to determine the validity of those practices. Instead I focus on performance in order to understand the reasons why states present themselves as vulnerable.

story. They want to “convey a particular impression” and “influence the definition of the situation which they come to have” (Goffman 1978: 6). This means that there is a performative dimension of power. Meaning that state power, to be exercised ought to be presented in a “lively and compelling manner” (Alexander 2011: 7).

Furthermore, the use of performative lenses for research of strong states’ vulnerability narratives speaks to the important theoretical expectation of the dissertation. Specifically, that without claiming vulnerability, strong states such as Israel or the UK would not be politically able to wage war against the underdog. Since both analysed states are strong, they have to give an impression that they are insecure by stressing their vulnerability. Consequently, as social actors, to make the war with the weaker party ideationally acceptable, they not only narrate their vulnerability, but they emphasize it by ‘playing it out’. While “staging and dramaturgy” are crucial for any type of warfare (Alexander 2011: 4), the controversial war against the underdog is predicated on vulnerability narratives. Following the theatrical metaphor of international relations, vulnerability narratives are a stage prop employed by the political actor to influence the audience, and to achieve goals actor scripted for itself.

Dramaturgical understanding of vulnerability narratives came about in a bottom-up (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) manner through observation of strong states behaviour (see Chapters 6 and 8). Paying attention to dramaturgy serves as a sense-making tool. It is a key analytical perspective that binds together the dissertation’s theory with the performative practice of vulnerability narratives. It accounts for the context of strong states’ vulnerability pronouncements. While vulnerability narratives are a heuristic term capturing a broad array of linguistic practices, referring to the dramaturgical or performative dimension of this phenomenon allows to accentuate the strong actors attempt to influence the perceptions of others about states’ standing. Speaking about the dramaturgy of vulnerability is case-specific (see Becker 1998: 132). It marks the shift from ‘generic’ vulnerability narratives, to the

context of strong states' vulnerability pronouncements. It underlines performative characteristics of strong states behaviour and identifies the general goal of this practice. Namely, that vulnerability self-identifications are a form of intersubjective act that allows the state to present itself as insecure; in an attempt to support the actor's identity (ontological security) and to designate a weak enemy as a threat (securitisation).

For example, it captures the fact that when in 1999 the bloody war in Chechnya started, Vladimir Putin - then Russian prime minister – dramatized Russia as insecure. He justified the operation by presenting itself as a 'reluctant' defender of an insecure state who does not have a choice but to attack the republic to save the lives of its citizens:

“The antiterrorist campaign was forced upon us (...) decisive armed intervention was the only way to prevent further casualties both within and far outside the borders of Chechnya, further suffering by so many people enslaved by terrorists” (Putin 1999).

Consequently, Putin was engaged in a state's identity performance that was simultaneously supporting Russia's ontological security - by providing positive meaning to the offensive action - and securitising the enemy – by depicting the enemies as terrorists.

The study of Israel's and the UK's public communication allowed also me to develop a more systemic perspective on vulnerability self-identifications. I contend that narratives of vulnerability are an element of a dialectical relationship between the actor (state) and sociocultural constraints (domestic and international audiences) on strategic action. The dissertation's understanding of states draws on Schimmelfenning's (2002) adoption of dramaturgical sociology for the study of international relations. I employ Goffman's metaphor of life as theatre (1978) and look at the performative elements of state's policies. Building on the drama matrix, I theorize that countries are performers playing for the audience (see e.g. Alexander 2011; Ringmar 2014, 2019).

Dramaturgy of ontological security and securitisation

Analysis of Israel and the UK public communication demonstrated that states acted through the narrative that dramatized their identifications. Namely, employed measures that represent or express who they are and what they stand for by rendering, underscoring or hyperbolising their vulnerable position. They justify their policies by acting out their claimed situatedness to the audience. Dramaturgical enactments support the alignment between the state's self-identifications and its actions. They are used to stress issues the performer wants the audience to know (Goffman 1978). This practice illustrates that states pursuit of ontological security has dramaturgical attributes. Furthermore, that ontological security can be explored by focusing on states' presentation of self.

Dramaturgical actions supporting ontological security may be a military parade, the release of the footage showing the effects of an airstrike, a political leader affirming the state's economy by giving a speech at a factory. The prime minister of India Narendra Modi was dramaturgic when he unexpectedly gave a speech to the nation announcing that the state had successfully tested its anti-satellite system. As was UK prime minister Theresa May's visit to Stoke-on-Trent – called the “Brexit capital of Britain” – to underscore her commitment to withdrawing the state from the European Union. Non-dramaturgical are social actions that are not aimed at being seen by the public and are not trying to advance the state's self-perceptions. These may for instance be inner-workings of the state administration, intergovernmental negotiations, clandestine military operations, diplomatic consultations etc. Non-dramaturgical state actions often happen at the ‘backstage’ of the performance. Goffman defines this region as being out of sight from the audience (Goffman 1978: 114-116). Consequently, it is the place where a political actor plans its actions and is allowed to drop its façade. Here the state does not have to play out its ontological security. Its biographical storytelling and routines may be put on hold. The backstage is the place of states' ‘dirty work’:

“We find that there are many performances which could not have been given had not tasks been done which were physically unclean, semi-illegal, cruel, and degrading in other ways; but these disturbing facts are seldom expressed during a performance” (1978: 53). This is where collective identifications – which following through the theatrical metaphor, are different scripted roles an actor may play – are being selected by the performer to be played on the stage. States’ roles are then evaluated and challenged on stage.

Since ontological security has performative qualities, it can be explored and empirically analysed through dramaturgical analysis. Employing dramaturgical sociology, I focus on the state’s presentation of self. For Goffman identity is not solely a sense of self but foremost, it is a performance of self, a way how the actor tries to be seen. Global politics is interpreted here as a social establishment:

“A social establishment is any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place. ...any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management. Within the walls of a social establishment, we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation” (Goffman 1978: 231).

The political establishment of the state is analysed through Goffman’s lens which views social life as a drama. Dramaturgical metaphor captures the agency of vulnerability narrative since states dramatized their security in order to legitimize war with weak belligerent. At the same time, it accurately reflects the core characteristics of ontological security (e.g. biographical continuity, routines) which accentuate behaviourally restrictive qualities of identity (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Lupovici 2012; Rumelili and Çelik 2017; Subotić and Zarakol 2012; Steele 2005, 2008, 2017). It is precisely because states want to act in line with their positive self-perceptions, that Israel and the UK dramatised themselves as vulnerable.

Importantly, the metaphor of dramaturgy allows us also to accentuate that both Israel and the UK aspired to legitimize hostilities against a much weaker enemy. Both countries performed in a way that was “likely to evoke from (...) [the audience] a specific response”

(1978: 6). The review of Israel's and the UK's public communication showed that both actors employed vulnerability narratives to designate the underdog as a source of vital threat. Thus, by dramatizing their situation, they securitised their opponent.

To conclude, recognition of the dramaturgical dimension of vulnerability narratives supported the formulation of the dissertation's theoretical expectations (see Chapter 3). Specifically, that by presenting themselves as vulnerable, actors pursue ontological security by aspiring for a new principled meaning to their offensive actions. Furthermore, that vulnerability self-identification leads to the securitisation of the weaker opponent.

Dramaturgy and resilience

The dramaturgical metaphor illustrates also that ontological security is not solely an identity preservation process³⁴. By employing dramaturgical sociology, I better account for the resilience of identity (see Chapter 3). While it is correct that states are driven by the avoidance of ontological anxieties, this does not mean that anxiety cannot be put to work. States have the agency to interpret their 'I', and thus to innovate how they pursue ontological security. Each collective identification reflected by the state - while it may limit the scope of ontologically acceptable behaviours - does not exclude states' agency to modify its behaviour. States may apply a different course of action to the same ideational standing. They have a capacity to defend their various performances as being in line with the biographical story-telling. Actors do examine their ontological security and derive from its different behavioural patterns. The same ideational roles are often acted out differently.

For example, in the last years in Poland, the state used Christian heritage, European values and positive self-representations to justify two profoundly different immigration

³⁴ More on the treatment of the ontological security as an identity preservation see Browning and Joenniemi 2017.

policies. In 2015, the Civic Platform government linked the country's European heritage with an open-door policy and announced a program for refugees coming to the southern borders of the EU (Kopacz 2015). A year later a newly elected Law and Justice government started arguing that Polish "Europeanness" precludes it from accepting migrants (Newsweek 2017).

Employing theatre as a metaphor for the state's pursuit of ontological security, we better recognise that identity imposes constraints on the state's behaviour. However, the state has agency in how it will approach and 'play out' its identity. Political actors operate "in a cultural environment as performers engaged in manipulative presentations of self and framing who [they] are, at the same time, [they are] constrained by the script and the consistency requirement of their roles" (Schimmelfennig 2002: 417).

The state's performance is limited by its role, the script of the play, and the audience expectations. On stage, the state is required to keep a consistent façade.³⁵ This reflects the biographical boundaries, expectations and requirements the state is facing when trying to support its ontological security. To keep their self-representation in line with the ideational requirements:

"performers must pay attention to act and argue consistently with the cultural repertoires they have chosen in presentations of self or frames for their own advantage. Neither can they simply ignore these repertoires later in the process if they become inconvenient" (Schimmelfennig 2002: 424).

Arguing about the states' search for ontological security, Steele also accentuates the issue of boundaries in actor's play:

"It is unnatural for a state to identify itself one way and to 'perform' acts in a different way. In this case, discourse is entirely constitutive because a biographical narrative is a device of comparison for actors, and disconnects between it and the actions of a state produce anxiety" (Steele 2005: 527).

Steele points out that leaders are constrained by states' identities, and by countries' policies to which they refer in support of new initiatives: "At a minimum, then, states

³⁵ While states do not have one single unified, coherent identity (see Lebow 2013), they do aspire to have one (e.g. Mitzen 2006).

experience identity commitments, and challenges to these identity commitments (either to self, collective, or both) violate the ontological security of a collective state” (2005: 529-30). Similarly, Balzacq points out that social identity is both an enabler and a constraint to securitisation efforts (2010: 64). Mirow argues that the strategic culture and the national identity establish norms that lead to the creation of security practices (2016).

However, an ideational framework that limits political echelons is constantly negotiated. In their performative action, states take under consideration the potential incompatibility of their actions with the audience requirements by trying to stretch the limits of the collective ‘self’. As argued by Bevir and Rhodes, while the social background and political traditions influence states’ behaviour, actors “can reason and act in novel ways to alter this background” (Bevir and Rhodes 2003: 32). Also Mirow indicates, that political “elites can take positions deviating from strategic culture’s most widely shared cognitive elements” (2016: 41). Due to the external or internal strategic developments, state identity is sometimes acted out or dramatized in a way that grants the state to claim special agency. That was the case of the UK which uses Atlanticist tradition as a justification for different foreign policies. For example, while after 1992 London used it to express its reluctance to get involved in Bosnia, in 1999 Atlanticism was employed to support the country military involvement in Kosovo (McCourt 2012). Consequently, the same form of identity was applied to buttress vastly diverging behaviours. It was a foundation for claiming a special right to either abstain or employ military forces abroad.

States do indeed try to avoid undertaking actions that would disrupt the ontological security of the group (e.g. Mitzen 2006). At the same time, we have to bear in mind that almost all of their actions pose a challenge to some subset of the collective’s identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986). Especially at times of crisis – particularly, during conflicts – state strategies may be disruptive vis-à-vis the group ethos and ideational perspectives. The

country is involved in hostilities that challenge idealized collective self-perceptions. Furthermore, intergroup competition poses unusual burdens on the communities and often leads to the implementation of new restrictions and demands on the collective (Bar-Tal, Oren and Nets-Zehngut 2014). To justify their decisions, elites “employ the right ‘grammar of security’” (Mirow 2016: 42) which are performative actions that support its ontological security. States creatively play out their roles to bridge new actions with the group’s ideational scaffolding. This pursuit is predicated on dramaturgical behaviour. A state’s performance follows two pathways of resilience. Firstly, they present their actions as being in line with the country’s identifications. Secondly, they innovate their biographical storytelling (see section “Resilience of identity” in Chapter 3).

The dramaturgical approach is an effective illustration that captures the resilience of identity. This model recognizes the level of autonomy each actor has in interpreting its role and identifications. Like Goffman’s stage actors, states use their performance not only to follow the script. When they are on the stage, they are presenting a self in order to ‘get things done’: “they influence the definition of the situation which they come to have.” (Goffman 1978: 17). This characteristic of theatrical performativity reflects states’ capability to protect their identity from anxiety and shame (Steele 2005) caused by the critique of their actions. The dramaturgical metaphor of states’ behaviour, allow me to better capture the stabilising processes of self-presentation and performativity. As shown by the analysis of Israel and the UK’s public communication, it let them act in ways that could be challenging to the state’s identity.

Dramaturgy as an empirical marker

The decision to introduce the metaphor of theatre into the dissertation is functional. Dramaturgy is not facilitating further theoretical understanding of the reasons behind the

puzzling practice of strong states self-describing as vulnerable. Instead, it supports the empirical inquiry of vulnerability politics; and distils the study by identifying the character of the state's practice.

Dramaturgy is an analytical and empirical marker because it defines what counts as evidence in the study. It is used to capture the state's performative practice of employing vulnerability identifications. It signals the richness of performative acts that bring about the master narrative (Shenhav 2015: 24-25) of vulnerability.

The dramaturgical perspective provides evidence that is case-specific and reflects the theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation. By recognising the dramaturgical aspect of the practice of state's vulnerability narrations, it puts to empirical, in-field 'use', the theatrical metaphor of states' behaviour. One that accounts for the resilience of the state's identity by paying attention to their changing presentation of self. Dramaturgy binds together a sociological approach to security (see Balzacq 2010, 2015; Salter 2008) with ontological security and securitisation literatures, constructivist ontology with interpretivist methodology.

While dramaturgical analysis is not responsible for theoretical heavy lifting, it allows us to more intuitively grasp the in-field outcomes of the dissertation's theory. The approach provides the reader with a useful referent that captures both the performative quality of vulnerability narratives and their political effects. By bridging the security theory with state's practice, it signposts the performative and interactionist characteristics of strong states self-identifying as vulnerable.

Thus, referring to dramaturgy allows me to underline the representational character of vulnerability narratives. Implementing it actors, aim to achieve a 'declarative' precarity and insecurity. I.e., vulnerability narratives do not have to reflect the scale of the physical weakness of the collective. The state does not intend to worsen its geopolitical material standing. Vulnerability narratives are a form of performance challenging only the

representative dimension of the state's situation. This means that they are not directly linked with the physical, 'on the ground' balance between the belligerents.

Furthermore, dramaturgy points out the importance of audience for security practice. The thesis recognizes that states are important security providers. However, I do not follow state-centric realist perspectives on security. I conceptualize security practices using sociological interactionist lenses. While I focus on analysing a state's security policies, my understanding of this concept recognizes that a state is one of the multiple actors that define and constitute security. This does not mean that the dissertation is employing multiple levels of analysis. It is a study of statecraft. Nevertheless, my interpretation of state narrations and behaviours is paying particular attention to the socio-cultural constraints that limit their agency. By focusing on performances, I recognize that democratic regimes are continually justifying their actions. They speak to the society they embody. While they are powerful sense-makers, in their security story-telling states do compete with often conflicting visions (coming from e.g., ethnic minorities, political factions, international community etc.). Consequently, I employ a sociological security research agenda. This approach pays attention to the fact that the 'security-making' actions are influenced by their audiences and socio-cultural context (McSweeney 2004). After all, strong polities are rarely limited by structural constraints. Their biggest behavioural constraint is imposed on them by the ideational expectations and morals of their audiences. This means that vulnerability narratives must be offering the geopolitical 'haves' something that cannot be provided by mere physical might.

4.4. In-depth interviewing

The first step of the research design provides provisional knowledge about the cases. Since, "we social scientists always, implicitly or explicitly, attribute a point of view, a perspective, and motives to the people whose actions we analyse" (Becker 1998: 14), it is

essentially the dissertation's initial interpretation of the strong states' vulnerability pronouncements.

Hansen warns against taking political speech at face value (2006). 'States' talk' - while reflecting ideational and material needs of the collective - is also an exercise in deception and disinformation. The reading of texts may be insufficient to understand the reasons behind the emergence of vulnerability narratives of strong states. The texts provide evidence of practice but not grounded understanding.

In order to improve the provisional interpretation of vulnerability narratives, to move from "abstracted empiricism" (Back 2007: 16), I follow the Chicago-School practice and take this provisional interpretation to investigate it in the field (see Vidich and Lyman 2000). The antidote to our own perceptual biases and interpretive limitations is 'going out' (Molotch 1994), to get as close as possible to the context and conditions in which meanings are attributed to action and events (Becker 1998: 14). After all, "Without knowledge based on first-hand experience to correct our imagery, we not only don't know where to look for interesting stuff, we also don't know what doesn't need extensive investigation and proof." (Becker 1998: 16).

Consequently, another step in the research design is to move beyond the remoteness of provisional interpretation to interpretation based on local knowledge (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). I do this through the in-depth interviewing of states' officials. Ultimately, as both Becker (1998) and Molotch (1994) point out, the crucial trick behind good empirical research is that it does not necessarily require an abundance of "experience-distant" (Geertz 1974) data - if the researcher can talk to someone with the tacit knowledge of the issue. As Molotch warns social scientists, there is no need to spend a hundred thousand dollars to study prostitution just to learn what any taxi driver could have told us in one evening (in Becker 1998: 29).

While the analysis of texts has led me to interpret vulnerability narratives of strong states via ontological security/securitization lenses, to employ the theatrical metaphor (Goffman 1978) in the reading of texts and audio-visual materials, this understanding has to be further explored and investigated. Interviews are the key method of examination of the dissertation's theoretical framework. They allow me to check whether the "study's representations are recognizable by the people (...) studied" and whether "'these words', 'these views,' are theirs, rather than yours" (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 135). Consequently, interviews not only deepen my understanding of the matter but also function as a form of informant feedback (e.g. Miles and Huberman 1994; Tansey 2007) improving overall trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba 1985) and reflexivity (e.g. Schwartz-Shea 2014) of the thesis.

Talking to the state

The focus on state's officials draws on Tajfel and Turner seminal work on social identity (1979). Social identity is one of the most extensively researched, and empirically validated social psychology concepts (Hornsey 2008). It was developed to promote non-reductionist psychological research on intergroup relations (Abrams and Hogg 1990: 2). According to Tajfel, social identity is the "individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups" (Tajfel 1974: 72). He calls it a "self-concept" of salient emotional consequences (1974: 69). In the context of international relations, social identifications are a key phenomenon necessary for the continuation of the state. While the dissertation avoids the approach dominating among constructivists which applies social identity in the context of statecraft by treating it as a main explanatory factor of states' behaviour, it is not *en masse* rejecting the empirical validity of the concept. While the unitary "we-ness" (Williams 2003) of state does not exist (Lebow 2016), states are rather an assemblage of often contradictory

identifications, it does not mean that they do not aspire to act coherently vis-à-vis their ideational claims. The concept of ontological security helps to link our ideational needs with the state's behaviour. In the words of Tajfel, identity is an individual's attempt: "...to achieve a satisfactory concept or image of himself" (Tajfel 1974: 68). The state - understood as an organism of 'corporate nature' (Becker 1998: 40-43; Milliken 2001: 21) - is responding to the needs of individuals that comprise it (see Hansen 2006; Lebow 2006: 18; Wendt 1994).

The interviews with the states' officials are based on an argument that state's collective identity is a *declarative process, a goal, an aspiration to build a coherent narrative about the state and its surroundings*. It is declarative, precisely because it concerns identifications of the collective. These are everchanging, plural, non-unitary (Lebow 2016: 33), in "a process of negotiation among people and interest groups" (McSweeney 2004: 73). State's identification practices respond to their need for ontological security (see chapter 3).

Consequently, to account for those needs, I had to speak to people that were involved in statecraft. The challenge of understanding the employment of vulnerability identification by the state stems from the fact that when the state 'behaves', it means "that a host of people are acting and interacting to produce that behaviour" (Milliken 2001: 20). In order to examine and further develop my analysis of Israel's and the UK's behaviour, I interviewed state officials. The interviews allowed me to understand the collective and institutional processes by accounting for the individual level microfoundations of state behaviour (e.g. Tansey 2007). They bridged analytically the accessibility of individuals with the uncentered nature of states' assemblage. This research focus treated high-level state officials as "privileged definers of social reality", the key actors shaping the narratives about the state (Milliken 2001:24). While state officials differ on an individual level, when they are representing the

state, they “‘are the state’ because they have the moral burden of making policy choices and the capacity to implement those decisions” (Steele 2008: 18).³⁶

General characteristics

I focused on Israel’s and the United Kingdom’s political elites. The selection of participants was information-oriented (Flyvberg 2001: 79), mindful, intentional and tailored for the research outlook (Fuji 2018: 38). This means that the criteria for inviting participants were their experience of working for the state in a capacity that exposed them to the discussions, understandings and practices leading to the conception of states’ narrative practices. All interviewed participants had to have an intimate knowledge of the Israel’s/United Kingdom’s statecraft. While not all interviewees personally played a role in crafting the country’s war-time self-representations, the minimal requirements of the research design were to include officials with direct experience of representing the state, participating in meetings shaping the state’s policies etc. In order to gain a wide range of perspectives on statecraft, the study included officials working in administration, legislative, government, military and diplomatic corps.

The choice of participants was based on two strategies: the snowball technique (requesting recommendations for other participants from interviewees) as well as interlocutors’ introductions (using intermediaries to find participants). Firstly, the interviewees were invited if their experience was relevant to the study’s research focus. The participants further referred the researcher to other officials with similar career backgrounds (Bryman 2012: 424). Secondly, the selection was also partially based on personal contacts

³⁶ For a detailed analysis of the problem of applying individual-level needs and identities to understand the action of collective see: McSweeney 2004; Lang 2002; Steele 2008; Wendt 2004.

known prior to the project. Such interlocutors served as a bridge between the researcher and networks he does not have direct access to (e.g. Fuji 2018: 41; Rubin and Rubin 1995: 68).

Overall, the thesis included 38 Israeli and 32 British participants. I conducted all interviews personally. In order to encourage an open discussion and provide a setting facilitating the sharing of information on sensitive topics, the meetings were held under the Chatham House Rule, which protects the identity of the speaker. All participants signed a consent form before the interview (see Appendix 3). The interview design was reviewed and accepted by the University of Kent, School of Politics and International Relations Research Ethics and Governance officer. The interviews with the Israeli officials were conducted during two fieldwork trips conducted between July 2018 and September 2018 and between September and October 2019. Interviews in the United Kingdom were arranged into three fieldwork waves, one between July 2019 and August 2019, the second from October 2019 and January 2020, third one between April and October 2020. On average the interview took around 50 minutes. The shortest one was 15 minutes long, the longest took 1 hour 32 minutes. Aside from two interviews, all were audio-recorded. The researcher also took notes during the informal and formal parts of the meeting. Most interviews were conducted in person and were held across the United Kingdom, Israel and in Warsaw, Poland; however, a few were done over Skype and telephone. One interviewee preferred to respond to questions in writing. Most interviews were conducted in English, two were conducted in Polish³⁷.

The consent for the interview was obtained under the promise that the privacy of the participants will be protected. However, it is important to disclose that the dissertation is based on the conversations with (former and currently serving): members of the British Parliament, the Israeli Knesset, Israeli and British ministers, Israeli and British generals and senior officers, British and Israeli ambassadors, Israeli and British advisors to prime

³⁷ With Israeli officials who preferred to speak in Polish language.

ministers, a spokesperson of Israeli Prime Minister, four members of Tony Blair's Cabinet Office, key British and Israeli officials working for the military and intelligence agencies.

For the purpose of the dissertation, instead of numbers, I assigned first-name pseudonyms to the participants. The aliases were chosen with each state's cultural background in mind and reflected participants' gender identities. This relates to my goal of reducing the distance between their responses and the reader. It also improves readers' comprehension of their diverse narratives. No detailed affiliations of the quoted or referenced interviewees are disclosed. However, to contextualise and improve on the presentation of the analysis, sometimes I provide a broad description of the participant's background ("Member of Parliament", "Former Israeli ambassador" etc.). In order to protect interviewees' anonymity some of the quotations have been edited.

Due to the large quantity and length of the interviews, the author decided to conduct a selective transcription of the conversations (Davidson 2009; Coates and Thornborrow 1999). This means that the researcher transcribed sections of the interview that relate to the dissertation's research questions. Since the interviews are not tightly scripted, some parts of the interviews do not directly relate to the study. This interview characteristic is not a thesis' flow but was considered a necessary step towards bringing about the interviewees' tacit knowledge pertaining to sensitive matters of state's security policies. Considering the amount of extraneous information generated during the field work, it was important to recognise that in the case of this investigation, "a more useful transcript is a more selective one" (Ochs 1979: 44).

Goals and procedure

The interviews were in-depth semi-structured. They are in-depth because instead of reporting the world through coded correlations, they bring about a richly detailed narrative

that allows to “capture the respondents’ perceptions and perspectives such that the researcher can reconstruct meanings attributed to experiences and events” (Scheibelhofer 2008: 405). I was involved in “extended probing” to allow the interlocutor to expose its perspective and local knowledge, to “push further into the personal meaning” (Lane 1962: 9). The goal of the fieldwork interviewing is to co-generate “thick description” (Geertz 1973) which is a detailed, context-specific depiction of the meanings shared by the actors.

In-depth interviews are not arranged around a highly scripted fixed format of the conversation (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014: 150). Instead, they are more dialogical and dynamic method: “one that offers flexibility in the interview itself and shifting standpoints over time” (Soss 2014: 171). This means that the interviewer was giving room for conversational dynamics to encourage open and free explanations (Scheibelhofer 2008). Following interpretivist methodology, the set of questions – while retaining the same focus and general structure – evolved to reflect the new perspectives and understandings I developed. Furthermore, while each interview reflected the same design, the style of inquiry was flexibly adjusted to the character of the interlocutor and the conversation’s dynamics. The flexibility in the implementation of the design allowed for on-site reflexivity, instead of following a rigorous stepwise plan (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014: XIX). This was crucial for the quality of the fieldwork. It enabled the researcher to adjust the interviewing style to create a “shared language”, overcome barriers, and position itself differently vis-à-vis different participants (Brinkmann 2013; Rubin and Rubin 1995).

This approach is neither impressionistic nor unsystematic “as attention to the care with which settings, interview subjects (...) observations and interviews carried out; and analyses conducted will attest (...) along with procedural systematicity, interpretive work entails a ‘philosophical rigour’ – a rigour of logic and argumentation – rather than merely procedural ‘rigour’” (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014: XIX).

Vignettes technique

The interviewing is based on a discussion of textual vignettes. Among social scientists, the employment of vignettes and other stimulus material is increasingly considered to be an effective method of scientific inquiry (Barter and Renold 2000). Sampson and Johannessen define vignettes as a textual depiction of an “event which relates to the central topic of study”, a tool that helps the interviewer in “electing the information they desire from interviewees” (2019: 2).

The opinions of the high-level officials are a central evaluative tool of the dissertation. They provide a ‘bottom-up’ assessment - coming from the agents with local knowledge - of possible dramaturgical characteristics of the war-time employment of the narratives of vulnerability.

While most studies - to encourage a more open dialogue with the participants - adapt fictionalised vignettes in order to remove the pressure of participants having to speak directly about their own experience (e.g. Stacey and Vincent 2011), the textual material used in the dissertation could be defined as ‘real-life’ vignettes (see Sampson and Johannessen 2019). These are fragments of Israeli and British state officials’ commentaries/statements regarding the analysed conflicts: 2014 OPE and 2003 invasion of Iraq.

The vignettes were formed on the basis of the analysis of Israel’s and the UK’s public communication (see section Provisional sense-making). A close reading of materials regarding both conflicts allowed me to prepare for the interviews by deepening the case-specific knowledge and gathering relevant real-life quotes.

Each participant, at various times during the interviews, was presented with a vignette. Depending on the time and flow of the conversation, throughout the meeting, interviewees were evaluating and responding to 2-6 sequentially presented vignettes. Most vignettes included comments bearing the characteristics of vulnerability self-identifications.

Few were devoid of any references to the actor's vulnerability commentary. The difference disposed some of the participants to comment on the reasons behind divergence of state's identifications and overall allowed to facilitate more generative conversations. My questions were probing the interviewee's thoughts about the 'accuracy' and meaning of these narratives.

Example 1. Vignette with vulnerability narrative (UK case)

"Saddam believes his poisons and gases are a key element in his military arsenal, not a weapon of last resort. The Iraqi regime used nerve agents to gas 5,000 Iraqi Kurds in the village of Halabja in 1988. Memories of this incident in the west may have been dulled by the passage of time. But the Iraqi Kurds will forever bear the scars. (...) I ask you to imagine the lasting psychological impact on the British public of a chemical weapons attack - carried out by the armed forces - against one of our minority ethnic groups" (Straw 2003a).

Example 2. Vignette without vulnerability narrative (Israel case)

"[Security forces] won't let anyone put soldiers, and certainly not civilians, in danger (...) The IDF has enough bullets for everyone. I think that ultimately, the means that the IDF prepared, whether non-lethal, or if needed, lethal, in cases where it's justified by the open-fire regulations — there's enough ammunition for everyone" (Dichter 2018).

The actual examples of the political usage or avoidance of vulnerability narratives served as a basis for asking interviewees – in an indirect form - how vulnerable in their opinion the country was during the time of the conflict, what is the role of vulnerability in state's politics, was vulnerability an important element of collective identifications during the conflict etc. The questions were only at times openly referring to vulnerability narratives. Instead, the researcher was approaching the sensitive material by "throwing out the rabbit". This technique means alluding to the "sensitive subject matter without directly asking about it" (Rubin and Rubin 1995: 220). For example, by getting to controversial issues by asking on related yet less emotional matters.

This approach reflected the fact that the practice of strong states representing themselves as vulnerable is often seen with suspicion. Media, as well as academics, share a

growing concern with contemporary populist politicians like Orban, Trump or Erdogan employing vulnerability in their rhetoric (e.g. Hopkins 2019; Yilmaz 2017). Vulnerability, weakness and victimhood are increasingly linked with countries politicising history (Subotić 2019). States like Serbia or Israel are accused of using past tragedies to sow discord (Lerner 2020), systematically overstating harm (Schulman 2016) and cynically exploiting their suffering to justify oppression (Finkelstein 2000). Furthermore, I reasoned that the participants may have problems openly talking about the state's vulnerability narratives since such identification negatively reflects on the condition of the entity, the effectiveness of the establishment and indirectly may challenge the official's reputation. While the questions rarely mentioned the state's need for ontological security, securitisation practices or the dramaturgy of vulnerability - namely, the issues directly connected with the research questions - they were indirectly exploring the context-specific role of politics of vulnerability.

In this context, the real-life vignettes played a crucial role in the exploratory effectiveness of the interviews. They not only served as a form of textual "stimulus to extend the discussion" (Bloor and Wood 2006: 183), but they helped improve the interviewer's rapport with the participants by "rapidly establishing credibility" (Sampson and Johannessen 2020: 69) of the researcher. Furthermore, because the participants were exposed to the actual examples of the state's vulnerability narratives (not fictional vignettes), this discouraged elusive or idealised answers. Finally, by focusing the discussion on other officials' vulnerability narratives, the interviewees had an opportunity to de-personify their accounts – to share their own experience of statecraft by referring to or evaluating other person's practice.

Analysing the evidence

The interview analysis follows Shenhav's works on narratives – understood as the “narration of a succession of events” (2015: 19). The thesis' toolbox employs a modified version of the technique of narrative conceptualisation analysis. Namely, instead of identifying the analysed concept (vulnerability narratives) through a set of keywords – that researcher *a priori* identifies as “referring to the concept under examination” (Shenhav 2004: 84), it approaches the text from the perspective of thick level analysis (Shenhav 2015). The author examined 'narrative knots' – the broader textual units that derive their meaning from components such as descriptions of events and political actors. This technique identifies vulnerability narratives not by singular designates – keywords that may be constitutive of collective vulnerability – but by broader story-telling practices. Such an approach reflects the initial discovery (see Provisional sense-making section) that Israel and the UK dramatized their security by vulnerability-based performance. Consequently, I was paying attention also to extra-discursive elements of the interview such as the behaviour of participants. The analysis of the recordings and writing of the field notes took notice of the relations between the participant and its societal surroundings (Shenhav 2015: 84).

Vulnerability narratives can arise through explicit precarity-experience pronunciations, or they may emerge implicitly. A researcher may detect it by being attuned to the relation of the text and its socio-historical surroundings (see Shenhav 2015). This approach reflects the author's recognition of the complexity of vulnerability narratives as a concept that can come about through a broad set of designates. Actors may signify their claimed vulnerability by employing different practices. They may directly talk about being exposed to harm or being weak and easy to hurt. However, they may also refer to events that only subjectively (from the ingroup perspective) led to vulnerability.

Some descriptions of vulnerability require a tacit knowledge about the collective and could not be detected by more traditional text analysis methods, like content analysis (see Holsti 1969). For instance, references to the UN in Israeli slang. Often when Israelis compare the behaviour of their politicians with the UN, they actually want to express a critical view. When they want to say that something is nonsense, they may say it is like “Um-Shmum” (a derogatory reference to the UN) which signifies dismissal of the politics. It also reflects an opinion in Israel that the UN is biased and applies double standards to the country. Consequently, when Israelis are referring to the ‘UN treatment’ of their nation they may mean that they are being victimised by the unfair approach of foreign diplomats. Furthermore, since the author analyses vulnerability narratives from the state perspective, the dissertation looks at vulnerability at the societal (macro) level of analysis. Vulnerability narratives are often a highly politicized social identity. They may arise through descriptions of direct harm or inherent weakness; however, they may also refer to indirectly experienced threats (see Elcheroth 2006) or hypothetical damage and dangers ‘looming on the horizon’. Thus, when looking for vulnerability narratives, I had to pay attention to cultural tropes and references to historical events that bring about associations of vulnerability indirectly.

This means, that when I was working with the interview transcripts, I was not limiting my accounts of vulnerability narratives to instances of explicit references to one’s vulnerability (e.g. “we were vulnerable”, “we were exposed to attack”, “they wanted to harm us”). Instead, I also considered instances of narratives that were referring to an actor’s vulnerability contextually as evidence of this self-identification (e.g. “we were left with no choice”, “the key is to make a lot of noise, to look bigger than we are so that the people will know not to mess with us”, “we are obsessed with our image and how we are presented abroad”).

Vulnerability as a narrative

I argue that vulnerability – like all the other identifications – is introduced to collectives through narratives. It is one of the numerous identifications that compete for our attention. Identifications are promoted by actors along the lines of their political interests and aspirations: “They do so through discourses, texts, monuments, commemorations, and other means that have the potential to construct or sustain official and collective memories. Identities and their associated narratives are almost invariably contested” (Lebow 2016: 27). The importance of the narratives for the political is no coincidence (e.g. Fisher 1984; Hammack and Pilecki 2012). Without telling stories, humankind would not be able to cooperate on a large scale (Harari 2014; Lakoff and Johnson 1980). We learn about the world, organize our ‘reality’ and “memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths” (Bruner 1991: 4). Narratives give the meanings to what is happening and provide a frame that connects events (Steele 2008: 73). The fact that war-time vulnerability narratives were used to dramatize Israel’s and the UK’s standing, only confirms the particular meaning-making capacity of story-telling.

Narratives do not have to tell the truth or accurately represent reality. All because we use them not only to understand the world but also to change it. Narration is an embodiment of the political because as an act it defines what the ‘state is’ (2008: 72). I subscribe to the view that narrative is not only a passive descriptor, that it *constitutes* reality and shapes the “act of knowing” (Bruner 1991: 5). Without creating the discursive representations, states cannot act (Weldes 1999: 57-58). Narrative:

“provides a coherence to the Self. It creates the “person” of the state. (...) Without narrative, we only know “that state” spatially (...) conceptually, the “idea” of the state cannot exist without this narration to develop a sense of continuity. The reason states have an ontological security is because they have a historical account of themselves that has been “built up” through the narrative of agents of the past, present, and the future” (Steele 2008: 20).

The constitutive role of narration is particularly well captured by the dramaturgical use of states communicating their story. When during the months leading up to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, Blair's team was "feeding" journalists with "bloodcurdling lines about the damage Saddam might wreak" on the UK (Marr 2011: loc 9933) this story-telling was not only attempting to define the British understanding of their past and current situation. It was foremost an aspiration to shape the future by changing the state's agenda in the Middle East.

Talking to the high-level officials has two narrative outcomes. One, it provides a 'bottom-up' evaluation of the state's employment of vulnerability narratives. This means that I assess the meaning of this self-identification from the perspective of actors with internal knowledge of statecraft: "this practice of searching for experience-near concepts derives from the conviction that participants possess valuable 'local knowledge'" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 50). Through interviews, I gathered a wide range of viewpoints, assessments, reflections and observations on the reasoning behind Israel and the UK's use of vulnerability narratives. This allowed me to examine my theoretical expectations.

Secondly, the informants' answers themselves have narrative functions (e.g. Fuji 2018: 3). They bear performative characteristics because they present the participants and the others "as moral actors (...) informants construct themselves as narrative types: heroes, victims, survivors, successes or failures" (Whitaker and Atkinson 2019: 622). Consequently, the interviews were a stand-alone source of evidence of the state's self-identification practices. While the majority of participants were not working for the state at the time of the interview, almost all identified (whether they shared them or not) with the state's narratives. They tended to treat the state's image and policies very personally. Thus, during the interviews, they not only scrutinised and explained states' narratives, but also themselves 'narrated' the state. Participants often acted as if they personified the state.

Naturally, the challenge of elite interviews is the reliability of the participants. Officials have vested interests in how they are perceived. They lie, idealise, inflate, or downplay their role in an event (Kramer 1990). Becker suggests: “The trick for dealing with the hierarchy of credibility is simple enough: doubt everything anyone in power tells you” (1998: 91). Rubin and Rubin, warn: “check and double-check everything” (1995: 225). At the same time, the problem of truthfulness in in-depth interviewing should not be blown out of proportion. Exaggeration, deceit and falsehood on their own are a source of crucial insight into the functions of vulnerability narratives. The study is not a fact-checking mission. It does not matter whether the interviewees are truth-tellers or manipulators. Even if they are saying things cynically, their behaviour still exposes the state logic and the role ontological security inevitably plays in state behaviour. Interlocutors themselves are not truth-speaking, and the interviews’ value is revelatory (Whithaker and Atkinson 2019: 621).

Organizing the material

The point of the narrative analysis is to find out “stories that explain what it is (...) and how it got that way”, which means that the task is done well if it leads to “a story that explains why this process had to lead to this result” (Becker 1998: 57). This approach entails that the author is conducting an interpretive analysis of meaning (e.g. Geertz 1973). After all, narratives themselves are an ultimate tool of interpretation. Lawler calls them ‘interpretive devices’ arguing that when actors narrate, they do not simply describe but: “are making sense of the world” (2014: 26). Narratives are not purely factual; they are rather one of many competing personifications of the state. Vulnerability narratives are a story interpreting what the state is and what it should be doing. For Steele (2008) narratives are the main object researchers can focus on in order to understand the ideational factors behind states’ behaviour.

The analysis of the interviews is not linear but iterative and recursive (Avruch and Black 1993: 136; Becker 1998: 9; Fuji 2018: XI-XII). Following hermeneutic tradition, transcripts are studied multiple times until no new insights arise from the analysis. Furthermore, the reading of transcripts is complemented by the field notes and, guided by - or compared with - the case-specific knowledge gathered during the close reading of primary and secondary sources (see Provisional sense-making section). This orientation provides a robust, contextualised ‘thick’ analysis of the evidence (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014) and accounts for the intertextuality of narratives: “whereby one text evokes another through repetition of a key phrase” (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 134).

The process of narrative analysis of interviews leads to the formulation of recurring themes around which the researcher organizes the data and finally portrayals the understanding of the interview (Fuji 2018). Data brings about a multiplicity of perspectives and explanations. Related or recurring narratives are bound together by the researcher through integrative or overarching themes which are the same or similar “explanations for how and why things happen” (Rubin and Rubin 1995). For the transparency of the research process, as well as to enrich the research reporting, the interview excerpts are often combined with the relevant textual vignettes used during the conversations.

Interviewees’ narratives are arranged into themes and compared against the research expectations. Although the thesis does not employ a positivist methodology by hypothesizing about causal links between vulnerability narratives and some external factors, it is scrutinising my theoretical expectations. While the analysis is not fixed by the author’s anticipated findings, it is reflecting upon them (see Chapter 4).

The analysis of the transcripts advances my understanding of vulnerability narratives from experience-distant provisional sense-making to explanations rooted in the local knowledge of the state actors. Thus, the narrative analysis of interviews – while affected by

the researcher's positionality and expectations (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 67-68) – is not limited to them. In the process, new unexpected themes emerge, compelling the researcher to actively consider his own sense-making (Schwartz-Shea 2014). Consequently, the crucial evaluative standard of the dissertation is not only systematicity but also the reflexivity of the researcher (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 100).

4.5. Conclusion

To surmise, this chapter outlined the methodology, the general design of the thesis, research methods, as well as the key analytical perspective used to analyse the collected material. I explained that since at the centre of the dissertation was the puzzling practice of strong states employing vulnerability narratives during conflicts, my goal was to tease out what this self-interpretation means for the state. This specific research focus was best answered by an interpretive methodology that focuses on meaning-making. Due to my contention that the state's use of vulnerability narratives is context-driven, I searched for countries with similar institutional, military and economic characteristics. For the comparative analysis, I picked the case of Israel's 2014 OPE and the UK's 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Following the abductive mode of inquiry, I have conducted a study of secondary and primary sources on both of the conflicts. Based on this provisional sense-making, I conceptualised that strong states aspire to dramatize themselves as vulnerable. Dramaturgy is an analytical perspective and an empirical marker used throughout the study that captures both the performative practice as well as the security objectives behind strong states employment of vulnerability narratives. Goffman's metaphor of theatre allows to accentuate that actors use vulnerability self-presentations' to pursue ontological security and to securitise the weaker enemy.

Employing Chicago School's principle on taking theories to the field (see Vidich and Lyman 2000), my interpretation of the state's vulnerability narratives was further investigated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the British and Israeli state officials. Since I used different data sources (a diverse group of Israeli/British participants, range of textual and audio-visual data), methods of data generation (interviews, documents) and points of 'observation' (two conflicts) I devised a research strategy that leads to the triangulation of my findings. Namely, I investigated the validity and the robustness of the study's knowledge claims by accounting for similarities and intertextuality of vulnerability narratives across different contexts (see Schwartz-Shea 2014).

5. Israel: David and Goliath

5.1. Introduction

This chapter is devoted to the discussion of Israel's material as well as ideational standing. Israel is one of two dissertation's case studies – together with the UK – selected to research strong state's employment of war-time vulnerability narratives. I analyse Israel's 2014 Operation Protective Edge (OPE), a seven weeks long military conflict with Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The state, as well as this particular conflict, were purposively selected based on their characteristics. Since I argue that the use of vulnerability narratives is context-dependent, I opted for comparing states of similar political (parliamentary democracy), economic (developed state) as well as military standing (nuclear power). My choice of OPE reflected the comparative design of the study which was limited to modern mediatized wars (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010).

The chapter is used to present a detailed profile of the state. To establish why Israel is physically a powerful actor that fits the dissertation's focus on strong states self-identifying as vulnerable. Also, to determine that since Israel was so strong, vulnerability narratives were not a response to its lack of operational capabilities. Instead, their use was driven by a sense of ontological insecurity about the conflict with the much weaker enemy.

First, I examine the country's geopolitical standing by looking at its army, economy and society. Next, by analysing the Janus-faced identity of Israelis, I introduce the phenomenon of this powerful actor self-describing itself as vulnerable in the context of its ongoing geopolitical contests with the Palestinians, Iran and its striving for legitimacy. Third, I discuss why this phenomenon cannot be addressed by the realist and rationalist accounts which typically portray Israel as a deterrent state. Fourth, I propose that the 2014 conflict was

a disruption for Israel's ontological security and that vulnerability narratives helped the state to perpetuate its identity. Lastly, I provide a short overview of the OPE.

5.2. Strong state

When speaking to Israelis, you can hear time and again that their lives are good, their prospects optimistic and their homeland stronger than ever. Israelis are very proud of their achievements and like to boast about them. - Israel is a success story. Look what we have achieved in the last 70 years. There are only a few equivalents in the world to our advancement – told me the spokesperson for one of the Israeli prime ministers. My friend Michael, an archaeologist from Jerusalem often points out that the foreigners who look at Israel from the perspective of the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians, cannot understand Israeli's frame of mind:

“Most Israelis actually think they have it all. And it is hard to blame them for that. We have a great Mediterranean climate, cuisine that bridges the Middle East with Europe, a standard of life on par with Western Europe. Yes, rockets are falling here and there, there is occupation and Bibi (PM Netanyahu) but people are more content than ever, they feel safer than ever. Considering the tough neighbourhood we live in what else do you want?”

When in 2019 Israel launched its lunar spacecraft 'Beresheet' - with an ambition to be the fourth country to ever land on the Moon - the lander snapped a 'selfie' picture with the Earth in the background. This one-of-a-kind example of public diplomacy perfectly captured the nation's pride. In the frame, we saw a plaque with an Israeli flag as well as the inscription “Small country, big dreams”. Israeli's self-esteem is echoed in bestselling publications that present Israel as a political beacon of hope (e.g. Gordis 2012; Peres 2017), a cradle of innovation (e.g. Arieli 2019; Senor and Singer 2009; Siegel 2015), an army juggernaut (Katz Y. 2019; Katz and Bohbot 2017), and an actor who in defence of its people is more daring than any other democracy in the world (e.g. Raviv and Melman 1990; Bergman 2018).

Bombastic triumphalism is often present among the Israeli right and employed by the PM Benjamin Netanyahu (e.g. Blumenthal 2013). Israeli elites often juxtaposed to me the strength and stability of their country with the unrest of the Levant region. This way they were echoing a commonly circulated view that, as said by Ehud Barak, former PM of Israel, the country is like a “prosperous villa in the middle of the jungle” (Barak 1996), or, as PM Netanyahu stressed out: “an island of tranquillity [amid] the storm raging around us” (Netanyahu 2013). In this narrative, Israel is ‘the Goliath’, a country that made the desert bloom (Siegel 2015).

It is true that when Israeli leaders are speaking about the country’s success, they have good reasons to be confident. This success is particularly evident in the way how Israelis live today.

Society and economics

Israel is referred to as an economic “miracle”, all because of the pace of the development and the hurdles it had to overcome in order to prosper. The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs accentuates that “it is the story of an economy that was built from scratch, survived numerous crises and severe economic deprivation, and has finally emerged as a successful, free-market economy whose citizens enjoy a high standard of living” (IMFA 2010).

British-era Palestine is often juxtaposed with contemporary Israel. The point of entry for many specialists describing the beginnings of the Zionist dream is a series of quotations taken from Mark Twain’s travelogue “The Innocents Abroad” (2006) in which he describes the Holy Land.³⁸ The important role of the book in Israeli historiography is not a coincidence

³⁸ Twain descriptions of the region are used e.g. in Ben-Rafael et al. (2016), they are employed by Senor and Singer (2009), Ben-Ami (2006), Dowty (2019).

since Twain poignantly portrays the underdeveloped socio-economic conditions of Palestine under Ottoman rule:

“Of all the lands there are for dismal scenery, I think Palestine must be the prince. The valleys are unsightly deserts fringed with a feeble vegetation that has an expression about it of being sorrowful and despondent” (2006: Ch 56).

Today, Twain’s vivid descriptions (for critical reading of Twain see Malul 2018) are utilised as advocacy for Israel’s achievements. While Twain is talking about “silent, mournful expanse”, “miserable huts” and inhabitants that are dirty, covered with flies and “infested with vermin” (2006: Ch XLV), Israeli politicians are boasting about Nobel prize laureates, internationally acclaimed tv-shows, and a shift from a state selling oranges to a developer of satellites (e.g. Flug 2018). While the pre-1948 Zionist writing about Palestine often accentuated the region’s “wilderness... a stony desolation” and presented it as a “deserted home” (Faris 1975), today the Israeli establishment prides itself on making the state bustling with life and surpassing Japan’s GDP per capita (Schindler 2018). Such juxtapositions are rightfully being accused of misrepresentation of the Ottoman and British mandate Palestine. It is often argued that descriptions of an underdeveloped and empty Holy Land served the Zionist cause. Namely, that by describing Palestine as “a land without a people, waiting for a people without a land”,³⁹ Jewish immigration to the region was being legitimised regardless of the will of the Palestinian Arabs.

Putting aside the ethical considerations and socio-political underpinnings of different historical representations of Palestine, it is true that Israel after the proclamation of independence in 1948 was impoverished and underdeveloped. Israel of the 40s and 50s was a state of food rationing, economic stagnation and austerity policies (e.g. Shapira 2012: 211).

³⁹ A story of a phrase “a land without a people...” is actually more complex as it is often presented. For a nuanced analysis of the uses and abuses of this rendition see Garfinkle 1991.

On average, the standard of living in the country was similar to that of American in the 1800s (Senor and Singer 2009: 9; standard of living comparative data from gapminder.org).

Today, while there are growing concerns for rising social disparities (e.g. Cornfeld and Danieli 2015; Swirski 2016; Sachar 2007: 1094; Mindell 2019), the dominant political discourses about state's trends summarise its achievements as a unique success story. This finds confirmation in economic studies. Levi-Faour's comparison of the growth patterns of Israel, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan, shows that Israel – even in the context of the world's fast-developing economies – was exceptional:

“despite a dearth of natural resources, the limited size of the Israeli market, the Arab boycott, the heavy burden of military expenditures, a backward manufacturing base, a scarcity of foreign direct investment, and the absorption of immigrants and refugees who doubled Israel's population within five years” (1998: 66).

Since 2000, the Israeli economy has risen on average by 3.3% annually. This makes it one of the fastest-growing economies of the OECD (OECD 2018). Speaking in March 2018 at a press conference celebrating Israel's 70th birthday, Bank of Israel Governor Karnit Flug boasted about the “amazing achievements”:

“Where we were once a country whose ultimate pride was in the export of oranges, and which suffered from a chronic balance of payments deficit and then from huge public debt and runaway inflation, we have become a country with a balance of payments surplus, a surplus of assets over liabilities, and inflation that we would like to be a little higher” (Flug 2018).

Almost every socio-economic indicator indeed backs her view. From 1950 till 2016, citizen's life expectancy for men has risen from 66.3 to 80.7, and for women from 69.5 to 84.2. Infant mortality in 1950 was 45.6 per 1,000 live births. In 2016 it was 3.1.⁴⁰ In 1961 the average monthly wage was 275 IL, today it is 12.381 IL (Central Bureau of Statistics 2021). Israeli households have disposable income roughly on par with the Danes and the Dutch (OECD 2020). Between 1950 and 2017 the import of goods went from USD 300 mln to USD 69.143 billion. Importantly, exports soared from USD 35 mln to 61.087 billion (Central Bureau of

⁴⁰ Data from Central Bureau of Statistics 2016.

Statistics 2016). Material advancement is also followed by society's emotional well-being. Israel's citizens on average tend to be happier (World Happiness Report 2019), and more confident about the economy (IPSOS 2018) than in most places on Earth; they are generally optimistic about their future and very patriotic (Israel National Resilience Index 2017).

Israelis pride themselves on their tradition of scholarship. Israel has one of the highest ratios of scientific publications per million residents (Volansky 2012). Since 2000, Israeli scientists won eight Nobel prizes and one Fields Medal. Today Israelis are the 8th best-educated workforce in the world and their skills are ranked by employers as 2nd most competitive in the world (World Economic Forum 2018: 33).

Importantly, Israel's educated society created a unique environment for the capitalisation of its skills. Israel is perceived as one of the world's most creative, research-intensive economies. It is one of the top five most innovative states listed on the Bloomberg Innovation Index (Jamrisko, Miller and Lu 2019). Israel has one of the highest numbers of scientists and engineers per capita (Senor and Singer 2009), according to the World Economic Forum, it spends the biggest proportion (4.3%) of its GDP on R&D and has "near equal participation of women" on the work market (2018: 33). Israel has a modern banking system and the world's second-most robust venture capital market (2018: 33). Its patent output per capita is 5th in the world (Weinreb 2018). Israeli companies are also one of the world's best in sectors such as health, cyber-security, defence, artificial intelligence, biotech, solar energy, software (see Israel Innovation Authority 2018; Katz and Bohbot 2017; Gordis 2017). According to the Israeli Innovation Authority, Israel has now the largest number of start-ups per capita (Solomon 2017).

Israelis treat their achievements with pride and often mention them in conversations. Israeli businessman Gidi Grinstein summarizes:

“we doubled our economic situation relative to America while multiplying our population fivefold and fighting three wars. This is totally unmatched in the economic history of the world” (in Senor and Singer 2009).

The army

Israel is broadly perceived as one of the world’s most effective and modern military forces (see Katz and Bohbot 2017). Since its inception, the country has managed to develop a robust and very versatile domestic arms industry and has gradually increased its defensive and offensive capabilities. In the past, Israel has proven time and again that it can resist the collective forces of regional opponents. Today the IDF is capable of deterring its neighbours and winning in conventional military confrontations. Military analysts agree that it is “the most capable force in the region, with the motivation, equipment and training to considerably overmatch the (...) other regional armed forces” (Military Balance 2015: 332).

While Israel’s military doctrine in recent years has been evolving (see e.g. Eisenkot and Siboni 2019; Tira 2016) its fundamental geostrategic consideration has not changed. Due to its small size, Israel does not have the luxury of making mistakes on the battlefield. Consequently, it is argued that it cannot lose any war. Israel’s main strategic goal is defensive, however operationally it is offensive. This means that in times of war its priority is to quickly move the theatre of war outside of its borders.⁴¹ Such an approach was first articulated by Ben-Gurion:

“If we are attacked and war is again forced on us, we shall not adopt a defensive strategy, rather we will move to an attack on the enemy – and as far as possible in enemy territory” (in Raska 2015: 67).

Today the IDF could be interpreted as a direct organisational response to the threats articulated by Ben-Gurion. Due to Israel’s numerical inferiority and lack of strategic depth, its planners focus on maintaining the country’s technological superiority. Consequently, the

⁴¹ However, it is argued that in the case of conflicts with sub-state opponents, the Israeli doctrine has evolved, see Tira 2016.

Israeli army is punching above the state's weight. According to the Global Firepower Military Strength index, Israel's military potential places it in 17th place – in front of Australia, Spain and Canada. Reflecting its small size, Israel's *modus operandi* is based on citizens' "total mobilisation" and "continual preparation for war" (Kimmerling 2016). Due to its numerical inferiority, IDF was always a popular army with mandatory service for all non-Arab citizens, both men and women. This approach maximizes the numbers of troops. While IDF's active personnel is 169,500, the state's reserve is 465,000 (Military Balance 2019: 346). IDF's unique history makes it one of the most experienced and best trained armed forces in the world.

Israel is considered to be both – a laboratory and a showcase - for military innovation. The country is one of the leaders in the area of "armoured vehicles, unmanned systems, guided weapons and cybersecurity" (Military Balance 2019). In 2019 it was the world's eighth biggest arms exporter (SIPRI 2019a).

IAF presides over the Middle Eastern skies and is widely perceived as the best air force in the region (Military Balance 2019). Thanks to its strategic reach and diversified fleet of modern air fighters, Tel Aviv was able to uphold Begin Doctrine - asserting that Israel's has to prevent its enemies to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD) - and destroyed nuclear programs in Syria and Iraq (Yadlin 2018).

With its traditional emphasis on the survivability of the troops, Israeli-made armoured personal carriers come with one of the world's most effective protection systems and can quickly deploy troops to the borders (Military Balance 2019). Historically one of the main factors behind Israel's successes was tied to swift and decisive armoured warfare. Today, the IDF can quickly deploy forces that can fight in the open terrain as well as in the urban environment. It operates one of the best-armoured vehicles such as indigenous Merkava tanks. Equipped with the unprecedented active protection missile defence system, Merkava is

arguably not only the world's safest of the main battle tanks but one of the deadliest (Military Balance 2015: 312).

In order to gain what Katz calls “diplomatic manoeuvrability”, a chance to strategize before deciding on how to respond to rocket attacks on the state's territory (2017), IDF has developed three of the world's most advanced anti-ballistic missile defence systems. Israel is the only country with a fully operational anti-ballistic missile defence system that covers its entire territory (Katz and Bohbot 2017). Tel Aviv's geostrategic preparedness is funded on efficient early warning systems. Because of its unique know-how and indigenous reconnaissance satellites it has one of the most advanced programs of space-intelligence (e.g. Katz and Bohbot 2017; Military Balance 2019). Israel is a leader in the global drones' market. Consequently, the country's combat operations, as well as data gathering, is supported by one of the most deadly, versatile and accurate fleets of drones (Katz and Bohbot 2017).

The final, crucial element in Israel's military standing are the nuclear capabilities. While never officially confirmed by Tel Aviv (Hersh 1991), it is generally accepted that Israel has between 80 and 400 nuclear warheads (e.g. Arms Control 2020; SIPRI 2020). Israel's delivery means are the state's air fighters, as well as intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Furthermore, to guarantee itself a second-strike capability, the country has a modern fleet of submarines, all of which are widely believed to be equipped with Israeli made nuclear-armed cruise missiles (e.g. Military Balance 2015, 2019).

Participation in conflicts

Israelis early on knew that in order to advance, they urgently required an effective state apparatus. In 1954 Deutschner was writing that “To nearly all Jews here the ideal of an individual and collective happiness is to grow a solid, protective national shell.” (2017: 93).

Since its establishment, Israel's resilience was often tested and the state fought multiple times. Its borders were never calm, and especially in the first decades, the IDF was constantly involved in draining skirmishes with the Fedayeen (e.g. Morris 1993). In many cases Israel's military operations could not be based on numerical superiority. However, Jews won numerous multi-front wars with its Arab neighbours. While it is often pointed out that what stands behind Israel's victories is its technological supremacy, an adaptable chain of command and willingness to improvise (see e.g. Senor and Singer 2009; Katz Y. 2019), all of these interpretations are missing the key factor behind its success. It was the motivation that made Israel triumphant (e.g. Morris 2001, 2008). Former prime minister Golda Meir often remarked that it was the lack of alternatives that made Jews such efficient fighters. She tellingly captured Israeli's ingrained conviction that the wars they are fighting are wars of survival:

“If we lose a war, that's the end forever — and we disappear from the earth. If one fails to understand this, then one fails to understand obstinacy. We intend to remain alive. Our neighbours want to see us dead. This is not a question that leaves much room for compromise” (Shenker 1978).

The taxonomy of Israeli conflicts depends on applied definitions however, in the last 70 years the state was participating in eight major wars. It also fought two Palestinian intifadas and was involved in multiple armed conflicts. Arguably, the three most important wars that have shaped not only Israeli borders but foremost its identity and politics was: 1948 War of Independence, the 1967 Six-Day War and the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The first one constituted the state territorially and organisationally, the second was a showcase of military prowess which led some to believe in the state's invincibility, the third has traumatised Israel and defined its self-perceptions by reviving its fear of vulnerability for decades. All three were victorious for Israel and led it to control more territory than envisioned by the world powers. Out of 13 key wars and military conflicts in which the IDF participated, it lost only in one case:

Conflict	Enemies	Result
War of Independence (1948)	Egypt, Iraq, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Holy War Army	Victory
Sinai War (1956)	Egypt	Victory
Six-Day War (1967)	Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq	Victory
War of Attrition (1967-1970)	Egypt, PLO, Soviet Union, Jordan	Both sides claim victory
Yom Kippur War (1973)	Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, North Korea	Victory
First Lebanon War (1982-1985)	PLO, Syria, Amal, Jammoul	Victory
Security Zone Campaign (1985-2000)	Hezbollah, Amal, Jammoul	Defeat
First Intifada (1987-1993)	Hamas, PLO	Oslo Accord
Second Intifada (2000-2005)	Palestinian Authonomy, Hamas	Victory
Second Lebanon War (2006)	Hezbollah	Stalemate
Operation Cast Lead (2008-2009)	Hamas	Victory
Operation Pillar of Defense (2012)	Hamas	Victory
Operation Protective Edge (2014)	Hamas	Victory

Global standing

Today, Israel is more powerful also internationally. While in the first decades of its existence, the Jewish ‘experiment’ was mostly a point of attention for the world Jewry, today it is visited by more than 3.5 mln tourists yearly (Ministry of Tourism 2018). For a tiny country, which establishment could be interpreted more as an outcome of a truly fortunate confluence of post-Holocaust Soviet and US foreign policies (e.g. Sachar 2007), Israel’s diplomatic ties with the world powers are now uniquely strong.

From its inception, Israel required a powerful partner for its survival. During the 1948 War of Independence, the help came in a surprising and unexpected form of limited arms

sales from the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia (Morris 2008: 402; Shapira 2012: 155). Then came short cooperation with Paris, after which Tel Aviv was forced to successfully pivot towards Washington. From the late 60s till the end of the Cold War, Israel relied predominantly on technological and financial help from the USA and Western Germany. But while during the Cold War Levant was a theatre of a binary competition between - supported by the Soviet Union - Arab states and Pro-American Israel, today, the interstate alliances in the region became much more complicated.

In the context of Israel, one thing is largely the same, the strategic alliance with the USA is today probably stronger than ever. Washington not only provides Israel with \$3 billion in military financing annually but also defends Tel Aviv in the UN. Israel relies also on the 'special relationship' with Berlin with whom it cooperates closely militarily and scientifically. Both states have extensive cultural and economic relations.

However, since the 90s, the country has been rapidly developing close relations with other powerful actors. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the 1991 Madrid conference provided an impulse for rapprochement with Beijing and Delhi and in 1992 has led to the establishment of full diplomatic relations with both powers (Eran 2017). Katz and Bohbot highlight how Israel's know-how has allowed it to reposition itself on the global scene: "Israel's success has led aerospace giants, weapons manufacturers and even countries to flock to the Jewish State to learn about this unique combination of innovation, drive and technology" (2017: 9). Today, both India and China, as well as Japan, consider Israel as a strategic technological partner. In the last few years they all signed agreements fostering industrial and economic cooperation, and have started their innovation funds as well as R&D initiatives (e.g. Chaziza 2018; Eran 2017; Solomon 2019). With more than 1.5 million Russian-speaking Israelis, also Russia recognised the unique importance of Tel Aviv. Today

both countries have a visa-free movement, they cooperate on matters of security and have close economic, military and cultural ties.

With the growing military capabilities of Iran, also Gulf states opened up to Israel. While the cooperation is indirect or kept in secret, it is broadly argued that Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Allies are acquiring Israeli technology, equipment and expertise: “The long-standing Arab boycott of Israel has been eroded, as has the traditional pan-Arab commitment (or lip-service paid) to the Palestinian cause (...) Desalinisation, drip irrigation, solar energy and medical equipment are important areas of trade and expertise” (Strategic Comments 2019).

Given these developments, the growing internal power of Israel is being successfully translated into its increasing prominence on the international stage. Tel Aviv relies today not only on strategic partnership with a single (everchanging) world power that considers Israel as its client. Instead, it has burgeoning cultural ties with the West, impressive economic exchange with Asia and deepening understanding with the Arab world.

5.3. Israel: David or Goliath?

While Israel’s power is today undisputable, the citizens' perceptions of their country’s standing are more complex. Israelis, when talking about the country’s history, heritage and wealth, often accentuate the positive image of the state. When Rafi - one of the leading Israeli politicians - was summarising to me all the geopolitical advances of his country, he underlined that Israeli patriotism does not have to be any more predicated on “threat of annihilation”:

“You do not have to be all the time scared and live in fear to be an Israeli patriot. We are not in 1948 and we are not in 1973. We are a very strong state, with a very strong economy and mighty army” (2018).

In their analysis of the Israeli technological and geostrategic ingenuity, Katz and Bohbot conclude that “Israel as a story has always marvelled the world. It is a tale of how a

weak and ancient people returned to their homeland, established a state and, against all odds, not only survived but prospered.” (2017: 26) When on the 18th of April the president of Israel, Reuven Rivlin was celebrating the country’s 70th anniversary, he described it as a success story:

“All these leaders and representatives from all around the world have in common... they are amazed, and have such great appreciation for all we have achieved in just seventy years. From water technology to cyber, from academic research to medical breakthroughs, from agriculture to clean energy: Israel continues to inspire the world and the people of Israel continue to inspire me!” (Rivlin 2018).

However, the Israeli identity is Janus-faced, and the state’s culture is full of contradictions. Israelis self-identify as both – a mighty Goliath and a weak David. It is vital to understand that while the critique of Israel is induced by the state’s strength, the advocacy for it is driven by the state’s precarity. While the initial wave of the awe-stricken writing on Israel, most typical for the 60s, has abated (e.g. Prittie 1967), Israel is still an object of ardent support. Authors that advocate for Israel’s standing believe that the state is still involved in a fight for its very existence (e.g. Gordis 2010; 2017). - Israel is a tiny nation, with few natural resources and little natural wealth, that has had to devote an enormous percentage of its gross national product to defending itself against external and internal enemies – argues Dershowitz (2003: 223). He believes that Israel’s treatment by the international community and the negative portrayal in academia makes “the Middle East’s only democracy the Jew among nations” (2003: 222). For Gilder, Israel is a moral challenge to the bigoted world community. It is also an embattled object of festering jealousy of Arabs and one of the main enemies of the global left (2012). Lozowick shows that the uniqueness of Israel’s standing vis-à-vis other nations is that aside from having to advocate for its actions, it is burdened by a constant fight to justify its own existence (2004).

The fears and insecurities about the standing of the Middle Eastern ‘Goliath’ are one of the dominating themes within Israel itself. In 2019, 58% of Israelis believed that Israel will

‘forever live by the sword’ and 47% agreed with the statement that ‘the entire world is against us’ (Israeli 2019). Consequently, contrary to the popular view, worries expressed in the ‘pro-Israeli’ diatribes cannot be simply dismissed as a manipulation. They do reflect and often stem from Israelis’ own anxieties. As summarised by Rivka, a colonel in the IDF and a former advisor to one of Israel’s prime ministers:

“There is a difference between us being strong and our sense of security. We do not feel secure. It is not just the Shoah. It’s all of it. We wake up in the morning and we do not feel secure. And this is the source of this enormous gap in perception between us and the Western world. We look and are very strong but it does not mean that we think or feel secure enough. I am Israeli colonel and I do not feel secure” (2018).

The first source of Israeli fears is the issue of the future borders of the state and the challenge of the defensibility of its territory. “Israel is one of the most disputed settings in the world” (Ben-Rafael et al. 2016: Foreword). Since the establishment in 1948, Israel’s territory and borders have been a source of ethnic conflict, war, international controversy and legal disputes. The original dream of Zionists was that it will be the plough that will demarcate the lines of their homeland however, it was the sword that did it (Biger 2008: 78-79).

Today, with an area of 22.000 sq. km,⁴² Israel is considered to be a small state. Its size is similar to that of Belize (22.966 sq. km) or Slovenia (20.273 sq. km).⁴³ Just two out of the five state borders are recognised by the international community. Thanks to the peace agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), the state is not anymore in a territorial dispute with those neighbours. However, its current border with Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian Autonomy is questioned and not accepted by either Beirut, Amman or Ramallah. Jerusalem, as the capital of Israel, is recognised only by a few world actors.

Second is the matter of Israel’s right to exist. Israel (in any shape or form) cannot be found on the maps sold throughout most of the Middle East (Jewish Telegraphic Agency 2014) and its illegitimacy is the main agenda of the debates within the UN’s Human Rights

⁴² If not stated otherwise the statistics on Israel are taken from Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics (2016, 2018). Consequently, the data includes some of the occupied territories – Golan Heights and East Jerusalem.

⁴³ UN Data 2020.

Council (Government of the Netherlands 2019; Shamir 2007). Referred to as the small Satan⁴⁴, Zionist entity (Humphreys 2005: 51), Jewish cancer (Wistrich 2016: 928), colonialist excrescence (Sundquist 2005: 333), by politicians, activists and intellectuals alike,⁴⁵ Israel's existence – more than seventy years after its establishment - is still a matter of controversy. In 2003 unpublished Eurobarometer pool showed that EU citizens perceive Israel as the biggest threat to the world's peace. 59% of respondents were scared of the Jewish state more than that of Iran, North Korea and Iraq. The findings shocked Brussels and placed it in a very uncomfortable position (Deutsche Welle 2003). While the question was excluded from the following pools, it speaks volumes about the popular perception of Israel around the world. Especially in the Middle East, the Jewish right to self-determination is broadly contested. In the 2017 Arab Opinion Index, 87% of respondents are opposed to recognition of Israel's existence by their countries (ACRPS 2017). In the opinion of Rivka: "The fact that the region is not recognising us is an important source of our insecurity."

The third source of Israeli fears is the protracted, intractable conflict with the Palestinians. What many commentators are missing in their analyses of Israel standing is the fact that irrespective of their kinetic power and regional military supremacy, Israel's military success were somewhat paradoxical. The reverse side of the Jewish ascendancy was the Palestinian failure. The triumph of the Jewish self-determination was an obstacle to the self-determination of the Palestinians. Thus, in Deutscher's view, "The State of Israel has had explosives – the grievances of hundreds of thousands of displaced Arabs – built into its very foundations" (2017: 116). No matter how many times Jews won on the battlefields, they could neither break nor find a common ground with the Palestinians. Furthermore, for the international community, the stronger Israel was getting, the weaker its moral credentials became. While the wars Israel has fought helped the Jews to build and defend their right to

⁴⁴ Probably the first one to use this term was Muammar Gaddafi (The Glasgow Herald 1980).

⁴⁵ For a detailed discussion see Wistrich 2010.

have a state, their homeland was overshadowed by the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians (see Gordis 2010; Schwartz and Wilf 2020). The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and its 2.8 million Palestinian inhabitants (Toameh 2018), as well as military confrontations with Hamas in Gaza, are one of the main reasons for the geopolitical tensions the state is facing today.

Fourthly, is the issue of Iran's development of nuclear energy, as well as its encroachment in the Levant. For years Teheran has been promising to wipe Israel off the map (e.g. Kaye and Efron 2020). Its robust ballistic and nuclear programs and increasing military presence in Syria and Lebanon, are considered to be one of the greatest threats to the future of the Jewish state (Shine and Zimmt 2020).

Lastly is the matter of Israel's image abroad. Israel's power leads to a growing critique of its role in global politics. Rafi told me that the state is treated unfairly abroad:

"There is an ongoing war of advocacy, of hasbara [literally 'explanation' in Hebrew – the term used to refer to Israel's public diplomacy; see Gilboa 2006]. There is a very strong demonization of Israel by many organisations. Separating from the legitimate criticism of Israel, we are dealing with unfair and brutal demonization of Israel. (2018)"

Today the Jewish state looms larger than ever and is accused of different ills. Israel as presented by its harshest critics is an omnipotent actor that shapes the course of global politics, endangers the future of the US (e.g. Alam 2009) and destabilizes Europe and the Middle East. For Chomsky, it is an ultimate example of a 'terrorist' and 'mercenary' state (1986) which is doing the USA's 'dirty work' by policing the Middle East (1983: XIII). Tyler presents Israel as modern Sparta, a militarised and power-hungry juggernaut that is unwilling to find peace with its neighbours. Israelis for him are governed by bellicose generals. All citizens whole lives operate like soldiers, thus the conclusion is that the military establishment in Israel... are Israelis themselves (Tyler 2012). Ben Cramer accuses Tel Aviv

of clandestinely supporting the leader of the PLO Yassir Arafat to break the Palestinian national movement (2004: 231, 246).

Since its inception, the country was accused of utilizing its supposedly unique influence over Washington (e.g. Aridan 2019; Finkelstein 2005; Tivnan 1987). In 2007 Mearsheimer and Walt went so far as to blame Tel Aviv for steering the US to invade Iraq in 2003 (230). Portraying Israel as a “Jewish tail” that “wags the American dog” (Hitchens 2006) they believe that the country should be blamed for anti-American sentiments in the Middle East and see it as a crucial threat to Washington’s security. Finkelstein sees Israel and American Jews as master manipulators who are cynically using the memory of the Holocaust as an ideological tool that made Israel an ultimate ‘victim state’ and gave it credentials for human rights abuses (e.g. 2000, 2005). Describing the reasons behind the conflicts and wars between Israel, Palestinians and the Arab states, Alam flatly blames the Jews as repeatedly “provoking Arab hostility” (2009: 173). He accuses Israel of all sorts of problems such as destroying the Arab pan-nationalism in the 60s (2009: 183) or the rise of Islamic radicalism in the 00s (2009: 219).

While many Israelis and the Israeli right will often say otherwise, the truth is that those perceptions do not fall on deaf ears. Ben, a former official at Aman (Military Intelligence) summarizes:

“We pretend that we do not care what you think but we do really care a lot about external views. There is something about our psyche that makes us feel that we constantly have to legitimate ourselves to others. We underline all those things to be liked – like inventions, Nobel prizes and it is ironic. Because the whole point of Israel was to not having to legitimise and justify ourselves anymore (...) Israelis are constantly reaffirming their existence, their right to be, their contributions to the world. I do not see any other country doing that” (2019).

Under siege

There is an abundance of research showing that Israelis are wary about their country’s place in the world. Writing about Israelis’ ‘siege mentality’, Bar-Tal and Antebi succinctly

summarize a set of collective beliefs defining Israeli society. They believe that Israelis share the view that the world has negative intentions towards them, that their existence is threatened, and that they cannot count on others: “Thus, Siege Mentality (...) [is] accompanied by such beliefs as “No-one will help us in time of need”, “The world should be glad to get rid of us”, “We cannot rely on others advice” and so on (1992: 49). Talking about their profound existential worries, Abulof concludes that Israelis live under ‘deep securitisation’ which is a state where: “threats are explicitly framed as probable and protracted, endangering the very existence of the nation/state and that discourse is incessantly and widely employed by the society” (2014: 397). Gordis repeatedly portrays a nation and a state that is involved in – sometimes - almost paralysing existential uncertainty and biographical anxiety (2002; 2006). Sociologists (Zerubavel 1995), philosophers (Enns 2012), historians (Zertal 2005), political scientists (Amir 2012) and psychologists (Bar-Tal 1998, 2007; Oren, Nets-Zehngut and Bar-Tal 2015) believe that victimhood is one of the dominating Israeli identifications. They warn that this perspective induces collective fears, protracts the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians and provides legitimacy to harsh military actions. For many Israeli public intellectuals, the collective fear and trauma are so pervasive that they blind the state makers and are an obstacle to peace (e.g. Ben-Ami 2006; Shlaim 2014).

When speaking about this double identity that includes both the country’s strength and its anxiety, Israeli historiographers often retell the story of Ezer Weizman’s (commander of the IAF at the time) visit to Washington in 1965 (e.g. Shlaim 2014). Weizman was requesting a long list of military procurements. On one hand, he did not want to self-deprecate the Israeli army. IDF ought to be perceived as a valuable ally to the US and a capable fighting force. On the other hand, he needed to express a level of vulnerability of the state in order to convince the Americans to support the IDF. Weizman mentioned his worries

to PM Levi Eshkol who immediately came up with a solution: “Present yourself as Shimshon der nebuchdicker!”, which means poor little Samson (Weizman 1976: 262–63). Samson the weakling accurately captures the paradoxical collective self of the Israeli Jews. It is simultaneously pointing out both: physical strengths and collective fears. Commenting on this unique standing, Ben-Ami argues “that Israel could never really decide whether she was an intimidating regional superpower or just an isolated and frightened Jewish ghetto waiting for the pogrom to happen” (2006: 330).

5.4. The ontological security of Israel

To understand why such a powerful country as Israel is implementing narratives of vulnerability in their wartime public communication, I use the concept of identity. This reflects my contention that Israel’s behaviour cannot be accounted for by rationalist and realist readings of state politics. In the case of Israel, the use of vulnerability self-identifications during armed conflicts is particularly striking since the most popular reading of Israel’s security policy is based on the concept of deterrence (on links between realism and deterrence theory see Jervis 1979).

Deterrence applies to the state’s practice of using threats against its enemies to restrain their offensive plans. While with the collapse of the Soviet Union, deterrence theory lost its appeal for American security establishment (Rid 2012), in the case of Israel it is still very popular. Bar-Joseph argues that in academic debates Israel has become “a prime example” of a deterring power (1998). Its small territory and population, unstable environment, as well as nuclear strike capabilities, predestined it to be the quintessential case of major works on deterrence in international relations (e.g. Mearsheimer 1983; Jervis, Lebow and Stein 1985; Shimshoni 1988; Sorokin 1994).

However, the fact that Israel employs vulnerability at times of military conflict does not correspond with the rationalist theories on security competition where states build their deterrence on the projection of power (e.g. Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979). By claiming its vulnerability, Israel is alluding to its inherent weaknesses, something that seems incompatible with its military might. This directly undermines Tel Aviv's strategic posturing in the region, which Israelis often refer to as a 'tough neighbourhood'. The vulnerability of Israel seems to be incongruent also with the state's historical experience. After all, due to the decades of militant fighting before the establishment of the state, as well as subsequent brutal border clashes leading to repeated reprisals and punishment, the security apparatus of Israel was essentially established on deterrence (Rid 2012).

Deterrence theories account well for Israel's attempts to intimidate, scare or discourage their enemies. They answer how the state has raised – what Ze'ev Jabotinsky have referred to as "The Iron Wall" – a system of protections that will impede Arab attacks on the Jews in the Levant (see Jabotinsky 1923). However, they cannot help us to understand why a 'detering power' would be at times presenting itself as exposed to being hurt by its enemies.

Since the use of vulnerability narratives by Israel cannot be reduced to instrumental security practice (see Chapter 2), the alternative understanding of this puzzle ought to be predicated on non-material grounds. If vulnerability narratives do not respond to the state's need for physical security, then they have to be addressing its identity needs. Interestingly, also from a historical perspective, the vulnerability-based identifications of Israel cannot be easily interpreted.

For the first two decades after its inception, the Israeli ethos was built on an image of a strong, self-sustained, land-cultivating Jew – a vision that purposefully excluded the diasporic traumas of persecution and Holocaust. Only gradually the state's establishment recognised that the new Israeli society needs to reconcile with its tragic past (Segev 2000). In

1961 the Eichmann trial challenged the dominating narrative and has laid the foundations for a more nuanced debate about the condition and identity of Israelis.

Over the decades Israel at times spoke to and drew on the collective victimhood, martyrdom and vulnerability of its citizenry. While these themes were always present in Jewish life (Hareven 1983), the state was recognising and employing them more selectively (Zertal 2005). Narratives exposing Israelis' pain and fear – as any other form of identification – in the political context were politicised. Meaning that while vulnerability and victimhood are a crucial identity marker of Israelis, in the public discourse they were employed only at times (e.g., Amir 2012; Segev 2000; Zertal 2005). The only available study on Israel's war-time employment of victim narratives also suggests that the state self-identifies as weak or threatened, depending on the context and its standing (Markiewicz and Sharvit 2021).

The intersection of state and society is an interesting focal point because it exposes that there is much about Israel's narratives of weakness we do not know about. We know that there are historical, cultural and religious reasons that moulded the Israeli collective identity of vulnerability: Holocaust and centuries of persecution predestine vulnerability as group's *modus vivendi*. However, the question is why the state apparatus at times treats this identification as its *modus operandi*. Namely, why the Israeli identity of vulnerability shapes Israeli statecraft? Why does a regional powerhouse employ themes of weakness in its narratives? Especially, why it is doing so in times of military conflicts, where the collective resilience is tested by the enemy's actions?

My understanding of this practice is shaped by the ontological security studies which focus on exposing how states claim, aspire to and try to follow their autobiographical narratives (Steele 2008; 2021). States' actions and self-descriptions are analysed through the perspective of security over identity. The ontological security studies contend that actors aspire to and claim to act in accordance with their perceived self.

Ontologically insecure?

I show that Israel incorporated vulnerability narratives in its wartime public communications during the OPE and that this identification fulfilled its need for ontological security. This practice may be perceived as puzzling, also from the standpoint of the ontological security studies. Israel, as a strong geopolitical actor, is willingly tying itself with an identification that questions its agency and stability of being. By claiming its vulnerability, the state points out that it is exposed to potential harm and that it does not have full control over its condition (Hutchings 2013: 25). While the ontological security studies recognize that states may foster seemingly irrational positions – such as involvement in a costly protracted conflict - precisely to perpetuate their identity, vulnerability seems to be an identification that has a limited sense-making capability. Vulnerability as a recognition of one's precarity and unpredictable character of life intuitively could be considered as a weak mechanism generating basic trust in the world (e.g. Mitzen 2006: 346).

Israel may be considered a state with a deficit of ontological security due to the lack of acceptance of its self-perceptions and self-identifications abroad (Lupovici 2012). After all, states “need their identity confirmed by other states” (Adler-Nissen 2018: 4). However, Israelis find themselves ‘misrecognized’ by the international community, which means that their “dominant narrative of national Self” is not mirrored abroad (2018: 2). Thus, even 72 years after the establishment of the state of Israel, many share the sentiment that “we shall dwell alone”. With the growth of the Boycott Divestment Sanctions movement and the gradual inclusion of the Palestinian Authority into international organisations (Shai 2018), the anxiety about Israel's place in the global community is ever-present.

This deep deficit of ontological security is well captured by the triumphant and defiant tone of the Israeli political class. The country's leaders are often accentuating the

state's resilience, strength and tenacity. As in September 2019 when FM Israel Katz, opened his address to the General Assembly of the UN, by stressing out that:

“seventy-one years ago, we established the State of Israel. Since then, we have defended and developed our homeland, and today, the State of Israel is strong and advanced, a Start-Up Nation that leads in many fields” (Katz I. 2019).

Vulnerability narratives seem to be incongruent with affirmative self-identifications used by Israel to build its prestige abroad.

Furthermore, the war-time employment of vulnerability narratives seems to be incompatible with the Zionist ethos of a fearless new-Jew. The recognition of Israel's vulnerability goes against the vision of Israelis being resilient Sabras and is challenging an image of a strong successful state where, as famously captured by David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father: “Difficult things we do quickly. The impossible takes a little longer”.

At the same time, the use of vulnerability narratives during the OPE had to somehow perpetuate the identity of Israel. Since the conflict was broadly publicised domestically and abroad, Tel Aviv had to justify and contextualise its actions in Gaza. After all, states try to do and say things according to their identity needs (Steele 2008). Consequently, when Israeli representatives speak to the public, they aspire to reflect Self-perceptions and senses of Self shared by the constituents. This means, that repeated employment of vulnerability narratives by different state representatives cannot be treated as a superficial tool of social engineering. While this may be perceived as implausible, non-strategic or erratic, vulnerability narratives must be a building block of the ontological security of the state.

I show that the 2014 war in Gaza was a source of deficits to the ontological security of Israel. For a state that sees itself as systematically discriminated and misrepresented abroad, the war was an obstacle in its pursuit of international recognition and acceptance (see Greve 2018). Abroad, Israel was named and shamed by many NGOs and some prominent Western politicians, such as British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg who accused it of a

“disproportionate form of collective punishment” of Gazans (2014). The war with the much weaker enemy, high levels of Palestinian casualties as well as accusations about the unproportionate nature of the Israeli attack (e.g. Amnesty International 2015) were directly questioning the state’s positive self-perceptions. The country established on the tragedy of the Holocaust, a democracy that considered itself as fighting against all odds to provide refuge for the downtrodden Jews, was itself accused of oppressing the underdog. 2014 War in Gaza did not fit the Israeli historical narrative, because it could hardly be presented as a battle against the overwhelming forces. External critique as well as the high number of civilian casualties in Gaza were challenging the binary self-perception according to which the Jewish state was embattled David fighting with mighty Goliath. This situation was generating anxiety about its identity.

However, by employing vulnerability narratives, Israel was responding to those deficits. I argue that this form of self-identification had two functions. One, it reduced Israel’s anxiety about its Self. This form of self-identification was perceptually ‘balancing’ the asymmetric nature of the conflict. By presenting itself as vulnerable, the state was gaining principled meaning to its actions. This was leading to the reduction of its ideational anxieties. Secondly, the state was gaining a special agency to securitise the enemy. By presenting itself as vulnerable, the state was justifying its offensive actions against the Palestinians in Gaza.

In my empirical analysis of those two practices, I concentrate on the performative dimension of Israel’s vulnerability pronouncements (see Chapter 4). The dramaturgical metaphor is particularly helpful because it ties together the ideational and material realms addressed by the vulnerability narratives. Israel’s use of vulnerability narratives speaks to the fact that as a powerful actor, dramaturgical presentation of self was responding to the country’s need for ontological security and was enabling the policy of securitisation of

Hamas. Since Israel was so strong, it had to dramatize its security to gain legitimacy for its offensive actions.

5.5. Operation Protective Edge

OPE, the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas was Israel's last large-scale military operation. Depending on our perspective, it may be considered as a part of ongoing intractable conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, or as an episode in a broader struggle between Israel and its regional rivals (Friedman 2019). It commenced on 8th July and ended on 26th of August. Lasting 50 days, the operation was broadly covered in the Israeli and international media. It was discussed on a daily basis by politicians and state officials alike. Consequently, OPE generated ample of textual commentary that allows for a close analysis of Israel's wartime narratives.

The operation was launched by the IDF to stop indiscriminate rocket fire from Gaza into Israel however, IDF's second operative goal was to destroy an extensive network of tunnels leading into Israel (Watkins and James 2016). While both sides of the conflict were not interested in the new round of violence and did not conduct any advanced operational planning (Siboni 2014), they were responding to growing tensions after the kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teenagers and following the kidnapping and murder of a Palestinian teenager (Shkolnik 2017: 186).

In the weeks leading up to the attack on Gaza, Hamas rocket attacks intensified. They managed to send millions of Israelis to shelters, disrupted the economy of the South and questioned the resilience of the society (Shkolnik 2017: 186). Since the beginning of the year, approximately 450 rockets were fired at Israel (ICT 2012).

In the first phase of the operation, from the 8th till the 18th of July, the IDF was involved in an aerial offensive. In the second phase, the IDF invaded from the ground to

restore security to the Israelis and destroy Hamas infrastructure (e.g. Netanyahu 2014a).

Israel called more than 82,000 reservists during the war.

Overall, the IDF struck 4,762 sites in Gaza such as rocket launching pads, command and control centres and military administration facilities (ICT 2014). Israelis discovered an extensive web of more than 30 tunnels, out of which 14 were leading up to the Israeli territory (State of Israel 2015). The IDF forces managed to destroy a third of more than 10,000 rockets held in Gaza (ICT 2014).

In total, Hamas and other militant organisations fired 4,564 rockets and mortars during the war. According to the Israeli press and the IDF, most projectiles were harmless due to their inaccuracy. Out of “3,641 which exploded in Israeli territory only 224 hit residential areas, and the remaining fell in open areas”, more than 700 were intercepted by the Iron Dome anti-missile system (Ynetnews 2014) and almost 200 either has landed in Gaza itself or failed to launch at all (Hartman 2014). Israeli casualties were limited. Six civilians and 67 soldiers have died (State of Israel: XI), 556 Israelis were wounded, most of them soldiers (Hartman 2014).

After multiple ceasefire proposals, brokered with the help of Egypt and the endorsement of the Arab League, and ultimately, rejected or violated by Hamas, the conflict ended up with Hamas following the initial ceasefire proposal. According to Israeli data, OPD has led to the death of approximately 2,125 Palestinians. IDF argues that “at least 44 percent” of the fatalities were militant members of terrorist organisations (State of Israel: XI). Palestinian sources dispute this assessment and claim that most of the victims were civilian. They argue that almost 500 children have been killed and 11,000 Palestinians were injured (Ynetnews 2014). According to the UN Human Rights Council, 2,251 Palestinians have died, 65% of them civilians (UN 2015).

5.6. Conclusion

This section laid the grounds for the following chapter in which I analyse the role of vulnerability narratives in Israel's OPE. To justify the selection of Israel and the 2014 war as one of two dissertation's case studies, I profiled the state's characteristics showing it was a powerful regional hegemon. By making this point, I confirmed that the practice of self-identifying as vulnerable is seemingly incompatible with the state's standing. Furthermore, that from the realist and rationalist perspectives - especially deterrence theory – such presentation of self is detrimental to the standing of the state. This set of arguments allowed me to propose a non-materialistic approach to the puzzle according to which Israel used vulnerability narratives to address its identity-needs. Over this chapter, I developed an argument that the OPE was a source of ontological security deficits and that vulnerability narratives allowed Israel to address those deficits. Drawing on the dissertation's theory, I propose that this practice was used to reduce the state's anxiety about the self by providing principled meaning to the offensive. Furthermore, that it handled the state special agency to securitise the weaker enemy. In the following empirical chapter at times, I refer to these two functions employing the metaphor of theatre. I contend that the use of vulnerability narratives by Israel captured the state's performative practice to present itself as facing insecurities.

6. Israel: The Strongest Weakling

6.1. Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the way and reasons behind Israel's use of vulnerability narratives during the 2014 Operation Protective Edge (OPE). Thus, its role is twofold. First, it provides an analysis of how the state employed vulnerability rhetoric during the (OPE). After that, I problematised this puzzling practice on the basis of in-depth interviews with 38 Israeli officials. I employ the concept of ontological security to interpret the practice of Israel self-describing as vulnerable during the operation. I reveal that by employing vulnerability narratives, Israel was addressing the deficits of ontological security stemming from the ongoing fight with a much weaker enemy. Secondly, that through vulnerability narratives, it gained a special prerogative to securitise Hamas.

The first section is devoted to the analysis of Israel's public communication during the OPE. I begin by listing the type of sources I used to gather information about the actor's self-representations during the operation. I then outline the main findings of the analysis. In the second section, I analyse the interviews with Israeli state officials. The gathered material allows me to understand the country's vulnerability narratives from the perspective of people that have tacit knowledge about Israel's statecraft.

6.2. Vulnerability narratives

The study of the OPE was foremost based on a close reading of Israel's public communication. I have analysed official statements and communication published during the conflict by: the Government Press Office, the Prime Minister Office, IDF, the Israeli mission to the UN, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, Magen David, President

of Israel, Security Cabinet, the Tourism Ministry. Additionally, the analysis was further complemented by video materials as well as pictures portraying the operation published by the IDF and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

To deepen my knowledge about the conflict, I have also conducted a review of books, media and academic articles as well as governmental and nongovernmental reports dealing with the OPE. The analysis also included additional material on the OPE published in the aftermath of the war.

Vulnerable abroad

The analysis of Israel's public communication shows that the audience plays a key role in how vulnerability narratives are utilised. The review reveals a clear distinction in how Israel presents itself in domestic and foreign contexts, confirming that the state's vulnerability narratives have performative, dramaturgical characteristics. At the same time, the division between the domestic and foreign audiences was not part of the dissertation's original theoretical argument.

Generally, communication published by Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (IMFA) and the diplomatic corps was dominated by vulnerability narratives. Similarly, also Israeli officials, when speaking to foreign audiences were extensively drawing on vulnerability identification. Vulnerability narratives were also an important theme in the communication of the IDF.

To explicate, a significant part of IMFA's attention was devoted to detailed eulogies of the Israelis killed by the mortar and rocket attacks. The victims were commemorated by their family and friends, the articles were illustrated by the pictures of the fallen. The photographic coverage of the operation used by the IMFA almost exclusively focused on the harm caused to the civilian population of Israel. Under the slogan "Israel under fire", IMFA

was disseminating pictures of destroyed houses, cars, kindergarten playground, synagogue etc. At the same time, the ministry's depictions of the conflict were largely abstaining from describing or using the photographic/video coverage of Israel's military offensive. The main themes employed in IMFA's articles were the numbers of rockets fired at Israel, the high costs paid by the civilians and the terroristic character of Hamas.

Consequently, IMFA was providing detailed daily updates on the numbers of rockets launched by Hamas. In its visual and textual materials, the ministry was presenting the scale of Hamas' arsenal, the readers could see the daily count of the Israeli casualties. The communication accentuated the precarity of life of Israelis by underlining that they have little time to hide from rockets:

“Although Israel's Iron Dome Missile Defense system stops some of the attacks, most rockets are capable of reaching Israel's biggest cities. More than half a million Israelis have less than 60 seconds to find shelter after a rocket is launched from Gaza into Israel. Many have only 15 seconds” (IMFA 2014a).

Special emphasis was placed on the sophisticated network of tunnels built by Hamas, some going over the border with Israel. While Hamas did not manage to use them to hurt civilians, IMFA talked about “averted disasters” (IMFA 2014b) emphasizing the deadly potential of the tunnels:

“IDF forces thwarted an impending terror attack, preventing the terrorists from attacking an Israeli kibbutz. The foiled attack could have had deadly and devastating consequences if carried out.” (IMFA 2014c)

IMFA presented the long-range of different types of rockets used by Hamas and accentuated that “some 6 million Israelis are currently living under the threat of rocket attacks” (IMFA 2014d). Advertisements distributed during the operation were drawing viewers' attention to the traumatic experience of the Israeli civilians that struggle to cope with the rocket attacks. One of the ads, titled “You Have 15 Seconds to Take Cover, Run!”, presents a group of young children playing football. Just at a time when one of the players attempts to take a penalty kick, the air raid sirens interrupt the game. Children stand

paralysed and petrified by the sound. In a similar vein, an ad titled “Will Grandma Make It To The Safe Room in 15 Seconds”, was capturing an old lady cooking a soup being interrupted by the blast of the sirens. The clip ends with the lady rushing out of the apartment with a help of a walking frame, only to find herself stranded in front of the steep staircase.

Also, Avigdor Liberman, at that time Minister of Foreign Affairs, was predominantly focused on describing the vulnerabilities of Israelis. Liberman, a leader of the nationalist party Yisrael Beiteinu built his career on accusations of the Israeli political establishment as being too weak and conciliatory towards the Palestinians. For years he was calling for the employment of stronger and more decisive security measures targeting Gaza. In 2009 he argued that Israel should re-occupy Gaza and to: "continue to fight Hamas just like the United States did with the Japanese in World War II" (Liberman 2009) and in 2018 he resigned as a Minister of Defence due to the fact that Israel has agreed to a cease-fire in Gaza (Harkov 2018).

However, during the OPE, Liberman is more conciliatory. As the head of the MFA, his famous hawkish attitude becomes moderated for foreign audiences. The politician focuses mostly on Israeli fears and victimisation. In this role, he did not hesitate to draw bold historical parallels. During his meeting with British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond, he compares Israel's situation to that of Great Britain during WWII and points out that: “The aims of Hamas are very similar to those of the Nazis - the annihilation of the Jews” (Liberman 2014a).

The vulnerability narrative is clearly justified by Liberman himself during the briefing with the Israeli ambassadors on the situation in Gaza. He instructs the diplomats:

“to distribute [in their respective countries] the pictures in which Israeli kindergarten children are seen lying flat on the floor in an attempt to find cover in their kindergarten during a "Color Red" alert, and to explain that Israeli children are no different from other children around the world, they too deserve an enjoyable, non-threatening summer vacation” (Liberman 2014b).

His agenda is to promote Israel's suffering abroad. The goal of the ministry is "to garner maximum support for Israel's actions against the rocket terror from Gaza". Liberman underscores, that it is vital for the Israeli diplomats to not only point out the scale of the rocket attacks but also the fact that Israel has been under fire many years before the operation. He insists that the Israeli narrative has "to emphasize that Hamas does not only launch rockets but also attempts to carry out all types of murderous terrorist acts, regardless of time or manner." (IMFA 2014b, also IMFA 2014c).

Liberman's narratives of vulnerability are also echoed by the other MFA officials, such as Deputy Foreign Minister Tzachi Hanegbi, who during a briefing of foreign ambassadors was arguing that Israel's avoided high casualties "miraculously": "Hundreds of missiles were launched. The only reason we don't have funerals all over the country is that we have Iron Dome" (IMFA 2014h).

During the OPE, MFA, as well as Israel's Government Press Office are arranging visits for foreign journalists and officials to visit the wounded, inspect the destructed property or show the humanitarian help provided by Israel to Gazans. This vulnerability presentation reaches its height during a visit of Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende during his visit to Ashkelon. After meeting a teenager wounded by a rocket, the guest and other officials had to be placed in the bunker. As the MFA bureau underlines, when they were waiting in a protected area, Brende "heard a rocket explode nearby" (Liberman 2014d).

Even more adamant are Israeli diplomats at the UN. Ambassador Ron Prosor and Ambassador Deputy David Roet, Israel's Permanent Representatives to the United Nations as well as ambassador Eviatar Manor, Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations in Geneva, base their war-time speeches on vulnerability narratives. They present the war as an act of desperation of an embattled nation, that fights against all odds. Roet points out that the OPE was "not a war we chose. It was our last resort." (Roet 2014), Prosor refers to the

operation as “inferno” (Prosor 2014a). To give emphasis to the precarity and contingency of Israelis, Prosor opens one of his speeches by pointing out that while the Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was providing a daily press briefing: “In the time he spoke, another five rockets were fired from Gaza. One of these fell on a house” (Prosor 2014a). Talking about the rocket attacks from Gaza he provides a vivid description of the Israeli struggles:

“Fifteen seconds [play sound of siren]. That's how much time you have to run for your life. Imagine having only 15 seconds to find a bomb shelter. Now imagine doing it with small children or elderly parents or an ailing friend. A generation of Israeli children is growing up under the shadow of this threat” (Prosor 2014a).

The ambassadors emphasize that Israel had no other choice but to fight, that the war was cast upon it. They often use expressive, emotional language:

“In the face of terrorists kidnapping our children, we were left with no choice. In the face of rockets raining down on our citizens, we were left with no choice. In the face of jihadists tunnelling under our borders, we were left with no choice” (Prosor 2014b; also: Manor 2014; Roet 2014).

Talking about the pain and fear experienced by Israelis their speeches are dramatic and elegiac. Speaking about the Hamas tunnels Prosor refers to them as “tentacles”, a “giant web (...) ending on the doorsteps of our communities” (Prosor 2014c). Roet underlines the high costs the society is paying for the intractable conflict with the Palestinians. He emphasizes the small size of the country, points out that the threats to its future come from its “backyard” and that every citizen was “affected by terrorism”. The diplomat argues that Israelis will never become accustomed to their children in military uniforms or to “burying our sons and daughters” (Roet 2014).

Also, other Israeli state leaders, when speaking to foreign officials or journalists, prioritised a vulnerability narrative in their communication. When hosting the visiting delegations, Israeli politicians and officials showed them videos, posters describing the difficulties and anxieties of the society. During a meeting with UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, PM Netanyahu presented the remains of different types of rockets launched at Israel,

displayed infographics about Hamas terror tunnels and aerial photographs of the launching sites in Gaza (Netanyahu 2014b). When the International Committee of the Red Cross President Peter Maurer was visiting Israel, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and Magen David Adom Director General Eli Bin arranged a meeting with Israelis living in the areas adjacent to Gaza. The residents were invited to discuss “their fears and concerns, stemming from the threat of rockets or terrorist attacks” during the OPE. Talking to Maurer, Livni explains that it is crucial for him to understand not only the pain of the Gazans but also the vulnerability and fear of Israelis “who live with the threat of missiles and [Hamas] tunnels. She underlines she cannot let her citizens live under the shadow of this threat.

The communities living close to the border with Gaza were an important point of reference for the Israeli officials, used in the broader communications about OPE. The narratives describing their vulnerability were prominent in the public diplomacy of the MFA, PM and presidential offices, as well as the IDF. For instance, when President Shimon Peres was speaking to the media during a meeting his team has organised with the children from the Israeli communities adjacent to Gaza, he was justifying the Israeli military campaign by specifying the experience of women and children living in the area:

“We want the children of Israel to be able to live normal lives, to go to school and to play outdoors. Israel has a responsibility to protect its women and children who are sitting in bomb shelters day and night” (Peres 2014a).

In a like manner was speaking PM Netanyahu:

“Now, let's imagine your country - it could be any country, could be the US, could be Britain, could be Germany, France, India, you name it. Let's imagine your country attacked by 3,500 rockets. Your territory is infiltrated by death squads. What would you do?” (Netanyahu 2014c).

Also, the IDF included in its communication materials describing the vulnerability of the Israelis in the Gaza border towns. The army circulated amateur videos capturing disruption of the civilian lives by the rockets coming from the Strip, it created infographics and video clips highlighting that millions of Israelis are in the range of Hamas rockets.

Three vulnerabilities

Interestingly, the vulnerability narratives used by Israel during the OPE do not solely refer to the precarity of Israelis themselves. The review of the country's communication revealed three main themes that together build the image of Israel as vulnerable.

The first theme is the vulnerability of Israeli citizens. This motif is discussed in detail in the previous section. This vulnerability narrative is straightforward since it is directly supporting the identification of Israelis living under risk.

The second theme is the vulnerability of Palestinians living in Gaza, which is often used by officials to not only point out Israel's humanitarianism but to contextualise Israeli precarity by calling the audience's attention to the indiscriminate methods of Hamas' warfare. This broader perspective paradoxically is further advancing the vulnerability image of Israelis themselves. Consequently, Israeli officials often stipulated that the country is in a unique double bind. According to this argumentation, on one hand, Israel as a democracy involved in a just, defensive war, is fighting proportionally trying to minimise civilian casualties. As argued by the country's Ambassador to the UN, Ron Prosor:

"Israel is taking great measures to avoid harming innocent civilians. The Israeli Defense Forces warns Palestinians in Gaza of imminent strikes".

This virtue - the strive to avoid collateral damages - is making Israel even more vulnerable.

All because Hamas is fighting without respect for its citizens' lives:

"At the same time, Hamas instructs these civilians to stand on the roof of buildings and act as human shields. Hamas is exploiting our concern for human life by hiding in Palestinian homes, schools, and mosques and using the basement of a hospital in Gaza as its headquarters. They are committing a double war crime: targeting Israeli civilians while hiding behind Palestinian civilians" (Prosor 2014a).

PM Netanyahu goes further and talks about a triple war crime. Third, being Hamas rejecting socio-economic assistance from Tel Aviv:

"so it's actually a triple thing that they're doing. They're not only firing on our civilians, not only hiding behind their civilians and accruing as many civilian deaths as they can pile up because that's what they want for the PR game against Israel, but also

I think that they've done something else and that's to prevent and refuse humanitarian assistance that Israel itself offered for their own people” (Netanyahu 2014d).

According to this narrative, Israel is then placed in front of an impossible to solve dilemma, where whatever it will do, it will be vulnerable to some form of critique. If it does not respond strongly to rocket attacks, it will be showing weakness to its enemy and neglecting its citizens. If it attacks, it will victimise Palestinian civilians for which it will be criticised in the international arena. Israel is then vulnerable because of its own victimhood and the victimhood of the Palestinians:

“And I think when you put it all together, you understand that there is a deliberate strategy here and that is to have Hamas inflict as much civilian damage as they can on their own people as part of a deliberate strategy to try to have Israel accused in international public opinion” (Netanyahu 2014d).

The third type of vulnerability narrative employed by Israel ‘extrapolates’ the precarity of Israelis by presenting their conflict as an element of the global war between the West and the Islamic fundamentalism:

“Israel is on the frontline of the war against radical extremism. The battle we fight today is the same battle that all of you will fight tomorrow. Hamas - like ISIS and Al-Qaeda - shares a disdain for democracies, a contempt for modernity, and a willingness to target innocent civilians” (Prosor 2014c).

According to this interpretation, Israel is at the centre of a Huntingtonian struggle:

“what is happening today in the Middle East is a colliding of civilizations between the free world and radical Islam” (Lieberman 2014e).

The conflict is presented as a key to the future of the West, the survival of democracies and the defence of human rights. It is not only Israelis that ought to feel vulnerable, but the ‘civilised world’:

“This struggle is the greatest challenge facing the free world since World War II, and Europe must be committed to supporting Israel. Beyond the moral aspects of the issue, Israel is the vanguard on this front, because it represents Western values” (2014e).

Netanyahu describes OPE as a testing ground for global terrorism. He underlines that Israel's behaviour delineates the contours of the battle for the future of the world, a struggle for the very soul of what democracies can and ought to do to defend themselves. PM argues that the fact that Hamas operates from schools or mosques should not lead to IDF's inaction:

“it would hand an enormous victory to terrorists everywhere and had a devastating effect on the free societies that are fighting terrorism. If this were to happen, more and more civilians will die around the world, because this is a testing period now. Can a terrorist organization fire thousands of rockets at cities of a democracy? (...) Can we accept a situation in which the terrorists would be exonerated and the victims accused?” (Netanyahu 2014c).

Narrating about the vulnerability of the West allows Israeli officials to tie the state's standing and interests with that of the West, or 'free world'. Netanyahu warns democracies that the fears and anxieties of Israelis should not be ignored. He underlines that Israel is a “test case”, and that “What happens here will happen for everyone” (Netanyahu 2014d).

Strong at home

The role of vulnerability narratives in the public officials' speeches changes when they are talking to the internal audiences. In this context, president Peres (e.g. Peres 2014b), his successor president Reuven Rivlin (e.g. Rivlin 2014), PM Netanyahu (e.g. Netanyahu 2014e), the IDF military leaders (e.g. Gantz 2014) convey the message of strength and unity. In his farewell speech to the Knesset, president Peres argues that Israel, as a “great country” will win the confrontation. He points out that “There is no place to doubt our victory” and describes the country's operational strength:

“Israel will win because of the IDF. Because of its excellent commanders and dedicated soldiers. There is no other army like the IDF. Its power is great. Its equipment is advanced. Its values are clear” (Peres 2014c).

The officials do sometimes refer to Israeli sacrifices and victimisation however, this experience is used as a point of reference to Israeli power and determination. To illustrate, in his statements PM Netanyahu does recognise the vulnerability of Israelis (e.g.):

“Our goal is that the residents of Kerem Shalom, Sderot and the other communities in the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip, Ashkelon and Tel Aviv will be able to sleep quietly and that the children of Ofakim, Netivot, Ashdod and Be’er Sheva won’t have to run to the protected areas at school”.

However, this is followed by a detailed description of military successes and the IDF’s prowess:

“We have killed hundreds of terrorists. We have destroyed thousands of rockets and launchers. We broke up the network of assault tunnels that Hamas built over the years in order to launch simultaneous attacks against our communities and we foiled all of its attempts to attack us from land, sea and air. This is the harshest blow that Hamas has taken since it was founded (...) Hamas thinks that it can wear us down. It is mistaken. The Israeli people are strong. Instead of attrition, Hamas will be crushed - its infrastructures, terrorists and commanders. Our policy toward Hamas is simple: If they fire, they will be hit, and not just hit but hit very hard” (Netanyahu 2014f).

In this context, the dramaturgy of vulnerability is largely absent. While the vulnerability of Israelis is at times referred to, the officials abstain from many evocative practices, such as detailed descriptions of pain and fear of the citizens, presenting the conflict as a broader competition between the West and radical Islam. Vulnerability, if present, is rather recognised as one of many identifications experienced by the citizens. The performative characteristics of vulnerability pronouncements of the Israeli officials become muted. They are not being actively ‘played out’. For instance, Defence minister Moshe Yaalon talking about the security situation of the state’s citizens recognizes that Hamas actions are posing threat to Israelis. However, he does it indirectly, focusing instead on praising the IDF:

“The IDF has impressively succeeded in intercepting the rockets being launched at the State of Israel and in thwarting the terrorist organizations’ malicious intentions to perpetrate attacks, both by sea and in other ways”.

Yaalon talks about the price Israeli civilians are paying, nonetheless presenting them as highly motivated and confident:

“But this is also the opportunity to express appreciation to the residents of Israel. I have visited several local councils and, indeed, the stamina of the public is an important component in our ability to continue the operation” (Netanyahu and Yaalon 2014).

Similarly, resolute sound politicians and leaders representing the Israeli border communities, e.g. Sdot Negev Regional Council Chairman Tamir Idan assured the governmental delegation visiting the area adjacent to the Gaza Strip:

“Our insistence has been (...) let nobody be confused, you will hear everybody say the same thing more or less: Support for the government, support for the IDF and national unity, that the spirit of the entire nation should be a wind at our back, you, us and the IDF. Do what needs to be done and what you know must be done. We are strong and can take more. We will bite our lip and we want to know that at the end you will bring us to a different place – quiet for a long period”

Shaar Hanegev Regional Council Chairman Alon Schuster pointed out that Israelis would not hesitate to support a bigger military conflict:

“We are united and it is clear to everybody – citizens, the government and certainly to us – that there is no going back to the reality of the past 13 years. Therefore, if they do not agree to a change, then there could be a larger war here, after which the situation will improve” (Netanyahu 2014g).

Furthermore, the analysis has shown that vulnerability narratives are generally absent from Cabinet meetings, also the Tourism Ministry’s communication abstained from vulnerability pronouncements and was instead accentuating that Israel’s sky is safe and opened for travellers despite the ongoing military operation.

6.3. Understanding vulnerability narratives

To examine my theoretical expectations and my interpretation of Israel’s public communication during the OPE, I have conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 38 Israeli officials. By going out (see Molotch 1994) and taking my sense-making about Israel’s vulnerability narratives back to the people that worked for the state, I corroborate whether I “got it right”; that is [whether I] understood the experiences of those studied on, and in, their own terms” (Schwartz-Shea 2014: 135).

Strong but vulnerable

While Israel during the OPE was self-describing itself as vulnerable, almost all interviewees⁴⁶ indicated that today and at the time of the conflict, the state was safe and strong. The military leaders were especially adamant about the good geostrategic standing of Israel were. For instance, Sefi, a senior official at the IDF and a former colonel, was offended by a suggestion that repeated military operations in Gaza may suggest that the state has grave security deficiencies:

“So, you have asked whether Israel is a safe state. I would say it is one of the safest globally. (...) We manage all the threats that we are facing and I think that the perception of Israelis reflects that. People feel safe here” (2019).

David, one of the Israeli top military officials and political leaders did not hesitate to express that in the last decades Israel has achieved strength and safety:

“Today there is no existential threat to the state of Israel. There was in 1948, 1967. But the Six Day war was a crossroad when our enemies understood that using conventional warfare, they will not defeat us. That was also the end of the ideology of pan-Arabism. Today there is no existential threat, we do enjoy also a very strong economy. We are not anymore poor like in the 50s when the feeling was, we are a society of struggle” (2018).

The Perspective of Israel being safe and prosperous was also shared by other participants. As illustrated by Zach, one of the former key decision-makers at the Ministry for Strategic Affairs:

“Generally speaking, the Israeli society is quite satisfied with their situation. They do understand that considering their location, what are they getting is pretty good. They see that the state is in the best position since its establishment. Israel has the strongest military in the Middle East, strong economy, people feel that their standard of living has improved dramatically (...) They feel that the regional and international position of the state has improved dramatically” (2019).

⁴⁶ Only one out of 38 participants believed that geopolitically Israel is currently endangered, weak polity: “Country like Israel is experiencing a do or die state of affairs every single day of the year. We do not have the luxury the European countries have; the Northern American countries have, or even Asian countries have. Our national security hinges on very critical decisions which are made every single day and which could lead the country to oblivion or survival” (Albert 2018).

Many of the officials stressed that Israel is not existentially threatened anymore and that the state's standing during the OPE was better than ever since its establishment. As argued by Noa, a former head of Military Intelligence:

“Generally speaking, Israel’s standing should be judged as clearly positive. The security threats we are facing have changed over the years to the degree that we are talking about a different situation. In the beginning, it was actually an existential risk. Israel was very small, very, very weak. We were with no resources to speak off, surrounded by so many Arab countries. At times it was unclear whether we will make it. But since then we have grown not only numerically, but also qualitatively to the extent that the existential threat has gradually diminished... to the extent that after the end of the 70s – beginning of the 80s (...) the country is not facing anymore any viable security risks from the Arab countries. We do have security problems, especially the non-state actors operating in the region however, none of them reach the level of existential threat” (2019).

Participants agreed that although the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians is important however it is not posing a major threat to the state. A diplomat who was more critical towards the OPE and other military operations in Gaza accentuated that Palestinians do not really challenge the state:

“In a geopolitical dimension the conflict with Palestinians is not a threat to Israel. We cannot forget that Israel is a hegemon in the region” (Itzik 2018).

Similarly, while many interviewees raised serious reservations about Iran's nuclear and ballistic programs, as well as the country's growing presence in the Levant, most argued that for now, Teheran is not an existential problem. Yonah, a retired colonel and former security advisor of Israeli prime ministers, concluded that currently, Israel has “no challengers” and that the last decade should be considered a “golden period of the state” (2018).

Furthermore, interviewees often accentuated Israel's growing importance for the foreign powers and global economy. Yossi, Former Director General of the MFA insisted that our assessment of Israel's standing should be based on ‘big’ politics - not media, academic or humanitarian debates:

“What matters are official governments and what is important for them is the fact that we are strong. We are providing important intelligence regarding terrorism; we are selling weapons, all that makes us important with our partners. We care about the governments, not about the public. And with the decision-makers, we are doing fine. Not only in Eastern Europe also in Western Europe” (2018).

At the same time, the interviews have highlighted the separation between the domain of expertise and collective perceptions of security. Moshe, a Knesset member known for his peace activism and work for the dialogue with the Palestinians, underlines that it is identity - not geopolitical calculations - that drives Israelis: “At the end of the day – even Israeli – do not know that much about the conflict” (2018). Anna, an IDF’s expert, admits that Israeli kinetic strength is mirrored by Israeli perceived vulnerability:

“As Jews, we know that there will be no guarantees for our existence. We can be very, very strong in one point of history and then lose in the face of a new threat we were not prepared to solve. Jewish identity and Israeli identity are dualistic. On one hand, it is about our resistance to threats and challenges. On the other, it is about resilience, about our capability to keep up the spirits. The organising ethos of our society is that we are a victim (...) We always feel like we are victims. Victims of different rivals, of different nations that want to exterminate us. Consequently, the notion is that we should always stay strong. The notion is that if we want to have peace, we need to be strong. Being weak is very intimidating to Israelis. Their vulnerability leads to strength” (2019).

Drawing on her first-hand knowledge of the behaviour and organisation of military command, she points out that Israeli operational strength and posturing does not directly correspond with people’s fears:

“We are like a nation that acts as if it is a minority group. We experience ourselves as an underdog. The feeling is that we have to always prove ourselves. Prove higher than everyone around us. We may be a strong state, but as a nation, we experience ourselves as vulnerable. (...) No one thinks of Israel as an underdog because of the perception of Israel as a start-up nation, the general view that Jews are successful and the fact that we have a very strong, winning military. This is what you are seeing on the TV. But when you strip us of all the layers, we do not feel very strong. We can say that there are no threats we will not overcome, but deep inside people experience their nation as being exposed” (Anna 2019).

Rafi, one of the key Israeli parliamentarians and a popular politician of the Israeli left, considers this duality as a unique characteristic of Israeli politics and statecraft:

“On one hand we are feeling very safe because, thank god, we have a very strong army. But Israelis and Jewish people have fears and paranoias. We have our history. We know that for the first time after 2.000 years we have our own state. It is a time when we finally take care of our destiny, within our borders we protect our people. What happened between these two kingdoms, were persecutions, pogroms, hunting of the Jews and the Holocaust. While Jews are good mathematicians, you do not have to be a specialist to add up those facts and understand what would happen to us without our state” (2018).

Anna points out that that the fear of being vulnerable drives the Israeli security apparatus:

“Weak people have to rely upon others in order to exist. This is for us - after two thousand years in exile - is a big no-no. Our vulnerability leads to our strength” (2019).

The vulnerability of “Strong Israel”, was a dominating theme of the conversations with the interviewees. References to the state’s precarity were ubiquitous and appeared in almost all conversations. However, participants approach to vulnerability radically differed. Some interlocutors were talking about the collective’s vulnerabilities with ease. For example, Gabriel, former colonel serving in various intelligence positions, was not hesitant to admit that:

“Vulnerability is the element of the Israeli identity. You will be born with it, or at least at a very young age, you will be thought to feel vulnerable. And from one perspective it is something perfect in order to maintain yourself later on. Each state and society are always balancing between its ability to be resilient and its fears and vulnerabilities. Both feelings are necessary” (2019).

Michael, the former IDF’s general who played a crucial role in the army’s policies in Gaza in the last 15 years, presented Israel as a global scapegoat, a state under siege that is miraculously continuing its existence and is acquiring more strength against all odds. Asked whether Israel was vulnerable during the OPE, he did not have any doubts that it was:

(...) give me an example of any Western European state that requires building in every flat a bomb shelter. Give me an example of any other Western state where children for a long time are sleeping in bomb shelters. Go to places surrounding Gaza and you will see the situation. This is an exemplification of vulnerability (Michael 2018).

This was echoed by Yonah who argued that Israel is still fighting its “war of independence”:

“Israel is not like any other state. Its supposed illegitimacy is its shadow. Its historical emergence is unique. Borders of states may change, let us take an example of Poland or Germany, but their essence, their right of existence is broadly accepted. Israel is

involved in a constant struggle to legitimise itself. That is why we are being tested all the time. Not like other states. To legitimise ourselves we have to be extra good but it is hard to be the world champion of liberalism in our region” (2018).

At the same time, not all participants were willing to directly recognise Israel’s vulnerability. Some reacted with irritation to any suggestions that Israel may be drawing on vulnerability narratives in its statecraft, or that the state may be weak. Often, they assured me that the state is not drawing on the identification of vulnerability, just to – later on - indicate or declare (directly or indirectly) vulnerability as a key foundation of the state. This was the case when meeting with Dvora, one of the top officials of the Israeli intelligence. At the beginning of our conversation, she was presenting a compelling vision of Israel as a regional hegemon with little to worry about:

“Israel is a safe state. We have a growing population, the economic and military strength has just improved exponentially. When you are asking me is Israel safer than it was, I answer yes, it is. All because of our peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan. Of the increase of acceptance and convergence of interests with many countries throughout the region. There is no imminent threat to the existence of Israel. Even Iran is not such a menace” (Dvora 2019).

After reading the vignettes of political speech including the vulnerability narrative, she first dismissed the importance of vulnerability identifications in the society. She expressed the feeling that the threats are used by politicians instrumentally. That they are exaggerated when it “serves them politically”. Only later Dvora recognised the importance of vulnerability in Israelis’ and her own perceptions:

“There is a broadly shared understanding in Israel that we are strong. That does not mean that there is no feeling that we are threatened. It looks as these two elements cannot go together but they can. This is genuine while may be hard to understand for a Westerner. We are feeling strong but threatened. (...) There is a very strong feeling in the Israeli society of the vulnerability, of the fact that we have been persecuted for so long. We are also a young state and our memories of the wars we fought, especially the independence war, have built a strong inner feeling of vulnerability. There is no question about that. At the same time, we know that we are strong. This can exist together. Even I sometimes wonder what can happen here in the near future. What if on the border suddenly Syrians will bring their militias. They are not well armed but in very big numbers. Everyone would wonder, what would be. Israel is such a small country. The threat would immediately come to our borders... this feeling... it is not a very pleasant feeling” (2019).

Sometimes the contradictions in the perception of the state's security were easier to bring about and locate. For instance, Saul, a political adviser to Israeli politicians was adamant that Israel is not facing serious geostrategic as well ideational challenges. He was insisting that Israel is flourishing, strong and prosperous, as the latest example of the state's 'initiative and creativity' he pointed out the Eurovision contest (hosted in 2019 in Tel Aviv). However, he himself undermined this positive vision:

"Everyone has its own opinion but Israel is not fighting anymore for its survival. I do not think we are now in a war for its independence. Israelis are a very strong society, the country has a very strong army and economy. The idea we are involved in an ongoing war of independence is bullshit. (...) So, in a competitive area like ours, and it is a competition for your life here, to survive you need to encourage people to be motivated."

"I think that the Eurovision well depicted Israel as a country of initiative and creativity. However, unfortunately, we have bad neighbours. Since this is the Middle East and not Europe, you have to fight here for your own existence. Hamas for example does not want to recognise our right to self-determination under any conditions. They just want to kick us to the sea" (Saul 2019).

The collective vulnerability of the Israelis was visible also in the behaviour of the interviewees themselves. Some of the participants responded and behaved in a way that could be characterised as Siege Mentality, which is a belief that there is a threat endangering the future of the group and that the outgroups have intentions to "do wrong or inflict harm on their group" (Bar-Tal, Antebi 1992: 49). Many participants expressed worries that my research will be used instrumentally in the initiatives calling for the boycott of the state. Some questioned whether my interests in official's perceptions is a pretext to gather material discrediting the state. Many approached my interest in vulnerability narratives with suspicion.

Moishe, an influential political commentator, advisor of Israeli leaders and head of one of the Israeli think tanks, abruptly ended our interview and protested every time I used the term 'vulnerability narratives' in the conversation. His answers were always short and he dismissed any suggestion of Israeli precarity. He insisted that the state is powerful and that the Israeli society does not experience anxiety. Responding to a vignette of PM Netanyahu

talking about the Israeli “bleeding baby” and “thousand rockets and missiles” being fired at Israelis, he briefly concluded:

“The Israeli society is managing very well. We know the conflict and we have a strong nation, also the social cohesion is strong.”

After being asked about – and exposed to – vignettes showing Israeli officials interchangeably abstaining from and using vulnerability language, Moishe first ignored the question and only later, after being asked again, raised his voice and answered wryly:

“It is another side of the same coin! We are in conflict!” (2018).

Sefi after reading an excerpt from president Rivlin’s speech in which the politician talks about Israel’s geopolitical challenges, at first rejected any suggestions that Israel may be vulnerable or drawing on vulnerability self-descriptions. At the same time, throughout the whole interview, he was oscillating between assertions of Israeli strength and weakness. While referring to Israelis feeling safe, he admitted that Israelis are “outnumbered physically and virtually” and that Israelis would “have to be stupid to not be scared” about their state. At the end of the conversation, he dismissed the validity of my work, pointed out that my approach is naïve and that my PhD is a waste of time. While he was clearly showing his contempt and disregard for the study, he also insisted that he would like to read my work (Sefi 2019).

In Anna’s opinion, this behaviour is contradictory only on the surface. She believes that such an approach in which the interviewee is interchangeably talking about Israeli strengths and vulnerabilities, where he/she is dismissive but wary of interlocutor’s opinions, shows their lack of trust to the outside world. She insists that these responses reflect the fact that many Israelis see themselves and their state as victimised:

“Their response is fascinating because it corresponds with your research question. They by thinking that your interview and your questions have anything to do with the BDS movement are actually reflecting the raison d’etre of the state. Which is the Holocaust. (...) The organising ethos of our society is that we are a victim” (Anna 2019).

Yuval, a former Israeli ambassador and advisor to Israeli prime ministers, sees this nonchalance as an element of performance typical for the Israeli political class:

“Ben Gurion was saying ‘umm shmum’ [derogatory reference to the UN], but what he actually meant is that he cared about the global community. (...) There is an internal paradox in Israelis ‘ignoring the world’. They say they do not care but really they do actively consider the world’s opinion” (2018).

Dalia, a lobbyist for politicians and NGOs, a former spokesperson of Israeli PM believes that the erratic mixture of strength and vulnerability reflects Jewish history and Israeli geopolitics:

“Even today if you would ask people on the street, you would be astonished to find out the number of Israelis that are trying to get a foreign passport. (...) It is something in our DNA to be prepared to escape. We are always feeling that they are chasing us, that someone tries to kill us. All the Jewish holidays could be summarised by a saying: They tried to kill us, we won, and now lets it. And this vulnerability has a rational grounding. It is part of us. When you look at our surroundings, other nations and groups do really try to kill us. On our borders, we have very hostile countries. Within a state, we also have hostile elements” (2019).

Alan, a famous Israeli journalist, writer and former political spokesperson, summarizes this unique identification comparing Israel to Popeye the Sailor, a fictional cartoon character who needs to eat spinach in order to sustain his physical strength:

“(...) we have a saying ‘Poor Samson’. Or, if you like, we are like Popeye. Maybe we are a superhero, but we need spinach to retain our posture, and we are also a toy” (2018).

The dramaturgy of vulnerability narratives

While not all participants spoke about the dramaturgical character of Israel’s vulnerability self-descriptions, those who did, confirmed the significance of - and allowed to better conceptualise – the dramaturgical dimension of this phenomenon. The term functions as a marker capturing the performative characteristics of the states’ employment of vulnerability narratives. I argued that Israel’s vulnerability narratives should be understood as a form of socio-political performance, in which the actor tries to present to the audience its claimed situatedness (see Chapter 3).

This interpretation was echoed throughout my conversations. Interviewees often emphasized that the audience plays a key role in driving Israel's usage of vulnerability narratives. For example, Simon, an intelligence expert with more than 25 years of experience work for the IDF, considered vulnerability narratives as a form of performance that allows the officials to advocate for the benefit of the state. He accentuated that this self-presentation should be treated as an element of "perceptual combat" and is more predominant in the situations where Israelis are speaking to foreign observers:

"There are differences in how the statemen are talking to the different audiences, whether they are addressing the internal or external public. Their messages depend on the audiences (...) You want to say to the Israeli audience that we are very strong, but if you want to advocate at the international community that we are also a victim (Simon 2019).

Sara, one of the IDF's former key legal experts involved in multiple Track-one negotiations with Israel's neighbours, also believes that the positionality of the speaker and the character of the audience are crucial factors influencing the performative employment of vulnerability:

"Whenever you are talking about the security of the state, you are always talking to three different audiences. The one audience is internal, and here you want to assure them that you will be a strong and firm leader, you want to calm them. You are saying here that you are very powerful and that no one will hurt the community. The other audience is the international community. Here you want to show how vulnerable you are. That you are a victim in a precarious position where terrible things may happen. This justifies that you want to act very firmly. The third group is the enemy. Here you are projecting your strength and showing that the enemy cannot frighten you" (2018).

Daniel, an influential writer and former director at the IDF radio, also sees vulnerability narratives as a performative tool of Israel's self-representations. However, he argues that the state officials also change descriptions of the state depending on other audience characteristics:

"Those three audiences also have to be divided. For example, foreign arena is not one arena, you actually have to adjust your message to the expectations of the Europeans, Americans etc. It is very difficult to balance those messages when you are representing Israel" (Daniel 2018).

For Simon, vulnerability narratives are one of many referrals used interchangeably and depending on the context:

“Israel’s self-representations cannot be based only on narratives of strength. You should have a lot of messages. Sometimes you should posture strength to deter your enemy, to make citizens comfortable, to make them believe in the state’s strength. Sometimes you want to talk about hope. State-making is not about one message. But it has to be also based on messages of threat” (2019).

Meir, former director of the Strategic Planning Division in the IDF also brought to my attention the performative character of this identification. Referring to a vignette including vulnerability narratives, he emphasized that Israel is building its image on both strength and weakness:

“This is a political enabling method which is based on interchangeable employment of narratives of strength and vulnerability. In order to be successful in a situation of Israeli politics, politicians have to be jugglers. All because when the politicians are talking about security, they do know that actually, they cannot provide full security. Israel is also reluctant to be involved in a war that would provide a full victory where the opponent surrenders because of humanitarian costs.”

For Meir, this puts the state’s officials in a double-bind:

“We know that Palestinians will continue to bother us like the mosquitos and we cannot do anything about it. Thus, the juggling technique. You have to juggle because you cannot provide on your security promises. This is the crux of Israeli politics. Politicians are expected to promise full security but they do know that they will never fulfil this promise” (Meir 2019).

The ontological insecurity of the conflict

Overall, the participants have confirmed that the ongoing conflict with the Palestinians is a source of ontological insecurity of Israel. While they recognise that the direct military threat posed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups is limited – especially in comparison with the arsenal of Hezbollah, Syria or Iran – many actually consider the protracted conflict with Palestinians as the biggest ideational challenge to the continuation of the Jewish state. Gabriel sees it as the main source of tensions within the Israeli society:

“The conflict is causing problems to Israel’s self-perceptions. Different people have different points of view of the conflict. And different points of view on life. The

competition is actually underlining those differences, it gives those cleavages a shape. It increases the divisions inside the Israeli society.” (2019).

This sentiment is shared by Jerry, a former Israeli ambassador and one of the key negotiators at Camp David Summit who insisted that:

“The fact that the conflict is enduring is a source of threat to the identity of the state.” (2018).

Meir sees it as a challenge to what the state is about:

“Conflict with Pal is not only kinetic but predominantly ideational conflict. It is challenging what the state wants to represent. We can today deal effectively with any security threat that would come from the Palestinians. The issue is the problem of our self-identity. How we are seeing ourselves. Everyone likes to be just. It is not easy to accept that the other party is also just” (2019).

Daniel points out that the operations in Gaza question positive self-identifications shared by the Israelis:

“Looking back at the previous confrontations with Gaza, they do cause a feeling of unease. I think that one of the main problems that Israelis are dealing with is the fact they have grown up being thought and believing that they are a little David, a boy who is fighting for his life. And at the same time when they are looking around, they see that abroad it is the other way around. They are presented as a Goliath. Israelis feel very uncomfortable about this representation. Fighting in residential areas of Gaza is their source of anxiety” (2018).

Olena, a public diplomacy and communication advisor for Israeli politicians, first did not agree that operations in Gaza pose a problem to Israeli self-perceptions. She insisted that actually have an only positive effect on the wellbeing of the Jews:

“They [Palestinians] do threaten us because of who we are because we are Jews, so it is also a defence of our identity. This only strengthens our identity as Jews. For the majority of Israelis, those security operations are a must. We have to defend ourselves”.

Later, she recognised that the repeated armed conflicts have both positive and negative effects on Israeli identifications:

“Yes, the conflict is a challenge to how we are viewing ourselves. Jews do try to follow the saying Tikkun Olam [improve the world], to help other people. The IDF always considers civilians before conducting strikes. But when Hamas is using civilians as human shields, how can you be ‘righteous’ and satisfy your own expectations? We are one of the most moral armies in the world, and we are pursuing peace for decades. But

we do not have a partner on the other side. How we are supposed to dance if what you need is two to tango... Currently, it is the other side that is perceived as David, and we are the Goliath. Before it was just the opposite” (Olena 2018).

Counterintuitively, Noa sees the conflict as an internal threat. All because the competition with the Palestinians plays a central role in the ongoing debate about what Israel is about and who the Israelis are:

“The most important is the Palestinian issue. Which I actually do not think is a security issue (...) It is a very serious political obstacle, a social obstacle and a cognitive challenge. This challenge has even physical emanations, namely lack of recognised state borders. (...) Palestinian issue should not be understood as an external challenge. It is an internal threat. It all goes back to the issue of who we are. What is our identity.” (Noa 2019).

The fact that the conflict is still not resolved directly challenges the liberal and democratic identifications of the majority of Israelis. It puts into question the future Jewish character of the state:

“Since it is so important for most of the Israelis that the state is Jewish and democratic, the occupation is endangering this status. If Israel will not keep its democratic and Jewish characteristics for people like me it will be a major failure of Zionism. If we will not have a solution with the Palestinians, and an agreed solution, we will have a state, a territory or a system that will be composed of 50% Palestinians and 50% Jews. And that would be a disaster. If we will live in a state that did not retain its Jewish identity, it would be totally contradictory to the vision of Zionism and democracy” (Noa 2019).

Meir connects the Israeli anxiety with the broader Jewish strive for legitimacy:

“The issue of legitimacy is important because of Israeli psyche, our history and our lack of confidence. We do inherently feel unsafe. This is typical for people who during WWII were butchered on an unprecedented scale. The second reason behind this anxiety is the history of Israel itself. There is something unnormale that people who have been thrown away from its territory, came back after 2.000 years. You know many people have been expelled from their lands but usually, they perished. So, Jews are an exception. Importantly, we came back to a territory that was not empty. By the creation of the state of Israel, we made one wrong right but created another wrong. The essence of the conflict is that both sides are right” (2019).

Functions of vulnerability narratives

1. Anxiety reduction

The fact that the interviewees consider the contest with Palestinians as a factor that challenges the ontological security of Israel, may support the dissertation's theoretical claim that vulnerability narratives and the country's attempts to be seen as insecure allow Israel to reduce its anxieties. I theorise that vulnerability-based performance helps the state to address ontological insecurity by providing beneficial meaning to its offensive actions against the weaker opponent.

This understanding was supported by the participants. Throughout our conversations, Israeli officials repeatedly raised the issue of the security of the state's identity in the context of the military operations in Gaza. Joshua, a consultant at the MOD and PM's office and a former official at the Israeli intelligence, tellingly depicts the unique form of anxiety caused by the repeated confrontations with Palestinians:

"Conflict with the Palestinians is not an existential threat in the sense that their capabilities to overcome us by force are too limited. They do not have the means to destroy us. But the Palestinian issue is questioning Israelis' sense of justice. It challenges our conduct and behaviour. Because of it, we do sleep with one eye opened" (2019).

Anat, former legal advisor to PM and official at the State Attorney's office talked in length about the unease Israelis share due to the situation in Gaza and communities that live close to the Strip:

"If I may speak on behalf of what I think are the majority of Israelis, I would say they feel very bad and uncomfortable about the situation with Gaza. They do not enjoy where are they and they wish the situation would have changed. The fact that people are going to the cinema, while the south of Israel is being targeted with rockets is a problem" (2018).

For her, the other side of this coin is Israeli's expectation to recognise their vulnerability:

"Public opinion expects their politicians to talk about sacrifice. Israelis are used to see themselves as victims. Wars with Arabs, wars of independence have strengthened in

Israelis the perception that they are threatened. This may be one of the tragedies of Israel that we see ourselves this way.”

Jerry believes that vulnerability narratives are a powerful political performance:

“It is rewarding to speak about threats because people feel that those who realise the existence of threats and possibility of their materialisation, they are realists. (...) There is something in the expression of threats that captivates people. It speaks to them and gives political credibility. We have a natural tendency to listen to the guy that warns us about our vulnerabilities” (2018).

The state’s employment of narratives of vulnerability fulfils the ideational, ‘ontological’ needs of the state involved in a conflict. Karen, an influential Israeli intellectual and politician, shows how by projecting and dramatizing one’s vulnerability, Israel promotes or sustains the positive identification and reduces its ontological anxieties. She even has its own name for this strategy: ‘playing a flat fish’ (- As opposed to ‘Blow Fish,’ when Israel bigs itself up – she explains). Speaking about a vignette including vulnerability narratives of PM Netanyahu, she summarizes:

“He plays on vulnerability both domestically and internationally. He says to Israelis ‘I am representing you on a global stage. I am telling your story.’ You have to remember that his speech is going against images of Israelis blowing up Gaza, Israelis being evil. Netanyahu here is saying: “No, you are not evil, you are a good side here. You are defending yourselves. You are not just mindless, bloodthirsty aggressors” – which is what Israelis are seeing in the world media. ‘I am telling who you truly are to the world. And you truly are people engaging in nothing more than the self-defence of your children” (Karen 2019).

David provided a detailed analysis of why talking about insecurities, helps Israelis to give meaning to the state’s offensive actions against the Palestinians. He believes that Israel tries to avoid being accused of using excessive force, showing that it acts morally:

“The use of disproportionate force can be dangerous for Israel. Ben Gurion, the first PM of the state said that Israel should operate following three categories. Courage, wisdom and morality. As a Jewish state, according to our tradition, when we have to use force, first of all, it will be to defend ourselves. When we have to kill, it is always reflecting the tension and consideration of two important values in Judaism. One, thou shall not kill, the sanctity of life but two, when he comes to kill you, rise up and kill first. In between, you have to make a decision, whether to kill or not to kill. This dilemma is in Jewish DNA. We are not bloodthirsty, we are not going to kill anyone to make him Jewish like the Muslims and when we have to use the force it is just to defend ourselves. That is our narrative.” (David 2018)

In David's opinion vulnerability narratives are a form of justification for Israel's offensive actions because it "helps us to introduce Hamas as a rogue element, as a violator of the international norms, laws and moral values."

Lastly, many responses themselves were a form of an anxiety-reducing comment. Interviewees defended Israel's offensive actions, often focusing on providing justifications of the state's actions and on presenting its people and regional policies positively. For example, my whole conversation with Mordechai, a far-right member of Knesset could be taken as a form of vulnerability narrative. During our meeting the politician was detailing how Israel is being hurt by Palestinians and how its own generosity is increasing its vulnerability:

"When in 2005 Israel uprooted 5.000 Jewish civilians from Gaza, we were told that 1.5 mln Palestinians are living there and that the Jewish presence is like a finger in the eyeballs of Palestinians. It was argued that if we only would remove the Jews, peace and quiet would return to the region. There will not be any more missiles targeting the Jewish settlements. Gaza strip would become Singapore of the Middle East. Everything looked promising. However, the next day it turned out that Palestinians elected Hamas. We have left behind greenhouses, water systems. All they had to do was to turn on the water and have Singapore. Instead, what they decided to do was to raise money and invest it in missiles and the terror tunnels" (Mordechai 2018).

In Mordechai's view, Israel's vulnerabilities are a crucial danger that precludes the state to reach its full potential:

"Israel is a state which would like to be a normal state. We would like to go ahead and build our industries and our economy and our science to become the light of the nations. Unfortunately, our enemies are trying to put us in the corner. But we cannot change our goals and be aware of our weaknesses" (2018).

A. Compartmentalisation

The conversations allowed me to further nuance my understanding of the vulnerability narrative's function of anxiety reduction and to link it with a process of compartmentalisation. Namely the attempts to separate and evade issues and perspectives that may induce anxiety about Israel's identity. For instance, descriptions of the Palestinian

casualties of the IDF's military operations or of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, negative depictions of the Israeli state as an aggressor or occupier and other messages that disrupt positive views of the self of Israelis.

In Moshe's opinion compartmentalisation allows Israelis to focus on their pain and victimhood and disregard the victimhood and vulnerability of the enemy:

"For Israelis, it is very clear. We are the victims. They did not want us here. When we came here, they killed us. Today when unwanted people come to Israel, we say 'go away'. If Palestinians were expelled, we say it is only because they started a war. Today, we say that if Palestinians are killed it is because they were too close to the fence. This identity provides a license to do more, to retaliate, to act offensively. Do you know what was the cover of the Yedioth Ahronoth on December 2008, the day after the Cast Lead, after the airstrikes that led to the death of 220 Palestinians, the bloodiest day in the history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, a day when no Israeli was killed? Their title was saying "A quarter of Israeli civilians under attack". 220 Palestinians dead but we are under attack" (2018).

Dan, a former advisor to Israeli PM and MFA, involved in many rounds of negotiations with Palestinians also points out that:

"You know the other side of those vulnerability quotations is that we bombarded different targets, we killed multiple people." (2018).

Moshe sees this binary, Manichean view as a necessary element behind OPE and other military operations in Gaza:

"Throughout history, nations always supported wars, because it is always the easiest thing to say: 'Here is the evil. Here is the bad guy and I am a good guy. Hamas is our enemy and we are the angels'".

"Vulnerability statements increase the political support. It is saying "You see, we are the victims. Hamas is attacking us." But politicians are not mentioning the fact that hundreds of people in Gaza were killed. They are not talking that Gaza is isolated. They are not mentioning the actual ways Israelis are operating in Gaza. It is a very one-sided representation where the suffering of one side – your side – is represented. While it is real suffering; it is ignoring the suffering of 2 mln people in Gaza" (2018).

In Daniel's opinion, vulnerability narratives are a crucial source of meaning that allows the state to continue its military policies by evading unpleasant information:

“Vulnerability narratives are unifying the public (...) they help to blame the other side. It helps politicians to argue that they are not the ones responsible for the situation. The responsibility is put on somebody else, and this somebody else is the enemy... This allows to also avoid cognitive dissonances stemming from the killing of the civilians” (2018).

B. Rationalisation

Secondly, the participants have supported the expectation that vulnerability narratives support the ontological security of the state through the process of rationalisation. Namely, Israel draws on vulnerability as a defence mechanism that provides justifications and explanations for its offensive military actions. The rationalisation helps to deflect the blame.

For Saul, Israel has to rationalise its military operations in order to avoid criticisms from abroad:

“When you want to conduct a military action, you need to justify it externally to the world. You say then that “they shot rockets at the civilians and we need to act and this is the only thing we can do”. People will get hurt so you need to tell the world that you are the victim” (2019).

Reflecting on a vignette including vulnerability narratives, Moshe contends:

“This message is supposed to improve Israel’s image abroad. It helps to build a platform from which in the future we can explain what did we act the way we act. “We organised a rocket attack on Hamas because they were sending rockets to Ashkelon. The baby is crying.” This helps to argue that we are defending ourselves. It helps to prepare the public opinion to the coming offensive action” (2018).

Uri, Israeli diplomat and former ambassador summarizes:

“When you are going to the BBC, or to talk to the students, you underline the vulnerability of your own nation. This shows that it is them who started it. ‘Do not talk to us, talk to them’” (2018).

2. Special agency

Interviewees also confirmed that vulnerability narratives have a securitising function. Namely, Israel designates the sources of its vulnerability by talking about threats. Thanks to that it aspires to gain special agency. Consequently, this identification is supporting

ontological security. It gives meaning to Israel's actions by presenting a clear threat.

Mordechai tellingly explained what vulnerability narratives allow the officials to express:

"It helps us to justify our offensive activities. It is part of our public relations activity to convince the world that what we are doing is our basic need. We have to try to convince the world. Show them the facts on the ground"

Presenting itself as vulnerable helps Israel to highlight the scale of external threats by showing that:

"all other alternatives are much worse (...) our enemy is a very cruel enemy and we have no choice. We cannot compromise. We have to go ahead, be determined and know where are we going" (Mordechai 2018).

Anat has laid out the securitising power of vulnerability narratives clearly:

"Politicians use the power of threat. They use it to influence people in Israel. When their constituents are feeling under threat it is much easier for them to hate the one that threatens you. Hate and fear are two factors that bring people together. The main thing you want to stop is the risk. Above anything else. You are not preoccupied at the same time with morality. You want to stop your vulnerability. The Israeli government is using that (...) This helps to deflect people's attention from other problematic uses and also to become more popular. To bring people together. To unite them against a threat." (2018).

Moshe accentuated that while this identification points out to Israel's fears, it is a tool of the agency since it allows the state to do more:

"This speech is not undermining the standing of the state. It is the opposite. It grants legitimacy to the state's actions. It places us in a situation where we have to react, we have to defend ourselves. When you are saying that you are defending yourself, you are asking for a right to use violence" (2018).

Also, Yossi sees vulnerability narratives as a political action that allows the state to do more.

In particular to justify robust military expenditures and operational practices of the state:

"Here we build a fortress. In order to build a fortress, you need to be under threat (...) because if the public is not afraid, the money could go to education, to transportation instead of security" (2018).

A. Weakness

Participants support the expectation that vulnerability narratives allow Israel to challenge its superior status. The interlocutors argued that they portray Israel's military

actions as stemming from a dire situation. Zach refers to the practice of the state pointing out its weaknesses as “charging the batteries of the international legitimacy”:

“When we will decide to retaliate militarily aggressively, it will be after those batteries will be fully charged. Because then we will be able to act fully, then the international community will be more understanding” (2019).

Zach admits that the currency of this practice is the perceived weakness of Israel. He points out the problematic character of this phenomenon and suggests that the country’s willingness to be treated as an embattled actor may be undermining the wellbeing of Israelis:

“It is a form of perverted logic in which the state is placed. To gain legitimacy, the state has to first show that it is paying a price. In this way, the state is actually breaching the promise to its people to do everything it can to secure their lives” (Zach 2019).

Interestingly, while I expected that the actor will challenge its superior status through depictions underscoring Israeli’s victimhood, some interlocutors felt very uncomfortable with this suggestion. Both Simon and Sefi, when I suggested that victimhood may play a role in the state’s public diplomacy, responded with anger to such an allusion. In the case of Simon, the interview could continue only after I strongly pointed out that my questions are not reflecting any political agenda (2019). Sefi after being asked whether victimhood may be used by Israel “to get some kind legitimacy”, first underscored that he does not understand the question. Subsequently, he responded bitterly:

“What do you mean by that? Do you mean that people who are being targeted in Sderot do not have a right to be afraid? Victim – is not the word I like but how come Jews would not be entitled to this status? I do not understand.” (2019).

Mordechai insisted that Israel officials avoid references to victimisation:

“We are not trying to victimise ourselves. We are not trying to present ourselves as victims. We are showing the facts that our people have missiles facing them and that we have to defend ourselves” (2018).

Regardless, most participants recognise that Israel is talking about its victimhood, vulnerability and precarity in order to gain legitimacy and question its status as the regional hegemon. For example, Rafi contended that:

“Separating from the legitimate criticism of Israel, we are dealing with unfair and brutal demonization of Israel. We are definitely allowed of showing pictures of dead or harmed pictures of Israeli kids. Kids that have been harmed by missiles. This helps us to counteract with a lot of fake imagery circulating the internet” (2018).

Anat thinks that the vulnerability narratives allow the state to blur “the line between who in the region is the victim” and expresses the fact that in the regional context Jews feel like an underdog (2018). Moshe sees the projection of vulnerability as one of the two elements of Israeli identity (this way confirming the importance of the strength function of the vulnerability narratives – see next section):

“Both – the statements of weakness and strength - speak to the Israel identity. They say that we are the victims and that is why we have to use power. These are the two most important characteristics of Israel. The majority of Israelis feel like that all the time. “We never just hit, we only hit back”. When Netanyahu is talking about bleeding Israeli baby, he is not saying we are weak for good. The victim can be a very powerful player“ (2018).

Ben, a former official at Aman (Military Intelligence), also believes that vulnerability narratives have a second side:

“Having a constant external threat is a unifying factor. You could probably compare Israel’s frame of mind to the WWII feeling of Great Britain or the post 9/11 US. When you have external factors, that is a unifying motivating factor. Let’s put our differences aside because we need to work together. Even though today threats are not as big as they were, still social cohesion of Israelis is record high” (2019).

Isaac confirms the importance of weakness for Israeli operational strength. He points out that without talking about external threats, Israelis are divided:

“(...) you know religion vs state, kosher things vs non-kosher things. Now, using this kind of [vulnerability] phrases makes us more united” (2018).

Shaul, a longstanding spokesperson of one of the Israeli embassies, insists that talking about Israeli weakness and victimhood allows Israel to talk about its own vulnerability, which normally is being ignored due to the victimisation of Palestinians:

“In this case, it is hard to win the battle of arguments... but what else is there to say or to do? You are trying to show Israeli’s suffering – even if it is not adequate to the Palestinian suffering. We do know – and I am telling you this as one of the creators of this propaganda (...) that it is not simulated. Israel is not a PR company that tries to

convince people that Coca Cola is a healthy drink. (...) We are trying to show, maybe not very effectively, that no one is untouched by this conflict” (2018).

Dalia is more critical of the political application of this theme for the purpose of presenting Israel as a victim is:

“Vulnerability is like a reflex. It is something entwined with us. However, often it is also a political spin. This employment of victimhood and vulnerability is derogated in Israeli media and pop culture too. Sometimes people say that because of what we have suffered, our sportsman should be allowed to start competitions earlier than their competitors. We are using our vulnerability as a political card; however, this practice also harms us” (2019).

B. Strength

Lastly, it is argued that vulnerability narratives allow the state to simultaneously point out a threat and a solution. This way they mobilize the constituents. The strength function demonstrates that this performance - while based on vulnerability narratives - allows the strong actor to support its agency. Israel is tying the references to threats with motivating calls and practical solutions that target the source of vulnerability. This sentiment was shared by many participants. Especially politicians and military officials argued that Israel's strength stems from its vulnerability. To illustrate, David believes that:

“Speaking about weakness is a way to mobilise the people. To show they have to take responsibility. Looking back at 2014, so many people then volunteered to support people leaving close to the border with Gaza. That's is the way to mobilise them. We are under threat. We should be unified. We should be responsible for each other“ (2018).

Anat points out that whenever Israel is talking about its vulnerability, it links this predicament with its agency:

“Remember that on the other hand, the gov is talking not only about the heroism and sacrifice it also points out that it will push back” (2018).

Yonah also suggests seeing Israeli references to precarity as a tool of statecraft and warfare:

“He wants to tell the world that we have to react. That we are so miserable, that... in twelve hours everybody will see how strong we are. So, he takes a few hours that are left to show that Israel is a poor country under attack. Which is true but we have a power to answer to our predicament” (2018).

Saul joked that without motivating people through vulnerability narratives, Israel's initiative and the innovative agency would be threatened and the country would become 'lazy like Germany or Switzerland' (2019). Dan sees strength in this identification because it allows the state to act:

"This is the aim of the political establishment. To convince the constituents that we have to retaliate, that we have to be decisive, brutal, untied behind the leader. Those narratives are a very effective enabler" (2018).

Sara believes that vulnerability should be associated not only with weakness but also with strength. For her, in the Israeli context, both identities go together:

"This also helps the state to persuade the international community that there are good reasons behind the attacks. To answer why we are using our force".

"(...) there is no contradiction between being a victim and posturing how strong we are. We are showing that we used our strength to react to the threat. Being a victim does not mean that you have to stay a victim. You actually have a right to respond, to not let this situation continue. Pain is not blurring the line here it is not contradictory to what are we doing. It complements our actions" (2018).

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed Israel's practice of employment of vulnerability narratives during the OPE. The analysis confirmed performative characteristics of the state's use of this theme. Israeli representatives, when addressing predominantly foreign audiences, tended to emphasize the state's vulnerability, the scale of looming dangers as well as in-group's victimhood. When speaking about the country's vulnerability narratives, the interviewees themselves instinctively gravitated towards the theatre metaphor and portrayed Israel as an actor playing to the audiences. Analysis showed also that Israel's self-presentation was predicated on different vulnerabilities. Interestingly, aside from the references to the in-group vulnerability (Jewish nation, the West), the state talked also about the out-group vulnerabilities (Palestinians).

The participants have generally confirmed theoretical expectations of the dissertation. Through the interviews, it was established that the 2014 war was indeed a source of ontological security deficits for the state. Israeli presence in Gaza was a challenge for the state's image abroad and a point of contention domestically. Almost all participants have confirmed that before and during the OPE Israel was a strong and safe country. This way, they have supported my argument that the use of powerful actors' vulnerability narratives ought to be foremost analysed from the ideational – not instrumental perspective. While such descriptions were speaking to Israeli worries about the physical security of the state, they were grounded in perceptions, historical identifications and social beliefs about the justness and victimisation of the Jewish state. Vulnerability narratives were addressing the collective's need to identify themselves and their state as a moral actor. Consequently, they buttressed Israel's ontological security by reducing anxiety about its offensive. However, the image of the vulnerability narratives emerging from the interviews and Israel's public communication is more nuanced and cannot be simply reduced solely to the ideational realm. The interviewees have confirmed also that by giving a principled meaning to the war efforts, the actor was gaining greater agency to act against the underdog. By self-identifying as vulnerable it was presenting Hamas as a source of threat to the future standing of Israel. This finding has confirmed that vulnerability narratives can be used to securitise the enemy. Thus, they shed a light on a more materialistic dimension of this practice.

7. United Kingdom: Powerful Britannia

7.1. Introduction

In the present chapter, I examine the British geopolitical position and ideational anxieties at the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The UK is one of the two dissertation's case studies – together with Israel's 2014 OPE – chosen to investigate the strong state's employment of vulnerability narratives during armed conflicts. The actor and the conflict itself were purposefully sampled selected on the basis of shared characteristics. They have analogous political (parliamentary democracy), army (nuclear arsenal) and economic profile (developed states). Both identify as being a part of “the West” (Porter 2018; Smootha 2002). The 2003 invasion of Iraq follows the comparative design of the dissertation was focusing on modern mediatized wars (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010).

The chapter provides a country profile, which is drawn to demonstrate that the UK was a strong actor. This step is necessary to confirm that the selection of the state is in line with the dissertation's focus on powerful states self-identifying as vulnerable. I first establish the claim that in 2003 the UK was one of the global powers without direct existential threats to its security. This argument is supported by a review of the state of British economics, society, military, involvement in conflict theatres and the country's international alliances. Secondly, I present realist and liberal readings of the 2003 war and explain why they cannot account for the puzzle of London's vulnerability pronouncements. Thirdly, in order to provide an alternative reading to this practice, I use the concept of identity and the ontological security studies (e.g. Kinnval 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005). Fourthly, I discuss why also from the perspective of the state's ideational needs, vulnerability narratives intuitively seemed like an impediment to the safety of British collective identity. Fifthly, I offer a detailed analysis of the ongoing debates about British identity and establish that for

decades London was struggling with deficits of ontological security. Sixthly, I outline why the state's policy of sending forces to Bagdad further destabilised its safety of being. The invasion clashed with a set of identifications, self-proclaimed values and biographical narratives employed by London. These detailed descriptions of the state's ideational predicament are used as a backdrop to the argument that vulnerability narratives, while counterintuitively, were addressing British identity anxiety. I explain how I utilise the concept of ontological security to answer why and how vulnerability narratives were supporting the identity of a strong political actor such as the UK. Lastly, I provide a short overview of the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

7.2. Strong state

On the 20th of March 2003, the day when British soldiers deployed on the banks of the Iraqi Al Faw peninsula, the UK was a safe, prosperous and influential global actor. Today this claim may for many seem palpably obvious. However, in the post 9/11 *zeitgeist*, it was questioned. The one challenging this perspective most avidly was the state itself. While the country's forces, shoulder to shoulder with American troops, were bringing down Saddam Hussein's regime, PM Tony Blair was warning the British public about new emerging threats of WMD, terrorism, inhumane regimes. He predicted the looming "disorder and chaos" and possible "catastrophe to our country" (Blair 2003a). The opposition was also worried. Duncan Smith, a prominent Conservative Party MP was adamant about "a clear danger to British citizens" and warned that those in doubt of this are unrealistic (House of Commons 2003c).

These descriptions - when applied to a leading European military power, a member of NATO with its own nuclear arsenal – may seem to conflict with the UK's standing. To better understand the reasons why British vulnerability narratives emerged before and during the

2003 invasion of Iraq, let us first analyse the geostrategic and economic position of the country. This will allow for a better assessment of whether such descriptions were inconsistent with British security.

Society and economics

- Today I want to set an ambitious course for this country. To be nothing less than the model 21st century nation, a beacon to the world – with these words on 1 May of 1997 at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton, Tony Blair, a newly elected PM of the United Kingdom, unveiled his programme of state modernisation (Blair 1997a). After winning a landslide victory in 1997 New Labour outlined a new, optimistic vision for Britain. After 18 years of Tory rule, the state was supposed to change dramatically. On the day of the government's inauguration, Blair promised to the cheering crowds: A new dawn had broken, has it not? (Wheeler 2017). Not only the commentariat of popular magazines at that time (e.g. Kamp 1997) but also today, academics (e.g. Clarke 2007: 603) and journalists (Bower 2016) accentuate that New Labour's triumph sparked infectious confidence in the British society.

From today's perspective, the enthusiasm of the liberal left at that time seems astonishing. In the first years of Blair's rule, the government was unabashed about its plan to sustain significant increases in public investment. In 2002 Chancellor Gordon Brown was not only boasting about the record spending done by the state in transport, health, education, local government, defence, social services, housing, sport and arts, but he was adamant that the state can do much more:

“Our mission is not just 1.5 million more jobs so far, but full employment for a generation, not just in one region of our country but in all regions and nations of our country. Our mission is not just more spending on education but ensuring that no one is left out and for everyone, at every age the doors of educational opportunity are open wide. Our mission is not just 1 million children already lifted out of poverty, put an end to child poverty and a guarantee that every pensioner has dignity in retirement. And our mission is not just better public services, but the best public service” (Brown 2002).

At the same time, the enthusiasm of the political establishment could not be easily dismissed as detached from reality. The years leading up to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq were marked by positive social and economic developments and supported by indicators building up this positive outlook. The country was recognized as one of the world's leading trading powers and London was considered to be a global spearhead of modern financial services. By 2003 the British GDP surpassed France making it the second-largest economy of the EU and the fourth largest economy worldwide. Furthermore, "by 2002 unemployment had fallen to below one million and inflation was low and stable" (Grant 2003:261). Value of both, UK's imports and exports were on a rise and by 2003 they were worth more than 300 billion GBP respectively (Office for National Statistics 2016a). Considered to be a highly developed knowledge economy, over the years high-value goods and services have become the brunt of the UK's exports and were successfully competing with the products from other developed as well as emerging markets (House of Commons 2018). The country's composition of manufacturing exports was improving due to the pivot "towards higher technology manufactured goods" (DBIS 2011). In 2003 the state was one of the world's biggest manufacturers (with steady growth in manufacturing output) and leading power in defence equipment, aerospace, environmental and automotive technology and pharmaceuticals (e.g. PWC 2009).

Not only the economy but also the quality of life and health of citizens was improving. In 2003 the UK was one of the best places to live. Citizen's life expectancy had steadily risen across the country and in 2003 it was 76.1 for males and 80.5 for females (Office for National Statistics 2016b). In 2002 infant mortality was a record low and has declined to 5.2 deaths per 1,000 live births (Office for National Statistics 2015). Labour introduced the minimum wage, almost doubled the NHS's budget and was significantly increasing expenditure on education. By 2001, the government was boasting that spending

per child had risen by 78% since the elections (Bower 2016: 183). British universities – one of the country's biggest pride - were rapidly growing. Partially due to the government's promise that in the near future half of the young British adults will be obtaining higher education degrees.

And then there was the Good Friday Agreement. It ended a decades-old conflict between Protestants and Catholics which made Northern Ireland “virtually ungovernable” (Davies 2000: 771). The brutal spiral of sectarian violence meant that by 1992 more than 3.000 people died as a result of the fights (2000). The end of the Troubles – as this ethno-nationalist rivalry is often called – was nothing short of a startling triumph of peace diplomacy. During the first Blair ministry, New Labour stopped one of the 20th century's most enduring conflicts. The end of Troubles marked not only security normalisation in Northern Ireland. The peace dividend meant also economic growth in a region with high unemployment.

The military

In 2003, with a budget of 28 bln 751 mln GBP, the UK had the 5th largest defence budget in the world (SIPRI 2019b) and was one of few European powers that year that was increasing its defence spending (Military Balance 2004). Furthermore, the UK was one of a handful of NATO members that was hitting the mark of spending over 2% of its GDP on defence annually. Due to its geographic location, the UK was traditionally a sea power with a relatively small regular army. At the same time, the country had what was considered to be one of the most effective military striking powers and despite its pacifist declarations, Labour intended on keeping it so (see Gummett 2000; Taylor 2011). London sustained a well-trained and well-equipped military force and was considered to be one of the world's most powerful armies (see Dorman 2018). In Europe, it was one of few actors capable of projecting its

interests abroad. At the time of the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, its expeditionary combat forces were comparable only to France (see Military Balance 2004).

The UK's focus on retaining capabilities for engaging in effective expeditionary warfare reflects a long-held view that as an island nation located far from direct geostrategic threats, it is not likely it will be a target of large-scale conventional strike (e.g. Military Balance 2004; MoD 2003a):

“the British army has never existed because of a clearly identified threat to the ‘homeland’: France, for example, with her long borders, was always vulnerable to attack from rival Austria or the Netherlands (...) Britain, on the other hand, always felt secure enough behind its ‘wooden walls’: the enemy could never come by sea, as successive sea lords confidently asserted, and when the Germans once tried to come by air the retort was emphatic” (Mallison 2009: 474).

This situatedness has not only provided security but predestined the state to play the role of a global actor. While the new generation of British leaders still saw the country as a global power involved in supporting international stability, the MOD materials, as well as ongoing expert and political debates, shows that there was a growing conviction that Britain's security is interlinked with the safety of others (Boyce 2007):

“globalisation is not just economic, it is also a political and security phenomenon. We live in a world where isolationism has ceased to have a reason to exist. (...) Many of our domestic problems are caused on the other side of the world. Financial instability in Asia destroys jobs in Chicago and in my own constituency in County Durham. Poverty in the Caribbean means more drugs on the streets in Washington and London. Conflict in the Balkans causes more refugees in Germany and here in the US” (Blair 1999).

The defence of British interests and British security was tied to the developments abroad. During the New Labour government, the country's involvement in international affairs was presented both as a unique privilege – an instrument of power reserved only for few major powers (e.g. Blair 1999) – but also as a necessity. According to this assumption, it is only through robust military activities abroad that the UK will be secure:

“Rather than responding to a security emergency when it has escalated, it is clearly better to prevent it arising, or escalating, in the first place. The armed forces are

therefore engaged in a range of stability-building and conflict prevention activities under the label 'Defence Diplomacy'" (MoD 2001).

Consequently, the defence responsibilities of the military were performed through the capability to fight abroad. (e.g. Codner 1997; Farrell 2008; Melvin 2008; MoD 1998).

In 2003 British Armed Forces (BAF) were a bigger army than they are today. Before the invasion, the country's active personnel was 207.000, most of which were professional volunteers (Military Balance 2004). While the BAF are relatively small, they are considered to be one of the best trained and best commanded land armed forces in the world (e.g. Mallison 2009). The effectiveness and broad operational capabilities of the force reflect well the innovative character of the country's defence industry. British military power was closely intertwined with the domestic arms manufacturers. The UK's defence industry had one of the most advanced technologies and production capabilities in the world. In 2003 it was the world's second-biggest arms producer and exporter, its annual sales were worth around £17bn (SIPRI 2005; Wheeler 2003). Many of its systems were considered to be world-leading or one of the world-leading (CAAT 2003).

Traditionally, the pride and crucial power projection tool for the state was the navy. Its main role according to the MOD strategists is to provide coercive and deterrent effects overseas:

"Our emphasis in the maritime environment is increasingly on delivering effect from the sea onto the land, which includes a land-attack capability, supporting forces ashore and on securing access to the theatre of our operations and protecting the crucial sea lines of communications from the home base." (MoD 2003a)

In 2003 the UK was still waiting for the new Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, however, it had three Invincible-class aircraft carriers. While smaller in size than the more advanced American warships, British light fleet carriers were allowing the UK – as proven in Falklands and Bosnian war as well as during operations in Africa and the Middle East – to quickly project airpower and tactical advantage overseas. The British navy fleet force was

composed also of destroyers, frigates and submarines which together allowed it to assemble versatile, resilient and deadly carrier battle groups (e.g. Armed Forces n.d.; Military Balance 2004; Pyle 1991). Furthermore, due to a world-class amphibious ship program, the Royal Navy had significant capabilities to transport and land its expeditionary forces (BBC 1998; Critchley 2004).

The UK is one of five nuclear weapons states recognised by the Non-Proliferation treaty and its international standing was based on the continuously developed Trident program (see e.g. Rogers 2006). Its key element was Vanguard-class submarines, in 2003 the only nuclear weapons system under the British command. Equipped with advanced ballistic missiles they provided the UK with a second-strike capability and continuous at-sea deterrent. Considered by the MOD as a “necessary element of [state’s] security” (MoD 2003a: 9) they were a distinction of prominence and were attesting to Britain’s global military outreach.

A key aspect allowing the UK to fulfil its doctrinal ambitions is the maintenance of air superiority. According to the MOD’s vision, it is the Royal Airforce that can help the state to quickly deploy expeditionary forces but also “will continue to be important as an integral part of war-fighting and as a coercive instrument to support political objectives” (MoD 1998: Ch. V). That is why the British air force was continuously involved in the development and procurement of a new generation of combat and transport aircraft. Air combat abilities of the Royal Airforce were manifested by a fleet of modern indigenous and US-made multirole fighters and strike aircraft. Thanks to powerful transporter helicopters and transport aircraft, the airforce was also uniquely prepared to deploy massive forces abroad (Military Balance 2004).

The Royal Army (RA), the UK’s land warfare forces, reflect the broad operational capabilities expected of the British military. For years, MOD was trying to combine

expeditionary and contributory strategic concepts in its logistics as well as preparedness. Expeditionary because the army played an active role in international humanitarian missions and military interventions, and contributory because it was continuously providing key support to NATO alliance missions in Europe (see Codner 1997). That is why in 2003 the UK infantry, as well as armoured forces, were prepared to operate as peacekeeping as well as a major combat force. The RA had under its command one of the most versatile ranges of armoured vehicles. Its infantry was trained to operate in different weather and climate conditions (Tanner 2014).

The main striking power of British land forces were indigenous Challenger 2 tanks. In 2003 they were the pride of RA and a showcase of British military technology. The UK has historically pioneered armoured warfare and Challengers were attesting to the fact that it was still one of few countries designing state-of-the-art armoured vehicles (e.g. Roblin 2017; UKDJ 2017). The operations of the ground forces were supported by modern aircraft, especially domestic-made multipurpose helicopters which proved to be an outstanding workhorse in the battlefield utility and anti-tank roles (e.g. Gray 2002; Military Balance 2004).

Lastly, BAE operations were supported by the state's own domestically developed satellite system which connected a broad variety of British stations operating on land, in the air and on the sea. Importantly, it provided the army command with sophisticated monitoring capabilities that were independent of its allies (see Whitehall Papers 1996; RAF Museum 2017).

Participation in conflicts

The post-WWII standing of the UK is often described as decline (e.g. Edgerton 2019; English and Kenny 1999). This sentiment - in a country that by 1920 has controlled almost a

quarter of the territories of the globe and in 1945 defied German invasion - is understandable. Porter points out that after WWII UK received significant blows by losing in the confrontation over the Suez Canal in 1956 and by withdrawing from Yemen in 1967 (Porter 2018: ix). However, this does not mean that the New Labour government was inheriting responsibility for a state that had withdrawn from global affairs. The UK was still an actor with a robust military presence around the world (see Hoon 2001). In 2002 the BAE had garrisons in the Falklands, Gibraltar, Cyprus and Northern Ireland. Close to 5.000 of its soldiers were deployed in the Balkans, 400 were operating in Sierra Leone. The UK had Training Teams and Military Missions in Nepal, the Antarctic, Bermuda and Bangladesh and was participating in UN's missions in Georgia, Cyprus, East Timor, Sierra Leone, Kuwait and DRC (Boyce 2002).

The 1982 Falklands War was a case in point that London did not want to be seen as a dwindling or indecisive actor. In fighting with the Argentinian forces, BAE outstretched its limited operational capabilities. In order to deploy a force capable of defeating the enemy, London organised "the longest air-maritime-amphibious operation in history" (Lindley-French 2018: 814). While Falklands were not considered as valuable or strategically important territory (Gibran 1998), the state was fighting for its: "principled sense of Self (...) Britain's political identity" (McCourt 2011: 1599). By winning over Argentina, London had made its point loud and clear. The country was not giving up on its active role on the international scene.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the single greatest source of fear and insecurity faced by the UK was gone (Dorman 2018). The major geopolitical threat to Western Europe was abated and the UK was one of the Cold War's greatest victors. British people no longer had to live in the shadow of nuclear apocalypse and London had greater leeway in drawing its foreign policies. The country was gradually reducing its presence at the

Western flank of NATO in Germany. This had given it new operational capabilities to act elsewhere (Lindley-French 2018).

After the fall of the Soviet Union up to the Invasion of Iraq in 2003, the United Kingdom has participated in a large scale conventional war with Iraq in 1991, a large scale military invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 as well as three smaller humanitarian wars in Bosnia (1992-1995), Kosovo (1998-1999) and Sierra Leone (2000-2002) (UK Military operations: The Handbook). The steadily growing presence of British soldiers abroad reflected the gradual expansion of the new ideology of liberal internationalism (see Bower 2016: 62-68). With the electoral success of Labour in 1997, British military involvement abroad increased and was described by Labour politicians as an element of London's mission to uphold the stability of the liberal world order and protection of human rights (see Kettell 2013). PM Tony Blair was adamant that the key driving force behind his foreign policy strategy was "liberal interventionism" (e.g. Garton Ash 2007: 633). Bower summarizes that Blair's doctrine meant "that the military would no longer sit in Dover waiting for the enemy but instead should be equipped to fight across the world in support of moral causes" (Bower 2016: 65). Freedman points out that Cabinet Office believed that withdrawal from warfighting would mean the end of the British world's role. Consequently: "The frequency with which Blair sent Britain's armed forces into battle became one of the defining features of his premiership" (in Freedman 2007: 616).

The UK of that time championed the use of force in world peacekeeping and argued that the Western powers have a responsibility to intervene abroad if the stability of the liberal world order and civil freedoms of people were endangered. All operations after the fall of the Soviet Union were 'wars of choice' not 'wars of necessity' (Farrel 2008), London was not acting to tackle direct threats to its security. The country's use of armed forces reflected its strength, not weakness.

Global standing

In 2005 Michael Codner, the former director of RUSI, argued that “As an island nation in the north-west Atlantic, the UK is one of the safest places on earth from external threats.” At the same time, he recognised that the state’s military does not reflect directly the security needs of the nation, since: “National defence expenditure is greater as a proportion of Gross Domestic Product than that of most Western nations.” (Codner 2005: 9). This discrepancy reflected well the traditionally active role the British military played around the world. At the turn of the 21st century, London was a global power also politically. The state’s special status was recognised and augmented by its permanent seat at the UN’s Security Council. London was described as a strategic ally and unique partner of the US (see Atkins 2013). The UK was a leading member of the Commonwealth of Nations and one of the most important powers within the EU. It advocated for its interests through the G7 and G20 forums. The state’s security was not only attested by the country’s modern military and nuclear deterrence capabilities, but also by its membership in NATO military alliance and Five Power Defence Arrangements.

Great Britain of the late 90s and early 00s aspired to be truly ‘great’ both at home and abroad. To mark the state’s new role the British political class quickly adopted the term “Cool Britannia” normally used to describe new pride and impetuosity of the British culture of the late 90s (Harris 2017). Britain started seeing itself not only as an exporter of manufacturing goods but also of style, culture and values. For the Cabinet Office, the term was used to mark “a modern, outward-facing Britain with a new kind of industry, and a new kind of workforce” (Campbell and Khaleeli 2017). The belief was that the economic future of the country would rely on the creative industries and “Not just factories or pinstriped bankers” (2017). In 2003 London was boasting that with almost 25 mln visitors, the UK was one of the world’s biggest tourist destinations (Visit Britain 2003).

Called the ‘third wave’, New Labour’s conception of foreign affairs was idealistic and optimistic (Blair 1998), it envisioned multilateralism and international institutions as a solution to the world’s instability (see McCormack 2011). It promised to bring back the “confidence in the nation’s greatness to fashion a new understanding of Britain’s place in the world” (Daddow and Gaskarth 2011: 1). Cabinet Office was enthusiastic about the enlargement of the EU and further unification of the continent. At the same time, it was insisting that London is an Atlanticist power that bridges Europe with Washington (e.g. Blair 1997b; Broad and Daddow 2010). Finally, New Labour combined: “humanitarian interventionism, foreign policy idealism, and holistic response to globalism”. The shared sentiment was that “Britain’s military power would be deployed to save mankind”. This meant the use of the state’s military abroad in unstable regions “to provide humanitarian relief as a force of good”. (Bower 2016: 62, 66).

Today New Labour’s ‘third wave’ seems like an odd mishmash of conflicting policies of pacifist-militarism, European-Atlanticism and finally of neoliberal-humanitarianism. However, this new strategy reflected the uniquely positive *zeitgeist* of the late 90s and expressed a declarative ‘can-do’ attitude of Blair’s cabinet. Commentators agree that up to the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, New Labour’s foreign affairs program was considered a success (e.g. Clarke 2007; McCourt 2011). London became a proponent for the International Criminal Court, it proposed to reduce its nuclear stockpile, increased its foreign aid, supported solutions restricting the use of landmines and sale of small arms, it played an active role as a mediator between Palestinians and Israelis, advocated for the write-off the third world foreign debts, participated in the “humanitarian war” in Kosovo, was one of the leading forces in the international coalition in Afghanistan.

With the fall of the Soviet Union and the success of the Good Friday Agreement, the UK has overcome its main external and internal threats. Due to the ongoing integration of the

European continent, its neighbourhood looked more stable than ever. Before the invasion of Iraq, British Isles were safe, its citizens were prosperous. At the turn of the 20th century, the country's leadership made it abundantly clear that the future is bright. When in 1999 in Chicago Blair was outlying his doctrine, he concluded that "The political debates of the 20th century (...) are over" and asserted to the audience that his way is the only way: "we are all internationalists now" (Blair 1999).

7.3. The ontological security of the United Kingdom

To account for Britain's wartime employment of vulnerability narratives, I use the concept of identity. This approach to statecraft reflects my argument that the key understandings of the Iraqi war – realist and liberal - both are insufficient in answering this unique theme in London's behaviour.

Two perspectives shape the debates about the roots of British participation in the Iraqi war. First, it is argued that the UK decided to join the American invasion based on a realist (yet flawed) calculation that this decision will improve its influence in Washington by giving "new impetus" (Lindley-French 2018: 822) to the UK-US 'special relationship'. While Porter rejects Hobbesian readings of the British decision, he also recognises that structural factors – such as "American power" and "the 9/11 terrorist attacks" made the attack possible (2018: 20). Secondly, this realist understanding is often integrated with the liberal internationalist reading of London's behaviour. For example, Holland shows that Blair had effectively used both - pragmatic as well as aspirational - arguments to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq: "he explicitly and repeatedly used a 'not only, but also' discursive strategy to wed 'realism' and 'moralism'" (Holland 2012: 84; on pragmatism and idealism see also Kettell 2013). Porter argues that London was foremost driven by the liberal ambition to positively transform the

world (2018). Regardless of which approach more accurately captures British motivations, neither does account for the UK's wartime employment of vulnerability narratives.

The adoption of the vulnerability narratives in the time of military conflict goes against the traditional realist understandings of power in the international sphere. If states do build their deterrence capabilities through the projection of power (e.g. Mearsheimer 2001; Waltz 1979), why would a nuclear global power question its standing and geopolitical posture? The vulnerable self-image seems to be inherently incompatible with the geopolitical situation of an affluent and powerful island nation. Vulnerability narratives cannot be also interpreted as a behaviour promoting London's ambition to strengthen its "influence over the American superpower" (Porter 2018: x; also Dunne 2004). After all, by claiming vulnerability, London was questioning its prestige and emphasizing the structural constraints of its agency.

Furthermore, the use of vulnerability narratives does not correspond with the liberal internationalist approaches to global politics. This view emphasizes the cooperative nature of states and the positive role norms and institutions have on global politics (e.g. Keohane and Nye 1977). Drawing on this approach, it is often convincingly argued that the UK's participation in the conflict was embodying New Labour's idealistic ambitions to democratise the Middle East, to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and spread the free market enterprise (e.g. Kettell 2013; Porter 2018; Taylor 2011). However, the vulnerability-based identifications do not go hand in hand with positive, agential and prescriptive visions of liberalisation of the world order. Being predicated on fear, precarity and insecurity, vulnerability as a group-level worldview can be a mobilising force. Nevertheless, it typically is associated with "catastrophic thinking", inter-group competition and even arms' race (Eidelson and Eidelson 2003: 186; also Jervis 1976; 1978).

In the case of the UK's use of vulnerability narratives during the 2003 invasion, this self-identification was neither an unprincipled tool of power maximisation (realism) nor a prescriptive ambition to spread democracy (liberalism). Vulnerability narratives were not addressing directly Britain's need for physical security nor its aspiration to be the source of international liberalism. In order to offer an alternative reading to this puzzling practice, I approach it from the perspective of identity (see Chapter 3).

The question then arises why and how vulnerability narratives supported the identity of a strong political actor such as the UK? My approach to this problem draws on the ontological security studies which investigate how in their behaviour states pursue the needs of their self-identity (e.g. Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Ontological security scholarship contends that actors claim and pursue modes of behaviour compatible with their autobiography. Country representatives consider collective identifications of the public and state "perform actions which satisfy their ontological security" which is "sense of who they are" (Steele 2007: 903). That is why the presence of British state vulnerability framings should not be dismissed as top-down political marketing. While London's aim may have had a strategic dimension and shared the characteristics of practice that tries to sway people in line with the government's ambitions; precisely to be effective, vulnerability narratives had to support the collective's need of ontological security.

Ontologically insecure?

I claim that the UK employed vulnerability narratives during the 2003 invasion of Iraq in response to the country's deficits of security of its identity.⁴⁷ At first sight, such behaviour may be considered surprising even from the perspective of the ontological security

⁴⁷ Similar argument about the foreign conflicts being a source of ontological insecurity of Britain were formed by Bayly (2015) and Steele (2005). However, these studies focused on the 19th century imperial-era Britain.

scholarship. The UK - one of the world's most stable and strong actors - was at the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq engaged in an information campaign that questioned its own physical security and agency.

By articulating or referring to its vulnerabilities, London was accentuating that it was exposed to potential harm and that it was not in full control over its environment (Hutchings 2013: 25). Britain was identifying in a way that was challenging its image of a secure and stable power. After all, we associate vulnerability with the instability of our existence, risk and exposure to being hurt (Bruk, Scholl and Bless 2018). Vulnerability in international politics is broadly associated with the disadvantaged underdog, an entity of limited capabilities to defend itself (e.g. Clark 2013).

The ontological security studies recognize that physical insecurity and conflict can support identity. However, it is because such competition provides a set of routines that allow the state to make its surroundings knowable and predictable (Mitzen 2006: 354). Consequently, in the ontological security literature, physical challenges are researched in the context of entities involved in protracted or intractable conflicts (e.g. Abulof 2014; Rumelili and Çelik 2017; Subotić 2016), not prosperous and safe nuclear powers. Namely in the environment where states have been already habituated to some level of precarity. The case of British vulnerability does not fit this picture. Its vulnerability pronouncements were suddenly introduced into the state's self-descriptions (Kettell 2013). Consequently, at face value, they were disrupting "a sense of continuity and order in events" (Giddens 1991: 243). By pointing out the uncertainty and precarity, the state was questioning the predictability of the environment. Instead of limiting anxieties about the world, London was inducing them. Intuitively, the vulnerability narratives employed by London were an anti-thesis to the safety of being. They were a 'hard uncertainty' (Mitzen 2006: 346) that questioned the predictive capabilities of the state.

Furthermore, the employment of vulnerability narratives questioned New Labour's credibility. By portraying the state as vulnerable the Cabinet Office was pulling the ontological rug from under its own feet. It was squandering an optimistic vision of the globalised world, undermining the agency and relevance of Cool Britannia. Vulnerability narratives were going against positive and collaborative visions of the state's new role in the world. By aligning itself with Washington, London was eroding its status as a pivotal state that would bring together Europe and the USA. Ignoring the lack of a UN mandate for the invasion it was contesting its commitment to liberal institutionalism. Furthermore, Labour was exposing itself to a critique of its past actions. By recognising the vulnerability of the state, it was admitting that the past behavioural patterns and routines ought to be challenged.

The Divided Self⁴⁸

The use of vulnerability narratives during the 2003 invasion of Iraq cannot also be easily answered by accounting for the broader historical context of the decades' old debate about British identity. First of all, modern Britain did not have a history of victimisation and devastation - like in the case of Israel - playing a role in the core self-identifications of the nation. Consequently, this identification was not corresponding to the experience and habitual practices of the collective (see Eidelson and Eidelson 2003: 186).

Secondly, founding identity on vulnerability narratives seems an odd behaviour for a state with ontological security deficits. For decades the state was grappling with the question about self. While physically the UK of 2003 was a powerful and secure actor, its greatest problems were ideational. At first sight, it seems unclear why talking about the precarity of being would help solve British identity insecurities. Especially since, in the literature on

⁴⁸ Title for the subsection was borrowed from Ronald Laing's book "The Divided Self" (2010).

ontological security, vulnerability is often considered to be a source of mistrust and thus an antithesis to secure identity (Giddens 1991: 40; also Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 242-243).

While all states' ideational stories are porous, inconsistent and contested, the case of the UK's self-perception is especially striking. Before the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, the British political class was involved in an old debate as to what the UK is standing for. - Britain takes its animus from the way political figures recognise it and how it is identified by other states (...) As such, perceptions of others matter – argues Gibbins (2014: 3). The problem is that the intensity of the ideational conflicts sweeping through the British corridors of power suggests that state makers themselves were vehemently disagreeing as to the UK's role in the world.

Following the dismantlement of its colonial enterprise, the UK had to redefine itself (see Dunne 2004). The state was no longer a geopolitical superpower but still retained a unique portfolio of operational, political and economic competencies that kept it relevant in global affairs. Reading the ongoing debates among the security experts at the turn of the 21st century (see Codner 1997, 2005; Garden and Ramsbotham 2004; Robinson 2005) one could be under the impression that the situation in which the country found itself was somewhat paradoxical. The state was in a deadlock, pulled by two factors leading to irreconcilable visions of its role in the world. On one side were its relatively robust power projection capabilities and post-imperial ambitions, on the other, was the stark reality that its agency was reduced and not sufficient for the pursuit of truly autonomous 'grand strategy'. Consequently, at the heart of London's problem was the unique position it was in. Depending on the point of view, the state was either relatively weak or relatively strong (see Codner 2005). Its prestige and status compelled it to pursue a broad range of foreign policy interests, and its material standing restrained its agency and undermined those aspirations.

The controversies regarding the British role in the world are well known (see Colley 2019; Hill 1979). Dean Acheson famously proclaimed that "Great Britain has lost an empire

but not yet found a role” (cited in Harvey 2011: 5). The politicians as well as the public disagree about the state’s past and current role. However, the conflicts about the country’s standing relate even to how to describe its capabilities. On one hand, we have those who, like Margaret Thatcher, privately insisted that London must accept that due to its economic decline, Britain is a ‘middle-ranking power’ (cited in Harvey 2011: 14). On the other hand, this perspective was repeatedly challenged by others. For example, Harold Wilson affirmed that London cannot resign from playing a central role on the global scene: ‘whatever we may do in the field of cost-effectiveness, value for money and a stringent review of expenditure, we cannot afford to relinquish our world role’ (House of Commons 1964). Also Douglas Haard, Thatcher’s Foreign Secretary was sure that the UK will keep being an actor that “punched above her weight” (cited in Harvey 2011: 5).

Another source of ideational contention was the British imperial past. Even today – with significant subsets of the society being either ‘proud’ or ‘ashamed’ of the British Empire - the controversies about its heritage are central to the debates about the country’s identity (see Colley 2019; Smith 2020). Those tensions were visible in the different messages New Labour was sending during its time in power. The legacy of the empire was both praised and criticised (e.g. Brogan 2005; Brown 2006).

Lastly, is the issue of the country’s geopolitical alliances. Writing about the state’s identity in 1991, Wallace argued that Britain's political class is in crisis. In his view, each British party has been traditionally internally challenged by the ‘issue of Europe’ (1991: 69). On the one hand, British nationhood was shaped by Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism which disconnects the UK from the rest of Europe. In this perspective, the state was routinely “a free country confronting an unfree European continent” - a view still playing a key role in the ideational references of the British society (YouGov 2005) and political elites (Colley 2019). Such identifications drew from the national mythos of: “Magna Carta, parliamentary

sovereignty, the continuity of our 700- year-old parliamentary traditions, our island status” (Wallace: 69). This exceptionalism was further reinforced by the tradition of Atlanticism which implies that London and Washington share values and have a ‘special relationship’ (see Dumbrell 2006; Dunne 2004). On the other hand, this approach was challenged by the Europe-oriented framing and the decades of growing integration with the European continent (see Daddow 2013). Especially New Labour politicians repeatedly referred to the European credentials of the state. As when in 1999 Gordon Brown was assuring that: “Britain did not and would not relinquish our role in Europe or abdicate responsibility for the progress of the continent. Europe, by virtue of history as well as geography, is where we are” (Brown 1999).

According to Schnapper, the post-WWII debates about Britishness are symptomatic of the decreasing national cohesion of the UK: “The loss of the Empire, which had acted as the glue between the different nations through their shared colonial experience, as well as the economic and political decline that Britain experienced after the war, weakened the links between England, Scotland and Wales” (Schnapper 2011: 48). She says that in the decade before the 2003 Invasion of Iraq the British society was ‘agonizing (...) about what it means to be British’ (2011: 48). McCourt echoes this view by pointing out that: “the feeling persists that Britain’s place in contemporary world politics is, in fact, unclear and that this represents a problem for UK foreign policy-makers” (2011: 33).

Davies - writing at the turn of centuries - concluded that, after WWII, the UK gradually lost all key elements that anchored its identity. Its monarchy was exposed as petty and dysfunctional, its seapower was not a source of public pride, the Anglican church was weak. The faith in the British nation was eroding. The composite state did not manage to solidify the unity of its popular nations. It failed to “develop either the federal or the unitary structures (...) It has no unified legal system, no centralized educational system, no common cultural policy, no common history - none of the institutional foundations, in other words, on

which nation-states are built” (2000: 870-871). With the ongoing integration with EU institutions, the ‘Mother of Parliaments’ was increasingly losing sovereignty. In order to save the Union, in 1999 Westminster inaugurated Welsh and Scottish parliaments and opened the doors to the further devolution of the state. Consequently, while before the 2003 invasion, the UK was physically powerful and secure, its collective identity UK was in decay.

It is important to stress that I do not argue that vulnerability narratives used during the 2003 invasion were addressing any of those deep-seated dilemmas about the British identity. Vulnerability narratives could not solve the conflict between the Atlanticists and Continentalists. They did not offer any guidance as to what to do with the state’s colonial past. Nevertheless, they were a source of public trust and a guiding force through post 9/11 unstable global politics. While they were not settling any of those fundamental questions, they played a key role in the state’s effort to predicate its identity at a time when London needed it the most.

Iraq, New Labour and British identity

I argue that prior to the Invasion of Iraq in 2003, the UK had a deficit of ontological security. The decision to participate in controversial military operation only further challenged the state’s stability of identity. It clashed with a set of identifications, self-proclaimed values and biographical narratives employed by London. Importantly, it quickly exposed the internal tensions within the New Labour’s unique conceptualisation of British identity.

Blair’s government tried to tie together different visions of the British role in the world. It offered a new, all-encompassing vision of the future of Britain in the world. One that theoretically was overcoming lingering ideational contentions. It attempted to square “the

circle of internationalism, European unity and the Anglo-American relationship during its first term of office” (Coates, Krieger and Vickers 2004: 12–13).

Firstly, Cabinet Office wanted to overcome the traditional rift between the European and Atlanticist agendas. To do just that, Blair famously argued that the UK does not have to choose between one or the other. As a ‘pivotal power’ it can instead serve as a ‘bridge’ between two actors (cited in Harvey 2011: 7):

“Strong in Europe and strong with the US. There is no choice between the two. Stronger with one means stronger with the other. Our aim should be to deepen our relationship with the US at all levels. We are the bridge between the US and Europe. Let us use it” (Blair 1997c).

Secondly, on the new ideational agenda was the issue of ‘ethical foreign policy’ (see Cooper 2000). According to Blair, the UK was supposed to become a guardian of the international community: “Century upon century, it has been the destiny of Britain to lead other nations (...) We are a leader of nations, or we are nothing” (in Kampfner 2003: 3). This meant that UK’s actions abroad were not only a buttress for the state’s interests but also a tool promoting liberties, human rights and universal values (see Atkins 2013; Kettell 2013).

This precarious political construct tried to combine international humanitarianism with Europeanness and Atlanticism in one. It offered British people an optimistic vision of the British ‘self’. It provided a biographical story that was addressing the collective’s needs for ontological security. It presented the state as a force of good, allowed to understand the causes of its actions, fostered a belief in being in control of the environment. At the same time, this vision was precarious. Its ability to reinforce the safety of being elusive. It was built on top of shaky grounds of decaying national identity, devolved powers and rapid growth of the EU (Davies 2000). It collapsed rapidly with London’s decision to participate in the USA’s invasion of Iraq.

London in Bagdad

The controversial 'global war on terror' launched by George W. Bush after the 9/11 attack increasingly estranged European capitals from what was considered to be a nebulous political program. Despite London's tireless diplomatic campaign to convince the European partners to support the toppling of Saddam Hussein, as well as attempts to secure a second resolution at the UN's Security Council to sanction the invasion (see Greenstock 2016), it became obvious that that the war in Iraq would be an exclusively unilateral Washington endeavour. The British could either join adamant US colleagues or not. Their influence over the US's agenda in the Middle East was illusory (e.g. Porter: 2018).

New Labour's promises of support for humanitarian multilateralism, internationalism and European cooperation were directly challenged by the growing international opposition to the war. While it is true that the plurality of British citizens supported the war (Dahlgreen 2015) however, the issue was quickly becoming a political hot potato. With close to a million Britons marching in February 2003 on the streets of London to protest the invasion in the biggest ever demonstration and a third of Labour MP's not supporting the operation in the Parliament (Kettell 2013: 270), it was increasingly obvious that the war in Iraq would be a source of contention.

Britain traditionally presented itself as a principled and restrained actor. Due to the experience of WWII, it was often identifying as fighting against the odds "in the spirit of Dunkirk or the Blitz" (Noakes and Pattinson 2014: 8). Going to impoverished and isolated Bagdad did not correspond with the country's self-perception. The New Labour project itself was incoherent with the military invasion of a remote Middle Eastern state. The war questioned the state's identifications of Britain being a pivotal player that brings together nations and acts for a greater benefit of humanity. It has deteriorated the political position of the government:

“first five years of New Labour’s foreign policy were dominated by the attempt to construct a role for Britain as a ‘bridge’ between Europe and America (...) the remainder of Labour’s time in office was dominated by the transatlantic bridge’s collapse” (McCourt 2011: 41).

The 2003 Invasion of Iraq further increased British identity anxieties and had a negative effect on the collective’s ontological security. It cut across London’s biggest ideational quandaries. Conflict with weaker enemy exacerbated fears about the state’s self that were present long before the invasion. US’s expeditionary war was being described as an imperialistic affair. Jeremy Corbyn, a backbencher from Labour accused his party’s colleagues of using “medieval powers (...) to send young men and women to die, to kill civilians “(2003).

For some commentators, the invasion would be illegal and against the will of the international community. The PM’s office was accused of using intelligence materials for warmongering, a claim later confirmed by the Chilcot Report. Despite the government’s declarations, the invasion was not considered by many as a last resort. Furthermore, even before the invasion, some people argued that it is against Britain's national interest and Blair’s vision of multilateral international interventionism (Ralph 2011). Resignations of cabinet members - such as Robin Cook, Leader of the HoC and Claire Short, Secretary of State for International Development - also showed that the country’s leadership was torn about it. Even more, unease was present among the Army’s command. Under the auspices of the New Labour, the British Armed Forces rationale was based on two aims. One, the delivery of “security for the people of the United Kingdom”; two “to act as a force for good by strengthening international peace and stability” (MoD 2003a: 4). Whether going to Iraq would serve any of these goals was questioned. Also, the legal status of British soldiers operating without a clear UN mandate was an issue. The chief of defence staff Michael Boyce demanded a general written opinion about the legality of the invasion from the country’s attorney (Bower 2016: 330).

New Labour had to make a convincing case about Bagdad (see Kettell 2013) and vulnerability narratives were a response to British ideational anxieties. While not solving any of the longstanding points of ideational contention, they offered a principled meaning to the state's offensive actions in the Middle East. In line with the dissertation's theory, I reason they had two key functions. First, by giving positive ethical grounds to this policy, they have reduced the deficits of ontological security caused by the conflict with a weaker belligerent. Claiming precarity gave London's offensive actions a sense of salience – much needed for a power so removed from the Middle Eastern theatre. Secondly, vulnerability narratives were a source of a special agency to do more. By presenting Bagdad as a source of threat to the future of Britain and the liberal world, London securitised the weak opponent and justified its offensive move.

I approach the study of Britain's vulnerability narratives and their two functions from the performative dimension. To capture this orientation, I often refer to the dramaturgy of vulnerability narratives. This speaks to my contention that strong states use of vulnerability narratives reflects their general aspiration to be seen as insecure.

7.4. The invasion of Iraq

The 2003 invasion of Iraq was a military operation of a US-led coalition of American, British, Australian and Polish forces against the Iraqi Armed Forces. The war in Iraq was a part of the 'global war on terror', an international military campaign of Washington launched after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

While the Iraqi conflict is continuing, the research focuses solely on the lead-up to the invasion as well as the first six weeks of the war, up to the end of major combat operations (20th March – 1st May). At that time the invasion was one of the central topics in the British media and was broadly commented on by the political class. Therefore, the first phase of the

Iraqi conflict generated a significant amount of political commentary about the British role in the war and provides the thesis with rich narrative material describing the state's standing and motivations. I analyse the phases of conflict that were specifically marked by the ongoing debates about the reasons behind the operation. Naturally, the debate about the causes of the war is ongoing. It was especially passionate at the time of publication of the 2004 Butler Review and 2016 Iraq Inquiry reports. While London had to justify its military presence in Iraq up to the withdrawal of its forces in May 2011, it was the time before the invasion and during the multifrontal invasion when PM's office was most actively engaged in expressing the state's reasoning behind the operation.

The direct goal of the invasion was to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime. This decision was a corollary to an attempt "to disrupt a perceived gathering threat, a potential union of terrorism, destructive weapons technology, and 'rogue states'" (Porter, 2018: x). The main worry, as well as rationale provided for the war, was the danger of use and proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), a claim which later was proven to be unsubstantiated since in 2003 Iraq did not have any more such arsenal (e.g. Isikoff and Corn 2007; Ricks 2007).

Foremost, it was an invasion to change the socio-politics of the Middle East. It reflected an utterly unrealistic belief that the American modern military might, combined with the free market program and liberal values could be successfully used to democratise and develop Iraq. Iraq was supposed to become a showcase of Western capabilities to transform illiberal systems: "The invasion was supposed to help spread free markets and democracy. It was supposed to spearhead the emancipation of the Greater Middle East" (Porter 2018: x). There was a hope that bringing Bagdad closer to the West may be a stepping stone towards the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Blair underlined that Iraq is a case of a war of "liberation not conquest" (Blair 2003b) and that there were key humanitarian reasons

behind the operation (see Clarke 2007; Kettell 2013). For Britain, another crucial reason was the conviction that London ought to retain a 'special relationship' with the American superpower (Chilcot et al. 2016).

During the invasion, the British deployed 46.000 troops along with a much larger contingent of close to 2.00.000 American colleagues (MOD 2003b; Carter 2005). While British operational capabilities were incomparable with the American might, London was especially valued for the contribution of its SAS special forces, as well as some of its aircraft systems and mine clearance and explosives clearance specialist capabilities (Ryan 2020). The British used one helicopter and aircraft carrier, several frigates, destroyers and landing ship logistic vessels. The actor also deployed two nuclear-powered submarines. Its air forces used 115 aircraft and 27 helicopters. The use of diverse types of ground forces such as Royal Regiment of Artillery, various infantry battalions, intelligence and engineering corps – allowed British commanders to execute different types of operations. The army brought an impressive range of ground combat systems, such as Challenger 2 tanks (116) and Warrior infantry carrying vehicles (140) (MOD: Operations in Iraq, 2003). During the invasion, Britain lost 33 servicemen (BBC 2016; MoD n.d.a).

In less than four weeks coalition soldiers toppled the Baathist regime. The UK was responsible for a divisional sector of the invasion. The British army first launched an effective amphibious landing on the Al Faw peninsula and secured Rumaylah oilfields. London's main responsibility was the Basrah province. In the coming days, the British captured Basrah airport and later, the city itself. On 22 April the MOD was informed that the province was effectively under coalition control. During the invasion, the British Air Force flew close to 2.500 sorties. The RAF conducted strikes all over the country, as well as participated in reconnaissance and airspace control operations. (MOD 2003b) On 14th of April, two weeks before the end of the invasion, Blair boasted in House of Commons that:

“Less than four weeks after the commencement of the war, the regime of Saddam is gone, the bulk of Iraq is under coalition control, and the vast majority of Iraqis are rejoicing at Saddam’s departure” (2003b).

However, the invasion did not put to rest the state’s ontological insecurities. It only exacerbated them. After the Gulf War of 1991 PM John Major and the royal family feted soldiers in the capital. During the victory parade held after the Falklands war, Margaret Thatcher argued that “Military parades and pageants are part of the distinguished history of the city of London” (1982). This time it was different. The homecoming of British soldiers was not marked by a parade and was supposed to be “antivictorious, nontriumphalist, inoffensive”. Neither the Queen nor the archbishop of Canterbury was willing to participate in celebrations. Sir Michael Boyce, chief of defence staff, warned that he does not want the state to “seem arrogant”. The British elites appeared anxious about the meaning of their own invasion (O'Neill 2003).

7.5. Conclusion

This chapter serves as a foundation to the following chapter analysing the role vulnerability narratives played during the British participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. I discussed different attributes of British power in the lead-up to the conflict. I outlined the state’s societal and economic strengths, as well as its ability to defend itself and project its might abroad. Having established that the UK was a powerful actor, this substantiates the grounds for the research puzzle in this dissertation. Namely, the practice of strong states employing vulnerability narratives at times of military conflict. This chapter lays the grounds for an investigation into the reasons behind British vulnerability self-descriptions. It justified the selection of the UK as a case study of a powerful actor and confirmed that from a realist perspective vulnerability self-identification seemed inconsistent with the state’s standing.

Furthermore, it showed that the employment of this identification is not corresponding with the liberal intuitionist motivations that commonly are ascribed to the 2003 invasion (e.g. Porter 2010).

This argumentation allowed me to propose that London has used vulnerability narratives to address its identity-needs. I discussed ontological security deficiencies troubling the state before and during the invasion of Iraq. It was argued that conflict further galvanized internal tensions between competing state identifications. Employing the dissertation's theory, I posit that vulnerability narratives had two functions. One, they have reduced London's anxiety about the conflict in the Middle East by offering a principled meaning to the invasion. Secondly, that they offered the state a special agency to securitise the Iraqi regime. In the following empirical chapter at times, I capture those two functions employing the dramaturgical perspective. I argue that the use of vulnerability narratives by Britain exposed the state's performative practice to present itself as facing insecurities.

8. United Kingdom: The Anxious Invader

8.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the means and the motivations behind the UK's employment of vulnerability narratives during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. This research focus is reflected in the two-step design of the study. One, I analyse how the UK employed vulnerability narratives in the lead-up to and during the 2003 invasion. Secondly, based on 32 in-depth interviews with the British officials, I problematise this surprising phenomenon. To explain the practice of a nuclear power employing narratives of vulnerability during a conflict with a much weaker opponent, I employ the concept of ontological security. First, I argue that this narrative allowed the state to reduce its ideational discomforts about the controversial war with Iraq. It was responding to London's ontological security deficits by presenting the invasion as being consistent with the state's identifications. Secondly, I contend that through its use of vulnerability narratives, the state gained a special agency for offensive action. Namely, it allowed Britain to present a much weaker enemy as a source of threat to London.

In the first section, I provide a detailed review of the UK's public communication during the 2003 invasion. I first discuss the type of sources employed to conduct the analysis. After that, I present the key findings of the analysis of the textual and audio-visual data. The second section offers an analysis of the interviews with British officials. The interviews allowed to examine and nuance the dissertation's theoretical reading of the strong states war-time use of vulnerability narratives.

8.2. Vulnerability narratives

The analysis of the 2003 invasion of Iraq focuses on the UK's public communication. I have studied speeches, interviews, commentaries as well as other materials coming from state's officials that referred to the ongoing military operation. The data was gathered from different branches of the UK government, British Parliamentary debates and media outlets⁴⁹. Significant attention was paid to the MOD public communication. For this study, I have accessed an archived version of the ministry's webpage⁵⁰. With the help of website capture software, I have collected the MOD's materials about the 2003 Invasion of Iraq – a detailed photo coverage, video materials, speeches, press conferences and other relevant transcripts as well as reports and the army's gazette. This was further complemented by the analysis of the governmental reports about the invasion, as well as reviews of books, media and academic articles dealing with the subject.

A number of studies accentuate the importance of political elites' narratives in advocating for use of force abroad (see Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009; Western 2005). There is a growing body of research that suggests that the public opinion about the conflict is not solely shaped based on military casualties (e.g. Johns and Davies 2019) but it may be more attentive to a state leaders' discourse about the goal and course of the operation (e.g. Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2006.). Holland points out that in the British political tradition the public support for foreign military intervention plays an important role in the government's calculations (Holland 2012). This section shows how narratives of vulnerability allowed the

⁴⁹ Although I paid a particular attention to "The Times" newspaper. I have analysed "The Times" issues published around and during the time of 2003 Invasion of Iraq. 2009 articles published between 19 March and 03 May referred to Iraq. Light read of the materials allowed to gather and analyse ones that included interviews and comments of British representatives.

⁵⁰ I have used The Wayback Machine Digital Archive's snapshots of the MOD's webpage from 2003 (MoD n.d.b).

UK establishment to participate in the invasion of Iraq by addressing constituents ideational needs.

Political vulnerability

New Labour's government was acutely aware that the state's participation in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq was predicated on successful framings about the reasons and goals behind the operation. In his study of Tony Blair's speeches about the 'war on terror', Holland concludes that their key goal was to make foreign interventions a rational inevitability and that the threat of WMD was used instrumentally (2012; also Dyson 2007). This claim was partially confirmed by Blair himself when in 2009 he admitted that invasion would still be justified without the evidence of WMD (BBC 2009).

Regardless of the broader political calculations, vulnerability narratives were a theme defining London's discursive campaign. They were present before the invasion, at its height and the end of the operation. Bellow, I present a short (non-exhaustive) temporal illustrative outline of the use of vulnerabilities in the context of the 2003 invasion. To emphasize that vulnerability was present at different times, I divide the analysis into three phases:

<p>Before the invasion (up to the invasion 20th of March 2003)</p>	<p>24th of September 2002 – government warns that Iraq can deploy WMDs in under 45 minutes</p> <p>11th of February 2003 – “force must be used” against Iraq, states foreign secretary Jack Straw</p>
<p>The major combat operations (20th of March – occupation of Bagdad on 9th of April 2003)</p>	<p>20th of March PM's TV address is warning about a coming “catastrophe” to the country</p> <p>9th of April Chancellor establishes special fund to deal with terrorist threats</p>
<p>The final phase of the operation</p>	<p>14th of April – PM warns that Bagdad has put in place a systematic campaign of</p>

(10 th of April 1 st of May 2003)	<p>concealment of WMDs</p> <p>28th of April – Home Secretary David Blunkett insists that Iraq had procured “considerable quantities” of uranium from Africa and that the regime was a threat</p>
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The analysis shows that the political employment of vulnerability narratives was performative and had dramaturgical characteristics. The Iraqi government was presented in the harshest of terms as “barbarous” (Blair 2003g), “appalling” (Hoon 2003), “a scar on” the world’s conscience and “a standing affront” to the UK (Straw 2003d). British standing was compared with that of 1938 - when the country was trying to appease Adolf Hitler (HoC 2003). At the same time, the discursive practices of New Labour’s cabinet were adjusted to the needs of the audience. For example, while most of Blair’s speeches made in the weeks before and during the 2003 Invasion drew extensively on vulnerability narratives, the character of the audience was determining the centrality of this theme. During the invasion, in his interviews for the foreign audiences, Blair - instead of focusing on the threats of international terrorism, WMD or rogue regimes - accentuated that “it is genuinely a war, not a conquest, but of liberation” and emphasized that British soldiers will bring self-governance to the Iraqi people:

“the one thing that I want to make absolutely clear is that at the end of this Iraq is not going to be run by Americans, or by British, or by any other outside power. As soon as the process of transition is over, it is going to be run by Iraqi people, and a broad and representative government, not a small clique and elite around someone like Saddam” (Blair 2003c).

While in his op-ed to the Arabic press, Blair mentions that the goal of the operation was to disarm Saddam of WMD, he nevertheless focuses on outlining a vision of a positive, prosperous and peaceful future for the country. He talks about Iraqi exiles expressing their wish to go back to the country, pledges humanitarian aid and envisions a “prosperous Iraq,

united within its current borders. An Iraq free from tyranny, fear and repression” (Blair 2003d).

Members of Blair’s cabinet draw on vulnerability narratives extensively. For instance, on the 20th of March, the Secretary of State for Defence Geoffrey Hoon passionately defended the rationale behind the war. When Lynne Jones, Labour MP suggested that the invasion is based on “dubious assumption” that Iraq cooperates with Islamic terrorists and develops WMDs, Hoon protested. He expressed certainty about the links between Al-Qaida and Bagdad and warned against the WMDs:

“It is important not to lose sight of the reason for military operations: to enforce the will of the United Nations to remove the threat of weapons of mass destruction, either, as the Prime Minister has said, when they are in the hands of the Iraqi regime itself, or when there is a risk that they might fall into the hands of unscrupulous terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda” (House of Commons 2003a).

Similarly adamant was the government’s Home Secretary David Blunkett. Defending the 2003 invasion in Parliament on 28 April, Blunkett insisted that Saddam was trying to procure “considerable quantities” of uranium from Africa and that: “Saddam's regime had not provided and never did provide, any evidence to support its claims that its weapons of mass destruction programmes were no longer active” (House of Commons 2003b).

Foreign Secretary Jack Straw’s speech from 11th February, at times, sounds more like a sensational journalistic exposé about a threat to humanity than a lecture at the International Institute of Strategic Studies:

“International terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction threaten to make collective security a redundant concept. How can multilateral institutions guarantee the safety of their members when crazed individuals are prepared to kill themselves to inflict mass casualties? How can we protect ourselves against nerve agents, bacilli and viruses which, once released, are almost impossible to contain? How can we claim to enjoy security at home when individuals sheltered by rogue regimes plot mayhem and mass murder in our streets? Saddam Hussein's regime typifies these threats. He has challenged the international order for well over a decade” (Straw 2003b).

Even Chancellor Gordon Brown speaking on 31st of March to the business community at the British Chambers of Commerce's annual conference referred to Iraq and international terror. He opened his talk by drawing on a repository of collective vulnerabilities and anxieties:

“Madam President, today our country is having to deal with a new security threat: the danger from states with weapons of mass destruction and the risk of those weapons falling into the hands of terrorists. All of us know families who have someone in the armed forces in Iraq. All of us will wish to send them our best wishes in all they do and achieve for our country. All of us will wish to send condolences to the families of the 25 British servicemen who have sacrificed their lives”.

This political performativity of British vulnerability narratives is best visible in juxtaposition with the language and framings used to describe the invasion by the commanders of the army. Throughout the operation, British military command has refrained from employing this theme. This is particularly striking considering the fact that it was their responsibility to be the first to inform the British public about the fallen soldiers. Press conferences, speeches and statements coming from the MOD and various senior army officials were traditionally starting with the announcement about British casualties. However, the hardships of British soldiery, the tragic circumstances of their death as well as the pain of their families is never discussed in detail by the command. When such information was disseminated by the press, this was always strongly condemned by army representatives (e.g. Burridge 2003). As in the case of the 28 March press conference at the MOD during which Minister of State of the Armed Forces, Adam Ingram started by expressing sorrow for the Invasion's casualties. He offered “condolences to those families who have lost their loved ones in this campaign” and praised the excellence of the British troops by underscoring that “These men demonstrated all of the qualities which we admire in our Armed Forces”. Nevertheless, he directly admits that he is unwilling to discuss this matter in any detail: “However, it doesn't do to dwell or fixate on the details that near real-time media provides in these tragic circumstances. Such matters need to be dealt with in a sensitive way”. Instead of

talking about collective victimhood, sacrifice or future challenges of the British military, he focuses on praising the soldiers: “Our troops are the finest in the world. They have the best training, and they are supported by state-of-the-art equipment. The Iraqis are simply no match for them” (Ingram 2003).

Also, the photographic coverage of the invasion is not presenting any events that could question this positive outlook. While the MOD had prepared a special subpage with a list of names of the fallen soldiers and few pictures from the funerals, the photo galleries about the invasion itself do not include any materials that convey the soldiers’ anxiety, victimisation or fear. Military materials show the British military might in great detail by presenting the army’s different arsenal in the field. They display the skills, professionalism and devotion of the forces. Some attention is given to the defeated enemy. Photos show carcasses of the Iraqi equipment as well as the captured POWs. Lastly, the materials present the army’s local initiatives, deliveries of humanitarian aid and interactions with the sympathetic locals (archived MOD n.d.b).

The cynical treatment of the issue of fallen soldiers by the Cabinet Office was best captured by the spirited campaign of victimhood pursued by the government during the invasion. With the help of the “News of the World” tabloid newspaper, Tony Blair launched a Yellow Ribbon campaign. It aimed to promote expressions of support for the troops fighting abroad. Mick Hume, at that time, a columnist for “The Times” accused the government of trying to win “public empathy for the troops as vulnerable victims:

“The Government’s support for the yellow ribbon campaign chimes with its attempt to touch the public through the new politics of victimhood and personal emotion, rather than old-fashioned Falklands-style appeal to patriotism” (Hume 2003).

For Hume, the way how the government was promoting British forces reflected the disorientation of public opinion. Instead of proud flag-waving, citizens were offered a way to

individually display their empathy. They could express their solidarity with soldiers while keeping their distance from the political context of the invasion (Hume 2003).

8.3. Four vulnerabilities

Vulnerability narratives used by the UK in the lead-up to as well as during the 2003 invasion can be divided into four separate thematic strands. Together they fashioned the war as an inevitable necessity serving vital national and international interests. The UK's presence in Iraq was justified on the basis of the vulnerability of the British state, the vulnerability of the government, the vulnerability of the international community and the victimisation of the Iraqis. Those narratives were commonly used together. By blending the national and international interests with humanitarian responsibility, the Cabinet Office has put together a tapestry of arguments that induced and spoke to the feelings of urgency and vulnerability of British citizens.

1. The vulnerable United Kingdom

The key vulnerability motif used by No. 10 presented the UK's security as challenged by the Iraqi regime. Before the war, the government was involved in a communication campaign that aimed at "Bringing Bagdad closer to home" (Bradley 2019) and presented future security of the homeland as vulnerable to the whims of Saddam Hussein and international terrorism (see Chilcot 2016). As when Straw warned the audience gathered at Chatham House that:

"Saddam believes his poisons and gases are a key element in his military arsenal, not a weapon of last resort. The Iraqi regime used nerve agents to gas 5,000 Iraqi Kurds in the village of Halabja in 1988 (...) I ask you to imagine the lasting psychological

impact on the British public of a chemical weapons attack - carried out by the armed forces - against one of our minority ethnic groups” (Straw 2003a).

British citizens were warned against foreign threats to public security and their way of life (see: Holland 2012; Johnson 2002) and were asked to stock up for possible terrorist attacks (Ford, Tandler and Elliot 2003). The PM's Address to the Nation at the beginning of the war was an emblematic example of this outlook. In it, Blair used his authority to present dark clouds gathering over middle England:

“But this new world faces a new threat: of disorder and chaos born either of brutal states like Iraq, armed with weapons of mass destruction; or of extreme terrorist groups. Both hate our way of life, our freedom, our democracy. My fear, deeply held, based in part on the intelligence that I see, is that these threats come together and deliver catastrophe to our country and world. These tyrannical states do not care for the sanctity of human life” (Blair 2003a).

He argued that invading Bagdad is a necessary preventive step against a completely new type of threat. Blair portrayed the country's position as inevitably leading to a confrontation with Saddam. As on other occasions (e.g. Blair 2003e), the insistence was that sooner or later British soldiers will have to deal with the coming disaster. And the sooner they will do it, the better:

“Britain has never been a nation to hide at the back. But even if we were, it wouldn't avail us. Should terrorists obtain these weapons now being manufactured and traded around the world, the carnage they could inflict to our economies, our security, to world peace, would be beyond our most vivid imagination. My judgement, as Prime Minister, is that this threat is real, growing and of an entirely different nature to any conventional threat to our security that Britain has faced before” (Blair 2003a).

This vulnerable zeitgeist was present also among the Conservatives. The leader of the opposition, Duncan Smith, echoed the urgency and imminence of the invasion by warning in Parliament that those who do not understand its vital importance for the future of the nation “are living in cloud cuckoo land” (House of Commons 2003c).

During the invasion, the vulnerability zeal did not abate. This was especially visible when Blair and his team at Downing Street insisted that two British troops found dead near

al-Zubayr were “executed” (while the MOD was reporting that they were missing). Speaking to journalists Blair used this tragedy as justification for the invasion:

“If anyone needed further evidence of the depravity of Saddam’s regime the atrocity proved it. It is yet another flagrant breach of the proper conventions of war. To the families of the soldiers, it is an act of cruelty beyond comprehension. Indeed, it is beyond the comprehension of anyone with an ounce of humanity in their soul.” (Pank and Webster 2003).

After the PM’s office apologized for this sensationalism (Wintour 2003), Hume commented that it looked like Blair “was keen to depict” the soldiers as “hapless victims than as soldiers killed in battle” (2003).

2. The vulnerable West

Secondly, the government described the invasion as a response to the growing vulnerability of the liberal world order. Straw, speaking to Chatham House before the invasion, warned that “The stakes could not be higher”. He insisted that the objective of “Iraqi disarmament unites the world” and presented Bagdad as a force challenging international stability:

“This reflects a common perception that Saddam’s appetite for WMD, when married to his willingness to use all possible means to repress his own people and intimidate his neighbours, makes him a unique threat to international peace and security” (2003a).

In his oratory tour-de-force on the eve of the invasion, Blair argued in the Parliament that by going to Iraq “Britain and the world will confront the central security threat of the 21st Century”. He warned that the Western world by appeasing Saddam was making the same mistake as “when Czechoslovakia was swallowed up by the Nazis”. Beating the globalist drum, he showed that the instability in the Middle East will challenge the world’s order:

“But the world is ever more interdependent. Stock markets and economies rise and fall together. Confidence is the key to prosperity. Insecurity spreads like contagion. So, people crave stability and order. The threat is chaos. And there are two begetters of chaos. Tyrannical regimes with WMD and extreme terrorist groups who profess a perverted and false view of Islam” (Blair 2003f).

3. The vulnerable government

Thirdly, Cabinet Office employed vulnerability narratives in its self-identification. In the lead-up to and during the invasion, the government was drawing on a set of themes that typically are associated with effective statecraft: strength, persistence, leadership, initiative etc. However, it also sidestepped from what could be understood as a realist modality of power (see Schmitt 2007) and presented its standing as precarious and endangered. By this means, Downing Street was questioning what for realists was its prestige and agency (Morgenthau 1997).

Just before the invasion, the government has deployed its oratory skills to present the invasion of Iraq as an urgency. On 18th March Blair gave a dramatic appeal to the members of Parliament. - To retreat now, I believe, would put at hazard all that we hold dearest – he argued. Interestingly, his persuasive rhetoric was based on the vulnerability of the government itself. Counterintuitively, to boost its standing, PM put on the line authority of the government itself: “Tell our allies at the very moment of action, at the very moment when they need our determination, that Britain faltered. I will not be a party to such a course.” He expressed the gravitas of the moment by accentuating the fragility of the Cabinet. In his speech he directly referred to the recent resignation of John Denham, Home Office Minister who left openly criticising the moral grounds of the invasion of Iraq: “Here we are, the Government with its most serious test, its majority at risk, the first Cabinet resignation over an issue of policy, the main parties divided” Blair 2003f).

Initially, the British government framed the idea of invading Iraq as an international initiative (Holland 2012). However, since a significant subset of the domestic constituency was sceptical about British possible involvement in Iraq and because London has failed to secure an UN-mandated intervention, in the lead-up to the invasion, No. 10 has focused on swaying the domestic audience by talking about country's unique responsibility on the global scene: "the mantle of global leadership appealed to the perceived heart of the UK electorate. Embedding British foreign policy within a long tradition of global leadership and even as a repeat of the foundational moment of modern Britain—the successful defeat of Nazi Germany—ensured that foreign policy was framed to mesh with the cultural terrain of the domestic political landscape" (cited in Holland 2012: 90).

After France have declared it will not support passing a second Security Council resolution authorising the use of force against Iraq (Bolton 2003), Downing Street spoke of the untrustworthiness of Paris. Blair presented its government as being a victim of French indifference to the looming threat. In the parliament, he juxtaposed his cabinet with the international community. London was presented as a principled, value-driven actor stepping up to take responsibility for the future of humanity, while the UN and the Security Council was short-sighted by bureaucracy. Britain was portrayed as abandoned by its allies. Blair's characterisation of its country brought to mind traditions of Greek tragedy where the protagonist does not have control over its fate and has to act due to the inevitability of the greater forces. In this description role of the UK is dramatic:

"The way ahead was so clear. It was for the UN to pass a second resolution setting out benchmarks for compliance; with an ultimatum that if they were ignored, action would follow. The tragedy is that had such a resolution issued, he might just have complied. Because the only route to peace with someone like Saddam Hussein is diplomacy backed by force. (...) Looking back over 12 years, we have been victims of our own desire to placate the implacable, to persuade towards reason the utterly unreasonable, to hope that there was some genuine intent to do good in a regime whose mind is in fact evil. Now the very length of time counts against us."

Along those lines, the UK has to take responsibility for itself and the greater good of the world. This fate – while tragic – is presented as the lesser evil:

“And if this House now demands that at this moment, faced with this threat from this regime, that British troops are pulled back, that we turn away at the point of reckoning, and that is what it means - what then? What will Saddam feel? Strengthened beyond measure. What will the other states who tyrannise their people, the terrorists who threaten our existence, what will they take from that? That the will of confronting them is decaying and feeble. Who will celebrate and who will weep?” (Blair 2003f).

This sentiment was echoed even by Clare Short, International Development Secretary who openly criticised intervention. Just before the invasion, she justified why she stayed in the Cabinet by complaining to the press that “Tony has no option” and thus her leaving him at that arduous time would be a “cheap” attempt to salvage her popularity (The Times, 19 March).

4. The vulnerable Iraqis

Lastly, the British public was swayed by vivid descriptions of Iraqi victimhood and vulnerability. No. 10 repeatedly followed the same script. It was emphasized that Iraq due to its oil resources could have been a highly developed country on par with Portugal and that 60% of the population depends on food aid programs (e.g. Blair 2003c). Officials provided detailed descriptions of the brutal character of the regime and brought back past violations of the international and humanitarian law by Bagdad (e.g. Straw 2003a). Straw claimed that the invasion saved the lives of Iraqis:

“I’m also certain that the result of this military action will be to have spared the hundreds and thousands of Iraqis who would have otherwise faced death at the hands of Saddam Hussein and his people” (Straw 2003c).

The descriptions of the suffering and vulnerability of the Iraqi nation meshed together with the references to the vulnerability of the UK. They buttressed the broader argument that the invasion is serving British vital security interests. For example, in other

Straw's speech - after comparing Iraqi policies to that of the Yugoslav wars "worst excesses" and providing gruesome descriptions of the regime amputating and mutilating its dissidents - the Foreign Secretary was concluding that "The removal of Saddam Hussein's regime has become necessary to eradicate the threat from his programmes to develop weapons of mass destruction" (2003d).

8.4. Understanding vulnerability narratives

Strength and change

Even though the British government presented the UK as vulnerable and existentially endangered by Bagdad and international terrorist networks on the eve of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the majority of the interviewed British officials disagreed with this view. While not all participants gave a clear indication as to what they thought about the government's justifications for the war, the overwhelming majority provided a positive assessment of the country's standing in 2003. The participants pointed out that the UK had significant military capabilities, they raised the issue of its membership in NATO and the EU, the possession of atomic weapons etc. Many argued that the invasion was driven by London's belief in its ability to change the global world order. – The invasion was partially an outcome of arrogance – was Ryan's (2019) summary of the state's hubristic frame of mind in 2003.

Martin, a former British ambassador - who at the time of the invasion was a Director of one of the FCO's divisions – was of the opinion that British traditional understanding of its geopolitical standing contrasted with that of PM's office. Since for "58 years after WWII" citizens did not experience "conflict between Britain and foreign power on its territory", the language of vulnerability was genuinely alien to British political culture:

"On the British mainland, the only threat was coming from indigenous terrorism. So, in dramatizing a threat for a British audience, the British politician would be inevitably

seeking to explain it in terms of what people are prepared to accept. This means an audience that is not used to be automatically thinking in terms of threats that are coming from foreign powers” (Martin 2019).

Frank, a former British diplomat who dealt with Iraq at the FCO, did not have doubts that “In simple terms, terrorism was never an existential threat to the UK” (2019). Bradley, a researcher and a former senior civil servant in the Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office and FCO, pointed out that considering British geopolitical standing: “Iraq plainly, was just not an existential threat”. - Some people thought it was the right thing to do and there were good arguments to support the invasion. I did not. I thought it was crazy – he argues (Bradley 2019). Christopher, a general who was co-responsible for preparation of the plans for the invasion and who later commanded a British division in Iraq said he was “not one bit” worried about Iraq:

“I was never convinced that Iraq posed a direct threat to the UK. I fought against Iraq before and I have seen, and I knew how quickly – this supposedly invincible army - collapsed. I had no illusions about the operational capabilities of the Iraqis” (Christopher 2020).

Out of 32 interviewees, only three shared the cabinet’s perspective that London was under existential threat. All three were either member of the Cabinet or were very close to the New Labour’s government. Dominic, who was one of the army’s most senior officers and one of the architects of the invasion, pointed out that before the operation he “believed there were WMDs in Iraq”. However, he too criticised political usage of vulnerability narratives before the invasion:

“It is possibly true that some of the political speeches were inducing the feeling of vulnerability among British constituents. That is what politicians do. (...) They exaggerate or frighten people so that they can influence them. This helps them to push things through parliament. (...) Politicians are not the people of whom I have the highest opinion of” (Dominic 2020).

More worried was Morgan, who in 2003 was one of the key British diplomats (2019) as well as Rob, a former senior army’s commander who worked closely with Blair’s cabinet (2019). Morgan pointed out that he believed that Saddam had a “genuine program” of WMD

and that in 2003 there was “a real threat to British citizens”, while Rob expressed he believed that Saddam could work in tandem with terrorists and “that was a very, very great danger to us”.

While most participants viewed the portrayal of London’s geostrategic vulnerability critically, the interviews show that Iraq ought to be interpreted in the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the global nature of subsequent political processes. The officials emphasized that vulnerability narratives were speaking to the apprehensive zeitgeist of that time. Jim, who between 2001 and 2003 was working in the Cabinet Office, suggested that:

“It would be unfair to say that it is all about Blair trying to support his political position. As with any narrative, there is some sort of empirical reality that allows the politician to use this narrative in a plausible way” (2019).

Denis, one of the Committee members of the Chilcot Inquiry views vulnerability identification as important “in the post 9/11 atmosphere” and points out the general excitability among the decision-makers in Washington and London after the attacks (2019). Stewart, who played a key role in the post-invasion reconstruction of Iraq, remembers that there was an atmosphere of anticipation: “It was clear something was going to happen” (2020). Alex, a former ambassador specialising in the MENA region, says that 9/11 was representing for London “a dramatic ideological rapture” (2020). In Martin’s as well as Jerry’s (2019) memory, 9/11 was considered in London as a domestic issue (2019).

According to the latter:

“9/11 was the key moment. It was the most serious loss of British life in a terrorist incident. There was a very strong case that this was an attack on the UK, there were so many British people working in NY who were killed” (Jerry 2020).

- The 9/11 attack on the US was perceived by the UK as not only an attack on a NATO ally but an attack on globalisation and the interests of global society – echoes Martin. George, a defence analyst who served as an officer in the RAF summarizes:

“Despite the 1990s being horrific in the Balkans, we all seemed to corral ourselves around happy euro-pop and the idea that there was now no great existential threat

between East and West. It was a time of happy democracies all around and very bright people talking quite seriously about the end of history. (...) 2001 changed that. Collective happiness shifted into collective risk and the narrative that we are all endangered. There was a feeling that we have to do something after 9/11 and this manifested into the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq” (2019).

The first years after 9/11 were also a time of political opportunities for the British internationalists. Owen, one of London’s most important diplomatic representatives at the time of the invasion, believes that New Labour post 9/11 “intense shock” used it for its benefit. Especially to “rethink international relations”. He argues that in many European capitals at that time “There was a willingness to look again at a way how divisions are drawn”. Commenting on the cooperation between the US and the UK, as well as post-9/11 sympathy for Washington at the UN Owen says that “This looked like the basis for a new multilateral understanding”.

The true vulnerability: Alliance at any cost

Interviewed officials generally differ in their assessment of the real causes behind the 2003 invasion. While most of them agree with Chilcot Inquiry’s conclusions that the military action was not a last resort and that Saddam was not an imminent threat, their interpretations of the causes behind British participation in the operation vary. Eric, a decorated veteran and one of the key British commanders in Iraq, points out that while he was responsible for the preparation of the plans for the invasion “13 months” before the motion was voted in the Parliament, he and his colleagues did not understand the reasoning behind the operation:

“at that time already there was no doubt that we will deploy with the Americans. Even though, many of us, many soldiers could not quite see the logic of invading Iraq. Among the people responsible for the operational architecture of the mission, the logic behind the task escaped us” (Eric 2019).

Jerry, like many other participants who personally knew the PM, argued that the leader’s frame of mind played an important role in the invasion:

“Blair had a hard task to persuade people to go along with him. This was not cynicism. I talked to him many times about this. He genuinely believed that the threat is not about a war between big powers, it is new disorders, it is chaos, it is terrorism and rogue states” (2020).

Elaine, a prominent Liberal Democrat politician had a more cynical reading of the British motivations. She understands the invasion predominantly as political opportunism based on the post 9/11 tragedy:

“It was not that they had damning evidence proving that the invasion is necessary, it was the other way around, first was the decision that we will strike Saddam Hussein, and then search for reasons behind the decision started. So, they hit on that mythical WMD, that did not actually exist” (Elaine 2019).

The participants presented a panoply of different – sometimes incompatible – interpretations of the invasion. However, the dominating and most widely shared reading of the event prioritizes the role of the relationship with Washington in British calculations. While this dissertation does not try to definitively answer the historical puzzle behind the 2003 invasion, the role of the ‘special alliance’ with the US provides an important context for an understanding of the British politics of vulnerability during and in the lead-up to the invasion.

The perspective emerging from the interviews shows that prioritising Washington was means to an end. In this case, the preservation of the UK’s global relevance. For Blair’s cabinet, the relationship with the US was not a vanity project but a vital tool providing prestige to the nation. After all, as expressed by Jerry: “The UK would never invade Iraq on its own” (2020). Rob was adamant that “our alliance with the USA” was “of paramount importance to our country’s interests” (2019). Timothy, a former prominent official at the MOD reminds that:

“There was a strong desire to prove ourselves as good allies with the Americans. Blair sincerely felt that it would be a disaster to stand on one side and allow Bush to go by himself. There was a worry that it would do terrible damage to our standing in Washington and our influence with the Americans and our position in the world. Blair felt about it strongly and made his mind irrespectively of the evidence about the WMDs. We went to Iraq to be loyal allies” (2019).

This means, that while the vulnerability narratives – about the WMD, global terrorism etc. – may have been partially calculated, the underlying motive behind them was the perceived vulnerability of British global standing and the future shape of the relationship with Washington. Ryan – who had extensive experience of working with the Americans in Iraq – recalls that British decision-makers did not want to repeat the past mistake of not joining Americans in a major foreign intervention:

“Having joined the British army at the end of the Vietnam war in all my dealings – all the way up to the Invasion of Iraq in 2003 – there was always a sense that ‘the last time we needed your help [Vietnam war], you let us down, so do not do it again’. It took the post 9/11 period for the American leadership to sort of forgive the British to not join them in their hour of need. Certainly, among the British military, there was a sense that we could not let them down again” (2020).

Participants often expressed that they or their colleagues believed that the war in Iraq was inevitable and that this fact has placed the country in an uncomfortable position. On one hand, London wanted to retain its special alliance with the US, on the other, it was the worry of the negative repercussions of the unilateral approach pursued by Bush’s administration. Leonard, one of the key architects of Cabinet’s foreign policy, insisted that the UK wanted to shape American’s policies in the Middle East:

“The anxiety of the No. 10 was that the US will go off and do something violent in response to 9/11 (...) that there will be an ill-considered response and that it will alienate the Islamic world” (Leonard 2020).

The interviews allowed to unearth – an often overlooked - angst among British decision-makers in the lead-up to the invasion. The state leaders felt that the best way how to support the country’s standing is through the American corridors of power. This calculation made the state vulnerable to Washington’s whims and bound it to bear the consequences of the US’s foreign policy. One vulnerability was effectively substituted by another, and to decrease the negative outcomes of this predicament, London shield itself by beating a drum of yet... another vulnerability – of Saddam Hussain and its WMD. As described by

Benjamin, a former senior official at the FCO, who shared his reading of the prime minister's position:

“He was trying to present himself as vulnerable. But the substance of this vulnerability was lacking. He was fundamentally weak but not in the way he was presenting it. Not ‘geopolitically’ as one of the leaders of the free world but as a leader that wanted to keep his job at any costs. He was very efficient in drawing on this imagined weakness” (2019).

The dramaturgy of vulnerability narratives

Overall, the participants confirmed the dissertation’s theoretical interpretation of vulnerability narratives. I claimed that states are performers involved in the ongoing process of the presentation of the self in front of audiences. To mark and capture the characteristics of this practice, I refer to this phenomenon using the dramaturgical metaphor. Consequently, Britain’s vulnerability narratives are understood as a performative action that conveys “impressions to a group of auditors” (Merelman 1969: 217). The state ‘plays out’ its situation and identifications in an attempt to gain acceptance for its actions.

While I did not mention this interpretation to the interviewees, the dramaturgical perspective on politics seemed to naturally surface in their responses. Speaking about London’s frame of mind in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion, Steve, a former British diplomat reflected that: “Politicians speak to an audience in a way that they feel that audience may respond and be sympathetic to” (2019) After using the term ‘dramatization’ to describe Cabinet’s language during the war, Martin explained that he employed it to depict language that was used to gain legitimacy “to take action”:

“This means that the political brass is making a problem dramatically clear so that the individual voter cannot simply say: ‘Look, this is terrible what has happened, but it has nothing to do with me’” (2019).

Almost all officials, when interpreting British vulnerability narratives, referred to terminology that could be associated with performance (see Goffman 1978). Some perceived

politics of vulnerability as a negative phenomenon. Responding to textual vignettes bearing this characteristic, Benjamin was clearly displeased with the way how politicians described the country's standing. He called it "political spin, exaggeration", "desperation-framing" as well as "exploitation of language" (2019). Dylan, an academic and former senior diplomat described vulnerability self-identification as a practice of "talking-things-up" (2019). Many participants introduced language fitting drama studies in their analyses. George talked about "Disneyland of international relations" (2019), Frank mentioned "drama queen act" (2019), Alex - judging London's vulnerability talk - spoke of it as of thriller movie by calling it "flesh creeper designed to make people scared", an "interesting trick", "rhetorical turn", "discursive elision, a switch (...) prompting people to imagine horror" (2020). James, a former ambassador, emphasized transactional characteristics of the performance by describing politicians as "selling" their views and "going out their way" to do so (2019).

Many officials tried to be more measured, however, surprisingly their language also shared characteristics with dramaturgical sociology. Victor, a former senior British Army officer who served in Iraq in a commanding position, referred to vulnerability narratives as "emotive language" and the practice of "managing perceptions and narratives" (2020). Eric in his comments argued that vulnerability narratives allowed London to "invoke", "stoke" and "speak to British feelings" of the audience (2019).

Also, the participants who justified British vulnerability identifications employed dramaturgical language in their responses. Morgan, while defending London's actions, unwittingly drew on the performative repository. Speaking about the importance of public opinion he reasoned:

"For many also in the political class, it was very important to – if you are acting on the international arena – to be acting in consistence with international law. We the UK had to be seen to be acting in accordance with international law. Which is what we did." (2019).

Similarly, Dominic complained that the political leadership was involved in showmanship and was “driven by public relations” and “political spin”, he also emphasized that he “did not get involved in that sort of thing” (2020).

The actor and the audiences

The participants emphasized the role of the audience in the way Britain employed vulnerability narratives. Reviewing the state’s self-representation, Stewart summarised:

“The messages are very carefully put together. The emphasis, the rhetoric, all that has a purpose and takes under consideration who the audience is, how they are intending to shape what the people think” (2020).

The conversations shed a light on the difference between the use of vulnerability narratives by politicians and military officers. It was pointed out that army officials abstained from the employment of this theme because they did not have to motivate soldiers. As explained by Christopher, narratives of vulnerability were “aimed at the UK population”, not the army:

“I do not think whether there were concerns about their morale. Because that is what military forces are about to do. They are there to serve the country and if that is what the country has decided to do, they will get on and do it. Because they are well led and well-motivated people, they will be up for it” (2020).

Victor shared this sentiment:

“Politicians have to be careful about the language they use. You could say that they were trying to motivate people that were going to the war, but I do not think so that was a rationale at all. They were speaking the language – as presented in the fragments we discussed –to keep the civilian population on the side with the government action rather than addressing those who will be doing the fighting. Politicians took their motivation and loyalty for granted and actually, they had every reason for doing so. There was no doubt that if the Armed Forces will be asked to act, they would do that to the best of their abilities” (2020).

8.5. Ontological Insecurity of the Invasion of Iraq

The collected accounts confirmed that the invasion of Iraq was a source of ontological insecurity for the state. The operation questioned the liberal internationalism and humanitarianism of Blair's government. It disrupted or undermined a set of important perceptions and identifications of the population. The UK was no longer presented as a safe haven. The alliance with the US was a challenge to Cool Britannia. The country was broadly criticised in the international arena, its declared idealism was doubted.

Almost all officials that participated in the interviews, spoke of London's situation in the lead-up to and during the invasion, as a uniquely challenging predicament to the political leadership and the society. Their opinions allowed further exploration and examination of the key research expectation regarding the reason behind the proliferation of vulnerability narratives in the context of the Iraqi war. Namely, whether they were a response to ontological insecurity of the state.

When speaking about the invasion posing a challenge to the state's identifications, the participants often brought up the unprecedented scale of the peace protests before the invasion. Dylan believed that:

"The invasion of Iraq in 2003 did cause huge divisions within Britain. We had the largest numbers of protesters on the streets opposing the war in Iraq. While he would not admit it, it destroyed Mr Blair's standing" (2019).

According to Christopher, the growing opposition to the war showed the real controversies surrounding the decision:

"You won't forget massive protests against war at that time. Those protests told us in the army that the invasion does not have the unqualified support of the British population. There were real reservations about it."

In his opinion, it was clear that 'the second Gulf war' - as opposed to the first Gulf war - would not gain people's backing:

“This was in clear contrast with the First Gulf war which had overwhelming support. Kuwait was being invaded by an aggressor, we needed to support our friend. The second war in Iraq did not have popular support and that have very far-reaching strategic implications. It meant that the government was not united. It undermined what Clausewitz calls the Trinity: of people, army and state. They need to be in balance in order to ensure the state’s action” (Christopher 2020).

Jerry, who advised the government, underlined that the fact London failed to get the UN mandate for the invasion posed a direct challenge to society’s will and the state’s image of a multilateral player. Speaking about the predicament of the PM, he illustrates how this new situation caused a dissonance between the state’s ideals and its interests:

“Blair was faced with terrible choice does he pull his troops out of the plan, causing a huge upset in the American military machine (...) or does he justify the lack of mandate and goes on. The latter is what he did. (...) That left him knowing that he would have to justify to the British people a major military commitment in circumstances in which there is no evident British interest. (...) In contrast with Afghanistan, Iraq was not perceived as a direct threat to the UK” (2020).

In Timothy’s opinion, Blair was aware of the fact that “the country is split” (2019). Owen, who at the time of invasion represented London in one of the key foreign capitals, stressed that the lack of international support for the invasion “*was a considerable problem*” for the country (2019).

Dylan points out that the alliance with Washington, as well as the framing of the war, was incompatible with collective identifications of British society:

“Blair’s close partnership with Bush did not go down well in many circles. We have been coping with sporadic IRA terrorism since the 1920s. We never talked about a war on terrorism as a worldwide thing. It was a very specific, local thing. Now we were a part of something that was impossible to solve because you are fighting something so nebulous, so hydra-headed. That is why lumping all those different phenomena together as ‘terrorism’ was a mistake” (2019).

The terminology used by the Americans was not fulfilling the ideational needs of the British population. It was disrupting established identifications of the collective and questioned its positive self-perceptions. Its incompatibility with the meanings employed in the UK threatened the collective’s ontological security (Giddens 1991). Justin, who was responsible for coalition forces’ information policies regarding the invasion, stated that the phrase ‘global

war on terror' was an obstacle in his work. He pointed out that "The British audience was sceptical" about it and that he personally insisted on changing the term to 'global counterterrorism' (2019).

The invasion was a source of ontological insecurity also for the political echelons. Jerry remembered that while Blair managed to push the war through the parliament, his officials had mixed feelings about the matter:

"House of Commons voted eventually by a large majority in favour of the invasion, but the public at large were deeply divided and still are, as to the wisdom of that act. As you can see from the Chilcot report, most senior officials and individual cabinet members, were deeply sceptical. In the end, they were loyal to PM but the degree of unease within government and as well within the country was very significant" (2020).

Bradley remembered the majority of his colleagues at the FCO were opposed to the war (2019). Manny, a British diplomat, and former ambassador recollected that his colleague resigned from his post in the MOD due to the invasion (2019). Owen highlighted feelings of anxiety about the fact that he had to defend this decision to the foreign audiences:

"There was considerable controversy among the political elite about the decision to invade. Just look at the debates between state's lawyers. (...) There were arguments in the House of Commons about there not being a legal justification for war. I myself was on the spot. I did not believe in my own heart and mind that we should go to war on this basis. I questioned should I stay in my job. (...) I was most uncomfortable with the narrative we have been giving" (2019).

Also, Christopher – while preparing for the invasion – at the same time felt puzzled about it. He expresses how the operation was threatening an individual's ontological security:

"I remember having a conversation with another colleague, a senior general. It was clear back then that we will inevitably invade Iraq. I remember thinking at that time – why we do need to invade? (...) There were definitely concerns about the invasion" (2020).

Bradley argued that many officials questioned that Saddam was a threat:

"A lot of people would say: 'But why we are acting against this bad ruler when there any number of bad rulers around the world we could think of'" (2019).

In Elaine's opinion, Blair felt that his credibility was at stake and that the crisis has shaken the political establishment:

“PM knows about the importance of the anti-war alliance. A huge number of people were leaving his party at that time to protest, some were joining us, the Liberal Democrats. He knows that was a real threat. Blair wanted to be the first labour PM that won three elections in a row. He has to justify the unjustifiable. Namely, the fact that we have joined the US in the war against terror and so-called WMD” (2019).

While some interviewees spoke about the strategic benefits of the alliance with Washington, even the less critical voices recognised that, as described by Ryan: “PM was in a pretty invidious position”. On one hand, he had Americans “insisting that either you are with us or against us” and on the other was sceptical public opinion (2020).

Most officers interviewed for the study spoke about the anxieties pertaining to the legal status of the invasion. Confirming journalistic accounts (e.g. Bower 2016), they showed that the highest echelons of the country’s command were worried about how British society will interpret the invasion. Participants illustrated how the invasion was a challenge to positive self-perceptions of the state. Thus, it disrupted security as being (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017: 4). Dominic and his colleagues in the military command – while preparing British troops for the invasion – pressed London for receiving legal assurances about the mission

“When it became clear that we are having great difficulty in generating a new Security Council resolution for the invasion (...) we wanted to be absolutely clear that our people and our armed forces had legal umbrella about what they going to do. If we did not have that assurance, we were not happy to go to fight on the ground that sometime in the future, ten, twenty years later we could be taken to court and accused of a crime. That is why we wanted to have a very clear, unequivocal legal advice”.

Also, they were worried about the safety of families of soldiers at home:

“If you had been in London in February or March 2003, there was a great deal of anti-war speculation in the press, and a march of more than a million people protesting against the invasion. (...) My concern, in that case, was not for soldiers but predominantly for their families” (Dominic 2020).

Ryan echoes this sentiment, and highlights that for a liberal democracy the moral component behind the military operation was crucial:

“unless the people will believe that the reason is legitimate and legal, people will not do it. That is why there is always a great fear that when you are asking the military to

do something if they do not believe it is the right thing to do, they will resign, walk away or get a headache” (2020).

Functions of vulnerability narratives

1. *Anxiety reduction*

The interviews provided an in-field investigation for the dissertation’s theoretical assumption regarding the role of vulnerability narratives during the invasion of Iraq. The participants largely confirmed that the operation was a profound challenge to the state’s ontological security. Their reading of the UK’s standing in 2003 laid the ground for investigating whether Britain attempted to dramatized itself as precarious to deal with ideational anxieties. The thesis’ theoretical framework posits that states address ontological insecurities through identifications based on vulnerability narratives.

This understanding was supported by participants. To effectively justify the war, London had to innovate how it was describing itself. In Victor’s view: “the Moral imperative may have been not enough to convince British to invade. That there was a need for a second type of argumentation for the war” (2020). Jim believed that the importance of keeping the strategic alliance with the US was also not enough:

“Population was not prepared to sign up to the war just to stay closer to the US. It was easier to sign up to the war in order to fight an ‘evil dictator’ as he was portrayed” (2019).

The UK had to base its argumentation on warning against threats coming from Bagdad. – They played the oldest political game in town by bringing the bad guy into the living room – George claimed (2019). The problem with this task – as with any attempt to securitise a concrete issue – was how to convince the audience that Iraq is a salient challenge. George pondered on the boldness of this approach:

“This dominating narrative was about the risk and threat. This endangers our homes, streets, and our very existence. So that someone in a village in Devon feels the same levels of a threat as somebody in central London. It was all about getting to a

collective, national sense of being endangered. Which was a rather remarkable claim – that such a level of danger could emanate from a relatively mid-tier state in the far region of the world. (...) What a strange narrative we have tied ourselves into” (2019).

What George captured was the scale of the challenge mounting in front of the New Labour government. Interviews showed that it was necessary to refer to people’s emotions. To make the invasion more acceptable, the state had to dramatize its precarious position by ‘playing out’ to the public the external threats. Vulnerability narratives allowed London to do just that. While Rob shared many of Blair’s worries about Saddam, he admitted that “there was an element of exaggeration of threat” in British public communication (2019).

It may sound paradoxical, but to reduce the anxiety stemming from the controversial invasion, the state drew on vulnerability narratives to present itself as insecure. Commenting on one of the speech vignettes including vulnerability identifications, Justin was sure that its role in the government’s communication was to present the operation as in line with the collective cognitive and ideational framework. To address ontological security deficits, London presented the invasion as being consistent with the state’s identifications. It allowed the state to make this action “knowable” (Mitzen 2006: 354) to the set of identifications shared by the British:

“The British public did not see Britain anymore as a country which goes and invade people without being attacked. Saddam did not attack us. But we are going to invade Iraq. Thus, politicians are thinking ‘What do I have to say to convince the British public so that they will think that this is not only a good idea but that it is a justifiable and supposable idea’. You say then that he is a tyrant who torturers and murderers his own people. Answering whether is this in our national interest, you respond that the ‘threat his arsenal poses to British citizens at home and abroad, whether in a hand or his regime or hands of terrorists (...) those are the arguments you have to make if you have uncomfortable public. You have to convince people about the legitimacy of something you are doing in their name” (Justin 2019).

Justin emphasized that the British population would not identify with unprovoked action:

“It is very British. Do you walk up to somebody on the street to kick him in the balls? No, you wait so they kick you in the balls and only then you respond” (Justin, 2019).

– Vulnerability was something the politicians were looking for. On it, they could build the whole apparatus of invasion - affirmed Benjamin (2019).

William, one of the Army's leading medical experts with command and staff appointments in MOD as well as NATO, indicated how vulnerability narratives made the invasion more easily acceptable by addressing ontological insecurity:

"What you are seeing here is the interaction between the leadership and the people. The people clearly need to be persuaded that the UK is going to do something and that British life may be lost in military action. People do not like that unless you can show them that there is a clear reason for that to happen. Such speech increases societal and political cohesion." (2019).

James, a key FCO's diplomat, pointed out how making the invasion of Iraq compatible with the British identifications, required presenting it as a case of national importance (2019). This provided the operation with its meaning so that it will be "constitutive of identity" (Mitzen 2006: 342):

"What you need to understand, you do not seem to be grasping is that if you are going to send British soldiers to weird parts of the world to blow up foreigners, they did not join the army to do that. They have joined the army to defend the queen. So, what you have to do is to convince the public that what you are doing is reasonable enough. It is not a coincidence that the word British appears so many times in speech"

"(...) that it is not in the British interest to try to stop Saddam from killing Iraqis. That may be a moral problem but that obviously is not in the interest of the British army to stop that. Whereas it does seem to be in the British national interest to stop Saddam Hussain from giving weapons to terrorist to kill British citizens. That is a clear link." (James 2019).

Dealing with the collective anxieties caused by the invasion required performative actions that would shift people's understandings or perceptions of the action. This need was particularly well addressed by the employment of vulnerability narratives. They had a capacity of evoking fears, of speaking directly to emotions. For the state, they were a platform from which it dramatized its position as being precarious. As described by Alex:

"What you are seeing is a horror movie that requests you to suspend your ability to rationalise. When someone is saying to imagine a chemical attack happening in the UK, he is making an interesting trick. He asks you to imagine yourself as someone else entirely, living in a completely different universe. (...) This reflects there was a feeling

among the decision-makers that instead of appealing to the rational arguments it would be better to draw on people's emotions" (2020).

According to James, vulnerability narratives were exceptionally effective:

"What do you think this speech is for? It is not enough to be smart; it is not enough to be right or analytically rigorous, you have to be convincing" (James 2019).

This sentiment was echoed by many other officials. Some mentioned that vulnerability narratives not only allowed the state to act by legitimising the invasion in the eyes of the constituents but also that, in the process, it often also swayed the establishment itself. - Collectively we hypnotised ourselves into believing that these folks [Iraqis] had almost mythical capabilities - argued George (2019).

Also, some of the comments made by the participants could have been interpreted as vulnerability narratives used during the conversation to reduce the participant's anxiety about its role in the invasion. For example, three military officials that worked closely with the cabinet complained about the manipulateness of the political leadership at that time. Some participants underlined they were deceived into considering Bagdad as a threat.

A. Compartmentalisation

The participants offered their perspective on the processes through which vulnerability narratives reduced British anxieties about the invasion. Their comments largely confirmed that during the invasion, the state representatives tried to avoid issues that could challenge the positive perspectives on waging the war against the weaker actor. This process of compartmentalisation presented the British army as a humanitarian force fighting for the greater good against a ruthless dictator.

In Eric's view, that is why the Cabinet was speaking about the plight of Iraqi Kurds and other crimes of Saddam Hussein:

"Kurds illustrate well the sentiment, the intention to show that we will protect the weak. They serve as an argument supporting that what we are doing is righteous. This is essentially virtue signalling. A major argument for the invasion" (2019).

By presenting itself as vulnerable, it was easier for London to ignore negative depictions of the offensive and avoid its problematic aspects. That is why the state emphasized the justness of its cause:

“I see someone making a case that this war is just. He is trying to say it is as a conflict like Rwanda, Sierra Leone. In other words, the humanitarian mission” (Eric 2019).

Describing the conflict in a Manichean manner, the state was avoiding full ethical scrutiny and feelings of discomfort about the offensive action. As explained by Justin:

“That is why you point out that Saddam was happy to gas his own people and conclude by asking ‘Why do you think he would not be happy to gas you?’. (...) If you are doing something unpleasant in their name, you need your people to feel worried about the thing you say you will deal with. How otherwise you would be able to convince them if they will believe that Iraq is nothing to be worried about? You have to engender some feeling against your enemy” (2019).

B. Rationalisation

Additionally, the conversations confirmed and further developed the understanding of vulnerability narratives as a process of rationalisation. Participants provided a bottom-up understanding of this practice being a form of defence mechanism that supplied London with justifications and explanations for the invasion. This way of presenting the country’s situatedness allowed to deflect the blame.

As argued by Justin, the invasion was a “complete change vis-à-vis years of foreign policy”. Due to significant controversies surrounding the operation, the state ought to convincingly justify the new approach: “you need to justify why the complete change. Why they were wrong in the past?” (Justin 2019). Vulnerability narratives were a particularly effective meaning-making tool because they brought a sense of urgency. Laurence, one of the leading parliamentarians who opposed the invasion, believed that there was an element of emotional blackmail in the Cabinet’s arguments:

“In a situation like this you could argue that any day action was not taken was putting at risk lives of more people in Iraq and the Middle East. This was similar to the argument by the Americans about Hiroshima. They claimed that if we will not drop the

bomb, the war will carry on. (...) It was almost a tactic of shaming people, of pushing them to a conclusion. Saying 'What will people think of you if you will not act now?'. This is intended to intimidate. To make you think 'Do I really want the blood of more people on my hands by not acting?' (...) If we do not act now, will it not be worse? Can you justify to your conscience, to your children to your nation not supporting the invasion?' (Laurence 2020).

In Timothy's view, by identifying as vulnerable, London was presenting the invasion as a priority that triumphs over normal considerations: "The warning was that if we will not stop it now, then everybody will have nuclear weapons. That will be the end of civilisation as we know it and an existential threat." (Timothy 2019). Denis believed that the insistence on the immediateness of the threat created a unique imperative to act: "Blair wants the invasion to be understood as last resort action. To show to people that we have tried everything. It is PM using everything he can to make the case for war" (Denis 2019). In his opinion this way of explaining the action shielded from an external critique of the government:

"It is a basic condition of going to war, to show that what are you doing is the last resort. Obviously, it was not a last resort, why now? The problem Blair was in at that time, was that the UN inspectors were still in Iraq. Lots of people in the UN were asking 'what is the rush?', the same thing was going on in the Parliament. So, he was trying to explain why he was in the rush. Blair wanted to show he was an internationalist that he was not trigger happy" (Denis 2019).

For Dominic, vulnerability narratives allowed to challenge people's optimistic understanding of British security (Dominic, 2020). According to Leonard, a key member of the Tony Blair cabinet, they gave meaning to the invasion by providing a captivating explanation:

"PM had to raise the flag to remind people that despite the fact that the Cold War is 13 years passed, there are serious international threats. In particular a threat to the liberal world order. My assumption is that he is referring back to that. These are not only threats to values but also the threat of WMD, terrorism and asymmetric warfare and other unconventional threats. He says to people, that just because the Cold War is gone does not mean there are no other things we have to worry about. We have got to meet this challenge" (2019).

Participants were adamant that vulnerability pronouncements were used to justify the war. To illustrate, Christopher reflected that:

“It absolutely was the case that No. 10 was thinking about popular support. They constantly needed to prove that there was a real and present threat in order to justify the invasion. Hence the so-called dodgy dossier. Effectively the fabrication of intelligence about Saddam’s WMD (...) they presented the UK as existentially threatened to persuade people to support the invasion. Blair was looking for ways to demonstrate the threat” (2020).

2. Special agency

Interviews showed that vulnerability narratives not only made it possible to present the invasion as being consistent with the state’s identifications. Aside from decreasing the ontological insecurity of the collective, it securitised Iraq. By pointing out where its vulnerability is coming from, London received a prerogative to act. I call this function special agency to underline that it allows the state to do more than it could without presenting itself as vulnerable.

This was particularly evident in the case of the UK and Iraq. After all, as Manny argued, “there surely was no constituency in Britain for waging war, unless there was a threat to the UK”. Saddam ought to be seen as a “horrible monster like Hitler” (Manny 2019).

William stated that vulnerability narratives functioned as a political enabler that handed new prerogatives to the government:

“Presenting the country in a vulnerable place justifies changing direction. It is no different from the football manager who has been losing for 10 matches. There comes a point when he says, ‘I got it wrong, I have to change my tactics and my approach’. No politician would say that [presenting itself as vulnerable and mistaken] unless they wanted to change the course of action. You would not say we made mistake unless you want to propose an alternative” (2019).

Commenting on one of the speech vignettes that included vulnerability narratives, Benjamin observed that it “misrepresented the threat. In order to gain extraordinary measures, they needed extraordinary challenges” (2019). – Without a doubt, I am reading narratives about the threats as a form of a request for more prerogatives - stated Stewart (2020). Owen also highlighted that by claiming vulnerability, the UK gained special agency:

“No 10 was not only trying to justify Britain’s involvement in Iraq but also the new powers the government got due to 9/11. For example, to hold suspects for longer in captivity. Blair is making a passionate statement for the policies he wants to introduce to give the government more power to keep terrorism at bay. Changes which would reduce the freedoms of society in Britain” (Owen, 2019).

For Jim, this theme may be understood as “language of mobilisation” which allows the state to “pull people into support” of a specially “risky course of action” (2019). In Rob’s view drawing on vulnerability narratives:

“bridged that gap between what people would understand as a threat and what they should see as a threat. Speaking about vulnerability and challenges can be a motivating factor. It can certainly motivate people that do the fighting. It can also motivate people that need to give the government their support” (2019).

In Frank’s opinion, vulnerability narratives made “all sorts of things become possible”:

“If you have a common enemy, you unify the whole country behind you. If you can show that you are a leader of a nation a defender of civilisation that is in jeopardy, this helps you” (2019).

A. Weakness

The interviews validated that by using vulnerability narratives, the UK was questioning its superior status. This presentation of self challenged positive perceptions of the actor’s standing and allowed it to claim it was placed in an uncertain and precarious situation. Dylan referred to this practice as a “dramatization of British situation” and a “rhetoric (...) designed to say, ‘Oh look we are really threatened by this small country in the Middle East’ (2019).

This has let the state to present itself as having no alternatives but to invade. As explained by Eric:

“I think that in all the discussed cases the idea is how to convince people that you do not have a choice. Even when in reality you do. Iraq is a war of choice. The way you make a choice look like not-a-choice is you say, ‘We are victims of this situation, we have to react, we have no choice but to do something’. You do that by creating a notion of being vulnerable” (2019).

Participants pointed out that the references to WWII made by the government were particularly useful in underscoring the state’s weakness. They argued that in the collective

memory of the British society as well as the establishment, the inter-war policy of appeasement of the Third Reich is a present source of shame. That is why in Martin's opinion, Blair tried to draw parallels between Hussein and Hitler to accentuate the dire situation of the country:

"He uses language that brings back this sense of national guilt. We allowed Hitler to annex Austria, to take over Sudetenland, to annex parts of Czechoslovakia, we woke up only when he invaded Poland. We must not fail again" (2019).

Frank suggested that:

"We are back to the old Chamberlain-Hitler argument. We have been appeasing for too long. (...) We are a victim who thought well of people and yet we encounter an immoral actor and it comes a time when the great British armed forces will have to teach the bully a lesson" (2019).

B. Strength

The weakness is one of two integral components of the special agency of vulnerability narratives. The second building block of the special agency is based on references to strength. For a strong state such as the UK claiming weakness is a gateway to the agency against a much weaker opponent such as Iraq. The weakness lays the ground for the strength by legitimising the offensive agency of the state. As explained by Manny:

"if there is an extraordinary thing you want to do, and invading another country is extraordinary, then that is when you can say "Sorry but we are not secure and we have to take the following action to achieve security". (...) Apologies, we are vulnerable and now we will behave to make us safe again" (2019).

Consequently, the actor suggests how to deal with the problem. It brings strength as a response to weakness. In Frank's words, the state is saying: "We need to pull out the sword and slay the dragon. We have been too passive, now we need to be bold" (2019).

Vulnerability narratives are a tool of statecraft. They are employed as a prerequisite for concrete action. The state first designates its deficits and external threats and then provides a solution. Consequently, claiming vulnerability may be a privilege. In Manny's view this identification is effective only if a politician will point out how to address it:

“Politicians can get away with that. I do not think that people will say ‘how did you let us be threatened’, provided that politicians offer a way of dealing with this threat. I think you cannot admit vulnerability unless you have a solution. If you say, ‘we are vulnerable’, people immediately will want you to deal with this problem. Therefore, in the same breath, you have to say, ‘we are vulnerable, but this is the solution’” (2019).

Eric warns that due to current socio-cultural processes:

“it is best to make yourself a victim. It is paradoxical, but by placing ourselves in such a problematic position, we are getting a free hand to act. The international community plays a major role in this way of thinking. Since it is perceived as paramount in creating a sense of legitimacy, states want to show that they are righteous. That they are upholding values and rules outside of the boundaries of their own narrow interest. Today such value is justice. It goes across the state boundaries. If you are a victim of some injustice, your situation transcends national boundaries. All these narratives are an element of a broader struggle to show why military action is just. Why it is jus ad bellum. Fear, victimhood, vulnerability goes a long way”.

In his opinion victimhood played a particularly big role in the invasion:

“We live in times when the victims are the new aristocracy. The highest virtue in society is to be a victim. So, if you are a victim, you are virtuous. And this status of vulnerability gives you agency. Being virtuous gives you agency. So, you create a narrative that says ‘We are in danger, therefore we are virtuous. We are virtuous; therefore, we are entitled to do something. And this is what we will go to do” (Eric 2019).

Eric believed that claims of vulnerability allowed London to present the invasion as an act of self-defence and the only choice (2019). Participants showed that there is power hidden in the argument based on insecurity and precarity: - It is like Margaret Thatcher who drove a bulldozer through the economic life of GB and she insisted – while she was holding the controllers of the bulldozer – that there is no alternative – observed Timothy (2019).

8.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have first analysed how the UK employed vulnerability narratives in the context of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The study has shown the key role of the audience in the country’s use of vulnerability narratives. Britain was foremost employing this theme when addressing its citizens. In its communication abroad it focused rather on accentuating

its agential role. Furthermore, not only the character of the ‘receiver’ but also that of a ‘sender’ shaped the use of vulnerability self-identifications by the actor. Generally, the British political class drew on this theme, while the military abstained from such references. These findings confirmed that strong state’s vulnerability self-identifications had performative and dramaturgical characteristics. Namely, that the UK’s use of vulnerability narratives was context-dependent. The dramaturgical character of vulnerability pronouncements was also confirmed in the interviews with the British officials. Furthermore, the empirical study revealed that vulnerability narratives that shaped London’s image were actually predicated on references to in-group (the UK, the West, government) and outgroup (Iraqis) precarity.

Secondly, the UK’s employment of vulnerability narratives was discussed and reviewed by 32 British state officials. The interviews have confirmed the main expectations about the case study. Namely, that vulnerability narratives for Britain were a form of a performative action used by the actor to convey to the audience its claimed situation and identification and to gain acceptance for its offensive actions. They played a key role in the UK’s war-time presentation of Self. In their answers, the participants independently employed terminology suitable for performative analysis (‘playing out’, ‘showing off’, ‘to be in the spotlight’ etc.). Secondly, they have confirmed that the 2003 war was a source of ontological security deficits for London. It was a source of controversies that questioned the positive identifications of the state and the collective. The majority of the participants confirmed that the UK in 2003 was a prosperous secure and powerful actor. This way they substantiated a key empirical assumption and foundation for the dissertation’s theory. Namely, that London’s ‘vulnerability narratives could not be solely answered by instrumental perspective and that realist readings of British intervention do not account for this self-identification (see the previous chapter). Vulnerability performance was speaking to people’s

worries about the safety of the state. However, its importance for the collective was predicated on public perceptions, historical accounts and social beliefs about the moral role of the state. References to precarity and insecurity allowed the strong actor to reduce its anxiety about the controversial military operation, precisely because it addressed the collective's need to ascribe positive meanings to the UK's actions. Vulnerability narratives made it possible to present the invasion as being consistent with the state's identifications. This self-identification undermined negative representations of the invasion, where the UK was presented as an unethical combative Western power. Aside from its role in the realm of the state's identity, London's use of vulnerability narratives was also a prerogative to act. By presenting itself as precarious, Britain did securitise Iraq and claimed a special right to intervene on its soil. Since this theme was employed in securitisation practices, vulnerability self-identifications do not speak to the liberal internationalist ambitions commonly ascribed to the Cabinet Office by the commentators (see the previous chapter).

9. Discussion and comparison

9.1. Introduction

The chapter is separated into six sections. First, I describe the dissertation's goals and summarise its results. Second, I compare and contrast both case studies (Israel and the UK). Third, I discuss the novelty of the thesis. Fourth, I explain the dissertation's contributions to our understanding of the role vulnerability narratives play in statecraft. Fifth I discuss the shortcomings of the dissertation. In the last section, I discuss possible future avenues of research.

9.2. Goals and findings

Puzzle and research questions

At the heart of the dissertation was the “strange talk” (Becker: 1998) of states. Namely, the surprising employment of vulnerability narratives in a strong states' wartime communication. The study seeks to answer why strong countries implement narratives of vulnerability in their wartime public communication?

To address the main research question, I devised two secondary questions instrumental in the process of collecting the evidence necessary to solve the thesis's puzzle. I wanted to know how do strong actors adopt vulnerability narratives during armed conflicts? Furthermore, how do political elites understand the role of the state's vulnerability claims during armed conflicts?

Argument

My investigation was guided by the educated contention (see Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) that vulnerability narratives will address the identity needs of strong states. Since I interpreted identity as a key factor shaping statecraft (see Berenskoetter 2010), I wanted to examine theoretical expectation that during armed struggle vulnerability narratives perpetuate the identity of strong countries.

To theorise about the vulnerability pronouncements in the context of state politics, I integrated critical security studies scholarship with a sociological focus on interactionism. Drawing on the sociology of trust, I showed that vulnerability is linked with ontological security (Misztal 2011, 2012). The thesis problematized the role that vulnerability identifications play in states' politics. While traditionally the literature considers ontological security as "the sense of invulnerability" (Giddens 1991: 40), I argued that vulnerability narratives may provide a sense of ontological security to states' actions.

I contended that vulnerability narratives have two functions for strong actors. First, claimed vulnerability counters anxiety about the state's safety of the self. Conducting offensive warfare against a much weaker opponent is in itself an 'ontological crisis' (Innes and Steele 2014) because it causes international controversies and may challenge the positive national image of the strong actor. The use of state resources against foreign enemies is a source of anxiety for the state officials who have to present to their constituents and the international society the reasoning behind costly offensive actions that inflict harm not only on enemy combatants but also civilians. War brings the question of what the state stands for to the forefront of ongoing debates. For the nation, the use of force against the weak is a poignant illustration of the "unreliability of international order, the finitude of politics, the impermanence of relationships" (Ejdus 2017: 10). By attacking 'David', 'Goliath' has to make a convincing case for its actions. Consequently, vulnerability narratives respond to this

deficit of ontological security by offering positive meaning to the military confrontation. Secondly, vulnerability narratives provide a special agency. Employing securitisation literature, I theorised that this form of strong actors' self-identification offers justification to hostilities against a weaker opponent.

I argued that the employment of vulnerability narratives by strong actors is making identity resilient. Namely, it is a practice that supports states' biographical consistency in times of crisis. I contended that states follow two pathways that protect and strengthen their identity. First, countries present their modified behaviour as reflecting state identifications. For example, in 1999 Tony Blair referred to the Atlanticist tradition in British foreign policy to justify his country's participation in the intervention in Kosovo. Importantly, the same Atlanticist identification was also used by the Tory governments preceding him to advocate against sending British troops to Bosnia (see McCourt 2012). Secondly, countries innovate their storytelling while keeping it in line with the core autobiographical apparatus of the actor. For example, after the 2004 Orange Revolution and the 2014 protracted Russo-Ukrainian war, Russian politicians started depicting Ukraine as an ultra-nationalistic Western pawn, while still arguing that Russia considers Ukraine as a "brotherly country" (Nebenzia 2021).

Analysis

To investigate my theoretical expectations, I analysed the employment of vulnerability narratives by Israel in the 2014 OPE and by the UK during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Due to the research orientation which focused on the 'meanings and beliefs' of the actors (Bevir and Blakely 2018: 9) as well as a design attitude that starts with a puzzling phenomenon (claimed vulnerability of strong states) and abductively pursues the answers (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2009), the study needed to employ the interpretive methodology.

My motivation was to analyse and co-generate (Soss 2014: 147) an interpretation of strong states' employment of vulnerability narratives that would be contextual, rich and trustworthy (see the evaluative standards of the interpretive methodologies: Schwartz-Shea 2014). This approach drew on hermeneutic sensibility which sees "narratives as explanations" (Bevir and Blakely 2018: 9) and story-telling as central tenet to human existence (e.g. Fisher 1984; Hammack and Pilecki 2012; Harari 2014; MacIntyre 1981).

The comparative strategy employed for the dissertation was systematic and contextualised (see Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2014). One, the method is 'systematic' because in both cases, I am looking at the same phenomenon (armed conflict). I pose the same questions and use one conceptual framework across both cases. Furthermore, the actors were chosen on the basis of their common characteristics. Both have analogous institutional (parliamentary democracy), army (nuclear arsenal, advanced equipment, well-trained forces, indigenous military technology) and economic profile (developed states, highly-globalised, robust high-tech, financial and academic sectors). They share national identifications as being a part of the West (Porter 2018; Smootha 2002). Secondly, the comparison is 'contextualised', since I concentrated on examining the role of vulnerability narratives. Reflecting the interpretive epistemology, instead of investigating "experience-distant concepts" (Geertz 1974: 28) which are operationalised as "variables abstracted from the lived experience they represent" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 18), I focused on localising and exploring vulnerability politics *in situ*. I looked at how they are being used in the field and how they are understood by the actors themselves (Becker 1998; Fuji 2008; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2014).

I employed two separate research processes which - while being disparate methods - overlapped by informing and shaping one another. One, I conducted an analysis of primary (Israel and UK's public communication such as speeches, commentaries, press conferences)

and secondary sources on both of the conflicts (e.g. books, reports, media and academic articles). Second, over a series of field trips, I have conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 32 British and 38 Israeli state officials.

By using different data sources (a diverse group of Israeli/British participants, range of textual and audio-visual data), methods of data generation (interviews, documents) and points of ‘observation’ (two conflicts) I triangulated my findings. Namely, the research design allowed for validation of the robustness of the study’s knowledge claims by showing similarities and intertextuality of vulnerability narratives across different contexts (see Schwartz-Shea 2014).

The analysis of states’ public communication allowed me to develop case-specific knowledge about vulnerability narratives’ role during both conflicts. The process led to the recognition that both Israel and the UK dramatized themselves as vulnerable. This led to the adoption of the perspective of dramaturgical sociology for the dissertation (Goffman 1978). I argued that the strive for the resilience of identity (and OS in general) can be explored by focusing on states’ presentation of self. To justify their policies, actors are engaged in performative actions that present their claimed situatedness to the audience.

By looking at the states’ practices, the investigation has examined my preliminary research expectations and further advanced the study by nuancing my understanding and theorising about the vulnerability narratives. It allowed me to explore the politics of vulnerability in the unique context of both case studies. Furthermore, it led to designing a more refined research toolset. Based on this provisional sense-making, I conceptualised that strong states aspire to dramatize their standing as precarious. This claim was developed in a bottom-up manner. It came about through the observation of strong states employment of vulnerability narratives. Both Israel and the UK ‘acted out’ their vulnerability identification. The storytelling about their situation was not solely conveyed through written or spoken

accounts. Both states - to position themselves as vulnerable - used audio-visual materials, arranged presentations and conferences. Their 'vulnerability-talk' had performative qualities because it was adjusted to the needs of different audiences. Dramaturgy captures the richness of tools that together brought about the master narrative of vulnerability (Shenhav 2015: 24-25). The concept was a sense-making tool, an analytical and empirical marker that was case-specific (Becker 1998: 132). It accounted for the performative characteristics of strong states self-descriptions.

Following the Chicago School's principle on taking theories to the field (see Vidich and Lyman 2000), my interpretation of strong states' vulnerability narratives was further investigated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with 70 Israeli and British state officials (in total). The interviews served as the dissertation's internal evaluative method supporting the study's reflexivity and trustworthiness (Schwartz-Shea 2014). I employed textual vignettes with real-life examples of states' vulnerability narratives from either 2014 OPE (interviews with Israelis) or the 2003 invasion of Iraq (British officials). This allowed me to externally review 'states' talk' and cross-check it with my research expectations. Furthermore, the informant's responses themselves employed vulnerability narratives and at times were engaged in behaviour leading to the dramatization of states standing as precarious. Thus, the interviews themselves generated a unique source of data about the politics of vulnerability. This moved the study from remote reflection (Molotch 1994: 223) about political practice, to sense-making derived from actors with local knowledge.

Results

Note on the project's reflexivity

One of the greatest threats awaiting researchers conducting studies of states' identity is the folly of essentialisation of actor's collective self. Soon after I started doing my

fieldwork in Israel and the UK, I was increasingly self-aware that I did not avoid this trap. My initial expectations, as well as the positivist theoretical outlook, were quickly challenged by the conversations with the study participants and had to be discarded. The key mistake I had to reflexively⁵¹ reconsider was thinking too instrumentally about the phenomenon of strong countries employing vulnerability narratives. In the beginning, my thinking about this practice naturally gravitated towards all-encompassing “*cui bono?*”. Only after seeing the Israeli and British state officials themselves, I realized that concentrating on the potential utility of vulnerability narratives, in the context of statecraft is a gross simplification.

It is true that many of the officials I have interviewed had a rather cynical view of some of their state’s practices. For example, Jerry (2020) who in 2003 was one of the key advisors to PM Blair, argued that London’s employment of vulnerability narratives before the invasion of Iraq allowed to “shape complacency”. - There was a very strong feeling that you had to add some colour – he explained. Simultaneously, time and again my interlocutors were either rejecting my own instrumental readings of vulnerability pronouncements or insisted on refining my understanding of this theme in the British/Israeli politics. Importantly, most participants, whether they agreed or not with the general tone of public communication during 2014 OPE or the 2003 invasion of Iraq, they tried to qualify (“you are forgetting”), explain (“you must understand”), justify (“we are not criminals”), or just contextualise (“let me tell you about”) the state self-presentations we were discussing. Naturally, in many cases, it could be argued that such an approach was a form of post-factum justification of their role in the controversial military conflicts. However, also members of the opposition were rejecting Machiavellian understanding of their states’ vulnerability narratives.

When the group of assistants of Knesset politicians affiliated with two left-wing parties decided to explain to me the intricate nature of the Israeli vulnerabilities, they were in

⁵¹ On the role of reflexivity in checking researcher’s sense-making see e.g. Fuji 2010; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012.

a rush. We were talking during their smoking break at one of many beautiful courtyards hidden within Knesset walls. – The issue of Israeli's vulnerability and fears is one of the central obstacles facing the country's left agenda – one of the assistants told me. – No. It is THE central obstacle we are facing – corrected his colleague. – It is hard to explain in such a short time – continued the previous interlocutor – but the predicament of the left is also a predicament of the Israeli psyche. Politically, while on the TV we are derogating situations when the government is manipulatively using vulnerability speech, back at home we are very well aware of the fact that the nation is feeling vulnerable. – So, is this then a manipulation if it reflects how the people are feeling – I ask. – You do not understand! It can be both. We are vulnerable but we are also using this theme to be powerful. To use our power we have to speak to our weaknesses. But also, we would not use our power if we would not feel vulnerable – he argued.

While I have to admit that even after spending years studying vulnerability narratives of strong states, I still cannot comfortably say that I intuitively grasp all the complex and often contradictory processes that drive states to self-identify as vulnerable, I do not try to simply rationalise this phenomenon anymore. Collective identity processes are not driven by universal laws and cannot be simplified to a causal 'equation'. The attempts to put two and two together – to come up with an overarching theme driving politics of vulnerability – is bound to fail. In the realm of states' identity-seeking, we have to stop looking for a single logic. Instead, it is much better to focus on noticing the internal tensions, contradictions and inconsistencies we notice in the ways how states present themselves. While such moments will not provide us with a universal key that will solve the puzzle of all different shades of vulnerability politics, they will be offering contextual insights into particular drives behind those instances of vulnerability self-identifications. Identities are neither simple tools of the pursuit of power nor some form of atavistic self-expression.

The dramaturgy of strong states' vulnerability

The analysis of the state's public communication has confirmed dramaturgical use of vulnerability narratives by Israel during the 2014 OPE and the UK during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. While I found that vulnerability narratives were one of the dominating themes and self-identifications used throughout both conflicts, their employment was audience-dependent. Israel expressed vulnerability predominantly for the foreign audience while the UK presented itself as vulnerable mostly for the British public. Also, the public officials confirmed that the employment of this identification by their countries had performative characteristics. While they presented a broad spectrum of views as to whether this theme was an inevitable identification or a cynical political manipulation, most recognised that vulnerability narratives allowed the state to underscore the precarity of its situatedness to the audiences. The ingrained dramaturgy of state's vulnerability self-identifications was directly emerging in participants' interpretations of this phenomenon ("perceptual combat", "propaganda", "political spin") as well indirectly – through the employment of terminology associated with performance ("framing", "acting out", "audience"). Lastly, during our interactions, some informants themselves employed vulnerability narratives in their presentation of the state. As was in the case of Hugh, a former key member of Blair's cabinet and architect of the invasion. In response to my email with an interview inquiry, in the first sentence of his response he dramaturgically asked what do I wish to know about the:

"the events of 2003 regarding the UK's involvement in the international action against the corrupt and brutal regime in Iraq suspected of developing and being prepared to use WMD?" (Hugh, private correspondence 07.10.2020)

Ontological insecurity of conflicts

The study's participants confirmed that the 2003 invasion of Iraq and 2014 OPE were a source of ontological insecurity for the UK and Israel, respectively. Israeli officials

generally considered the intractable nature of conflicts with Palestinians as a main ideational challenge to the state, a source of anxieties about the values and character of the state.

Repeated military operations against significantly weaker Hamas – such as OPE – were considered an obstacle to the state’s positive image abroad. British informants highlighted that the invasion of Iraq was a source of controversies and mass protests in the country. The war disrupted established identifications of the UK being a liberal champion of international cooperation and a safe, isolated island-nation.

Anxiety reduction through vulnerability narratives

These findings were crucial for investigating the dissertation’s central theoretical expectation that vulnerability narratives addressed ontological security deficits of both states. Fieldwork allowed for a bottom-up (see Soss 2014) examination of the states’ practices. Interviews provided evidence that vulnerability narratives perpetuated the identity of Israel and the UK by reducing anxiety stemming from armed conflict against a much weaker opponent. Consequently, they have supported my interpretation of textual and audio-visual data.

Since the British public had reservations about the legitimacy of the invasion and was unwilling to identify with unprovoked aggression, presenting the state as vulnerable became an autobiographical foundation of the war. Such narratives provided justification, made the war “knowable” (Mitzen 2006: 354) by depicting it as coherent with British values and identifications. For Israel, vulnerability narratives addressed legitimacy deficits by levelling the playfield between strong Israel and weak Hamas. They gave meaning to the offensive action and provided moral credentials to the foreign audience.

The participants supported and nuanced my understanding of mechanisms through which vulnerability narratives reduced Israel’s and the UK’s ontological insecurity. The

studies highlighted that both actors - by presenting themselves as vulnerable - compartmentalised and rationalised their armed operations. Those two functions answer how this self-presentation allowed the strong states' identity to be maintained.

Compartmentalisation

By employing vulnerability narratives both actors attempted to separate themselves from the unequal nature of the fight. This self-presentation allowed them to focus on the ingroup's own needs and evade negative perceptions or external critique of the military operations. Vulnerability narratives essentially served as a foundation for dissonance avoidance (see Lupovici 2012; Steele 2005).

Rationalisation

Furthermore, vulnerability narratives provided meaning and cognitive coherence between states' identifications and offensive actions. They have put processes of rationalisation in motion which support strong actor with explanations and justifications for the war against a weaker opponent. They gave a sense of urgency and inevitability to the chosen policy.

The compartmentalisation has primarily an evasive function. Vulnerability narratives allow the actor to discount unwanted information that could disrupt ontological security. The rationalising functions of this theme mean that it provides legitimising meaning to the offensive action. Both functions show that this identification is a trust-building mechanism. Namely, that for privileged actors - such as Israel or the UK - claiming vulnerability in the time of conflict with a weak opponent, provides positive meaning to the contentious action. It gives the policy a sense of continuity with the state's past and allows it to disregard potentially disruptive messages. This coheres the action with the state's autobiography.

While references to uncertainty could (and for some citizens, they did) challenge an individual's sense of being, due to actors' military superiority, vulnerability narratives do not

jeopardize the identity of the collective. After all, for powerful actors, unexpected does not have to disrupt its identity: “vulnerability events can be explained within familiar interpretative frameworks” (Misztal 2012: 226). Consequently, instead of erosion of basic trust, vulnerability narratives provide an understanding of the state’s actions.

Special agency of vulnerability narratives

The second major finding of the dissertation confirmed that by presenting themselves as vulnerable, Israel and the UK aspired to receive special agency. Vulnerability narratives had a securitising function because they allowed both actors to frame Hamas/Iraq as posing threat to their wellbeing. Consequently, they were a form of a request for employing extraordinary measures. By presenting themselves as precarious and insecure allowed both states to act more freely against weaker opponents.

Interviews, as well as an analysis of the textual and audio-visual materials, confirmed that the special agency of vulnerability narratives has two components.

Weakness

First, by acting out vulnerable, strong actors questioned their superior status. Vulnerability narratives allowed the actors to present the enemy as a source of threat. Israel and the UK dramatized their standing and presented their military operations as an inevitability, a logical outcome of their precarious standing. This contextualised their actions as a response to injustice (“we are hitting back”). By portraying itself as insecure, Israel and the UK wanted to mobilize support for their operations.

Strength

Secondly, after pointing out the threat, both strong actors offered a solution. Namely, neutralisation of the source of insecurity. The weakness was a foundation for strength, a

source of agency. Vulnerability narratives laid the ground for employing concrete actions against the enemy.

Resilience of identity

Vulnerability narratives are a unique and potent tool of statecraft. The dissertation provides evidence that they have protected the identity of Israel and the UK in times of ‘ontological crisis’. Acting out this identification allowed them to mitigate anxiety stemming from warfare with the much weaker opponent by underscoring strong states’ physical insecurities. By dramatizing their situatedness, they presented their actions as a response to dire threat and made them congruent with the ideational apparatus of the state. This finding contributes to the ontological security studies by accounting for the resilience of identity.

Israel’s and the UK’s behaviour and driving it motivations show that both states have pursued actions that lead to the disruptions of their self-esteem. Both, invasion of Iraq as well as OPE were the major source of controversies. They were costly, were fought against much weaker opponents. The lack of a mandate of the international community was a source of cognitive dissonance for some officials and citizens. The operations have addressed Israel’s and the UK’s needs for physical security – after all, Tel Aviv was responding to rocket attacks from Gaza, while London wanted to retain its special alliance with Washington. However, they were also a source of guilt and problems for positive perceptions of self-identity (see Giddens 1991: 64-65). War with the underdog brought cognitive instability and thus has led to ontological security deficits.

To deal with the anxiety, both Israel and the UK presented themselves as vulnerable. This allowed them to be flexible about the needs of their self-identity (see Browning and Joenniemi 2017). Namely, to go on with the ontologically disruptive military operations, by providing an identity-sustaining meaning of this action. This behaviour illustrates the resilience of identity because it reflects:

- The adaptability of autobiographies to the state's evolving behaviour and ideational needs
- Insusceptibility to the critique of its actions

During the initial phases of the dissertation, I conceptualised two possible key pathways of resilient identity. First, actors present their actions as reflecting state identifications. Secondly, they innovate their storytelling while keeping it in line with the core autobiographical apparatus of the actor. The dissertation has confirmed the general validity of this expectation by exposing important divergence in the use of vulnerability narratives by Israel and the UK. For more details, see the following section of the dissertation.

9.3. Comparing and contrasting the results

By looking at Israel's and UK's self-presentation, I have analysed the war-time employment of vulnerability narratives across different settings. While both countries share many characteristics – especially the considerable military potential – their use of vulnerability narratives partially differed and played a distinctive role in actors' broader self-identifications. The comparison of similar actors, both operating in the context of armed conflict, allowed me to account for features of vulnerability narratives that were intracase and intercase specific. This led to an exposal of the role - diverging motivations, biographical requirements and geopolitical considerations - play in states' use of this theme.

At the same time, the dissertation has found important commonalities between Israel's and the UK's performance. The fact that many practices of vulnerability politics were not case-specific, highlights that this identification may be used as a *sui-generis* concept for the study of statecraft. A practice which application is not customary or limited to a few distinct events, but a phenomenon that is more prevalent in international relations. For example, as

argued by Slater, metaphors pointing out the precarity of the international security and vulnerability of the US were used throughout the Cold War to justify multiple American military and political decisions such as the war in Vietnam or intervention in Greece in 1947. US politicians explained the state's operations abroad by warning their constituents about the possible domino effect of whole regions coming under the influence of communism. To point out that the security in Chicago or Seattle is dependent on what is going on in South Asia or Western Europe, they used different persuasive metaphors to underscore the volatility of global politics. They talked about "fingers in the dike, the cork in the bottle, the keystone in the arch, the weakest links in the chain, spreading rot or cancer, an inexorable chain reaction, and more" (Slater 1993: 188).

The intra-case similarities have confirmed that the concept of vulnerability narratives can 'travel' across different contexts (see Ragin 2004). Meaning, that despite country-specific characteristics, vulnerability narratives were used with the same general purpose of strengthening the resilience of actors' identities. Comparative analysis shows that both countries have used this theme performatively and have based it on referents to both – ingroup and outgroup vulnerabilities. Furthermore, the actors presented themselves as precarious to offset existential anxieties caused by military operations against the enemy. This finding suggests that the politics of vulnerability ought to be studied as a distinct tool of statecraft.

On the other hand, the dissimilarities between the use of vulnerability narratives by Israel and the UK, have confirmed that state's practices supporting ontological security can be highly adaptable and at times, even a source of innovation.

I compare and contrast Israel's and the UK's self-presentation in two parts. First, I explain the common attributes of both states' vulnerability narratives. I show that both Israel's and the UK's war-time use of vulnerability narratives was deployed performatively.

Furthermore, that those actors establish their vulnerable image on an assemblage of ingroup and outgroup vulnerabilities. Lastly, I discuss that in both cases vulnerability narratives had the same general goal. Namely, to shield the state from disruption of ontological security caused by the critique of offensive operations. The second section is devoted to the differences between Israel and the UK's employment of this identification. I am talking about how the audience has differently influenced the state's behaviour and how the situatedness of performers reflected the distinctive use of vulnerability narratives. Finally, I am showing how precarity plays a distinct historical role in broader Israel's and the UK's national self-identifications. This allows me to explain the different ways of how states protect their identity while being engaged in controversial actions.

Similarities

Israel's 2014 OPE and the UK's 2003 invasion of Iraq were disrupting the ontological security of both analysed actors. This finding confirmed the general trustworthiness of the comparative approach to vulnerability narratives of both actors. Generally, both cases had a high level of intercase convergence. The textual and audio-visual analysis as well as the interviews with states' officials have exposed the dramaturgical characteristics of strong states' vulnerability narratives. Both Israel and the UK had to carry out acts that would allow them to dramatize themselves as insecure.

Many vulnerabilities

The dissertation has determined that the vulnerability self-presentation of both actors was actually constructed through references to different insecurities. Together they formed an image of Israel/the UK as being in a precarious position. Israel's vulnerable image was built through references to the vulnerability of Israeli citizens but also Palestinians and the West.

The UK referred to four vulnerabilities – of the state, the government, the international community and the Iraqis.

It is important to underline that one of the elements that were accentuating the urgency and insecurity of the strong state was the vulnerability of the enemy's civilian populations. Speaking to the Newspaper Society Foreign Secretary Jack Straw gave gruesome descriptions of the brutality of the Iraqi regime and underlined that while “There are no TV cameras in Saddam's torture chambers or in the darkest corners of Baghdad (...) the suffering and oppression are real” (2003d). Furthermore, despite OPE and the invasion of Iraq being fought against different entities with separate political goals, both London and Tel Aviv presented their wars as an integral element of the struggle for the future of the Western civilisation and the democratic, liberal global order. Addressing the Security Council, Israel's Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, David Roet emphasized that “The entire civilized world has a stake in the outcome” of the war in Gaza (2014).

This shows that the construction of identifications of states' vulnerability is based on references to both, in-group but also out-group vulnerabilities. The finding suggests that the formation of collective vulnerability is multidimensional and can be derived from a wide range of referents - not necessarily rooted in the traditional collective identifications. Also, that states' vulnerability identifications can be based on threats of victimisation of others, or broader groups (such as the West) the state identifies as being part of.

Importantly, the fact that Israel's and the UK's self-presentations were comprised of multiple distinct vulnerability narratives, shows that it was the states' identifications that were the key target of this practice. What was bringing together references to external and internal vulnerabilities was the state itself and the way how those narratives influenced Israel's/UK's understanding of self. The point of convergence for vulnerability narratives was the actors' need for ontological security. Namely, by referring to multiple different

vulnerabilities, the state's self-presentation gained deeper meaning to its constituents and was easier to identify with. The multiplicity of vulnerabilities grounded the state's actions in the context that was speaking to a broad range of collective sensibilities and needs. This allowed people to understand the state's way of being and supported the ontological security of the country.

Resilient identity

While at times, both Israel and the UK abstained from vulnerability narratives (see the following subsection on differences between cases), when the actors were employing this theme, they did it in the same manner. Namely, they supported ontological security by presenting themselves as a moral actor dealing with vital threats, which meant to increase in-group trust (Misztal 2012). Vulnerability pronouncements were a story-telling mechanism that ought to provide understanding, justification and context to the hostilities Israel and the UK were involved in. In both cases, the actors manifested their ongoing pursuit of ideational resilience and strived to shield the state from the critique of its actions. It allowed the strong actor to securitize the weak enemy while retaining positive self-identification. For example, this process was well summarised by Ann, the Labour MP who voted against the invasion of Iraq. In her opinion, vulnerability narratives helped the UK:

“to portray us and the Americans as the good guys. That we have done everything we could to be seen as reasonable in relations to Hussein and therefore that we had no alternative but to invade” (2020).

Differences

While both Israel and the UK have used vulnerability narratives dramaturgically to provide meaning and legitimacy to offensive actions, their performances differed. This

reflected a unique historical role precarity played for both states. Furthermore, it exposed how the current geopolitical standing of actor shapes when strong states are inclined to draw on vulnerability self-identifications.

Audience

The study has shown the central role audience plays in performative practices bringing about vulnerability narratives. For Israel and the UK, it was the character of the auditors that functioned as the main determinant behind the use/avoidance of vulnerability identifications. Tel Aviv was foremost projecting insecurity to the international community while London focused on British audiences.

Israeli officials, when speaking to the international community, used vulnerability narratives as central identification and an important performative tool of the state. Also, the MFA and diplomatic corps emphasized the gravity of threats Israel was facing. However, while speaking to the Israeli audiences, this dramatization was largely absent.

In the case of the UK, the use of vulnerability politics was inverted. It was employed for an internal not external audience. For example, after gaining the mandate for the invasion, Blair has generally abstained from using vulnerability narratives in communication to foreign audiences. Instead, he accentuated that the war has paved the way for the development of Iraq.

This divergence accentuates that state actors' need for ontological security ought to be theorised at two levels. The state to sustain its existence makes "being in the world" (Innes and Steele 2014: 16) understandable and meaningful to the collective internally and externally. First, it is a source of collective identifications, an institutional framework that is considered to embody the society itself (see Kinnvall 2004). Secondly, the state is a member

of the international community. This means, that its ontological security is also predicated on the perceptions of others (Steele 2005; Zarakol 2010; Zarakol and Subotić 2012).

Differences in the performative employment of vulnerability show that Israel's and the UK's anxieties had a different source. The UK projected its 'vulnerability' inwards, thus showing elites own insecurity about the democratic support for the invasion of Iraq. Consequently, London's designation of Bagdad as a source of the threat was top-down.

On the other hand, Israel did not enact precarity to the constituents. It was the border communities located close to Gaza that emphasized the importance of offensive action. This shows that in Israel, the securitisation of the enemy was bottom-up. Namely, society generally shared the view of being vulnerable and considered Hamas as a source of danger. That is why the government did not have to further accentuate the threats to the collective and instead focused on projecting resilience.

This finding shows that the dramaturgical employment of vulnerability is selective and context-dependent. Israel and the UK presented themselves as insecure foremost to the audiences that were a source of anxiety about actors' military operations. After all, the ontological security of a country is based on interactions with others: "Like individuals, the state or other groups are social actors, constructing a sense of Self against, with and amongst others" (Innes and Steele 2014: 17). For London (after failing to secure a UN mandate for the invasion) the greatest source of unease about the invasion came from within the state. The government had to deal with the critique of war from its own party members and voters. Multiple participants directly argued that without employing vulnerability identifications, the UK would not go to war. In Eric's opinion (one of the key British officers in Iraq and a military hero) this posturing "created a credible cause of war" (2019). Hugh, who was one of the government's most vocal advocates of the invasion admitted that it "would probably not be possible for the British public to go Iraq without pointing out the threat" (2020).

For Israel domestically its offensive actions were not as controversial. This suggests that while intractable conflict with Palestinians, as well as repeated military confrontations in Gaza, are a source of ontological insecurity for Israel, the 2014 OPE has not led to severe internal anxiety of the society. Israelis were in a different position than British citizens. Their territory was directly targeted by Hamas rockets. Consequently, the justification for conflict was more pronounced. Israelis rallied around the flag and did not question the state's authority and legitimacy as was in the British case. It was the perceptions of the international community of the war in Gaza that were the source of ontological insecurity. This was confirmed in the interviews with Israeli officials. Participants often argued that the international community treats the country unjustly - applying double standards to the state's actions in the region. As explained by Matan, a former colonel of the IDF and director of a key Israeli think tank:

"The world does not understand enough Jewish sacrifice (...) Even world leaders are quite ignorant. They concentrate on the fact we are strong; they argue that we are safe that we do not have to worry and carry out operations against Hamas" (2019).

That is why Zach, one of the former key decision-makers at the Ministry for Strategic Affairs believed the state has to show "the price the Israelis pay":

"We have to turn the focus of the international community on the misbehaviour of Hamas. To act we need to show that it is breaching international norms. This justifies and legitimizes our retaliation" (2019).

This interpretation was supported by Uri, an Israeli diplomat and former ambassador who argued that:

"Expressing vulnerability can be useful (...) If you highlight, emphasize the fact that the state is more vulnerable than it really is, it may help abroad" (2018).

Performer

This investigation has shown that the responsibilities of the performer played an important role in the employment of vulnerability narratives. This was most visible in the

context of the differences in which Israeli and British militaries used this identification. The former actor produced multiple materials accentuating precarity and victimisation of Israelis. The latter has almost completely abstained from any such references.

This difference may reflect the fact that IDF traditionally plays a key role in Israel's public diplomacy (Hadari and Turgeman 2018) while the British military is rather absent from the state's political messaging abroad (see Fisher 2009). UK's armed forces in 2003 played a more traditional role in the state's information policies. During the invasion of Iraq, the coverage of the warfare was left to journalists who were allowed to join some of the British formations. On the other hand, the IDF during the 2014 war was a producer of robust audio-visual coverage of the conflict. Its spokesperson's unit played a role in a broader country's information campaign. Consequently, the IDF may have emphasized the vulnerability of Israelis in order to gain international legitimacy for its military operation.

Such discrepancy points out the fundamentally different self-understandings of both actors. For British commanders, emphasizing military victims would have underlined the precarity of the decision to enter the expeditionary war to the already sceptical British public. In the Israeli context, the military did not have to focus its efforts on convincing its citizens. The Israeli civilian "home front" – being exposed to Hamas rockets – has generally considered the operation as an act of self-defence.

Two pathways of resilient identity

Lastly, it is important to notice the different roles vulnerability narratives played in the broader self-identifications of Israel and the UK. This motif in the British context was a form of ideational innovation, a novel element in its biographical storytelling. As was underlined by the study's participants, since the end of WWII the UK was not threatened by the ground invasion of its territory. Vulnerability and insecurity did not play a central role in the contemporary history and ethos of the nation. For Israel, the vulnerability was not a

novelty but rather a form of *topos*. Namely, a conventional theme used over the decades to describe the state's past and present standing (see Bar-Tal 1998; Segev 2000). Consequently, Israel when using this self-presentation was referring to a rich repository of historical identifications and experiences that buttressed the ontological security of the state. The state was bringing about its victimhood, sense of isolation and sacrifice. While it is true that the UK has also based its vulnerability narratives on historical references. However, in comparison, British rhetoric was constricted. Speaking about the past, the state leaders mostly referred to the country's existential WWII struggle.

The context and use of vulnerability narratives by Israel and the UK confirms one of the main theoretical expectations of the dissertation. Namely, that resilient identity is not predicated on one mode of action. I have proposed that there are two main pathways that allow the state to protect their identity while acting in a way that causes disruptions to its self-identification. First, actors present their modified behaviour as reflecting state identifications. Secondly, they innovate their storytelling while keeping it in line with the core autobiographical apparatus of the actor.

The gathered evidence shows that Israel's actions fulfil the description of the former pathway, while the UK's the latter. Israel's employment of vulnerability narratives allowed the state to bridge its offensive actions with the collective ideals and values that are considered foundational to the state. For example, by claiming to be vulnerable it invigorated the deep-seated victimhood of the nation (Zertal 2005). Vulnerability narratives spoke to and manifested the collective fears and memories about uncertainty and precarity of one's existence. This identification was used to argue that the war in Gaza is in line with what the country is standing for. Which in David's opinion (one of the Israeli top military officials) means "courage, wisdom and morality" as well as the idea that the state's use of force is

defensive (2018). Consequently, during the war country officials focused on presenting the war as just, legitimate and the state's use of force as proportionate.

Israel was not – like in the case of the UK – including a new form of identification. After all, the country's foundational story was established on recognition of Jewish vulnerability. As described by Anna, expert training IDF's military leadership, states' *raison d'être* is based on survival:

"It is our fate since biblical times. First, we had the Egyptians and Pharaoh, waves of native tribes we fought against, we had Greeks and the Romans, then pogroms and now we are fighting with the Arabs" (2019).

On the other hand, the UK's vulnerability narratives ought to be treated rather as a biographical innovation. In the years before the invasion, the country's leadership was rather boastful about the UK's international and domestic standing. As summarised by Morgan, who in 2003 was one of the key British diplomats: the country has "grown used to the fact that there are no threats to our security" (2019).

Consequently, Britain followed the second resilient pathway. Vulnerability identification was added to the already existing tapestry of self-perceptions such as internationalism, humanitarianism. While this self-portrayal was new and thus could be disruptive to the state's way of being in the world, British leaders used every opportunity to embed claims of vulnerability with key country's identifications. For example, that is why they have insisted on enforcing its liberal values. Victor, a former senior British Army officer explains that London combined both, its values with the fear of vulnerability: "[they were] drumming up every argument – of ethical foreign policy and arguments of national interest" (2020).

9.4. The novelty of the thesis

In this dissertation, I have brought together concepts that are rarely considered to be going hand in hand. Answering why secure and powerful actors, at times of war employ narratives of vulnerability in their public communication, I have associated vulnerability references with ontological security. To better understand how strong states can sustain their identity, I have shown the securitising power of vulnerability narratives. Simply put, I have found that a strong state's references to precarity and potential to being harmed, induce trust and enhance political agency of the actor.

While it may seem odd that countries support freedom of their actions and keep at bay societal "existential anxieties" (Kinnval 2004: 746) by referring to collective vulnerabilities, actually we should not be that surprised. After all, as shown by psychologists, people are foremost driven by their fear of losing what they have (e.g. Kahneman and Tversky 1979). As argued by Brown, it is a mistake we consider vulnerability as a weakness and instead should associate it with agency and strength (Brown 2012). This is echoed by Koselleck's argument that the group's recognition of our precarity is a potent source of historical progress (2002). Finally, politics of vulnerability has particular application in conflicts since it is visions of dread, not of victory that are the strongest motivator in warfare (Clausewitz 2006: Book IV, Ch. X).

The novelty of the dissertation exists in the fact that no research so far has considered analysing vulnerability narratives as a distinct practice of statecraft. Furthermore, that there is little evidence about the strong states' war-time use of this identification. Lastly, the enquiry was based on an innovative interviewing technique. I used real-life vignettes of the state's public communication. This approach facilitated research into vulnerability narratives - a subset of states' identifications that generally is considered to be off-limits in discussions with the outsiders.

The tool of statecraft

To my knowledge, the dissertation is the first systematic study of the state's employment of vulnerability narratives in its policymaking. Focusing on armed conflicts, I contribute to our understanding of vulnerability narratives as a unique tool of statecraft and warcraft. We know that references to one's precarity and victimisation were historically present in strong (e.g. Nakano 2013; Pratkanis 2009) and weak actors' self-identifications (e.g. Hintjens 2008). However, so far, the studies have abstained from conceptualising vulnerability narratives as a separate tool of political agency. Furthermore, while conflict studies provide some understanding of the effects of political actor's war-time employment of precarity-self identifications, they concentrated on weak belligerents (e.g. Honig and Reichard 2018; Kuperman 2009). With its focus on Israel and the UK, this dissertation shifts our attention to a more puzzling practice of the strong states use of vulnerability narratives.

Strong state's vulnerability

- The perception that vulnerability is weakness is the most widely accepted myth about vulnerability – argues Brown (2012). Experimental research confirms that - both on the individual (Bruk, Scholl and Bless 2018), as well as group level (Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards 2007) – being perceived as vulnerable, can be beneficial. Also, in conflict settings, the underdog status was an effective tool of garnering support (Kuperman 2009; Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards 2007). However, so far, the evidence about the state's use of identifications of vulnerability is scarce. The only systemic studies into practices of political actors' employment of self-descriptions of weakness and precarity are limited to weak entities (Crawford and Kuperman 2006; Honig and Reichard 2018). The existing scholarship

has shown that substate groups gain legitimacy and support for their goals from references to their vulnerability. This dissertation provided evidence that strong, internationally recognised states, also try to gain legitimacy by accentuating their precarity.

Vignette-based interviews

The dissertation offers a multidisciplinary theory of the role vulnerability narratives plays in the strong states' warcraft. Its findings are based on a research design that allowed for the exploration of the practice in local knowledge terms. I have analysed the role of vulnerability narratives in war-time statecraft not only by looking at the actors' self-identifications (textual, audio-visual data, secondary sources) but also by 'talking to the state'. The role of the vulnerability narratives in statecraft was explored in conversations with the representatives of 38 Israeli and 32 British officials.

What distinguishes the study from International Relations enquiries into the role identity plays in global politics, was the employment of the vignette's technique. During the interviews, I showed real examples of Israel's and the UK's wartime vulnerability narratives. This stimulus material allowed me to quickly establish the credibility of my research focus and discourage participant's potential disregard for the role vulnerability plays in state's politics (see Sampson and Johannessen 2020). Such a mode of inquiry let me explore the phenomenon that most officials initially were reluctant to speak about.

9.5. Contributions of the thesis

Overall, the dissertation makes several noteworthy contributions. I have decided to divide them into three sections. However, this compartmentalisation was done solely for the clarity of the argument. Naturally, the outlined separation between "vulnerability studies",

“International Relations” and “ontological security studies” is a titular exercise in editorial housekeeping.

Contribution to vulnerability studies

A new conceptualisation of vulnerability

The dissertation’s key empirical and theoretical findings of Israel’s and the UK’s war-time employment of vulnerability narratives contribute to the ongoing debates about the politics of vulnerability. The fact that it is puzzling why powerful actors aspired to be seen as insecure in times when they were involved in costly and challenging armed conflicts highlighted that we are ill-equipped to understand this phenomenon. The study was a response to this problem. The dissertation provides a theoretical framework that allows us to better explain the role vulnerability plays in international relations.

The approaches offered by some of the disciplines that traditionally focused on vulnerability are not sufficient. Namely, they do not provide the tools necessary to account for and understand the strong actors’ active pursuit of vulnerability status. Criminology and social work (e.g. Hale 1996; Killias 1990; Killias and Clerici 2000), gender (e.g. MacKenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2013) and environmental studies (e.g. Frumkin et al., 2008; Gemenne et al., 2014) predominantly consider vulnerability as an individual/group condition that ought to be alleviated. While they do sometimes account for the possibility of politicisation of vulnerability (e.g. Thomas and Warner 2019), their disciplinary position naturally predisposes them to treat vulnerability as a societal problem. Political theory is not much of help, since – as argued by Nussbaum (2001) and Shildrick (2000) - our Western epistemology is based on seeing vulnerability as a flaw, source of shame and sign of failure. So far in the field of International Relations, vulnerability appears rarely and traditionally is

equated with lack of political agency (Keohane and Nye 1977; Walt 1990; Wendt 1999) or reason of state's "self-defeating behaviour" (Kupchan 1994: 486-487). While new International Relations scholarship has drawn attention to vulnerability, its focus was on discussing vulnerability as an ethical dilemma and a challenge of global society (Clark 2013; Russell-Beattie and Schick 2013).

The novelty of the dissertation lays within its unique research focus. I did not treat vulnerability as a condition. After all, this perspective is most suitable for the normative or problem-solving scholarship. Instead, when looking at the vulnerability narratives of strong states, I considered them as a form of identity claim⁵². This approach was tailored to the political context of the states' employment of vulnerability narratives - precisely because it exposed the political dimension of this concept. It accounted for the interactionism and intersubjectivity of vulnerability. After all, in the social and political environment, group status is not a given. It is an outcome of ongoing processes of presentation of self to others. My interest laid within the processes that lead to states presenting themselves as vulnerable. The dissertation problematized our understanding of vulnerability and contributed to the ongoing debates on the politics of vulnerability.

New analytical approach

Aside from novel research orientation, I proposed an analytical approach that is particularly suitable for the research of the role vulnerability identifications play in the politics of the state. Drawing on interactionist sociology, I have focused on the performative dimension of Israel's and the UK's vulnerability narratives. I interpreted states as performers who foster the impressions of who they are (Goffman 1978). This approach reflects the

⁵² Links between vulnerability and identity in international politics are also pointed out by Steele (2013), Gammon (2013) and Nakano (2013).

dialectical and representational character of political identifications which were at the heart of the thesis. Consequently, it was particularly well suited to the study of the role identity plays in international relations. The finding that Israel's and the UK's use of vulnerability narratives was dramaturgical, validated my decision to employ the concept of identity in the study of this practice. A sociological approach to states behaviour showed that in the political context vulnerability is a form of group identification. As such, it had interactionist qualities – it ought to be 'played out' by the state to the audiences. Furthermore, it had political consequences. Strong states by presenting themselves as vulnerable, influenced and shaped how they are seen and what they can do.

Dramaturgical analysis has its advocates in the International Relations discipline (Schimmelfenning 2002) and it has been fruitfully utilised in the study of global politics (Salter 2008). However, it has never been used in research on vulnerability. The dissertation confirmed that it can be a highly generative approach to the study of this phenomenon in politics. By focusing on the performative dimension of vulnerability, I have employed a mode of inquiry that allowed me to abstract from the question about the authenticity of states' vulnerability. I did not seek answers as to whether Israeli or British state vulnerability narratives accurately reflected the social identity (Tajfel 1974) of their people.

This does not mean I discount the salience of the ethical dimension of political identities. However, I recognise that applying the concept of identity to the analysis of state may lead to homogenisation of states character (Steele 2008; also Wendt 1994). Namely a simplification of the complex and multifaceted process behind the formation of state identifications. The identity of the state is never complete, it is constantly contested and ought rather to be understood as an "uneasy composite of multiple self-identifications" (Lebow 2014: 179). Consequently, in the context of states identifications, the question of 'realness' of vulnerability narratives – while being a fascinating ontological puzzle – is an epistemological

trap. Since, all that states claim to be is an ever-politicised, ever-changing interpretation of polity. Accordingly, the dramaturgical approach was not only a tool that reflected my research orientation and provided answers to my research questions. Importantly, it guided the dissertation's evaluative standards away from running onto the rocks of ethical evaluations of the authenticity of the state's vulnerability.

The dissertation paves a way for future inquiries into the state's use of vulnerability. The dramaturgical analysis allows researchers - who focus on political contexts of vulnerability - to leave the baggage of ethical assumptions surrounding this concept. By looking at performative employment of vulnerability identification, we move the conversation from normative grounds of rights and wrongs of the vulnerable subject and instead ask questions about the reasons and political outcomes of this practice. This allows us to not simplify the complex and often ambivalent role of political vulnerability.

Convergence of vulnerabilities

The fact that Israel and the UK have based their vulnerability self-identifications on references to multiple out-group and in-group vulnerabilities suggests a novel reading of the political vulnerabilities of groups. Limited socio-psychological studies are available on the role vulnerability plays in inter-group relations. The investigations looked at how collective identification of vulnerability influences group's attitudes (Elchereth 2006; Spini, Elchereth and Fasel 2008). However, no research has examined how vulnerability self-identifications are introduced to the collective.

This dissertation exposed that states' vulnerability self-identifications may be based on a diverse range of vulnerability narratives (in/out-group). This suggests that collective vulnerability does not have to be established on memories and social beliefs about experiences of the in-group (Elchereth 2006) but also on the vulnerability of others – such as

the enemy's civilian population. The finding highlights how little we know about the actual make-up of collective vulnerability. It should be used as a starting point for further enquiries into the processes leading to the development and dissemination of this identification by political actors.

Securitisation

The dissertation theorised and confirmed that vulnerability narratives may be used by states to securitise the enemy. So far, the studies linking securitisation and vulnerability were uni-directional. Namely, securitisation was studied as a process leading to the vulnerability of various groups (Gray and Franck 2019; Kinnval 2017; Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking 2013; Seckinlegin et al. 2010; Thomas and Warner 2019). The thesis showed that it may be the other way around. In this case, the claims of vulnerability were used as a bulwark of securitisation. Both Israel and the UK performed to be seen as insecure. They have employed references to states' vulnerability to be able to securitise the enemy. By pointing out that the opponent is a source of threat to the state, they aspired to gain legitimacy for military action.

The fact that Israel and the UK derived from vulnerability narratives not only a sense of ontological security but also leverage for use of force, accentuates that this practice has both ideational and material outcomes. By linking vulnerability narratives with securitisation, I have provided evidence that this self-identification can be used to change states' surroundings. The dissertation contributes to generating a new perspective on the politics of vulnerability. The one that considers the possibility of vulnerability self-identification being used as a transformative tool (see Russel-Beattie and Schick 2013: 18).

Conflict-supportive narrative

The findings of the dissertation echo socio-psychological readings of the role vulnerability self-perceptions play in conflicts. Generally, the literature considers collective vulnerability as a conflict-supportive identification (Elcheroth 2006; Spini, Elcheroth and Fasel 2008). As argued by Eidelson and Eidelson: “One particularly problematic aspect of the collective vulnerability worldview is the impetus it can provide for a group to act aggressively in an effort to preemptively ensure its own safety” (2003: 186).

Israel’s and the UK’s employment of vulnerability narratives as a justification for the military operations, suggests that state officials must have a tacit understanding of the effects of vulnerability pronouncements have on the audiences. It offers evidence of state-level references to group vulnerabilities. While social-psychologists accentuate that both individuals and groups that share vulnerability perceptions have a propensity to support violence, the dissertation is the first study that bridges this theorisation with the actual practice of the state.

9.6. Contribution to International Relations

Agency granted by vulnerability

The dissertation demonstrated that vulnerability narratives were a source of ontological security of Israel and the UK. Furthermore, that they granted both actors special agency to securitise the enemy. By linking the vulnerability narratives of strong actors with existential anxieties and the process of designation of threats, the dissertation challenged non-agential perspectives on vulnerability. The phenomenon of powerful actors wilfully presenting themselves as insecure cautions us about making assumptions on the efficacy of vulnerability in politics. It is clear that in the context of both case studies, vulnerability self-

identifications were a source of agency. They provided meaning to states actions, thus allowing both actors to attack the weak opponent without bearing full cognitive and ideational consequences for its actions. Consequently, by enacting insecurity, Israel and the UK claimed a special right to make leeway for offensive operations. Vulnerability narratives were used to protect states interests of both: geostrategic and ideational nature.

This finding goes against conventional wisdom and traditional perspectives pervasive in Western political thought which considers vulnerability as a debilitating condition (see Nussbaum 2001; Shildrick 2000; Russell Beattie and Schick 2013). While “International Relations as an academic field is the study of vulnerability and its effects in the public sphere” (Michel 2013: 86), so far it did not study vulnerability as a source of agency for states. For a long time vulnerability was treated as a designate of political failure (e.g. Kupchan 1994; Walt 1990).

Notably, contemporary studies call for new readings of the vulnerable in global politics. Clark questions the objectivity of vulnerability status and accentuates the responsibility of global society for the plight of vulnerability (2013). Russell-Beattie’s and Schick’s seminal volume challenges a rationalist approach to vulnerability and advise the transformation of global politics through recognition of the marginalised (2013: 3).

While my thesis also contributes to constructivist reading of vulnerability in global politics, I did not approach this concept from the ethical dimension. Clark, Russell-Beattie’s and Schick’s challenged the traditional understanding of vulnerability by pointing out collective responsibility for this condition. This dissertation reads vulnerability anew because it exposes it as a source of statecraft.

By bringing the agency to our understanding of the political implications of vulnerability, I offered a novel political reading to this identification. One that accounts for the changing status of the vulnerable in society. Vulnerability today became an accepted and

ennobling condition (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Furedi 2004; Illouz 2008; McLaughlin 2012). Political ascendancy of vulnerability is intertwined with the “Civil Rights Revolution” (see Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Pinker 2011) but also the growing importance of identity politics and victimhood culture (Campbell and Manning 2018; Enns 2012). Across social sciences, there is a growing need for recognition of the agency of those who identify as weak or vulnerable (e.g. Cole 2007; Illouz 2003). The dissertation provided empirical evidence showing that today states’ behaviour reflects the changing public perceptions and general growth of sensitivity towards the underdog (Pinker 2011; also Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards 2007). Consequently, not only individuals (McLaughlin 2012) but also states establish their political claims based on vulnerability narratives.

This finding reflects a growing scholarship that warns against the possibility of states’ instrumental employment of fear (Furedi 2006) and victimhood (Markiewicz and Sharvit 2021; Enns 2012) to gain legitimacy for their actions. Abstracting from whether such identifications in the context of strong states are a nefarious tool used by mighty against the weak (e.g. Schulman 2016), or a practice reflecting constituent’s societal beliefs and collective needs (see Bar-Tal 1998), we have to come to grips that they can be a form of agency.

The source of ontological security

At the core of the agency of vulnerability narratives of Israel and the UK was the ontological security of the state. The dissertation showed that both actors used vulnerability narratives to deal with existential anxiety and gain special agency to securitise the enemy. While for Giddens ontological security ought to be read as a state of “invulnerability”, drawing on sociology of trust, I problematise this perspective.

As pointed out by Misztal, vulnerability may as well erode and build ontological security of the collective. The outcome of “vulnerability events” on the collective’s basic trust depends on the broader context and standing of the actors (2012: 226). Vulnerability can lead to people losing trust in the state’s leaders. However, this depends on the level of self-perceived vulnerability (2012: 213). Consequently, vulnerability narratives do not always distort the group’s ontological security and may instead be a powerful sense-making tool. This means they provide meaning and context to state actions. In the case of Israel and the UK, I have shown that they were performatively used by the state to gain public trust. While others also point out links between trust and vulnerability (Michel 2013; Shildrick 2000), the dissertation offers the first systematic empirical evaluation of links between the two concepts.

So far political thinking about vulnerability offered conflicting views about the role vulnerability plays for the state. On one hand, Platonic tradition considers it as eroding public authority (Butler 2009: 40) while Machiavelli could not see the agency of vulnerability even when it was “under his eyes” (Trovato 2015: 84). On the other hand, Hobbes and Mencken recognise the usefulness of vulnerability for the state. However, they consider it as a manipulative tool of top-down control where vulnerability instils fear and thus motivate people.

By providing evidence that vulnerability narratives can be a trust-inducing mechanism, the thesis offered a more grounded reading of the politics of vulnerability. Instead of either equating vulnerability with inaction, or Hobbesian exploitation, it is presented as an intersubjective social construct that emerges on the intersection between the audience and the state. The fact that the fundamental role of vulnerability narratives was to support the ontological security of the collective, questions reductionist reading of this theme. By employing the concept of ontological security in the analysis of vulnerability I accounted for the role existential anxieties played in Israel’s and the UK’s self-descriptions.

Recognising that vulnerabilities were speaking to state-makers and the audience's ideational needs, allowed me to consider the fact that powerful actors themselves maybe not only instilling vulnerability but have also responded to collective vulnerabilities.

9.7. Contribution to ontological security studies

The resilience of identity

The dissertation also contributes to the ontological security studies. The investigation of Israel's 2014 OPE and the UK's involvement in the 2003 invasion of Iraq brought attention to an empirical finding that lays out a new research avenue for the study of the resilience of identity. This approach underlines that states adapt their autobiographies to the state's evolving behaviour and ideational needs. Furthermore, that the state's identity can be protected from a critique of its actions.

Unique study of ontological security

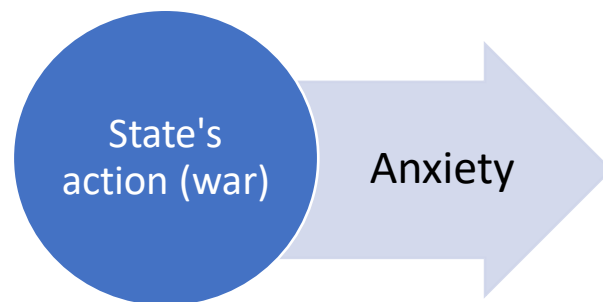
While it is true that countries foremost act to fulfil their self-identity needs (e.g. Steele 2008), this does not mean they do not wilfully pursue policies that challenge their sense of ontological security. This phenomenon was particularly well illustrated by actors' participation in military operations that questioned their positive image abroad (Israel, the UK) and internally (the UK). In both cases, the states' involvement was an embodiment of their will, agency and projection of power. Especially in the case of ground invasions, Tel Aviv (e.g. interview with Karen 2019) and London (e.g. interview with Dominic 2020) were perfectly aware of the negative consequences this will bring to their image and international standing. It is the relative operational flexibility that proves that states whose actions are not

simply dictated by the enemy, independently and intentionally take actions that distort their sense of ontological security.

The novelty of this thesis lays in its recognition that the source of disruption to ontological security may be the state's own wilful and unrestrained behaviour. The existing scholarship has largely concentrated on using this concept to study external disruptions that lead to loss of feelings of certainty about the actor's role in the environment. As explained by Kinnvall and Mitzen: "Consider catastrophic or traumatic events like 9/11, the financial and migration crises, or more recently Covid-19, which disrupt both the sense that tomorrow will be like today and the confidence that existing political and social institutions can protect us" (2020: 246). Consequently, studies examined how states deal with challenges to ontological security that were independent of themselves. They offered insights into existential anxiety stemming from geopolitical processes happening outside of the state's direct control – either geopolitically and diplomatically (e.g. Ejodus 2017; Johansson-Nogués 2018; Lupovici 2012, Steele 2005, 2007, 2008; Subotić 2016) or temporarily (Zarakol 2010). From such perspective, the metaphor for the function of ontological security was "protective cocoon" (e.g. Chernobrov 2016; Croft 2012; Flockhart 2016; Johansson-Nogués 2018; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008).

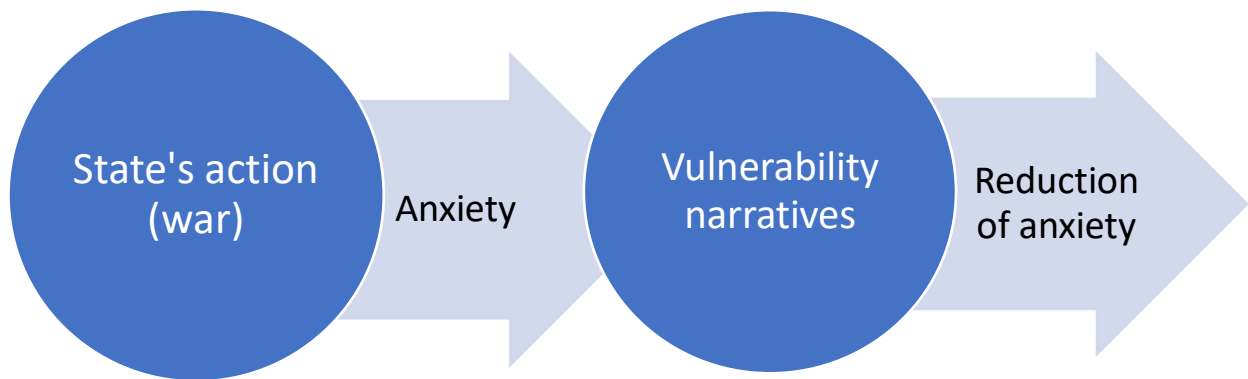
The case of Israel and the UK was different. Regardless of our political interpretations of the causes behind Israel's 2014 OPE and the UK's participation in the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the character and scale of their military engagement were reflecting their privileged operational prerogatives. It was not the behaviour of Saddam Hussein or Hamas leadership that was the source of unease about what the British/Israeli state is standing for. The dissertation shows that Israel's and the UK's ontological security challenges were self-inflicted. Abstracting from the political responsibilities of Hamas and the Iraqi regime, the ontological insecurity of both strong states stemmed from their own behaviour. This finding

shows that states do not necessarily avoid disturbances to their ontological security (e.g. Steele 2008). They themselves may generate them:



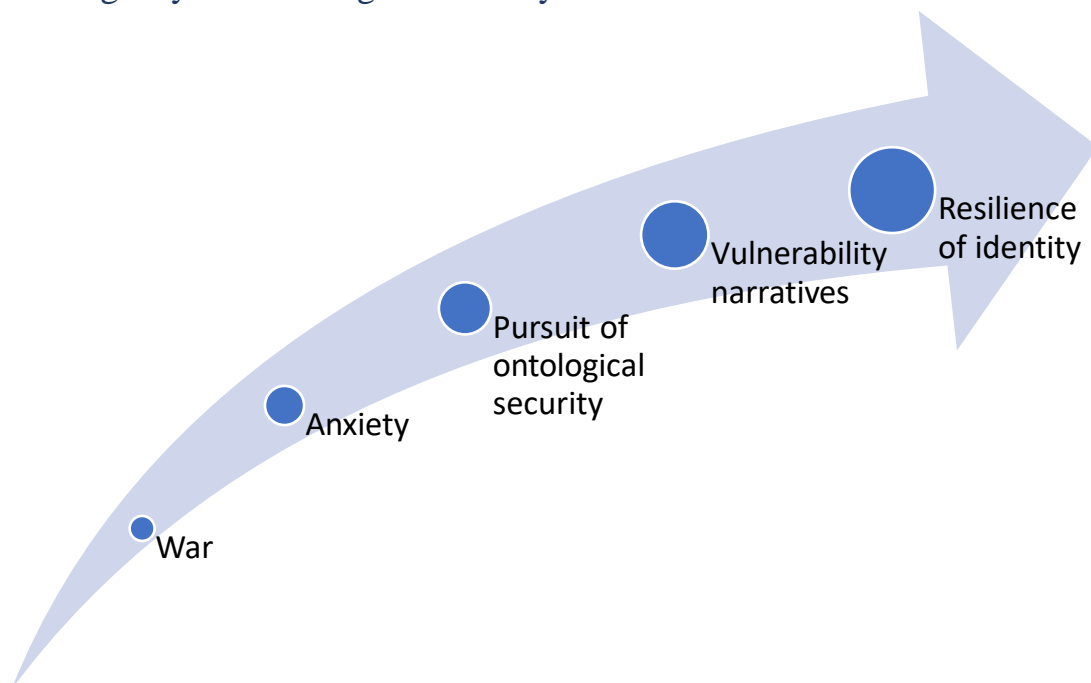
Furthermore, the case of Israel and the UK showed that ontological security-seeking may be a driving force leading to states' resilience of identity. States are shame-avoiding, self-reflexive actors (Steele 2005) striving for acceptance (Subotić and Zarakol 2013). Thus, they try to identify and behave in ways that shield them from critique. Not only Israel and the UK, but also other powerful countries gravitate towards narratives of vulnerability, victimhood and insecurity when they are involved in asymmetric and/or controversial military operations. It is not a coincidence that Richard Perle, the US architect of the 2003 war in Iraq and David Frum, a speechwriter for the president George W. Bush defended the invasion on such Manichean terms: "We believe they are fighting to win – to end this evil before it kills again and on a genocidal scale. There is no middle way for Americans: It is victory or Holocaust" (Frum and Perle 2004: 9).

Consequently, by looking at the vulnerability narratives, the dissertation has shown that strong states, by going to war, did act in a way that was a source of anxiety about their self. This has inevitably exacerbated their ontological security-seeking. Since the source of the state's shame or embarrassment stems from its offensive actions against the underdog, narratives justifying this action are a common reaction. In order to avoid insecurity of self, strong states employ narratives of vulnerability. The process of self-identifying through vulnerability narratives is driven by anxiety-avoidance:



Vulnerability provides positive meaning to warfare. Thus, it anchors the state's identity by providing resilience to critique of its actions:

Special agency and ontological security



The dissertation has shown that the pursuit of security of the self may be used by the state to claim special right to justify doing more. Both Israel and the UK by identifying as

vulnerable were appealing directly to collective needs for a coherent and meaningful cognitive framework. One that would explain and justify the state's actions, as well as present them as reflecting the broader values of the collective. State actors wanted to increase public trust through references to external threats (securitisation). Thanks to that they received a right to do more. Vulnerability narratives allowed them to use the military against Hamas/Iraq while protecting the state's positive self-perceptions.

The thesis has demonstrated that states may put ontological security 'to work' to support their image and international standing and to claim special rights. Ontological security is here not solely a protected 'I' of the state, but biographical storytelling that can be used as a figure supporting the state's agency (see Brownining and Joenniemi 2017). This finding shows that the spectrum of future investigations into ontological security needs to be broadened to account for the resilience of identity.

The dissertation did not question the validity of the theoretical framework of ontological security studies. It is crucial to recognise that the security of being is a force influencing and often limiting states' actions. Importantly, I did not suggest that the ontological security studies are questioning the agency stemming from ontological anxieties. By pointing out the primacy of ontological safety over physical safety, the concept of ontological security has actually handed state's identifications a leading causal role in their actions. However, this position has led to the treatment of ontological security as a state's behavioural predeterminant. To show the unique role of ontological security in global politics, the literature has focused on exposing how the safety of being circumscribe behavioural options of the state. How it precludes some moves due to their incoherence with the state ideational framework. While this finding is one of the contributions of this research, it does not mean that the concept of ontological security cannot be used to expose the permissive role of the safety of being.

In line with the literature, there are two main explanatory consequences behind ontological security. One is the notion that the sense of safety of being is built on routines and biographical regularities (e.g. McSweeney 2004). This function of ontological security shows how ideational forces can limit and shape states' behaviour. Its implications for the study of international relations were far-reaching since they provided a crucial tool of critique of the rationalist readings of statecraft. They helped to illustrate and 'capture' the role of identifications in states' behaviour, offering an answer to their seemingly illogical policies. Consequently, this characteristic of ontological security had an immediate and profound impact on the direction of the debates within the discipline of international relations.

However, in the process of recognising the importance of state routines, we moved away from the second founding principle behind the concept. Namely, that ontological security provides agency. Agency is broadly recognised as one of the main purposes of safety of being (e.g. Berenskoetter 2020; Brownning and Joenniemi 2017; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017: 4). After all, without making its role in the world 'known' or having a biographical account, the state loses its explanation and significance. The lack of ontological security brings anxiety, uncertainty, definitional confusion. In such circumstance, actors may feel overwhelmed and their agency becomes paralysed (Giddens 1991: 43). Ontological security provides a sense of agency because it serves as a repository of answers to essential problems (1991: 27). It protects against the daily and universal "deep fear of chaos" (Mitzen 2006: 347). For McSweeney:

"Security is a central condition for action. The basic sense in which we must understand the order of 'the social order' is one of pattern and regularity affording the confidence of being able to function, to go on, to get by, to make sense of our particular segments of activity (...) Ontological security relates to the sense that the social order as practically conceived is normal, consistent with one's expectations and skills to go on in it" (2004: 156).

While the ontological security conceptualisation is based on an assumption that the safety of being demarcates and supports actors' agency, in the research practice this explanatory function of the concept is scaled down. Empirical studies have primarily concentrated on the delineating role of ontological security in state behaviour (e.g. Rumelili and Çelik 2017; Subotić and Zarakol 2012; Steele 2005, 2008, 2017), examining how states try to deal with the straitjacket of ontological security (e.g. Lupovici 2012; Subotić 2016), or what states do when their protective cocoon is gone (e.g. Ejodus 2017; Johansson-Nogués 2018). Ontological security is often theorised as an ideational matrix that can trap states in seemingly irrational intractable competitions and routines (e.g. Mitzen 2006).

The practice of states pursuing different pathways buttressing the resilience of identity may be interpreted as an argument for conducting further research into identifications that support states' agency. The fact that at times states' ontological security limits what they can do does not negate that it may be used also to do things. Dramaturgical employment of vulnerability self-descriptions by both Israel and the UK suggests that pursuit of ontological security has characteristics of a reductive-enabler, its outcomes may hinder but also assist statecraft. The dissertation has shown that the collective's desire for the security of identity may be addressed and utilised by the country's officials for purposeful articulations of the state's self.

Interviewing the state

This dissertation contributes to ontological security studies by employing interviews with state officials in the study of ontological security. While interviews have been recently employed to research ontological security in migration studies (Gazit 2020), this method was not used in International Relations inquiries. By conducting prolonged fieldwork leading to 70 in-depth interviews with the key British and Israeli state officials, this dissertation co-

generated rich empirical evidence exposing the central role the pursuit of safe identity plays in the modern state- and warcraft. The exploration of ontological security through conversations with participants confirmed the importance of employing an ontological security conceptual lens in the studies of politics.

In recent years, in their articles, Kinnvall et al. (2018; 2020) emphasize that investigations into ontological securities and insecurities, have to pay close attention to the fact that countries' 'safety of being' is actually 'security of becoming'. This means that ontological security is foremost a process, not a state or status. By investigating how the Israeli and British representatives pursued this goal, this dissertation offers uniquely granular evidence of the ways through which actors seek ontological security.

Change and innovation of ontological security

The dissertation responds to calls by Solomon (2018), Browning and Joenniemi (2017) for a more open understanding of ontological security. By displaying resilience and special agency stemming from vulnerability narratives, I offer reading that accounts for change and innovation in states' self-identifications. Analysis of Israel and the UK's employment of vulnerability narratives exposed two pathways of resilient identity. First, countries present their modified activity as consistent with state identifications. As it was in the case of Israel, this allows actors to cope with the critique of behavioural divergence and to support the maintenance of a coherent image. Secondly, political elites innovate their biographical storytelling. As in the case of the UK, this helps the actor to lay the groundwork for new behavioural patterns without disrupting the foundational identifications of the collective.

The dissertation contributes to the recognition of the Janus-faced role of ontological security in the state's agency. Ontological security is the waypoint the actors are always

referring to. At the same time, the study draws attention to the fact that ontological security is not a corporeal trap of the state. Political actors actively interpret their identifications and employ different courses of action that they portray as coherent with state values and self-perceptions. This was particularly well exemplified by the UK's innovative use of vulnerability narratives in its self-descriptions. Routines are used by states to gain "cognitive and behavioural certainty" (Mitzen 2006: 342) however, they are secondary to the importance of keeping consistent biographical narratives. If an actor engages in a new form of policy, old routines may become obsolete. That is why London innovated the way it was describing itself to support its decision to invade Iraq. Instead of accentuating its multilateralism and liberal institutionalism, it presented itself as vulnerable.

The thesis reveals that reinforcement of identity does not have to be predicated on one set of routines or stable narratives (Zarakol 2010; also Kinnval: 2004). States may feel good about themselves acting and identifying in a new way. Captivating identification that supports ontological security can be derived from vulnerability.

By accounting for the resilience of identity, we gain a better understanding of states involvement in actions that may be interpreted as challenging their idealised self. While the OS research program provides fundamental and critical insights into how OS provides stability and preserves identity, the dissertation exposes the flexibility of states physical 'application' of their ideational scaffolding. It shows that while states do avoid ontological anxiety, they also use it to gain agency. By studying the resilience of identity, we gain a new vantage point to capture controversial state behaviours. We account for states own practices of identity interpretation and identity enactment (or even identity-stretching). We recognise the transformation of meaning-making practices to deal with ideational anxiety. This has profound consequences for the theorizing on the processes underlying ontological security. While ontological security is most commonly understood as an ideational self-defence

mechanism, it is proposed that identity anxieties can be used as leverage. Namely, that by referring to the collective identifications, states may claim novel behavioural pathways.

Sociology of ontological security

The dissertation offers a reading of ontological security that accentuates its sociological characteristics and reflects the fact that as a practice, the meaning of security is competed over (Bigo 2008).⁵³ It develops alternative readings of the phenomenon, instead of conceptualising it as a protective cocoon or a stabilising self-help mechanism. Such perspectives risk scaling down ontological security to a one-sided feedback loop where the state tries to deal with external stressors to protect its identifications.

While states try to protect their identity from changes, there is no reason to assume that the need for ontological security deprives them of reflexivity and agency. While “they are constrained to draw on the ‘cultural repertoires’ that are available and acceptable in their social environment” (Schimmelfennig 2002: 421), they employ socio-cultural references selectively. Ontological security has interactionist qualities. It is recognised in the literature that states do respond or adjust to external changes, challenges and threats. They employ a range of methods to protect their being. Thus, they do actively interact with their environment. Since the ontological security studies assume that identity is the main tool of a state’s sense-making and determinant of their relationships with the environment, this predicates that ontological security is built on interstate/inter-group interactionism. After all, the state would not be able to understand its ‘I’ without comparing it with ‘You’ (or ‘Them’). By accounting for the social interactionism of ontological security, we can better understand the dynamic characteristics of identity (e.g. Mitzen 2006: 344).

⁵³ For more on the need to adopt sociological approaches to the study of security see Balzacq 2010.

Since ontological security shapes human behaviours, it must have the “property of symbolicity” (Borreca 1993: 58), and thus may be interpreted (following symbolic interactionism) as a “method of knowing and making known, through various means, whatever must be made known to prosecute and sustain transactions, relationships, institutions, organizations, and social structures” (Perinbanayagam 1985: 78). By recognising the dramaturgy of ontological security, we capture when the state is ‘making known’ its symbolic ‘I’. Such an approach accounts for instances of identity being acted out through the references to the state’s environment. After all the state functions as long as it retains its ability to tell a convincing story about the collective. The goal of politics is to encourage collective support for the state’s identifications (Merelman 1969).

The dramaturgical analysis of ontological security is a useful tool of epistemic inquiry. One that addresses the persistent critique of ontological security scholarship. In brief, it is argued that by applying the concept of ontological security one essentialises the multifaceted, ever-changing and internally inconsistent identity/ies of the state (e.g. Rosedale 2015; Lebow 2016; Guzzini 2017; Rumelili 2015b). Furthermore, as a form of analytical approach, ontological security leads to prioritisation of the process through which states keep the status quo. The dissertation’s findings echo Kinnval and Mitzen’s polemic with this critique. They accentuate that the state’s anxiety cannot be reduced to a source of paralysis of the actor. In their view, anxiety should not be conflated with fear, furthermore, it often is a source of transformation (2020).

By approaching the ontological security of Israel and the UK from an interactionist perspective I have captured this agency of state’s ongoing process of identification. The fact that both strong actors aspired to be seen as insecure, shows the performativity and agency of the identity. While Lebow is right that the state’s identity – understood as a stable, coherent

point of reference – does not exist, this does not mean we ought to abandon research into the state's process of identification.

Thanks to focusing on the performative practices of identity construction, the dissertation did not consider Israel's and the UK's vulnerability narratives as *the* identity of the state, but rather the 'construction in the making' (Kinnval 2004: 748; Wendt 1994). The dramaturgical analysis of the state's presentations of self captures well that the identity of the state is a never fulfilled aspiration to build a unifying narrative about the actor.

Lacanian turn

Importantly, the dissertation's findings echo Lacanian readings of ontological security. This more recent move in ontological security studies accentuates the aspirational character of the processes behind the pursuit of a secure self. It is pointed out that what drives states are never fulfilled (Vieira 2018) desires (Eberle 2019) to attain a meaningful and complete interpretation of self. My approach to identity is grounded in social psychology (e.g. Tajfel and Turner 1979; see Chapter 3) and thus it differs from the psychoanalytical tradition that emphasized the role of the unconscious in the ideational processes (e.g. Cash 2020). However, putting away the divergent ontological assumptions between these approaches, the dissertation's empirical findings share some key elements with mentioned literature. Thus, it could be treated as contributing to psychoanalytical re-articulations of the concept of ontological security.

Firstly, the investigation offers data that confirms Cash's theoretical claim that actors do not necessarily pursue ontological security through routinised behaviour but that they can predicate their "continuous identity" through "alternative practices" (2020: 307). Secondly, it provided new empirical evidence that powerful actors simultaneously may draw on narratives associated with weakness and greatness (see Hagström 2021) without necessary weakening

their ontological security. Thirdly, the securitising effects of ontological security seeking by Israel and the UK confirm Lacanian emphasis on the generative, the highly dynamic and aspirational character of ontological security-seeking. One which has the capacity to “construct (...) social reality” (Vieira 2018).

The fact that the project which is based on a distinct ontological foundation – grounded in social-psychology of identity and the sociology of vulnerability – solidifies Lacanian readings of ontological security, further confirms calls (Solomon 2018; Browning and Joenniemi 2017) for a more open understanding of ontological security. One that does not treat stable surroundings as a key prerequisite for secure identity.

Capturing the anxiety of the state

Empirically, the ontological security scholarship typically analyses how states deal with the arising anxiety regarding the identity of the actor. As argued by Bolton (2021) and Lupovici (2012: 809), the literature concentrates on tracing and providing nuanced explanatory readings of ways how states are dealing with anxiety that arises on the crossroads of state’s self-perceptions, its actions and the ever-changing environment (e.g. Krolikowski 2018; Steele 2008). At the same time, Kinnvall and Mitzen argue that “the phenomenon of anxiety can be hard to pin down” (2020: 242). Where the ontological security studies could be developed, is the way how we establish that states are anxious.

So far, little attention has been given to determine what evidence illustrates collective anxieties. Claims about the anxiety of the state-actor are based on historical and narrative analysis (e.g. Skey 2010; Steele 2007, 2017). For example, Ejodus (2017) and Subotić (2016) consider Serbia’s situation in the context of the secession of Kosovo, as a source of anxiety and ontological insecurity based on a detailed reading of political developments and state communication.

This thesis proposes to supplement our methods of ‘capturing’ national identity anxiety by evaluating the researcher’s interpretation of the historical processes and textual and audio-visual data with the context-specific knowledge of the state officials. By talking to participants involved in the evolution of state’s autobiographies, we scrutinise our perceptions of what constitutes a country’s anxiety.

Conflicts and ontological security

The dissertation echoes Mitzen’s seminal work on the seemingly irrational sources (2006) of conflicts. Particularly her argument that states due to their identities may become dependent on strategically dangerous situations. However, Mitzen concentrates on the *prima facie* irrationalities of many existing conflicts and answers why precarity may be a vehicle of ontological understanding. Mitzen’s work on ontological security answers why conflicts can be defining, accepted *status quo* for the community. Nevertheless, it does not tell us how such challenging, stressful events are introduced to the ideational infrastructure of the country. How the state can justify the emergence or continuation of destructive and disadvantageous circumstances. Vulnerability narratives illustrate how actors are able to promote ontological security based on physical or perceptual precarity.

Insusceptibility to critique

Lastly, it is important to stress a subtle but crucial difference between the resilience of identity and cases of the state’s securitising their identity (see e.g. Kinnvall 2017). The literature on ontological security recognises that states may purposefully designate certain phenomena as a source of threat to deal with existential anxiety (e.g. Croft 2012; Kinnvall 2004, 2017; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). Securitisation is considered a source of ontological

security because it allows the state to turn its anxieties about the unpredictable nature of the world into “identifiable threat” (e.g. Steele 2008: 64; also Huysmans, 1998: 242; Rumelili 2015b).

While the employment of vulnerability by Israel and the UK reflected this reading of the role securitisation plays in the state’s search for the safety of identity, it also exposed an unaccounted dimension of securitisation. Namely, that securitisation allows the actor to support its ideational scaffolding by calling into question critique and scrutiny of its offensive actions.

Vulnerability narratives employed by Israel and the UK had securitising effects. They did present Hamas and Iraq as a source of threat. This allowed the state to act offensively against the enemy and provided positive meaning to its behaviour that eased the existential anxieties of the state. However, securitisation here was important not solely – as described in the existing literature – to replace anxiety with fear (e.g. Mälksoo 2015; Rumelili 2015b). In this case, the state was also dramatizing itself as vulnerable to deflect critical voices (e.g. political protests, international opinion) that could further deteriorate its ontological security. Consequently, vulnerability narratives of Israel and the UK were a form of self-help to prevent the rise of feelings of shame and unease about the military operation against the underdog. Concretely, a form of avoidance of dissonant information – a negative appraisal of the offensive. By employing vulnerability narratives, states challenged this adversity and attempted to avoid a looming threat to its safety of identity.

Kinnval and Mitzen rightfully point out that state actors may deal with anxieties arising after traumatic and calamitous events such as 9/11, global migration, global warming or Covid-19 (2020). At the same time, the case of Israel and the UK shows that actors also attempt to pre-emptively protect their safety of identity from further deterioration.

9.8. Limitations

The dissertation's main goal was to understand the reasons why Israel and the UK employed narratives of vulnerability in their war-time self-representations. Instead of looking at billiard-ball causal relations between the state's behaviour and other factors, I focused on accounting for constitutive causality behind this phenomenon. This means that I answered the question of how Israel's and the UK's "understanding of their worlds" (Adcock 2014: 90) has led to their use of vulnerability narratives. The study followed the interpretive methodology and instead of generating "the law-like generalizations of the physical sciences" (Steele 2008: 6) tried to offer a rich, reliable explanation that was case-specific. However, paying attention to the constructivist character of social processes the researcher may fall "prey to relativity" (Steele 2008: 7).

While the fact that Israel and the UK shared several intra-case similarities suggests that the employment of vulnerability narratives by other strong states may have recurring characteristics, this would have to be explored in other settings. The comparative design of the thesis offered findings that may suggest that some of the processes behind the use of vulnerability narratives are not unique to the analysed states. At the same time, the dissertation does not offer simple models for the transfer of my findings to different settings (see Adcock 2014).

For example, one ought to be cautious about generalizability or external validity (Campbell and Stanley 1963) of the thesis' finding that vulnerability narratives work as a trust inducer for weak states. Aronson's classical experimental research on perceptions of vulnerability accentuates that its efficacy is contextual. This phenomenon - called the 'pratfall effect' – means that actors who are considered as powerful may derive sympathy from acting vulnerable. However, recognition of vulnerability by someone that is considered to be incompetent or weak has negative effects (1966).

Consequently, I am doubtful that this theme would serve as a source of ontological security and agency for weak states. It is possible that weak actors, by emphasizing their precarity would only further question their standing by “shattering their ontological and physical security” (Markiewicz and Sharvit 2021). Furthermore, it is uncertain how would claims of vulnerability influence the in-group dynamics for actors in peacetime.

9.9. Further research

This research offers empirically-grounded theorisation of an uncharted territory of global politics. Strong states’ war-time use of vulnerability narratives is not uniquely Israeli or British phenomenon (see Chapter 2). The dissertation shows that vulnerability narratives ought to be treated as a practice of statecraft and warcraft. As such, focus on claims of vulnerability can be understood as a distinct research perspective. Analysis of conflicts through lenses of politics of vulnerability has the potential to shed new light on past and current events. Thus, it could be utilised for a reexamination of factors that lead to warfare.

Further studies should analyse and compare how other powerful actors draw on vulnerability narratives during military conflicts. By analysing the implementation of this theme in other contexts, we could answer whether the presence of vulnerability narratives is dependent on a relative imbalance of power between belligerents. Further work needs to be done to establish whether also non-democracies draw similarly on this self-identification, and to see how vulnerability narratives were used before the end of the Cold War. The present studies did not focus on analysing how vulnerability narratives were actually interpreted by different audiences. Addressing this limitation would help us to develop our knowledge on the performative dimension of a strong state’s politics of vulnerability. It would also improve our understanding of how this theme responds to the identity needs of the collective (see

Enders and Armaly 2021; Vandello, Goldschmied and Richards 2007). Another potential avenue for research could be looking into the role of leadership in the use of vulnerability narratives. We might suspect that this identification may be differently used by populists and moderates, by liberals and conservatives (see Homolar and Scholz 2019).

More broadly, it is possible to employ my dissertation's findings in other contexts. For example, it would be interesting to see whether vulnerability narratives induce social trust and enhance political agency also in peacetime, or to non-state actors. Future studies could determine their role in organisations and companies. For instance, are vulnerability narratives utilised in business competition?

Conclusion

Not everything that states do has a clear rationale for the spectator. As the sum of the people, countries derive their strength from us. At the same time, many states' activities question the very potential of citizenry thus eroding the stability of the substructure on which their agency resides. Neoliberal reforms, unwanted wars, misguided investments – the list of puzzling state behaviours never stops growing. The point of departure for this dissertation was such a puzzle. Namely, the practice of strong states employment of vulnerability narratives during times of conflict. What guided me throughout this investigation was the need to answer why Goliath would like to be seen as David. After all, at the first sight, this identification seemed incompatible with the economic and military standing of the actor. At best, it was a bizarre point of reference. At worst, a source of social unrest questioning the agency of the actor.

The fact that a strong state's vulnerability narratives induce social trust and enhance the political agency of the actor is consequential for our understanding of interstate

competitions. Naturally, this realisation lets us recognise a largely unaccounted agency that comes with vulnerability self-identifications. But more importantly, it allows us to step away from the ever-increasing rift between those who consider politics of vulnerability, precarity and victimhood with suspicion and those who treat one's claims of harm and fear as a beacon of virtue. Yes, we should treat the vulnerability claims of strong actors with caution. But power in itself cannot be conflated with immorality. Both weak and powerful are capable of reprehensible actions (see Enns 2012).

As I have shown, Israeli and British vulnerability narratives were speaking to the identity commitments of both societies. It is precisely because of both peoples' need for seeing their state as a virtuous and legitimate actor, that both wars had to be predicated on vulnerability narratives in order to be politically viable. If Israeli and British claims were addressing collective's emotional needs, vulnerability narratives should not be discounted as a top-down manipulation even by the most critical commentators. In my opinion, this self-identification did not make both wars easier. This would suggest that vulnerability narratives were simplistic propaganda. Instead, they made wars politically possible. Without this presentation of self, they would be politically unimaginable. The anxiety, discomfort and distress stemming from the fight with a much weaker enemy would cause an overwhelming crisis of self-identification.

I do not advocate that this fact gives 2014 OPE and Invasion of Iraq moral credentials. My argument does not address the outcomes of these wars. However, if we ever want to fully grapple with the puzzling practice of strong actors presenting themselves as vulnerable, we have to accept that this self-identification also stems from the collective's needs, perceptions and emotions. And as such, it cannot be simply dismissed as state manufacturing consent.

Vulnerability narratives in a strong state's presentation of the self are an important clue. Such motif shows us that their actions – in this case, military offensive – are a source of

anxiety and ontological insecurity. Consequently, this dissertation strengthened the explanatory capacity of the concept of ontological security. Previous conceptualisations of the state's pursuit of ontological security accentuated that actors prioritise their identity needs over their physical security (e.g. Mitzen 2006). Furthermore, that they avoid situations that increase their anxiety. In this context, Israel and the UK are an outlier. Both conflicts attest to the fact that actors may themselves act in ways that are against the security of their identity. As pointed out by the state's officials, because of the war both Israel and the UK have dealt with deficits of ontological security. They challenged their idealised historical self-perceptions. The UK was not fighting in Iraq in the spirit of Blitz or Dunkirk, neither Israel in Gaza was a weakling fighting against all odds. Without accounting for the trust-inducing role of vulnerability narratives, we could not understand this phenomenon.

You will never be safe

While vulnerability is a universal, ever-present fact of our existence, for collectives that consider it as a central characteristic of their condition feelings of precarity may evoke feelings of fear and anxiety. Social psychologists point out that this may lead to the development of a negative emotional climate “dominated by beliefs that foster insecurity, threat, and stress” (Bar-Tal, Halperin and de Rivera 2007: 450). I am writing these words in times where vulnerability in Britain and Israel seems to be at the forefront of politics. Both countries are in the midst of the 2020 Covid pandemic. An event that shattered people's expectations about the predictability of their future and deteriorated trust in their states' capability to respond to the public crisis.

In January 2020 the UK left the EU. The 2016 EU membership referendum elevated the country's political temperature and started a public debate that deepened society's internal

divisions (Cosslett 2016). What is clear is that those who supported Brexit were motivated by the vulnerability. The “areas with deprivation in terms of education, income and employment were more likely to vote Leave” (Becker, Fetzner and Novy 2017: 602). With Northern Ireland and Scotland voting to stay in the EU and England voting to leave, the referendum has shown that the union cementing Great Britain is weakening. Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland’s first minister has already said that another independence referendum is “a matter of when, not if” (BBC 2021)

Israel’s fears and vulnerabilities erupted in May 2021 during the outbreak of intercommunal violence between Israeli Jews and Israeli Palestinians which led to an 11-day long military operation in Gaza. Close to 250 Palestinians and 13 Israelis died as a result of Israeli airstrikes and Hamas rockets. The conflict was a clear departure from the past confrontations with Hamas because it has led to violence in Israeli mixed towns. Places of prayer, public property as well as people’s houses were attacked. Israeli political elites were talking about the danger of the eruption of civil war. While Jewish and Arab mobs were attacking one another, president Reuven Rivlin called in to Israeli Channel 12 and begged his citizens to “stop this madness” (Magid 2021). But also abroad the situation looked more serious than before. Israel – which just before the conflict was accused by the Human Rights Watch of commission of the crimes of apartheid (HRW 2021) – was broadly criticised in foreign media and by prominent US democrats (see Al Jazeera 2021). Einat Wilf, a former member of Knesset in the Labour Party concluded that the conflict entrenched Israeli’s “sense of being under siege” and reminded that:

“Despite representing the majority of the citizens living within the sovereign territory of Israel Jews, many Jewish Israelis view themselves as a minority amidst an Arab majority” (Wilf 2021).

The truth is that neither Israel nor the UK will ever be free of vulnerability. At the same time, this dissertation has shown that both countries did employ narratives of

vulnerability to increase social trust and improve their political agency. This means that for strong states vulnerability self-identifications do not have to lead to social unrest.

Furthermore, while in 2014 and 2003 respectively, Israeli and British references to precarity played a role in the legitimisation of offensive actions, that does not always has to be the case. Narratives of vulnerability are foremost an expression of one's identity claim. However, how this claim will be utilised by the state or the collective is not predetermined. Yes, vulnerability narratives – especially if translated or reflecting feelings of vulnerability - may lead to “defensive” or even “aggressive behaviour” (Bar-Tal, Halperin and de Rivera 2007: 450). Nevertheless, the vulnerability (real, fake or imagined) of strong states should not be conflated with dread or panic. The relative security of such actors means that a vulnerability narrative is foremost a mobilising source of meaning. It calls for the state and the collective to define what is makes it vulnerable and use this knowledge for its benefit. There is no reason to assume that even a deep-seated feeling of vulnerability to be hurt by an enemy will lead to ever-spiralling securitisation by the state. After all, collective perceptions of precarity and willingness to fight vary and are influenced by the state's cultural values and climate (e.g. Basabe and Valencia 2007). As in the case of Northern Ireland, precarity may lead to efforts for reconciliation. Lastly, what is often ignored, is the prosaic fact that most interstate relations are based on nations continuous acceptance of some types and levels of vulnerability.

This observation is not solely a lesson for us, spectators of global politics. It could and should be utilised by statesmen themselves. Strong countries have a responsibility to their own citizens and the international community to recognise the agency that comes with the vulnerability narratives. Vulnerability narratives allowed Israel and the UK to reduce their anxiety and made it politically possible to engage in a controversial military offensive against a much weaker enemy. They were a source of mobilising legitimacy. While vulnerability

narratives were reflecting deep-seated worries and ideational needs of the governments and some of its people, they presented Israel and the UK as existentially threatened. Even though this dissertation has shown that this behaviour was not a form of calculative propaganda, this meant that states gained legitimacy by presenting themselves as weak and embattled. That had not to be the case. When the powerful agent is repeatedly fighting under the auspices of being deadly threatened, this inevitably will lead to a perceptual narrowing of the available responses to danger. As shown in the conversations with Israeli state officials, in 2014 Tel Aviv knew its future existence was not endangered. In the case of Britain before the 2003 invasion, Iraq was perceived as foremost a US affair. Thus, we cannot discount the possibility of politics of vulnerability being addressed differently. Since vulnerability narratives did support public trust in the state's actions, in the future we could see them being adopted in policies of desecuritization.

It is true that vulnerability narratives were coming from and responding to the identity needs of Israelis (e.g. Bar-Tal and Antebi 1992) and British (e.g. Dyson 2007). They were not whipped up and did not come out of thin air – as some critics of both operations would like to believe. I personally believe that there was a fair amount of fear and genuine vulnerability at play here.

Paradoxically, at the same time, this perception is one of the key obstacles that will prevent Israel and the UK to feel safe. If Israeli Jews will keep being paralysed by fear, I do not see them ever being able to “exhibit the confidence and openness of a comfortable majority in their own state” (Wilf 2021). If the UK will keep defining its security and national interest on the basis of international peace and stability (e.g. Kettell 2013) the silence on its shores will always be interpreted with unnerving suspicion.

Final remarks about the unspeakable concept

When academics choose a particular phenomenon as their point of interest, they justify it by advocating for the importance of that particular issue for the world. Most suitable naturally are the problems that we all agree are salient. For example, explaining why he focuses on the role of status in international relations, Renshon underlines that there is a consensus that the concept is a source of “critically important human motivation” (2017: 5-7). That is not the case with vulnerability. In debates on international relations concept of vulnerability appears rarely. This issue was poignantly visible during my meetings with the Israeli and British state officials. Any allusions to the role of vulnerability in the politics of states seemed to startle, surprise or irritate many of my interlocutors. The actual word ‘vulnerability’ was rarely mentioned by the participants. This phenomenon however should not be mistaken with the insignificance of vulnerability in statecraft. After all, both Israel and the UK did present themselves as vulnerable, and the very people I have spoken to were craftsmen of this theme or at least privileged witnesses of this practice.

Vulnerability in world politics is transparent. It is almost as if it is kept in the unconscious layers of the state’s identifications. While it is the universal foundation of human existence, it rarely is called by its name in politics. Instead, vulnerability is brought by state pundits indirectly. We see it in Donald Trump’s speeches about China, Boris Johnson’s warnings against the EU and Recep Erdogan’s anti-Kurdish rhetoric. While states – also powerful states – speak about their vulnerability, they do not call themselves ‘vulnerable’. This phenomenon reflects the political duality vulnerability self-identifications represent in the politics of the state. Vulnerability is eagerly used for political purposes as a source of mobilization; however, this practice is rarely recognized by the statesman. While attempts to try to deal with their vulnerability define and drive collectives, this fact does not come to the fore. Direct admittance of one’s vulnerability is avoided.

This dissertation attempted to bridge those two dimensions. Starting with the conspicuous practice of vulnerability-driven statecraft and warcraft, and ending with the hidden, unspoken-of indispensability of states' vulnerability. My hope was that by accounting for the disparity between the explicit and implicit, the uncanny agency of politics of vulnerability will be fleshed out.

Appendix 1. List of interviewees: Israel

Pseudonym	Position*	Date
David	One of the key military and political leaders. Former minister and general of the IDF	21.08.2018
Moshe	Member of the Knesset	08.08.2018
Sefi	Senior official at the IDF, a former colonel of the IDF	02.09.2019
Zach	National security expert, a former key decision-maker at the Ministry for Strategic Affairs	03.09.2019
Noa	Consultant for the Israeli government, former head of Military Intelligence	12.09.2019
Itzik	Israeli ambassador	25.07.2018
Yonah	National security expert, retired colonel and former security advisor of Israeli prime ministers	24.08.2018
Yossi	Diplomat. Former director-general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	13.08.2018
Albert	Former diplomat, activist and lobbyist	15.07.2018
Anna	Analyst and an expert at the IDF specialising in the training of the military leadership	23.09.2019
Rafi	Member of the Knesset	30.07.2018
Gabriel	Lecturer, security advisor. Former colonel serving in various intelligence positions	26.09.2019
Michael	Former major general in the IDF	09.07.2018
Dvora	One of the top officials of the Israeli intelligence	16.09.2019

Saul	Political adviser to Israeli politicians	21.07.2019
Moishe	Former advisor of Israeli governments and a head of one of the Israeli think-tanks	15.07.2018
Yuval	Diplomat. Former ambassador and diplomatic advisor to two prime ministers	02.08.2018
Dalia	Lobbyist. Former diplomat and spokesperson for prime minister	24.09.2019
Alan	Journalist, writer and political spokesperson	03.08.2018
Simon	Intelligence analyst and deputy head of one of the Israeli research institutes. Former senior intelligence figure	04.09.2019
Sara	Senior negotiator in multiple Track-One diplomacy efforts. Former key legal expert of the IDF	24.07.2018
Daniel	The former head of the IDF radio	14.08.2018
Meir	National security adviser. Former brig. General and a head of division in the IDF	15.09.2019
Jerry	Former ambassador and one of the key negotiators at Camp David Summit	15.08.2018
Olena	Media and communications advisor, as well as former spokesperson to multiple Israeli politicians	02.08. 2018
Joshua	Consultant to prime minister's office as well as the Ministry of Defence. Former senior Military Intelligence officer	22.09.2019
Anat	Former legal advisor to the prime minister and senior official at the State Attorney's office	12.08.2018
Karen	Prominent intellectual and politician, former advisor of the prime minister	09.09.2019
Mordechai	Member of the Knesset	24.07.2018
Dan	Israeli negotiator and a former advisor to the prime minister and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs	19.08.2018

Ben	A former senior official at Military Intelligence	10.09.2019
Isaac	Senior official of the Likud party. Former advisor to Israel's Minister and members of Knesset	19.07.2018
Shaul	Spokesperson of embassy	29.06.2018
Uri	Senior official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Former ambassador	05.08.2018
Rivka	Geopolitics expert and popular Israeli commentator. Former foreign media advisor to the prime minister and colonel at the IDF	30.07.2018
(not quoted in the dissertation)	Senior expert at one of the Israeli think tanks and governmental advisor. Former colonel at the Military Intelligence	23.09.2019
(not quoted in the dissertation)	National security analyst	03.09.2019
(not quoted in the dissertation)	Former general. One of the key scientists at the Ministry of Defense	04.09.2019

* In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, no detailed affiliations of the quoted or referenced interviewees are disclosed. However, I include general descriptions of the participant's background to better contextualise and improve on the presentation of the dissertation's analysis.

Appendix 2. List of interviewees: United Kingdom

Pseudonym	Position*	Date
Martin	Former ambassador and a senior official at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office	30.08.2019
Frank	Former senior diplomat	01.08.2019
Bradley	Researcher and a former senior civil servant in Ministry of Defence, Cabinet Office and FCO	15.10.2019
Christopher	Former major general. One of the key commanders of British forces in Iraq	18.09.2020
Dominic	One of the BAF's most senior officers and a key architect of the invasion	07.05.2020
Morgan	Former senior diplomat and ambassador holding the key diplomatic post on the eve of 2003 invasion of Iraq	11.12.2019
Rob	Former senior BAF's commander working for Cabinet Office during the 2003 invasion of Iraq	18.08.2019
Jim	Former senior diplomat working for the Cabinet Office during the 2003 invasion of Iraq	20.08.2019
Denis	Committee member of the Chilcot Inquiry	18.11.2019
Stewart	Key official responsible for the post-invasion reconstruction of Iraq	12.05.2020
Alex	Former ambassador specialising in the MENA region	06.01.2020
Jerry	Former director of one of the intelligence agencies	14.07.2020
George	Defence analyst. Former RAF officer	26.07.2019
Owen	Key diplomat during the 2003 invasion of Iraq	05.11.2019

Eric	One of senior BAF commanders in Iraq	21.10.2019
Elaine	Senior Liberal Democrat politician specialising in the foreign affairs	30.08.2019
Timothy	Former senior official at the MOD, and head of one of EU' security agencies	22.08.2019
Ryan	Former senior BAF commander serving in Iraq	20.07.2020
Benjamin	Former senior official at the FCO	12.08.2019
Steve	Writer, researcher and fellow at one of British think tanks. Former senior diplomat	13.07.2019
Dylan	Academic, and former senior diplomat	12.08.2019
James	Communications consultant, former ambassador	09.08.2019
Victor	Senior BAF officer. Key commander in Iraq	12.05.2020
Justin	Military expert. Former communication specialist in the US Army and British diplomat	13.08.2019
Manny	Diplomat and former ambassador	25.07.2019
William	BAF medical expert with command and staff appointments in MOD as well as NATO	31.07.2019
Laurence	Former member of Parliament and minister	01.20.2020
Leonard	Member of the Tony Blair's Cabinet Office	05.11.2019
Hugh	Member of Tony Blair's Cabinet Office, one of the architects of the invasion	13.10.2020
Ann	Former Labour Member of Parliament	16.10.2020

Adam Thomson	Former British ambassador and Permanent Representative to NATO	14.08.2019
(not quoted in the dissertation)	Former Member of Parliament	26.07.2019

* In order to protect the anonymity of the participants, no detailed affiliations of the quoted or referenced interviewees are disclosed. However, I include general descriptions of the participant's background to better contextualise and improve on the presentation of the dissertation's analysis.

Appendix 3. Interviews consent form

Tadek Markiewicz

PhD Candidate and Teaching Assistant
School of Politics and International Relations
University of Kent
Canterbury CT2 7NX
Tm472@kent.ac.uk, 0044 7809906073



Consent for participation in a research interview

I agree to participate in the research project led by Tadeusz Markiewicz, PhD Candidate at the University of Kent in Canterbury, United Kingdom. The purpose of this document is to specify the terms of my participation in the project through being interviewed.

- i. I have been given sufficient information about the research project and the purpose of my participation has been explained to me in a clear manner.
- ii. My participation is voluntary and there is no explicit or implicit coercion whatsoever to participate.
- iii. Participation involves being interviewed by the researcher himself. I allow the researcher to take written notes during the interview. I also may allow the recording by audio tape of the interview.
- iv. I have the right not to answer any of the questions. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview, I have the right to withdraw from the interview.
- v. I have been given the explicit guarantees that, if I wish to do so, the researcher will not identify me by name or function in any publications, reports or articles using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. In all cases, subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies at the University of Kent (according to the Data Protection Act).
- vi. I have been given the guarantee that this research project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Kent's Research Ethics Advisory Group (REAG).
- vii. I have read and understood the points and statements of this form. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.
- viii. I have been given a copy of this consent form co-signed by the interviewer.

Participant's Signature

Location

Researcher's Signature

Date

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