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Democracies and Success in War

Introduction

Democratic governments have spread quickly around the world since the end of the Cold War and fall of the Soviet Union. Democracy has become one of the most desired regime types amongst states and is contributed to fostering wealth, stability, and even peace. Dan Reiter and Allan Stam argue that democracies are the most successful in war or military combat.¹ In their book, *Democracies at War*, Stam and Reiter argue that after observing conflicts since the 1800's, democratic governments tend to be more selective in choosing conflicts to participate in and democracies also have a propensity to win more often than authoritarian regimes.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study to test if democracies fight better wars. The paper will examine Stam and Reiter's four propositions presented in their book and test the two propositions, political culture and political structure, that the authors suggest have a significant impact on democracies and the outcome of war. There are no previous intense case studies that have been performed over democracies and their success in wartime situations. Since only brief examples of case studies have been performed in previous literature, this paper will contribute to the discussion by presenting an intense case study on Israel during the Six Day War in 1967 and Yom Kippur War in 1979.

For Stam and Reiter to be correct in their assessments over democracies high success rate in war, political culture and political structure must be found internally within Israel during the time period of these two conflicts. To be able to identify political structure and culture I have proposed a few variables that should be present within the case study. These variables will be discussed in the following sections and will serve as a model to interpret the results.

The case of Israel was chosen for two reasons. First, Stam and Reiter mention Israel in their book and argue that this state is a prime example of how democracies are better equipped, trained, motivated, and successful in war. Michael Desch questions this claim by Stam and Reiter over Israel, especially the argument that they fight more adequately and the soldiers of democracies are better trained. These conflicting commits over Israel lays the foundation of an adequate need for a case study to see if Israel is, as Stam and Reiter claims, more successful at war because they are a democracy, or Desch's counter argument that Israel fought so well because they were fighting for survival, not because of their regime. The second reason why Israel has been chosen as the case study for this paper is because they have arguably never lost a war since independence and seem to improve in conflict through the years.

The greatest contribution I hope to make in this paper is a deeper understanding of how democracies choose and fight wars. Due to time constraints, this paper is only

addressing one case study that deals with two wars. As in any case study the results are limited to that particular case. However, the research creates more in depth examination over the arguments by Stam and Reiter and, in a more general sense, attempts to analyze propositions made by democratic theorist.

Methodology

The methodology, as stated before in the introduction, is a case study of Stam and Reiter's first two propositions of democratic success and war. Only the two successful propositions are used, political culture and political structure, because Stam and Reiter claim that they have the greatest impact on democracies. Future research should address the other two propositions, economic might and international community, but for the purpose of this paper, only the two variables that Stam and Reiter found to be successful will be tested.

The case study will include Israel and the Arab states of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. These participants will be observed based upon political structure and political culture, as defined by Stam and Reiter, pertaining to the two wars mentioned previously. Saudi Arabia and Iraq were involved in the Yom Kippur War, but were considered by the literature as minor players. The research in this paper is composed mostly of historical observations and depictions of both wars. Also, some interviews from political and military elite will serve as internal first hand observation to strengthen the research. The paper will first review some of the past literature written over democracies and war. Then it will progress to outline Stam and Reiter's four principles they present over democracies and war. The two case studies, Six Day War and Yom Kippur War, will then be examined to see if Stam and Reiter's theories are significant. Finally, a discussion of the findings and analysis will resume after the case studies.

As mentioned before, there are some key variables that Israel must possess to solidify Stam and Reiter's argument. For political structure there are two key variables that must be evident which are: decision constraint, which is the electorate placing a check on the decision-making process by government officials, and decision consultation, which refers to the process where government officials collectively decide what actions are appropriate during times of conflict. In both of these variables no one individual has complete control over decisions concerning war.

For political culture there are also two variables that are vital to Stam and Reiter's argument which are: democratic spirit, which encompasses the morale of troops, and patriotism from the home front, and democratic military structure, which refers to the elite characteristics that democratic soldiers possess. If these attributes can be found in the case study, then Stam and Reiter's theories may hold substantial significance when assessing democracies at war.

Literature Review

Stam and Reiter base their research on Immanuel Kant's principles of linking domestic politics and international relations.² Also, they build upon David Lake's 1991 ground-breaking research that links democracy and success in conflict.³ Michael Desch is one of the leading critiques of linking regime type and success in war. Desch takes a realist approach to the argument suggesting that power and security, not regime type, is what matters when it comes to fighting wars.⁴ Many realist and neorealist take this angle of the argument which is contrary to the liberal institutionalist argument.

The two propositions that I will be testing from Stam and Reiter are as mentioned, political structure and culture. Structure looks at the electorate and domestic constraints put upon leaders. Culture, according to the authors, looks at the "spirit" of democracies and how it drives democracies to be more successful. Positive culture is defined by Stam and Reiter in relation to democracies at war as the sacrifice of the electorate, training of soldiers, and nationalism of the participants. These propositions will be explained in detail in the latter part of this review. The roots of these propositions need to be examined so that the foundation can be presented to build upon Stam and Reiter's argument.

Regime types have been scrutinized since the end of the Cold War. With the fall of the Soviet Union came an increase and rapid mobilization of democratic principles amongst the international community. States have looked to adopt democratic principles for economic, political, and international alliance reasons. It has become more empirically obvious that democracies have a certain correlation between war and success despite the claims from realist that regime type does not matter.⁵

Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson assess that democratic leaders select winnable wars because of the constraints places upon them by the constituents.⁶ This is an argument that is trumpeted as well by Stam and Reiter. Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson find that democratic leaders pick wars that have a less chance of defeat than do authoritarian leaders. The results they found were tabulated over a span of 150 years and encompass numerous regime types and political systems. After extensive test, Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson found their argument to hold true to their findings that decisions to go to war have a strong correlation with the regime type.⁷

Reed and Clark also examine briefly case studies and show how democratic constraints motivate leaders to act certain ways during times of war.⁸ They examine a more exclusive group by looking at war initiators and the amount of success they endure. The results showed victors of wars that were initiators were generally those states that operated under a democratic regime. In the case of Israel and the Six Day War, Reed and Clark assess their success to their political institutions. The will of the masses pushed for the Israeli leaders to act against the Arab opposition and to act preemptively in the case of the Six Day War. Reed and Clark argue that the political ramifications that would be extracted upon Israeli leaders by the electorate would be devastating. This external pressure prompted government officials to act against the Arab states.

Stam and Reiter

Stam and Reiter use the MID data set in their research to show that democracies fight better wars than other types of regimes.⁹ The data set consist of wars from 1816 to 1990 and notes the participants, year the war started and ended, and the name of the war. The data set is tested in various hypotheses with multiple controls and focuses mainly in the four propositions given by the authors

Proposition 1: *The Skeleton of Democracy-Political Structure*

According to the authors, political structure encompasses the democratic constraints put on leaders by the electorate of a democratic society. Stam and Reiter assess that elected officials are more likely to submit to the will of the electorate because they wish to resume power. A person's vote in a democracy helps put a check on the government officials and balances their power. This constraint in return forces leaders to pick winnable wars if there is an international conflict that needs to be addressed. These external pressures by the democratic electorate create a need for accountability on the part of elected officials. Stam and Reiter suggest that voters can demand this accountability in three forms which are: retrospective, prospective, and contemporaneous voting.¹⁰ This assessment compliments Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson's argument that democratic leaders choose winnable wars to stay in power.

Along with voting, a balance-of-power is established by having different branches and departments in the government that have a voice in foreign policy decisions. This is a system that authoritarian regimes do not implement which causes foreign policy to be dictated by one or a few elites. Authoritarian leaders may still choose to go to war even though a possibility of success is minimal because of some personal gain or prize they are seeking. Stam and Reiter assess that authoritarian leaders are more likely to take this route regardless of the losses endured by the populous of the state.

Authoritarian leaders are less likely to loose power after picking a disastrous war because the masses have few if any institutions or outlets to voice their opinion. This lack of "voice" may cause migration and force the government to obtain possible exit problems.¹¹ However, the leadership of an authoritarian regime operates on a hierarchical system and will not be forced out of power unless the war causes a regime change or regime upheaval.

Perspective 2: *The Spirit of Democracy-Political Culture*

In this perspective, Stam and Reiter look to see if cultures of different regimes have an impact on the outcome of war. The authors look at culture as a form of nationalism or spirit that is embedded internally in the state. Stam and Reiter argue that democratic institutions empower the individual which then empowers the whole as well.¹² This emphasis on the individual by democracies gives strength to the soldiers and the leadership in the military. Stam and Reiter argue that democracies produce better trained soldiers because there is a bond that is present that does not exists in a hierarchical military such as an authoritarian regime. Democratic militaries have positions that hold greater power than others; however, there is a respect, according to

Stam and Reiter, which is located in a democracy because of the emphasis on the individual.

The authors also suggest that democratic soldiers are less likely to surrender than other soldiers in different regimes. Also, democratic soldiers are more likely to treat the enemy in a more humane way when it comes to the rules of warfare and implying the Geneva Convention accords. This behavior that Stam and Reiter attribute to democratic soldiers will have an effect on their opponents, making them more likely to surrender to the more humane democratic military. Democracies do not like long wars or conflicts that produce high casualties. However, the authors assess that democratic citizens will sacrifice and have a “rally-around-the-flag” effort when it comes to war. These qualities are not found in an authoritarian regime according to Stam and Reiter.

Perspective 3 & 4: *International Community and Economic Might*

Stam and Reiter’s third and fourth perspectives do not have a great impact, according to their findings, on wars and success. International community here refers to the support or aide that democracies will give in times of conflict. Cultural enthusiasts note that regimes with similar values or systems, more directly democracies, will form alliances and come to the aide of other democracies during times of conflict.¹³

After researching the wars that are in their data set, Stam and Reiter do not find any significance or trends that show democracies rush to the aide of other democracies. Joint democracy models first emerged after World War II. Stam and Reiter test wars after 1949 and still find no significant examples where democracies are aiding other democracies during war. There is some significance in their findings when examining material aide, but those results still showed only moderate results.

Economic might is the notion that democracies usually contain a more robust economy and are able to fight wars more adequately because of their economic prowess. Industrial power is related to war and the success of a state would logically be the participant with the greater amount of economy and industrial might. Stam and Reiter look at two perspectives concerning economic prowess and war. First, democracies are generally more successful and generate greater materials than their authoritarian counterparts. Secondly, democracies muster greater support and are more willing to sacrifice when it comes to times of war.

Unfortunately, data over GDP is scarce to find when looking at international states prior to the 1980’s. Sam and Reiter also found this a problem and focused on a state’s capabilities and equated those variables with their GDP. In October of 2002 Heston, Summers, and Aten compiled numerous variables dealing with a countries economy and compiled them in the Penn World Table data set.¹⁴ This data set compares countries from different years and selects 30 variables for analysis. After reviewing the Penn World Table data set, Stam and Reiter found little to no significant advantage in economic might in Israel compared to the Arab states. Also, besides some minimal

political and material support from countries such as Russia and the United States there was no outside military aide from other countries in either conflict.¹⁵

Stam and Reiter find that both authoritarian regimes and democracies during war exasperate around the same amount of resources. The technology and manufacturing output varies in certain cases but there is an overall equality and little significance found in the variable of economic might. An alternative explanation by Stam and Reiter might be that democracies take investment and economic might and use these resources more adequately than authoritarian regimes. Also, corruption in authoritarian regimes may have a large impact on economic might of authoritarian regimes. Overall, Stam and Reiter found no correlation on the different variables that deal with military equipment, economic might, and industrial output concerning democracies.

Critiques of Stam and Reiter

Michael Desch's argument that regime type is irrelevant to the outcome of military success is in line with the realist argument that domestic politics has little effect on foreign policy or international affairs.¹⁶ Desch assess that there are more persuasive arguments that link war and success that are contrary to domestic constraints and the selection of elites.¹⁷ He argues that a possible explanation of success in war by a particular state should include the consolidation of the government, if the military organization mimics the dominant procedures of leading states, and the nature of the conflict that is taking place. Desch's research he claims supports the notion that democracies do not hold certain advantages over other regimes in times of war.

Out of the 75 wars that are documented in Stam and Reiter's data set, Desch feels that 54 of the cases are "unfair fights," leaving only 21 cases to analyze.¹⁸ Desch describes these unfair fights as conflicts which a democracy was part of a mixed alliance, the democratic country was not as the researchers assess, and the democratic country was so powerful that the opposition had no chance of victory. All of these factors, along with other minor complaints, according to Desch give adequate cause to question the results of democratic "triumphalists."

Concerning Israel, Desch feels that some of the conflicts mentioned by Stam and Reiter, such as the War of Attrition in 1969 and Lebanon War in 1982, were actually draws rather than victories. Desch feels that Israel was unable to maintain long-term political gains. Desch also notes that Israel during the Six Day War was actually fighting for existence not because they chose to fight the war or was better equipped. In this view, Desch is arguing that Israel fought out of necessity and was on the brink of being purged from existence so they fought in desperation not because they were a democratic regime. Israel fought for nationalism not democracy.

Stam and Reiter defended their research and claimed that after all of Desch's modifications were made, democracies still won out over authoritarian regimes. Stam and Reiter also respond to Desch's criticism over "unfair fights," by assessing that if they were to leave out mismatched opponents in war it would defeat one of their perspectives

that democracies seek out weaker opponents or more winnable wars.¹⁹ In the case of the questionable Israeli wars, War of Attrition and Lebanon War, Stam and Reiter claim that Israel accomplished its victory to occupy the territory which was their objective and repelled enemy forces. If researchers should judge victory on long-term gains, there are many wars in their data set, Stam and Reiter argue, that involve an authoritarian victor but should be coded as an authoritarian loss according to Desch's logic.

Stam, Reiter, and Desch all agree that economic might and industrial power have balancing effects when it comes to the outcome of war. Desch also suggest near the end of his article that regime type may have a more effect on wars than once considered. For a state to have a cutting-edge military there seems to be a trend that is establishing to first gaining a democratic-like government. The argument still persists between both sides on whether or not democratic leaders chose winnable wars, and if the culture of democracies aide in their victory. The following case studies will add to this argument.

Research and Findings: The Six Day War and The Yom Kippur War

The Six Day War

The start of the Six Day War occurred in June of 1967. Israel attacked preemptively against the Egyptian Air force, decimating the airfield and only 3 Egyptian planes were able to reach the air.²⁰ The war only lasted six days and was a clear victory for Israel from a military stand point. Israel knew war was on the horizon, but did not know when it would soon unfold. Many democratic leaders of the Israeli government debated for weeks over when to strike and finally came to the conclusion that the attack must be preemptive in nature. Israel struck when the Arab nations least expected. Many commanders of the Egyptian were out of the country, at weddings, or on vacation during the first initial strikes.²¹

The withdraw of UN forces in 1956, the blockade of Israeli ports by Egyptian soldiers, and the Egyptian alliance between Syria in 1966 and Jordan in 1967 left the Israeli government with little choice but to strike.²² The need for the war to be short lived was warranted by many factors. The Israeli government could not afford for the Arab nations to regroup and produce a stronger counter-attack. More importantly, Israeli public opinion demanded action, and was vigilant in their voice when it came to security issues.²³ Failure by the Israeli government to act would have resulted in some severe consequences for the elites that ran the democratic Israeli government. Israeli leaders acted because they feared the political ramifications by the masses that would be implemented because of a relaxed and passive foreign policy concerning their Arab neighbors.

Prime Minister Eshkol of Israel also feared that he would loose his status if nothing were to be done against the Arab nations. The decision-making process constrained Eshkol to only have one option which was to attack. An authoritarian leader may see that a preemptive strike against numerous opponents may seem like a risk and

would not pursue such policies. In this case the price Eshkol would pay for not acting would supersede the risk of fighting on multiple fronts.²⁴ All these causes pushed Israel to proceed with a war that it could easily win and victory would come quickly.

Nasser, the leader of Egypt was constantly in fear of a coup or upheaval of office. King Hussein of Jordan also felt these same pressures from political opposition. Aman, the leader of Syria, Nasser, and Hussein could not unify their forces or agree on any type of conventional strategy.²⁵ All of the Arab nations were based on a hierarchical structure that their authoritarian regimes called for. This type of mentality hindered a united Arab force and ultimately played a part in their demise in the Six Day War. Israel had a formidable military and superior air power. However, they were no match for the combined forces of Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Jordan even sought aide from outside nations such as the Soviet Union. The cards were stacked against Israel, but because of their planning and electorate demanding action, they were able to quickly defeat their Arab enemies.

Sergio Catignani in his article, “Motivating Soldiers: The Example of the Israeli Defense Forces,” examines the functionality and abilities of soldiers in the Israeli military.²⁶ Concerning the Six Day War, Catignani notes the superior training and professionalism of Israeli soldiers during this conflict. Motivation is the secret weapon of Israel and this motivation comes from a sense of nationalism. Israeli soldiers often went to historical landmarks and devoted themselves to their people to remain free. Catignani describes the relationship between the Israeli soldiers and their officers as one of respect and brotherhood. Though there are ranks within the military, Catignani explains the relationship between officers and enlisted men as a father/son type role that is unbroken during times of war. The Israeli military are more cohesive, according to Catignani, than the authoritarian Arab state that base their military on a strict hierarchical system that creates a distinct wedge between ranks of officers and average soldiers. Many officers do not even know the name of most of their men serving with them.

Like the United States, Israeli soldiers are known to retrieve their wounded and casualties and frequently abide by the rules of engagement of warfare. This observation by Catignani is complimentary to the assertions made by Stam and Reiter that claim democratic soldiers are more cohesive and bonded together than other militaries under different regimes.

Michael Hadow, an ambassador for the British embassy, described the difference between the Israeli and Arab soldier was striking during this time period.²⁷ Hadow claims that the Israeli troops were not lavishly equipped as there Arab counterparts. Most of the men were civilians and used civilian transport. Hadow comments on the Arab soldiers as being inept to be able to use their superior military weaponry provided by the Soviet Union. The Arab leadership had little preparation and communication on all fronts, which according to Hadow seemed impossible after numerous years of experience.

After the 1973 war Egyptian Salah al-Hadidi, the chief justice over the trials of Egyptian officers who had defected during the war in 1967 claimed that it was the

superior-bureaucratic leadership that defeated the Arab armies.²⁸ Gen. Muhammad, Sadiq, an Egyptian officer, spoke on the promotion system of Egypt helped aide to their defeat. Sadiq claimed that promotions in the military were based on loyalty to Nasser not on their merits. Opponents to Nasser's policies were demoted and given menial task.²⁹ Zakkariya Muhieddin, an Egyptian official, argued that the Israeli military leadership knew the names of every soldier and military leader along with their whole families' name. Muhieddin claimed Arab forces could not even find out where the prime minister was located.³⁰ In an interview with Shams Badran in 1977, and Egyptian political advisor, stated, "Nasser took the decisions that placed the army in a trap. Without consulting with anyone, he led us into the ambush that Israel had laid..."³¹

The Arab leadership according to these accounts was unorganized and centralized most of their tactics on the policies that Nasser and his puppets concocted. The type of decision-making is contrary to the democratic approach of bureaucratic discussion and collective decision-making.

Yom Kippur

The Yom Kippur War was a surprise attack similar to the Six Day War; however, the attack this time was from Egypt and the Arab forces. It began on the 6th of October 1973, when Egyptian forces crossed into the Suez Canal and attacked the Bar-Lev in the southwest.³² Israel eventually took control of the conflict and was the victor of the war. Pollack describes how Israel in this instance was inferior in economy and technology, more so than in the Six Day War.³³

Bolia explains that there was a significant increase in weapon technology and tactics since the 1967 war.³⁴ Bolia claims that Israel at first relied heavily on weapon technology to see them through the war. After it was apparent the Arab forces had the same type of technology Israel had to rely on their morale, leadership, decision process, and national spirit to achieve victory.

Bolia claims that Arab leaders suffered from faulty leadership and horrible decision making usually decided upon by one person. The Arab officers had little respect for their troops and treated them similar to how the Soviet Union treated their troops during World War II; using them as merely expendable material easily sacrificed. Israeli officers had a rich tradition in fighting in the front lines with the men that served underneath them. Also, military was becoming a part of life since their independence.

In the case of Yom Kippur, Bolia claims that this war was one fought by fathers and sons. Early in the war General Peled, commander of the IAF (Israeli Air Force), was commenting to the press about a missing pilot and his crew that was serving in the IAF. During the briefing Gen. Peled was informed that they had been found and were coming home. One of the reporters tried to confirm if one of the pilots was actually Peled's son. Peled answered yes and noted that he would return to battle that night.³⁵

Clausewitz suggests that moral dimensions and the spirit of the combatant are one

of the most important issues to look at in war.³⁶ Clausewitz alludes to the fact, similar to Desch's argument that Israel was fighting during the Yom Kippur War for existence. He also claims that Israel had fought as commendable because of a fear of genocide, not just victory.

This war was robust with spirit of community, as every war Israel had fought, and every participant could identify with every civilian as untied fight for nationalism. Israel won this war because of spirit and the quality of their troops. Technology was the same, the regimes were different, and the war ended in the same manner with Israel as the victor.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has limitations in that it only examines two cases to test the argument of Stam and Reiter. Evaluating the situation in these two cases alludes to the fact that democratic leaders do tend to pick, or choose to participate in, winnable wars. They are also superior in preparing for these wars and training their military. Clausewitz presents an argument that Israel fought for survival, which is similar to Desch's claim. However, many Egyptian elitists claim that it was poor leadership that led to an Israeli victory. Also, outside observers have commented extensively on the difference in mentality between the Arab and Israeli soldiers.

Israel has received a score of 10 on the Polity III score since their start as an independent nation. The government is very democratic in nature and possesses the qualities, empirically and statistically, as being a well balanced and total pluralist democracy. Perspective one presented by Stam and Reiter over political structure seems to be more relevant in the Six Day War than in the Yom Kippur War. This may be because Israel struck first, unlike in the Yom Kippur War when they were attacked. However, the detail of strategy and intelligence, accompanied with the will of the masses for action in both wars left the Israeli leadership with little choice but to act. The research suggests that in the Six Day War Israel did show signs of decision constraint and consultation which are the variables of political culture pointed out at the beginning of this paper. These variables are not found extensively in either war by any of the Arab authoritarian regimes. The electorate of Israel held their leaders accountable which in return caused them to act efficiently and swiftly according to the will of the masses.

The democratic spirit and superior military structure was found as well in Israel during both conflicts. Also, the capability and readiness of the Israeli soldiers and the Israeli people is evident and seen in their actions. The Israeli communities were all linked to the military in both wars and were willing to sacrifice for the "cause." The research suggests that Stam and Reiter's definition of national spirit is prevalent in the case of Israel. The variables mentioned earlier, democratic spirit and military effectiveness can also be found in Israel during both wars. Stam and Reiter's claim that democracies, or in this case Israel, are more successful in war seems to be true.

More likely both Desch's claim that Israel fought well because of survival

purposes and Stam and Reiter's claim that regime type played a role in their success is valid. Israel fought because their democratic values allowed them to feel connected, have a voice, and freely choose to participate in both conflicts. However, the enormous threat by the Arab states, not only in these wars but since independence, were so overwhelming that Israelis had no choice but to fight or risk genocide thus giving merit to Desch's argument.

Democracy is winning out on all accounts and continues to grow, while authoritarian regimes, by choice or force, are dwindling on the world stage. Further research on Stam and Reiter's claims should be tested, along with other arguments from democratic theorist. I suggest that an alternative case study be performed concerning a successful authoritarian regime to test claims of realist and institutionalist. A study of this nature coupled with research such as this paper presents can be compared and evaluated to obtain a firmer grasp on regime type and success in war.

NOTES

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