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MIDDLE EAST

# Israel Buries 4 Soldiers, but the Mourning Is Marred by Discord

By ISABEL KERSHNER JAN. 9, 2017

JERUSALEM — One loved horse riding; another was the oldest of four sisters; a third had fought to enlist in the army despite medical problems that allowed him to defer the draft. The fourth was the 300th graduate of her Haifa high school to have died while serving as a soldier.

Israel buried its latest terrorism victims on Monday, the day after they were run down by a Palestinian man in a truck, enveloping them in the country's familiar outpouring of love for its service members.

But this time, the usually unifying ritual was marred by discord. Israelis called it the "Azaria effect," referring to Sgt. Elor Azaria, the soldier who was convicted last week of manslaughter for shooting a wounded and incapacitated Palestinian assailant in the head.

Video from the scene of Sunday's attack showed dozens of armed soldiers fleeing from the truck instead of trying to shoot the driver. Some Israelis who had complained that the army's high command failed to back up Sergeant Azaria

asserted that the soldiers had fallen short because they were afraid of being put on trial.

The military, security experts and soldiers at the scene quickly rejected that notion. “Those who ran from the scene were not concerned about Azaria, but about their own well-being,” said Yehuda Ben Meir, an expert in national security and public opinion at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Still, the argument — unfolding in full volume on Israeli news sites, social media and broadcast channels — reflected the disruptive influence the Azaria affair has had on the army and its central place in Israeli society.

In this small, conflict-worn country where most Jewish 18-year-olds are drafted into years of service, the military has long been a rare reserve of respect and consensus. Yet the same sentiment that leads Israeli Jews to treat soldiers as “everybody’s children” has also led many to call for a pardon for Sergeant Azaria, creating tension between the people and the commanders of their army.

“The motherly protection of soldiers sometimes overcomes your basic value system,” Mr. Ben Meir said, adding that the instinct to protect soldiers was not particular to Israel.

The soldiers targeted by the Palestinian truck driver on Sunday were in officer training programs, and most were not preparing for combat roles. Many were in the educational corps or training for administrative jobs on the home front. On a routine educational tour of Jerusalem, they were caught off-guard as they disembarked from buses at a popular observation spot with panoramic views of Old City.

The truck driver plowed into one group, then reversed and came back to claim more victims. A tour guide who shot at the truck with his pistol complained on television that the soldiers were better equipped with M-16s but had hesitated to shoot.

Noam Kedar, one of the soldiers at the scene, denounced those who passed instant judgment.

“Please stop your dime-store psychoanalysis,” she wrote in an impassioned Facebook post. “It has nothing to do with Elor Azaria,” she added. “It’s unrelated. Let none of you dare compare a semitrailer going at 100 km per hour with a disarmed terrorist who is lying down, already neutralized.”

The military’s preliminary findings were that two soldiers had fired at the driver; it remained unclear on Monday whether he had been killed by them or by civilians who opened fire. The defense minister, Avigdor Lieberman, said that any attempt to link Sunday’s events to the Azaria verdict had no basis.

One squad commander at the scene said she had instructed her forces to run for cover after determining that enough soldiers were already running toward the truck. There were also concerns, according to officers in the field, that too many people shooting could cause a “friendly fire” accident.

The four soldiers who were killed, all promoted posthumously, were identified as Lt. Yael Yekutieli, 20, from Givatayim, near Tel Aviv; Second Lt. Erez Orbach, 20, from Alon Shvut, in the West Bank; Lt. Shir Hajaj, 22, from Ma’ale Adumim in the West Bank; and Second Lt. Shira Tzur, 20, from Haifa.

“These are our children,” Herzl Hajaj, Shir Hajaj’s father, told the Israeli news media Sunday after hearing of his daughter’s death. “We send them to the army; we know they might not return.”

The Azaria case, regarding a shooting in the West Bank city of Hebron last March that was caught on video, unleashed its own kind of friendly fire and fury.

As a military judge read the verdict last week in a Tel Aviv military compound, hundreds of protesters demonstrated outside. Bolstered by some of the most extreme right-wing elements of Israeli society, like La Familia fan club of the Beitar Jerusalem soccer team and the anti-Arab Lahava organization, the crowd scuffled with the police. Among their chants were threats against Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot, the military chief of staff, a post normally among the most revered and popular among Israeli Jews.

General Eisenkot had drawn criticism for saying in a speech a day before the Azaria verdict that an 18-year-old in the army was not “everybody’s child,” but a soldier and a fighter with a mission.

“Gadi, Gadi, beware, Rabin is looking for a friend,” the protesters sang, referring to Yitzhak Rabin, the prime minister of Israel who was assassinated in 1995 by a right-wing Jewish extremist.

The three judges who formed the military tribunal were placed under guard.

The backlash was not long in coming, and was equally charged. The popular Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper gathered half a dozen former chiefs of staff and photographed them for Sunday’s front page, with the headline: “Behind you, Gadi.”

Days earlier, an army reservist who is well known to Israelis — as are many war heroes — captured national attention with a plea for unity after the Azaria verdict.

The reservist, Capt. Ziv Shilon, who lost one arm in an explosion along the Gaza border and was severely injured in the other arm, wrote in an emotional Facebook post: “Yes, I, who never cried in the hardest moments that I do not wish on anybody, sat today and simply cried.”

“I cried,” he wrote, “over the hands that I left in Gaza and I asked myself perhaps for the first time in my life, was it worth fighting for a nation that hates itself?”

Mr. Shilon announced plans to sit in Tel Aviv’s Rabin Square — named for the prime minister who was slain there in 1995 — on Saturday night with a huge placard calling to bring back solidarity and mutual respect, even if he had to sit there alone. Instead, he was joined by thousands.

Micah Goodman, an American-Israeli Jewish philosopher, said that the Israelis’ “automatic identification” with soldiers sometimes led to “irrational” results.

That was the common thread, he said, between the cries for a pardon for Sergeant Azaria and the contentious decision in 2011 to trade more than 1,000

Palestinian prisoners, many of whom had been convicted of deadly terrorist acts against Israelis, for one Israeli soldier who was being held captive in Gaza.

“Having that soft spot for soldiers is part of the Israeli solidarity, and it is part of what is really unique about Israel,” Mr. Goodman said. “The weakness of Israel is also part of the power of Israel.”

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