

Fury at Azaria Verdict is Israel's Trump Moment

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The United Kingdom has Brexit. The United States, an incoming president Trump. And Israel now has Elor Azaria. It may not have the same ring, but ultimately the turning point could prove as decisive.

Two fallacious narratives have greeted the army medic's manslaughter conviction last week, after he was filmed firing a bullet into the head of a wounded and helpless Palestinian, 21-year-old Abdel Fattah Al Sharif.

The first says Azaria is a rotten apple, a soldier who lost his moral bearings last March under the pressure of serving in Hebron. The second – popular among liberals in Israel – claims the conviction proves the strength of Israel's rule of law. Even a transgressing soldier will be held accountable by the world's "most moral army".

In truth, however, the popular reaction to the military court's decision was far more telling than the decision itself.

Only massed ranks of riot police saved the three judges from a lynching by crowds outside. The army top brass have been issued bodyguards. Demands to overrule the court and pardon Azaria are thunderous – and they are being led by prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Azaria is no rogue soldier. He is "everyone's child", according to much of the public. The unexceptional nature of his act is vouched for by the complete indifference of his colleagues as Azaria pulled the trigger. Polls show overwhelming support – 84 per cent – for Azaria among 18- to 24-year-olds, the age of Israel's conscript army.

The trial, meanwhile, reflected not the law's sanctity – it is 12 years since the last soldier, a Bedouin, was convicted of manslaughter. It revealed only the growing pressures on Israel. Cameras in phones are making it harder to cover up soldiers' crimes. By prosecuting Azaria in a case where the filmed evidence was unequivocal, Israel hopes to ward off war crimes investigations by the International Criminal Court.

As Israeli columnist Nahum Barnea noted, Azaria's defence team also erred. Riding a wave of populist indignation, they accused Azaria's superiors of lying and bullying. Prosecutors had already reduced a murder charge to manslaughter. The court would probably have settled for convicting a repentant Azaria of misusing a firearm. But given the defence's framing of the case, the judges had to choose: side with the soldier or the army.

Like Brexit and Trump, Azaria's trial exposed not only a deep social fissure, but also a moment of transition. Those who see a virtuous system punishing a rotten apple are now

outnumbered by those who see a rotten system victimising a hero.

Polls show the Israeli public's faith plummeting in most institutions, from the courts to the media, which are seen, however wrongly, as dominated by the "extreme left". Only the army is still widely revered.

That is in part because so many Israeli parents must entrust their sons and daughters to it. To doubt the army would be to question the foundational logic of "Fortress Israel": that the army is all that prevents Palestinian "barbarians" such as Sharif from storming the gates.

But also, unlike those increasingly despised institutions, the army has rapidly adapted and conformed to the wider changes in Israeli society.

Rather than settlers, we should speak of "settlerism". There are far more settlers than the 600,000 who live in the settlements. Naftali Bennett, leader of the settlers' Jewish Home Party and education minister, lives in Ranana, a city in Israel, not a settlement.

Settlerism is an ideology, one that believes Jews are a "chosen people" whose Biblical rights to the Promised Land trump those of non-Jews such as Palestinians. Polls show 70 per cent of Israeli Jews think they are chosen by God.

The settlers have taken over the army, both demographically and ideologically. They now dominate its officer corps and they direct policy on the ground.

Azaria's testimony showed how deep this attachment now runs. His company, including his commanders, often spent their free time at the home of Baruch Marzel, a leader of Kach, a group banned in the 1990s for its genocidal anti-Arab platform. Azaria described Marzel and Hebron's settlers as like a "family" to the soldiers.

By their very nature, occupying armies are brutally repressive. For decades the army command has given its soldier free rein against Palestinians. But as settler numbers have grown, the army's image of itself has changed too.

It has metamorphosed from a citizens' army defending the settlements to a settler militia. The middle ranks now dictate the army's ethos, not the top brass, as ousted defence minister Moshe Yaalon discovered last year when he tried to stand against the swelling tide.

This new army is no longer even minimally restrained by concerns about the army's "moral" image or threats of international war crimes investigations. It cares little what the world thinks, much like the new breed of politicians who have thrown their support behind Azaria.

The soldier's trial, far from proof of the rule of law, was the last gasp of a dying order. His sentence, due in the next few days, is likely to be lenient to appease the public. If the conviction is nullified by a pardon, the settlers' victory will be complete.

A version of this article first appeared in the National, Abu Dhabi.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are "Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East" (Pluto Press) and "Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair" (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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