# Support for Self-Censorship Among Israelis as a Barrier to Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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*Self-censorship, defined as an "act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles" often serves as a barrier to resolving intractable conflicts. Specifically, in order to protect the group, and in absence of objective constraints such as institutionalized censorship, individuals practice self-censorship and support its practice by other society members. This prevents free flow and transparency of information, within a society, regarding the conflict and the adversary. In an attempt to investigate the factors that contribute to the functioning of self-censorship as a sociopsychological barrier to conflict resolution, a longitudinal study was conducted among a large sample of Jews in Israel. The survey was administered in three waves: a few months before, during, and a few months after Israel's Operation* Pillar of Defense *in the Gaza Strip. The findings showed that armed confrontation can increase support for self-censorship. In addition, the findings revealed that personal characteristics (e.g., authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, siege mentality) predicted support for self-censorship, which, in turn, mediated the effect of personal characteristics on support for negotiations and for providing humanitarian aid. The theoretical as well as the applied implications of the findings are discussed.*

**KEY WORDS:** intractable conflict, sociopsychological barriers, freedom of expression, self-censorship

"When a nation is at war, many things that might be said in time of peace, are such a hindrance to its effort that their utterance will not be endured so long as men fight, and that no court could regard them as protected by any constitutional right."
—U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver W. Holmes Jr. (Schenck vs. United States, 1919)

The statement above articulates that at times of war, institutions and channels of communication disseminate official narratives that support the war, while at the same time, try to block information that contradicts this narrative. In this context, societies almost always rally to the banner set by the government and make efforts to be united in the face of threat, without criticism (e.g., Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999; Moran & Waldron, 2003).

In most cases, this context does not last long, since wars usually last for limited periods of time. However, similar processes also take place in prolonged violent conflicts and especially during intractable conflicts, which can last for decades and even centuries (Bar-Tal, 2013; Kriesberg, 1993).[1] In these kinds of conflicts, formal institutions through the years make efforts to create a political climate in which the dissemination of information that contradicts or questions the dominant conflict-supporting collective narrative[2] is beyond the boundaries of accepted norms (using, for example, censorship or monitoring; see, e.g., Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zehngut, 2014; De Baets, 2002). Moreover, in intractable conflicts, society members may not even be interested in this kind of information, adhering to the dominant conflict-supporting narrative, and they may even support self-censorship that prevents its dissemination.

The present research focuses on the general public's attitudes toward self-censorship that should be carried out by gatekeepers (e.g., politicians, journalists, filmmakers) and ordinary individuals in the mass media or other societal-cultural agencies. Specifically, the research presents the first quantitative empirical investigation into the sources of supporting self-censorship as well as its political consequences that have some potential to affect the society as a whole in the context of violent conflicts. The study was carried out among Israeli-Jews in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. In this context, the research also examines the possible situational effect of escalation in violence, as occurred during Operation *Pillar of Defense* (OPD)—the Israeli military operation in the Gaza Strip in November 2012.[3] This pioneering line of research is of great importance as self-censorship inhibits freedom of expression and free flow of information. This situation may lead to ignorance regarding issues of importance for the society, lack of transparency and control, impoverished public debate, impaired decisions, and even moral deterioration. For example, a recent qualitative study involving interviews with prominent Israeli journalists showed that during the Second Lebanon War in 2006, self-censorship was widely practiced. Israeli journalists thought that during the war their duty was to protect the ingroup and to rally the public to support the military campaign, instead of dividing it with criticism. They believed that they were expected to be faithful and patriotic by the general public. This resulted in the media mainly presenting the official narrative of the government and the army (Elbaz & Bar-Tal, 2016).

In the context of intractable conflicts, the effects of self-censorship can be more detrimental as it becomes a sociopsychological barrier that blocks new information supporting alternative views about the conflict, preventing progress toward peaceful resolution (Bar-Tal, in press). We thus believe that this line of research illuminates a sociopsychological phenomenon that is a result of intrasocietal processes, one relatively neglected by social psychologists. Before elaborating on self-censorship, we will first describe the context in which self-censorship flourishes, namely, intractable conflicts.

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[1] Intractable conflicts are defined as protracted and violent conflicts that are waged over existential goals, in which the parties invest extensive resources and are seen as central, irresolvable, and of zero sum nature (Bar-Tal, 2013).

[2] Conflict-supporting collective narratives focus on a number of themes: They justify goals of the conflict; stress the importance of personal safety and national survival and outline the conditions for their achievement; present and maintain positive collective self-image and collective sense of being the victim in the conflict; delegitimize the rival; and propagate patriotism and unity (Bar-Tal, 2013).

[3] The operation lasted eight days, specifically November 14–21, 2012, during which six Israelis were killed as a result of rockets that were fired from the Gaza Strip, and approximately 150 Palestinians were killed by Israeli aerial attacks (Stein, 2013).

## *Intractable Conflict and Conflict-Supporting Narratives*

Our point of departure is that societies involved in intractable conflicts develop conflict-supporting collective narratives that enable them to cope with the challenges of intractable conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013; Bar-Tal et al., 2014). These narratives provide a meaningful picture of the conflict situation, justify the behavior of the society, facilitate mobilization for participation in the conflict, differentiate between the ingroup and the rival, and enable maintenance of positive social identity. These narratives serve important functions in times of violence and war (e.g., Bar-Tal, 2013; Hammack, 2011).

Among conflict-supportive collective narratives, the central one is the master narrative, which is a hegemonic consensual story that is dominant in public discourses and cultural products. This narrative consists of two elements pertaining to the continuum of time from past through present and into the future (Bar-Tal, 2013). First, *Ethos of Conflict* as a narrative defines the particular dominant orientation of a society, which illuminates the present state of affairs and conditions and sets a direction as well as goals for the future (Bar-Tal, 2013). Second, *Collective Memory* refers to the narrative about a conflict's eruption and its course, providing a coherent and meaningful picture of the past (Paez & Liu, 2011). It has been suggested that collective memory is constructed in order to serve the present societal needs and goals by recounting the eruption of the conflict, its course, and its major events (Paez & Liu, 2011). Indeed, it was found that increasing the salience of specific historical events that constitute the society's collective memory can alter society members' attitudes towards present events (e.g., Schori-Eyal, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2014). Eventually, the master conflict-supporting narrative and more specific narratives become well-institutionalized and disseminated and serve as a foundation for the development of a culture of conflict that dominates societies engaged in intractable conflicts (Bar-Tal, 2013). It is usually this type of culture that gives rise to a political climate, which discourages the dissemination of information contradictory to the conflict-supporting collective narratives, because it is seen as harming the group's cause (Bar-Tal et al., 2014).

Thus, when the window of opportunity opens for resolving the conflict peacefully, the conflict-supporting narratives in the culture of conflict become a barrier to the peacemaking process (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Porat, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2015). These barriers can function on the societal level, where various mechanisms are used to block alternative information and narratives from entering the social discourse and to reject them if they do enter (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). These mechanisms can be activated by formal authorities, such as institutional censorship, i.e., governmental prohibition of publication of materials in the mass media that might challenge the dominant narrative (De Baets, 2002); the use of punishment for those who attempt to challenge the dominant narratives, by utilizing tangible sanctions such as imprisonment; and also by informal organizations that, for example, monitor the flow of information in academia or the mass media (Bar-Tal et al., 2014).

The sociopsychological barriers to conflict resolution also operate on the individual level. When the conflict-supporting collective narratives are held as an ultimate truth, they have a major influence on information processing. This prevents opening up to new perspectives that may facilitate peacemaking (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Hammack, 2011). Studies have shown that conflict-supporting narratives result in selective, biased, and distortive information processing that obstructs and inhibits the penetration of new information (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Porat et al., 2015). Eventually these societal and individual processes are conducive to the development of sociopsychological mechanisms such as self-censorship, conformity, or obedience.

In the present study, we focus on a sociopsychological mechanism, namely self-censorship that is a result of macro societal processes that create political climates. We argue that this mechanism helps to maintain the dominant conflict-supporting narratives in societies involved in an intractable conflict by blocking free flow of information and thus preventing the formation of alternative narratives. Thus far, this barrier has not been examined empirically. Before describing the present study, we review the literature on self-censorship and describe how it serves as a sociopsychological barrier to conflict resolution.

## Self-Censorship

Self-censorship is a broad and general sociopsychological phenomenon that is ubiquitous and is manifested in different forms and contexts. As a phenomenon, self-censorship has been observed in families—as secret keeping (e.g., Petronio, 2010)—and it has also been studied in organizations, focusing on whistle-blowers who break the norms of self-censorship within malfunctioning organizations (e.g., Gundlach, Douglas, & Martinko, 2003). Finally, on the societal level, several qualitative studies show that self-censorship is practiced by gatekeepers and ordinary individuals in the mass media or other societal-cultural agencies, such as the army or the Ministry of Education (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev, Ginio, & Winter, 2010; Nets-Zehngut, Pliskin, & Bar-Tal, 2015; Ngok, 2007).

However, in spite of the fact that it was observed to be quite prevalent, relatively little work has been carried out to define self-censorship conceptually and to investigate it empirically as a sociopolitical-psychological phenomenon. Until recently, self-censorship was defined very broadly and has included expressions of opinions, feelings, or thoughts (Hayes, Glynn, & Shanahan, 2005; Horton, 2011). For example, Hayes et al. (2005) defined self-censorship as "withholding of one's true opinion from an audience perceived to disagree with that opinion" (p. 299). Defining self-censorship in such broad terms makes it hard to differentiate between the practice of self-censorship and other closely related sociopsychological phenomena, such as conformity and obedience. Thus, Bar-Tal (in press) has recently developed a systematic conceptual framework that defines self-censorship as an "act of intentionally and voluntarily withholding information from others in the absence of formal obstacles" (p. 10). Unlike conformity, this definition focuses only on factual information and does not include opinions. Furthermore, the main motivation to self-censor is to protect the group, whereas in cases where individuals conform to the group, it is always to protect themselves. Additionally, unlike obedience in its classic sense, Bar-Tal's conceptualization explicitly limits its cases to absence of formal obstacles. Nevertheless, strong commitments to groups' dogmas and beliefs can be seen as obedience to the system and may lead to collective-oriented motivations or norms supporting self-censorship (for a thorough discussion, see Bar-Tal, in press).

According to Bar-Tal's (in press) conceptualization, self-censorship often takes place when a society member believes that she or he holds reliable information that may shed negative light on the ingroup and thus can potentially harm the society. As a result she or he decides to withhold this information from others, whether they are ingroup members or outsiders, without the prohibition of a formal agent (e.g., formal censorship). The self-censoring society members can be either gatekeepers or ordinary people. Gatekeepers are usually more aware of information of which most society members are unaware, and their decision to self-censor may have a greater impact on the society as a whole. Ordinary people can also be aware of information that may be important to the group but are usually less able to disseminate it. Finally, the characteristics of the societal context (i.e., stable political-economic-cultural characteristics, such as a democratic tradition and limited, situational characteristics, such as a military regime, or an intractable conflict) can also effect the ubiquity of support for, and actual practice of, self-censorship.

## Self-Censorship as a Sociopsychological Barrier to Peacemaking

As noted, the context of intractable conflict is one of the most conducive to the development of wide scale self-censorship, even in democratic societies. In this context, self-censorship is often viewed by authorities and segments of a society as a necessary sociopsychological mechanism that protects the ingroup by blocking the dissemination of information that is perceived as detrimental to the society's goals and interests (Bar-Tal, 2013, in press). Its practice enables the maintenance of the society's master conflict-supporting narrative and prevents the disclosure and dissemination of alternative information that may present the society in a negative light. Many believe that if such information

is exposed, it might jeopardize the mobilization of society members to participate in the conflict and reduce support from the international community. In order to prevent its exposure, societies utilize official methods such as censorship, restricting use of archives, and discrediting of counterinformation (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). Moreover, they propagate norms that encourage self-censorship, such as subordination of the value of freedom of expression to security related considerations, and use social sanctions to enforce them (Bar-Tal, in press). Under such conditions, these norms are internalized by some society members.

Accordingly, self-censorship in times of intractable conflict can be viewed as a sociopsychological barrier to peacemaking. Along with the biases in information processing investigated in previous research (e.g., Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Porat et al., 2015), self-censorship should be seen as a barrier that has both individual implications—as it indicates that an individual is, or would be, inclined to process conflict-related information in a selective, biased, and distorted manner—and also societal implications. By blocking alternative information and allowing the maintenance of conflict-supporting narratives, self-censorship contributes directly to the continuation of the intractable conflicts. Society members in these cases voluntarily, intentionally, and consciously prevent the diffusion of new information, even if they believe that this information is valid, as they prefer to avoid negative sanctions and/or try to protect their ingroup (Bar-Tal, in press).

Indeed, research using qualitative methodologies reveals that self-censorship operates as a societal-psychological mechanism in the context of intractable conflicts, which is nourished by the conflict-supporting societal narratives, specifically collective memory, but also takes part in the process of their construction and maintenance (e.g., Ben-Ze'ev et al., 2010; Nets-Zehngut et al., 2015). For example, Nets-Zehngut et al. (2015) show that Israeli gatekeepers, who worked in formal institutions responsible for the creation and dissemination of the collective memory (the National Information Center, the IDF/army, and the Ministry of Education), practiced self-censorship regarding the causes of the Palestinian exodus in 1948. They denied that the exodus was at least partially caused by Jewish military forces, even though this was already regarded as an historical fact by some Israeli historians.

Importantly, as already noted, in most cases, self-censorship is practiced within a particular political climate that develops norms limiting the flow of information (Ngok, 2007). Whether due to internalization of these norms or fear of negative social sanctions, a significant portion of society may support self-censorship as a method of restricting the flow of information in order to protect the ingroup. Therefore, the attitudes that society members hold towards self-censorship are an important factor, which may explain and predict the actual practice of self-censorship in a given society (Bar-Tal, in press).

We see support for self-censorship in the context of intractable conflicts as a manifestation of conservative ideology (Altemeyer, 1996), especially when it is based on adherence to a conflict-supportive master narrative. Conservative ideology reflects closure to innovation and change on the one hand and submission to tradition and stability as well as deference to authorities on the other. In addition, support for self-censorship may reflect a desire to protect the ingroup's positive image (Bilewicz, Winiewski, & Cichocka, 2013) and to protect the ingroup physically from those who try to harm it (Bar-Tal, in press). If one desires to study support for self-censorship, it is necessary to also reveal its conservative antecedents and its serious consequences.

## The Present Study

The main goal of the present study is to provide empirical support for some aspects of Bar-Tal's (in press) conceptualization of self-censorship (in fact, support for self-censorship) as a sociopsychological phenomenon that appears in violent conflicts. The present study, to the best of our knowledge,

is a first empirical attempt to extend qualitative research that provided descriptive accounts of the phenomenon of self-censorship in the context of intractable conflicts. Utilizing a nationwide sample of Israeli-Jews, the study reveals the antecedents and consequences of self-censorship. It was conducted in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, between February 2012 and January 2013, during which another cycle of violence erupted—the Israeli OPD (November 2012). Thus, we measured general and specific support for self-censorship during this particular violent event.

### Antecedents of Support for Self-Censorship

We identified three different antecedents of support for self-censorship, representing specific conflict-supporting beliefs and general worldviews, each tapping a different aspect of a conservative orientation. The first antecedent we investigated was *right-wing authoritarianism* (RWA), which refers to a type of personality that advocates a conservative view of the world, including adherence to traditional values and closure to new ideas (Altemeyer, 1996). In previous research, it was shown that RWA was associated with low levels of openness to alternative information and willingness to compromise (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011). A study by Feldman (2003) showed that authoritarianism reflects strong conformity "to ensure the maintenance of common norms and values and social cohesion" (p. 67). Thus, for an authoritarian person, obedience to political authorities and hegemonic formal narratives is a rule that should not be violated by new information. Therefore, we suggest that RWA would predict support for self-censorship to prevent the revelation of new information that contradicts maintained values and norms.

The second antecedent is *ethnocentrism*, which denotes the tendency to accept the ingroup and reject outgroups (Sumner, 1906). Specifically, ethnocentric group members tend to perceive their own group as virtuous and superior and outgroups as contemptible and inferior (Brewer & Campbell, 1976). This tendency leads to protection of the views of the ingroup in order not to damage the ethnocentric perception (Bizumic, & Duckitt, 2012). As mentioned above, one way of protecting the positive view of the ingroup is self-censorship of information that may portray the ingroup negatively. Indeed, an unpublished study by Bilewicz et al. (2013) conducted in Poland during peaceful times showed that ethnocentrism was related to support of self-censorship in a national representative sample. Specifically, those who scored high on ethnocentrism reported being "angry when information about Polish crimes towards Jews is revealed."

The third antecedent is *siege mentality*, which reflects a generalized societal belief that the whole world is against the ingroup, deep feelings of threat, and a sense of collective victimhood (see Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992). This societal belief is maintained widely by Israeli-Jews on the basis of their past experiences, such as the long history of anti-Semitism (Poliakov, 1974) and especially their chosen trauma of the Holocaust (Klar, Schori-Eyal, & Klar, 2013). It is unrelated to the conflict in the Middle East but feeds the general sense of collective victimhood in it (Schori-Eyal et al., 2014). In view of such feelings, the protection of the ingroup in the particular conflict receives high priority. Support for self-censorship may be a reflection of such protection.

Finally, the study also assessed the participants' political orientation along the left-right continuum. According to past research, political orientation is associated with ethnocentrism, perceptions of siege mentality (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), authoritarianism, and conciliatory attitudes regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011).

### Consequences of Support for Self-Censorship

Support for self-censorship has significant consequences. It signals willingness to prevent the free flow of information that may also shed new light on the conflict and the currently held conflict-supporting narratives. This may increase support for noncompromising positions and thus undermine
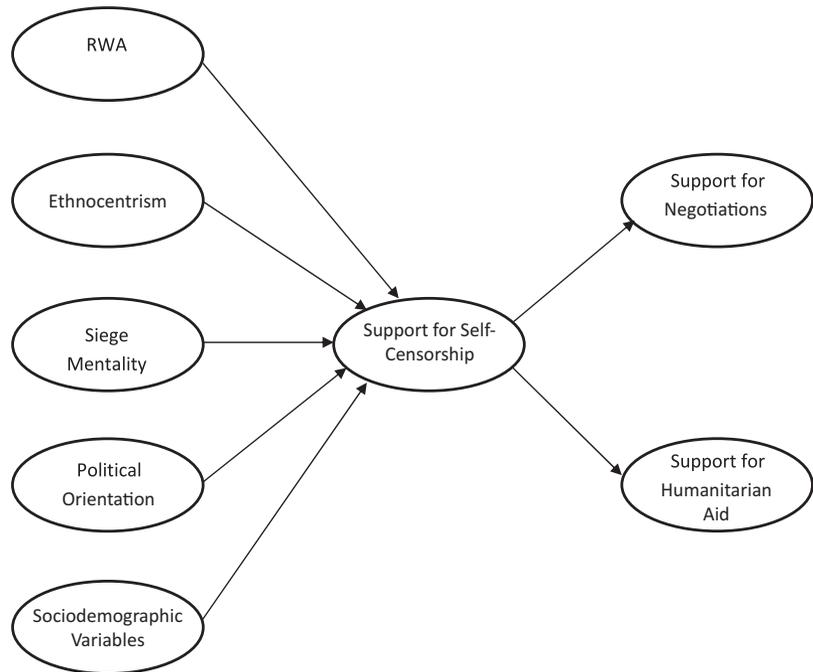
**Figure 1.** Illustration of the research hypotheses.

support for a peacemaking process and intensify backing of militaristic policies. Accordingly, in the present study we tested the hypothesis that support for self-censorship would predict resistance to conciliatory measures toward the Palestinians, namely negotiations with the Palestinian leadership and provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza residents. These two variables represent a complementary perspective on the conflict. The first indicates the level of the willingness to embark on the road to peace, indicating openness because a change in the conflict-supporting narratives is required (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011). The second reflects the strong adherence to the conflict-supporting narratives and negative emotions that resist helping the adversary when humanitarian aid is refused (Halperin & Gross, 2011).

In the major part of the study, we aimed to incorporate the concept of self-censorship as a sociopsychological phenomenon to the general model of sociopsychological barriers (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011). Thus, we hypothesized that support for self-censorship, as a manifestation of conservative ideology, would be predicted by RWA, ethnocentrism, siege mentality, and political orientation. In turn, it would serve as a barrier to conflict resolution, as it closes individuals to receiving (as well as disseminating) information regarding the conflict and the means to resolve it, indicating a selective, biased, and distorted information processing on the individual level, with implications on the closure of the society at large. This biased information processing, and adherence to the closure of the society, was found to be a crucial factor in the maintenance of society members' nonconciliatory attitudes (Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Porat et al., 2015). Thus, we expected support for self-censorship to be negatively related to support for conciliatory policies and to at least partially mediate the relationships between the conservative antecedents and support for conciliatory policies (see Figure 1 for an illustration of the hypotheses). In addition, as a secondary goal, we wanted to compare the general attitude towards self-censorship with the specific self-censorship regarding the military operation (OPD) and to compare the general attitude towards self-censorship in Israel with the attitudes towards self-censorship in other states (specifically the United States and Russia, chosen because they are super powers that profess freedom of expression). We thought that respondents will be more supportive of

self-censorship regarding OPD than self-censorship in general. We hypothesized that they will also be more supportive of self-censorship in general than specifically in other states. These results will be presented in the last part of the results section.

## Method

### *Overview and Procedures*

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted a three-wave prospective online survey among a nationwide sample of Israeli-Jews. The measures for the present study were embedded in a larger survey administered by the research firm Midgam Project (MP) and was first distributed online in February 2012 (t1), during a period of relative calm in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The original sample included 826 Israeli-Jews, randomly drawn from the general MP panel (see the online supporting information for sociodemographic characteristics). This opt-in panel covers Israelis aged 17 years and older. Between the 18th and 21st of November 2012 (t2), during OPD, we approached this sample again. Of all first-wave participants, 420 completed the wartime questionnaire, yielding a 50.8% re-response rate. For the third wave, which was administered during January 2013 (t3), approximately one year after t1 and two months after t2, we tried to approach respondents from t1, even if they had not participated in t2. The third wave included 466 respondents (56.4% re-response rate). In all, 355 respondents participated in all three waves (43.0% of the baseline sample). Total payment was approximately $10 per respondent. Studies and reviews suggest that participation rates between 30% and 70% are, at most, weakly associated with bias, although bias should always be checked (Galea & Tracy, 2007).

The present study focused on the subset of respondents who took part in all three waves. The sample largely represented the distribution in the adult Jewish-Israeli population (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2013), with the following sociodemographic characteristics: Average age was 46.72 years ($SD = 15.36$); 50.4% were male; 59.7% were secular, 21.1% considered themselves as observant, and 19.2% were religious; 40.7% had at least a college degree, 40.7% had some college education, and 18.6% had 12 or fewer years of schooling; 45.9% regarded themselves as having moderate to extreme right-wing political orientation, 36.1% regarded themselves as centrists, and the remaining 18.1% regarded themselves as having moderate to extreme left-wing political orientation. (See the online supporting information for a complete frequency table of the two political orientation items.) Logistic regression was used to examine drop-out bias due to age, gender, level of religiosity, educational attainment, and political orientation. Age was found to be a significant predictor of attrition ($p < .001$), while both level of religiosity and educational attainment were found to be marginally significant predictors of attrition (both $ps < .10$). However, the significant predictors of drop-out only predicted about 9% of the variance of attrition, indicating that attrition was mostly random. Finally, both political orientation and gender were not found to be significant predictors of attrition (both $ps > .31$) (See the online supporting information for the complete statistics of the drop-out bias analysis.)

### *Measures*

Our model included the antecedent variables of RWA, ethnocentrism, siege mentality, and political orientation (measured in t1), the mediator variable of support for self-censorship (measured in t2) represented by the indicators of general support for self-censorship and support for self-censorship regarding OPD, and the outcome variables of support for conciliatory policies toward the Palestinians (measured in t3). We also controlled for standard demographic variables (measured in t1).

*Predictor Variables*

*Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)* was assessed using a 10-item ($\alpha = .85$) abbreviated version of Altemeyer's (1996) original RWA scale (e.g., "Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children can learn."). The shorter version of the scale was used mainly due to space limitations stemming from the nature of a complicated nationwide survey. The selection of the items was based on previous uses of abbreviated versions of the RWA scale (see Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011).

*Siege Mentality* was assessed using a six-item scale ($\alpha = .79$) following the conceptual work by Bar-Tal and his colleagues on the concept of siege mentality (e.g., Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992) (e.g., "History is characterized by constant existential danger to the Jewish people.").

*Ethnocentrism* was assessed using a four-item ($\alpha = .90$) abbreviated version of Bar-Tal and Antebi's (1992) Ethnocentrism scale (e.g., "The ability to survive points to a unique quality of the Jewish people.").

*Political orientation* was assessed using two standard self-defined political orientation items ($1 = extreme\ right$ to $7 = extreme\ left$), which assessed political orientation regarding the conflict and regarding economics (i.e., "What is your political stance regarding the conflict, foreign policy, and security issues?" and "What is your political stance regarding socioeconomic issues?"; $r = .48$, $p < .001$).

*Mediator Variables*

We used two indicators of support for self-censorship, one referring to self-censorship in general and one referring to support for self-censorship specifically regarding OPD.

*General Support for Self-Censorship* was assessed using two items indicating the participants' support for free flow of information in general (i.e., "Journalism should be free and should publish reliable information, even if it might harm the society or state in which this information is being published."; and "The media should publish reliable information on immoral deeds that governments or militaries conduct, even if it might harm the society or state in which this information is being published"; $r = .73$, $p < .001$). This variable was measured again in t3 using the same items ($r = .82$, $p < .001$).

*Support for Self-Censorship Regarding OPD* was assessed using three items ($\alpha = .82$) indicating the participants' support for self-censorship of information that is directly related to OPD (i.e., "During OPD, to what extent do you think the Israeli media should publish reliable information regarding harm to Palestinian civilians?"; "To what extent do you think that the soldiers who participated in OPD should pass on reliable information regarding harm to Palestinian civilians?"; and "To what extent do you think that human rights organizations should publish reliable information regarding harm to innocent Palestinian civilians during OPD?"). This variable was measured again in t3 ($\alpha = .79$).

*Outcome Variables*

*Support for Negotiations* was assessed using two items indicating the participants' support for negotiating with Palestinian leadership (e.g., "To what extent do you support negotiating with the Palestinian Authority, led by Abu-Mazen?"; $r = .58$, $p < .001$). This variable was also measured in t2 using the same items ($r = .64$, $p < .001$).

*Support for Humanitarian Aid to the Palestinians* was assessed using two items indicating the participants' support for humanitarian aid to the Palestinian residents in Gaza (e.g., "In light of the security situation, to what extent do you think Israel should transfer food and medication to the Gaza

**Table 1.** Bivariate Correlations Among Study Variables

|  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| M | 3.12 | 3.31 | 3.39 | 4.26 | 3.25 | 4.67 | 4.41 | 3.79 | 46.72 | .01 | .04 | 4.20 | 1.63 | 7.51 | 0.59 |
| SD | 1.35 | 1.58 | 1.57 | 1.34 | 0.88 | 0.90 | 1.34 | 1.06 | 15.36 | 1.00 | 1.00 | 11.47 | 0.87 | 1.89 | 0.81 |
| 1. Support for Negotiations (t3) | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Support for Humanitarian Aid (t3) | .65** | — | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. General Support for Self-Censorship (t2) | −.30** | −.33** | — | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Support for Self-Censorship Regarding OPD (t2) | −.47** | −.47** | .53** | — | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. RWA (t1) | −.43** | −.41** | .40** | .43** | — | | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Siege Mentality (t1) | −.32** | −.32** | .31** | .43** | .45** | — | | | | | | | | | |
| 7. Ethnocentrism (t1) | −.37** | −.26** | .20** | .33** | .54** | .56** | — | | | | | | | | |
| 8. Political Orientation (t1) | .57** | .52** | −.27** | −.42** | −.47** | −.33** | −.41** | — | | | | | | | |
| 9. Age | .32** | .19** | −.11* | −.03 | −.02 | .11* | −.01 | .23** | — | | | | | | |
| 10. Gender | .02 | −.05 | −.09 | −.03 | .05 | .05 | .00 | −.09 | .06 | — | | | | | |
| 11. Marital Status | .06 | .05 | −.02 | −.06 | .05 | −.04 | .09 | .01 | .11* | .09 | — | | | | |
| 12. Income | .01 | .05 | .00 | .04 | .01 | .06 | .01 | .02 | .08 | −.11* | .06 | — | | | |
| 13. Religiosity | −.41** | −.29** | .24** | .31** | .51** | .21** | .40** | −.42** | −.17* | −.04 | .25** | .01 | — | | |
| 14. Education | .14* | .15** | −.10 | −.08 | −.23** | −.19** | −.16* | .06 | .04 | −.08 | .17* | .08 | −.07 | — | |
| 15. Born in Israel | −.07 | −.04 | .07 | .03 | .03 | −.07 | .01 | −.02 | −.28** | .02 | .02 | −.04 | .01 | −.01 | — |

*Note.* * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

residents"; $r = .80$, $p < .001$). This variable was also measured in t2 using the same items ($r = .76$, $p < .001$).

Unless stated otherwise, answers to all of the scales across the three waves were given on 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 6 (*very strongly agree*). In addition, all self-censorship items were reverse coded, so that the higher the score, the more supportive participants were of self-censorship (for complete scales, see the online supporting information).

### Covariates

Our model controlled for the following demographic variables: age, gender (1 = male; −1 = female), marital status (1 = married; −1 = unmarried), income (0 = no income at all; 1 = much lower than the average income in Israel (i.e., \$2,600 a month); 2 = slightly below average; 3 = average; 4 = slightly above average; 5 = much above average), place of birth (1 = Israel; −1 = Other), religiosity (1 = Secular; 2 = Observant; 3 = Religious; 4 = Very religious) and educational attainment (1 = Up to 8 years in school; 13 = PhD education).

## Results

### Bivariate Correlations

As a first step toward testing our hypotheses regarding the relationship between support for self-censorship and other variables, we examined the bivariate correlations between the variables (see Table 1). General support for self-censorship was strongly and positively related to support for self-censorship regarding OPD. As predicted, both self-censorship variables were negatively correlated with support for negotiations and support for humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. In addition, the self-censorship variables were positively correlated with RWA, siege mentality, ethnocentrism, and religiosity and negatively correlated with political orientation (high = left). None of the correlations exceeded the accepted threshold for multicollinearity (.70) (Bagozzi, Youjae, & Phillips, 1991).

### Structural Model

To assess the hypothesized complex relationships among the variables, we used the AMOS 21 statistical program to conduct a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis. To affirm the distinctiveness of the scales, we first advanced a measurement model. The measurement model consisted of factor-loading paths from the latent constructs (e.g., RWA, ethnocentrism, support for self-censorship) to their manifest indicators and nondirectional correlations between the latent variables. In the case of support for self-censorship, we specified the two component factors (general support for self-censorship and support for self-censorship regarding OPD) as also loading on a common factor representing support for self-censorship. Due to the large number of indicators, we followed the recommendations of Little, Cunningham, Shahar, and Widaman (2002) and created parcels in order to minimize potential pitfalls and to optimize the measurement structure of constructs in SEM procedures.[4] The measurement model displayed good fit to the data ($\chi^2(238, N = 355) = 428.61$, $p < .001$; $NFI = .91$; $IFI = .96$; $CFI = .96$; $RMSEA = .05$). Correlations between the constructs corresponded

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[4] We used parceling procedures for the latent constructs of RWA and siege mentality, which were the only ones assessed by more than five indicators. For RWA, items were randomly parceled into three composite indicators. For siege mentality, we created two composite indicators: one including items referring to the Holocaust and one including items referring to Jewish historical victimization in general.
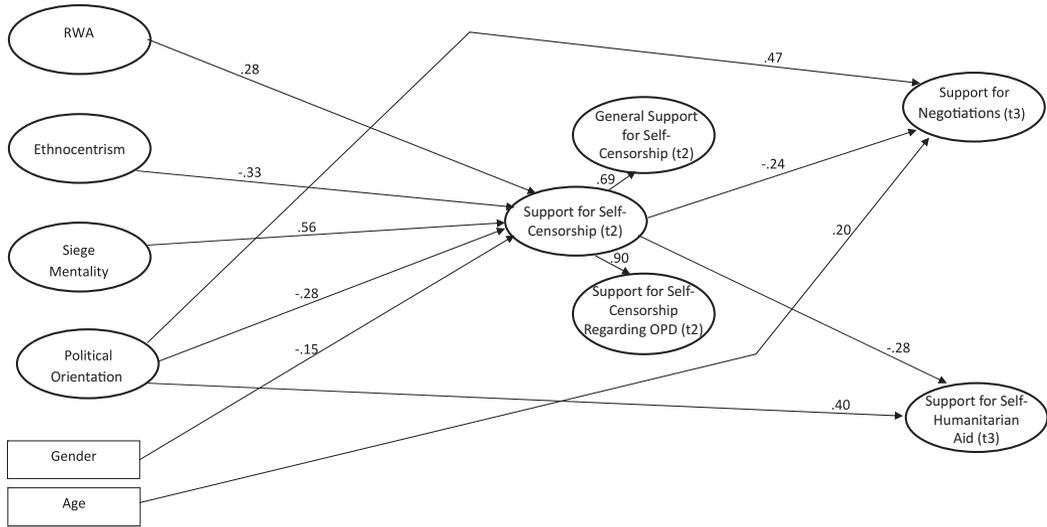
**Figure 2.** Structural model of the antecedents and outcomes of support for self-censorship. Nonsignificant paths, bivariate correlations and error terms are not shown. All coefficients correspond to the arrows beneath them.

with the ones reported in Table 1. Factor loadings on all latent variables were significant and ranged from .52 to .92.

In the next stage, we advanced the structural model, based upon the hypothesized relations. RWA, ethnocentrism, siege mentality, political orientation, and sociodemographic covariates were specified as exogenous variables. The t3 variables of support for negotiations and support for humanitarian aid to the Palestinians were specified as endogenous outcome variables. General support for self-censorship and support for self-censorship regarding OPD assessed at t2 were specified as two factors loading on a common "support for self-censorship" factor, which was specified as a mediator predicted by the t1 variables and predicting the t3 outcome variables. Finally, we also tested the direct paths from the exogenous variables to the outcome variables. All latent variables assessed simultaneously were allowed to correlate with each other. The results of the model can be seen in Figure 2.[5]

As in the measurement model, all factor loadings in the structural model were significant and ranged from .51 to .92. More importantly, the structural model showed good fit to the data ($\chi^2(238, N = 355) = 428.61, p < .001; NFI = .91; IFI = .96; CFI = .96; RMSEA = .05$) and corresponded well with the research hypotheses. RWA, ethnocentrism, siege mentality, political orientation, and gender emerged as significant predictors of support for self-censorship (t2). Interestingly, ethnocentrism was negatively related to support for self-censorship. Furthermore, in keeping with the hypotheses, support for self-censorship was a significant (negative) predictor of support for negotiations and for humanitarian aid at t3. Additionally, the direct paths from RWA, ethnocentrism, and siege mentality to support for negotiations and for humanitarian aid were not significant. However, the indirect paths mediated by support for self-censorship were significant between ethnocentrism and support for negotiations (95% confidence interval (CI) = [.004,.30], p = .043), ethnocentrism and support for humanitarian aid (95% CI = [.01, .30], p = .019), siege mentality and support for humanitarian aid (95% CI = [−.44, −.03], p = .026), and RWA and support for humanitarian aid (95% CI = [−.25, −.004],

$p = .030$). The indirect path from siege mentality to support or negotiations was marginally significant (95% CI = [−.43, .00], $p = .050$) as was the indirect path from RWA to support for negotiations (95% CI = [−.24, .00], $p = .050$).

The direct paths from political orientation to support for negotiations and for humanitarian aid were significant, yet the indirect effects mediated by support for self-censorship were significant as well (negotiations: 95% CI = [.002, .18], $p = .042$; humanitarian aid: 95% CI = [.01, .21], $p = .023$). Overall, the findings are consistent with the hypothesis that support for self-censorship would mediate the effects of RWA, ethnocentrism, siege mentality, and political orientation of support for conciliatory policies.

Because support for self-censorship and support for conciliatory measures were assessed both at t2 and at t3, we were able to compare our model with an alternative model representing a reverse causal direction. In this model, support for negotiations and support for humanitarian aid assessed at t2 were specified as mediators and support for self-censorship at t3 was specified as the outcome variable with general support for self-censorship and support for self-censorship regarding OPD as two factors loading on the common factor. The exogenous variables in the alternative model were identical to the hypothesized model. The alternative model fit the data well ($\chi^2(238, N = 355) = 480.41$, $p < .001$; NFI = .90; IFI = .95; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .05). However, Akaike's information criterion (AIC) and expected cross-validation index (ECVI) were lower in the hypothesized model (AIC = 708.61; ECVI = 2.00) than in the alternative model (AIC = 760.41; ECVI = 2.15), indicating that the hypothesized model had the better fit. Moreover, in the alternative model the paths from support for conciliatory measures at t2 to support for self-censorship at t3 were not significant. Hence, while our hypothesized model is correlational, little support is found for the reverse causal order.[6]

## Additional Analysis

### *Comparison of the Different Self-Censorship Measures*

First, we wanted also to examine whether OPD, as a situational factor, would increase the participants' support for self-censorship regarding the military operation (OPD), but it would not affect the more general attitude measure of self-censorship, which were combined in the model as two factors of support for self-censorship.[7] We hypothesized that individuals would be more supportive of self-censorship when it specifically focused on the OPD, than when it was general. In addition, we sought to compare support for self-censorship in reference to Israel with support for self-censorship in reference to other nations, such as the United States and Russia. We hypothesized that Israelis would be more supportive of self-censorship when it referred to Israel than to other nations. In order to examine this last hypothesis, we assessed *Support for Self-Censorship in Other Nations* using six items ($\alpha = .93$), administered during t3, indicating the participants' support for self-censorship referring to other nations, such as Russia and the United States, rather than Israel (e.g., "The media in other nations, such as Russia and the United States, should publish reliable information regarding immoral deeds done by the government.").

*General versus situation-specific support for self-censorship.* We conducted a two-way repeated measures ANOVA with level of assessment of support for self-censorship (general vs. regarding OPD) and time of measurement (during vs. after OPD) as within-subject factors. The means of the different measures at different times are presented in Table 2. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for level of assessment, $F(1, 354) = 153.59$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .30$. As hypothesized,

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[6] Complete information about the alternative model can be found in the online supporting information.
[7] The comparisons reported here did not control for the demographic variables. However, the pattern of results remains identical when controlling for these variables.

**Table 2.** Means of Self-Censorship Scales by Time of Measurement

| Self-Censorship Scale | Operation *Pillar of Defense* Wave (November 2012) | | Post Operation Wave (January 2013) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| General Support for Self-Censorship | 3.39$_b$ | 1.57 | 3.43$_b$ | 1.61 |
| Support for Self-Censorship Regarding OPD | 4.26$_d$ | 1.33 | 4.07$_c$ | 1.36 |
| Support for Self-Censorship in Other Nations | – | – | 2.74$_a$ | 1.25 |

*Note.* Means not sharing the same subscript are significantly different from each other at $p < .05$.

general support for self-censorship was significantly lower ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 1.39$) than support for self-censorship regarding OPD ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.24$). The main effect for time of measurement was not significant, $F(1, 354) = 1.99$, $p = .160$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, but there was a significant level-of-assessment × time-of-measurement interaction, $F(1, 354) = 6.92$, $p = .019$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Post hoc comparisons using the Bonferroni correction indicated that, as hypothesized, support for self-censorship regarding OPD was higher during OPD than in the operation's aftermath, $F(1, 354) = 11.20$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$. However, general support for self-censorship did not change significantly between the two measurements ($F = .20$, $p = .656$, $\eta_p^2 = .001$).

*Support for self-censorship among the ingroup versus outgroups.* In order to compare support for self-censorship among the ingroup versus outgroups, we conducted a repeated measures ANOVA with the factors general support for self-censorship, support for self-censorship in other nations, and support for self-censorship regarding OPD as assessed at t3. The means of all the measures are presented in Table 2. The analysis revealed a significant difference between the measures, $F(2, 708) = 179.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .34$. Post hoc comparisons using Bonferroni correction indicated that, as hypothesized, participants' support for self-censorship in other nations was significantly lower than their general support for self-censorship, which was significantly lower than support for self-censorship regarding OPD (all $ps < .001$).

## Discussion

The present study aims to extend the scope of research into the functioning of the sociopsychological barriers to conflict resolution in the context of intractable conflict. It shows clearly that support of self-censorship as a particular component of the conservative orientation is related to variables that reflect right-wing position towards the conflict. Past research has demonstrated that individuals—in order to maintain their conflict-supporting narratives—avoid being exposed to, searching, and absorbing new information that may contradict their held knowledge about the conflict (e.g., Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011; Porat et al., 2015). The present study provides for the first time empirical findings that substantiate the hypothesized manner through which support for self-censorship as a sociopsychological barrier to peacemaking may operate on the societal level, through shared societal-level norms. The findings are in line with the conceptualization that suggests that these barriers operate both on the societal level utilizing powerful mechanisms such as punishment and self-censorship by gatekeepers and on the individual level as an integrated operation of cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes, combined with a preexisting repertoire of worldviews, conflict-supporting beliefs, and emotions. In addition, the practice of self-censorship by ordinary persons is dependent on individual decisions and a particular political climate that discourages free flow of information. All of these join together to obstruct any penetration of new information or proposals that challenge the dominant

narrative into the individual and collective spheres (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Bar-Tal et al., 2014; Halperin & Bar-Tal, 2011).

The present findings demonstrate that in situations of intractable conflict, individuals support prevention of dissemination of information that contradicts the conflict-supporting narratives presented by the formal authorities—that is, they support the practice of self-censorship by society members (i.e., soldiers) and by gatekeepers in the media and NGOs. This sociopsychological phenomenon falls within the domain of situations in which individuals either intentionally and voluntarily withhold information from other society members even in the absence of formal obstacles or support such withholding of information that may reflect negatively on the society, creating a climate of silence. Support for self-censorship thus aims to protect the society in conflict by blocking the dissemination of information viewed as harming a society that is threatened by the rival group and is coping with vital challenges in a violent conflict (see Sharvit et al., 2016). Moreover, it is one of the mechanisms through which conservative political orientations contribute to the maintenance of intergroup conflict (Bar-Tal, 2013).

Consistent with this view, in the present study RWA and political orientation emerged as significant predictors of support for self-censorship, which was assessed eight months later. According to Altemeyer (1996), the three attitudinal clusters that comprise RWA are submission to authority, aggression toward subordinates and deviants, and veneration to conventionalism. In a situation of intractable conflict the convention, which is encouraged by the official authorities, is to endorse the conflict-supporting narrative. Hence, support for self-censorship of information that contradicts the conflict-supporting narrative increases with RWA. It is important to note, however, that in other situations, in which the act of self-censorship may be performed against the legitimate state authorities (e.g., radical left-wing movement members self-censor themselves in order to protect the movement), RWA and political orientation may not be significant predictors of support for self-censorship. This hypothesis should be tested in future studies.

As mentioned earlier, self-censorship is often motivated by a desire to protect the ingroup and its image. It follows that support for self-censorship should increase as the perceived threat to the ingroup increases. Consistent with this notion, our findings indicated that siege mentality, which reflects a deep threat and concern for the group (Bar-Tal & Antebi, 1992), predicted support for self-censorship, which was assessed eight months later.

Interestingly, ethnocentrism was a significant predictor of support for self-censorship, but the relationship between the variables was negative, contrary to our prediction. A possible explanation for this surprising finding is that RWA and siege mentality account for most of the variance in support for self-censorship having to do with a desire to protect the group from threats. After controlling for those predictors, the remaining variance that ethnocentrism can account for may have to do with the belief in the moral superiority of the ingroup. Firmly believing that the group is morally superior may reduce support for self-censorship (after controlling for threat perceptions), because one does not believe that the group has anything to hide.

The results of the model suggest that self-censorship is a mechanism of closure that aims to block information, which may potentially shed new light on the conflict and the rival and thus lead to a change of views by society members and possibly a change of policies regarding the conflict. We propose that it is an outcome of individual characteristics and societal circumstances that leads to closure. In our view, closure is the key mechanism of human stagnation. Without exposure to new or alternative information that refutes existing beliefs, human beings usually have difficulty in changing their already established repertoire (Kruglanski, 2004). We assume that this closure takes place because of the freezing of society members' conflict-supporting narratives, which has resulted from the threatening characteristics of the context of the conflict and socialization efforts (Bar-Tal et al., 2014). This, in turn, increases support for individual actions that limit the free flow of information about the conflict, even when no official barriers to the dissemination of such information exist. Hence, the conditions of

a harsh and prolonged conflict preclude the appearance of alternative approaches that may potentially facilitate advancement toward peacemaking (see Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003).

Although the hypothesized antecedents preceded the measurement of the mediating variables, which preceded the measurement of the outcome variables in the model, the present study is correlational, and we cannot draw any firm conclusions regarding the causal relationships between the variables. Future research should go another step and study the proposed causal relations by manipulating some of the variables in the model. For instance, siege mentality or ethnocentrism could be primed and the effects on support for self-censorship and conciliatory attitudes explored.

The additional results of the present study also demonstrate unsurprisingly that support for self-censorship increases significantly during a violent escalation in the conflict compared to times of relative calm. This increased support reflects the very general phenomenon of rallying behind the leaders during violent confrontation to support their decision to escalate the conflict (Moran & Waldron, 2003; Schechter, 2003). This means that in the course of societal efforts to prevail in a violent confrontation, society members feel obliged to refrain from criticizing and disseminating information that may harm the societal efforts. This norm is pronounced in Israel where there is an ongoing governmental campaign to silence criticism regarding the state's conduct in the conflict, especially of those individuals and NGOs that provide information about wrongdoings by the Israeli army (Lomsky-Feder & Ben-Ari, 1999; Oren, Nets-Zehngut, & Bar-Tal, 2015).

Indeed, the findings of the current study showed that during OPD support for self-censorship regarding the operation was higher than general support for self-censorship, which did not change over time. Thus, while a moderate level of general support for self-censorship exists in Israel constantly due to the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian/Arab conflict, support for withholding information increases in times of a violent escalation. In previous studies conducted in Israel, it was found that when the principle of secrecy on security matters was posed against the free flow of information, a large proportion of Israelis favored the former (Arian, 1995). For example, during the second Palestinian uprising (Second Intifada), 73% of an Israeli national representative sample stated that a democracy could not exist without free media. Yet at the same time, half of the respondents maintained that the Israeli media has too much freedom. Moreover, more than 80% of the respondents thought that when media coverage deals with security issues, journalists should practice self-censorship. Most strikingly, approximately 70% of the respondents thought that the media should not cover what happens in the occupied territories if the report might harm Israel's image in the world (Chaim Herzog Institute for Media, Politics and Society, 2003).

Of interest is the finding that, in general, Israeli-Jews did not support self-censorship in other societies, such as the United States and Russia, probably realizing that it hurts the functioning of the democratic system by preventing the free flow of information. This finding reflects double standards and moral hypocrisy whereby individuals expect other persons and groups to uphold certain moral standards, while excusing themselves and their own groups from upholding the same principles on the basis of various rationalizations (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007). Individuals also apply different standards of judgment while evaluating similar behaviors by their own society versus another society. While the behavior of the ingroup is judged positively, the same behavior by another group is often judged negatively (Oskamp, 1965).

It should be noted that there were two differences between the measure of general support for self-censorship and the specific measure of self-censorship regarding OPD: The latter referred to Israel and OPD, whereas the former did not refer to a specific group or event. Therefore, we cannot decisively conclude what is the specific source of the differences we found in the analysis. Nevertheless, when people are asked about journalism and the media, it is reasonable to assume that their default response would refer to their own nation, unless otherwise stated. Furthermore, the significantly lower support for self-censorship in other nations compared to general support for self-censorship also suggests that participants were not thinking about other nations when responding to the general support

for self-censorship items. Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that the specific reference to OPD is what drove the effect.

Support for self-censorship by Israeli-Jews may reflect doubt in the significance or even the validity of information that contradicts the hegemonic conflict-supporting narrative. This could lead to reduced willingness to consider alternative views of the conflict seriously. Because the hegemonic narrative supports the continuation of the conflict, we predicted that high support for self-censorship would predict lower support for conciliatory policies toward the adversary. Our findings supported this hypothesis, suggesting that support for self-censorship is not merely a byproduct of an ongoing conflict, but a significant process that acts as a barrier to conflict resolution.

In sum, the study supports the hypotheses that individuals' general sociopolitical orientations predict support for self-censorship, which, in turn, predicts opposition to conciliatory measures. Support for self-censorship seems to be an outcome of a well-entrenched ideology supporting continuation of the conflict, which closes society members to alternative information that may change their views about the rival and the conflict, and thus possibly advance peaceful resolution of the conflict. Under these circumstances, it is a considerable challenge to lead societies involved in a protracted and violent conflict to negotiations and eventually to an agreement, as the case of Israelis and Palestinians demonstrates. Self-censorship was shown to play a detrimental role in past conflicts, as in the Vietnam War, or the Algerian War of Independence, preventing exposure of the general public to crucial information that might have led to a timelier end of these wars and avoidance of many unnecessary deaths (Bar-Tal, in press). If we consider the possibility that in the context of intractable conflicts the same sociopsychological barriers work on both sides, it is possible to understand why such conflicts are not resolved easily.

We would like to end this article on an optimistic note and propose that society members have to come to an understanding that the continuation of the conflict will not lead to a better or desired future but may instead hurt (or is already hurting) the fundamental goals and/or needs of the group (Gayer, Landman, Halperin, & Bar-Tal, 2009). One basic condition for this understanding is free flow of information that brings new knowledge and ideas that may open minds and lead to an aspiration to terminate the conflict. Thus, genuine freedom of expression and discouragement of self-censorship must be one of the goals in societies involved in intractable conflict in order to bring peaceful conflict resolution.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Initial Sample

Additional Information About the Distribution of the Final Sample Participants' Political Orientation

Additional Information About the Drop-Out Bias Analysis

Additional Information About the Scales

Additional Information About the Hypothesized Structural Equation Model

Additional Information About the Alternative Structural Equation Model