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The 'Nayirah' Effect: The Role of Target States' Human Rights Violations and Victims' Emotive Images in War Support

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

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Research Panel: Framing Rights: Narratives and Advocacy

Presenters: Joseph Braun, University of Maryland; Kiyong Chang, University of Notre Dame

Title: The “Nayirah” Effect: The Role of Target States’ Human Rights Violations and Victims’ Emotive Images in War Support

Abstract:

When a target state violates human rights, how does the identity of the victims and the presence of emotive imagery affect the level of public support for interventionist war? How does the perceived race and gender of victims affect this relationship? We employ a survey experiment to study whether and when information about a target state’s human rights violations affects public attitudes toward the use of force. Specifically, we manipulate a fictional victim’s race (light-skinned vs. dark-skinned) and gender (male vs. female), and explore how these variations affect support for interventionist war. In our experiment, we find that war support is stronger when a target state violates human rights. More importantly, public support for intervention was affected by the characteristics of the victims of human rights abuse. Support for interventionist war was found to be greatest among those participants who viewed images of light-skinned or female victims, though a white male image was found to be most impactful. Our causal mediation analysis showed that subjects viewing light-skinned or female images had less concern about the costs of intervention. Our findings suggest that the racial and gender characteristics of the victims of human rights abuse plays a substantial role in determining individual support for war.

About Joseph Braun:

Joseph Braun has a master’s in political science, specializing in human rights, from the University of Nebraska and works in the Department of Government & Politics at the University of Maryland. His research interests include identifying practical ways to build individual and social commitments to human rights. Other research interests include political psychology, political philosophy, political communication, bargaining theory, and international organizations.