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# Masculinity, Nationhood, and the Military in Israel and Singapore

*Isaac Tham*

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## **Introduction**

On January 4th 2017, my eighteen-year-old self waved goodbye to my anxious parents before being taken by ship to an offshore military camp. I was shaved bald, issued green pixelated uniforms, and shown to a decrepit dormitory which fifteen similarly clueless compatriots and I would call home for the next two years. Standing at attention at the daily flag-raising ceremony, I learned to salute the flag of my country, the country I would train to protect: not the Star of David, but five white stars and a crescent moon.

Just like Israel, Singapore implements mandatory military service. While compulsory conscription is for males for a period of two years in Singapore, in Israel men serve for three years while women only have to serve for two. Conscription has been an integral part of both countries' national policies since they were each founded. This article examines the link between masculinity, military, and nationhood in Israel and Singapore – two small, relatively young nation-states established amidst a hostile regional environment dominated by another ethnic majority. Both states have had masculine discourses associated with nation-building and have used the military to institutionalize a hegemonic masculinity. I argue that the military

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has had a significantly greater impact on masculine norms in Israel, which emphasize the role of the protector, than on masculine norms in Singapore, which focus more on the role of the provider. The stronger link between the military and nationhood, and the resultant greater ties to masculinity, are due to males' greater willingness to protect their country from danger in Israel than in Singapore. The greater willingness to serve in Israel is due to a stronger sense of nationhood, while the stronger perception of protecting the country stems from the greater tangible threat to Israel than to Singapore.

This paper draws upon a diverse range of sources, including books and journal articles exploring masculinity, military, and citizenship conceptually, and many apply to Israel and Singapore specifically. As a Singaporean citizen, I incorporate a first-hand perspective on military service in Singapore. I also conducted surveys among Singaporean youths who have recently completed their military service, and I interviewed an ex-Brigadier General of the Singapore Armed Forces.

This paper begins with a theoretical discussion of the concepts of masculinity and nationalism. It then explores the masculinization of nation-building and the military in Israel and Singapore. The paper dives into the differences between Singapore and Israel, which build up to the proposition that the strength of the military-nationhood relationship rests upon both the male citizens' willingness to protect, and perception of protecting the country from danger. This military-nationhood relationship determines the significance of the role of a protector in the hegemonic masculinity of Israel and Singapore. I will also examine the state's response to the differing military-masculinity relationship, concluding that Singapore's military reinforces masculine norms associated with non-military societies. The last part of the paper explores how cultural changes in Israel threaten the military-nationhood compact and shift Israel's masculine norms toward those currently seen in Singapore, raising serious long-term security concerns for the threatened nation-state.

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## **Masculinity**

The repeated mention of masculinity raises definitional questions – what is masculinity?

Masculinity is defined as the “traits and qualities conventionally associated with boys and men.”<sup>1</sup> Masculinity as a concept was popularized by the rise of male studies in the 1980s. Many scholars in masculinity studies consider masculinity to be a social construction, circumscribed by norms applied to boys and men in a given culture.

Most scholars agree that there is no universal standard of masculinity,<sup>2</sup> but a “ubiquitous male” exists in many cultures based on the common criteria of impregnating women, providing dependents with resources to live a good life, and protecting dependents from danger. The concept of protection implies that one places himself in a dangerous or risky situation to shield others from facing danger.

Protecting and providing are the two main masculine roles that this essay refers to. Observing common features that define the core of the masculine is the essentialist way of analyzing masculinity.<sup>3</sup>

Another way of analyzing masculinity is via the normative approach, which emphasizes the idealized notion of male behavior. Many U.S. and European organizations embodied male codes of honor, which stressed “manly virtues” like willpower, strength, honor, and courage. In any society, in any time, there exists an identifiable normative “hegemonic masculinity,” an ideal type which sets the standards for male demeanor, thinking and action.<sup>4</sup> This notion deconstructs the image of a unified masculinity – for there exist many alternative masculinities which are constructed and compared in relation to the hegemonic masculinity. Implicit in the concept of masculinity as socially constructed is the notion that masculinity is changeable and mutable.

## **Nationalism and Nation-Building**

Next, we shall explore the concept of a nation. A nation is defined by

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Max Weber as “a community of sentiment which would adequately manifest itself in a state.” Nationalism, or a sense of national consciousness, is a goal to achieve both statehood, and a belief in a collective commonality.<sup>5</sup>

Nations engage in nation-building with the aim of strengthening a national identity. This involves developing the notion of a national past and present,<sup>6</sup> creating traditions,<sup>7</sup> and symbolically constructing commonality.<sup>8</sup>

### **Masculinity and Nationalism**

We will now examine the link between masculinity and nationalism. The culture of nationalism emphasizes, and resonates with, masculine themes. Values such as honor, bravery, duty, and patriotism are closely tied to both masculinity and nationalism. Additionally, notions of nationalism involve defending and protecting the nation-state, and protecting is one key masculine role in the essentialist view of masculinity.

#### *Israel – Concepts of the New Jewish Male*

The Zionism movement arose from 19th century European nationalism, which led to a desire for a “return” to Zion, the natural homeland, and assert sovereign control over it.

The Zionism movement for creating a Jewish national homeland involved significant notions of masculinity. It gained traction against the backdrop of 19th century anti-Semitic European sentiments depicting the Jewish man as effeminate, passive, and defective.<sup>9</sup> At that time, the political inferiority of Jews was encoded both in racial and gender terms – men were perceived as feeble-bodied and emasculate. The Zionist revolution radically rethought the image of the Jewish people, with the concept of “New Jew,” symbolized by an emerging healthy, strong male body. The New Jew was the answer to the imagery of the effeminate, weak body that had tainted the common perception of Jews, from Jews and non-Jews alike. This solution led to the creation of the new Jewish “Sabra” archetype, which contrasted with the

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European-ghettoized Jewish stereotype of being old, weak and cowardly.<sup>10</sup> The attainment of a “proper” masculinity is seen as an integral part of the national project, and was conceived as a process of regeneration.

Hence, masculinity, or specifically, the desire to assert a new, stronger masculine form and reject existing stereotypes, was a key driver of Zionist nationalism.

With the ultimate goal of nationalism being to establish a state, the Zionism nationalist project involved building and protecting a growing Jewish state. Building the state involved hard physical labor, and protecting it involved risking of many lives to fight for the Jewish settlements in Palestine, which were facing increasing hostility from the neighboring Arab states. These roles emphasized the corporeal traits of physical strength, further contributing to the masculinization of the Jewish nationalism. One of the iconic figures of Zionism was the male *halutz*, a pioneer holding a plow in one hand and a rifle in another, with his female counterpart standing ready to help him. Hence, masculinity became a prerequisite of “good citizenship” in the Jewish community in Palestine in the 1920s, and in the formation of Israel the idea of the new Jewish man carried huge significance as a national sign: a healthy male body was seen as symbolizing a healthy, vital nation.<sup>11</sup>

The relationship between masculinity and nationalism is cyclical in Israel – masculinity led to nationalism, and the nationalist movement led to an increased significance of masculine roles.

### *Singapore – Constructed Masculinity for an Accidental Nation*

In contrast with the Zionist project, Singapore did not have strong nationalist sentiments prior to its formation as a state. Singapore is often called an “accidental nation”<sup>12</sup> as its creation was unplanned and its survival was unexpected. Singapore’s founding political leadership did not believe that Singapore could or should be an independent state, having campaigned for a political union with Malaysia in 1959. Singapore became a sovereign state

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in 1965 after being expelled from this union due to what was then seen as irrevocable differences between the Chinese-dominated Singapore population and the Malay-majority Malaysian population.

Hence, the new Singapore state had to construct the Singaporean nation.

As established earlier, nation-building involves constructing commonality. Singapore's population was comprised of immigrants from all over the region, including multicultural immigrants without a shared ethnic loyalty. Without any ethnic commonality among the Singaporean people, an ethnic national identity was not possible, unlike in Israel's situation. The Singapore nation was thus conceptualized ideologically on the grounds of common material interests, values, and goals, rather than a sense of primordial loyalty to a pre-existing cultural form,<sup>13</sup> or in other words, a civic national identity.

Singapore's national identity is based on the founding principles of equality in a multiracial society, and the common vision for material economic progress, enshrined by the national pledge "to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation."

With nation-building also comes the creation of a national narrative, and for Singapore this narrative is one of survival and fragility that emerged from the political leadership. Singapore, a small nation in a hostile regional environment, was vulnerable to security threats such as *Konfrantasi* (Confrontation), Indonesian state-sponsored terrorism against Singapore and Malaysia from 1963-1966. Furthermore, Singapore was economically vulnerable, having no natural resources and high unemployment.

Considering the common vision for materialistic progress and the country's vulnerability, the Singaporean political leadership insisted that the development of masculine ideals was essential, and that a society dominated by stereotypical feminine characteristics, such as softness, would spell doom for the young nation.<sup>14</sup> Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew exhorted Singaporeans to be "highly-disciplined, strong, with tremendous qualities of stamina, endurance and, at the same time, having great intellectual discipline." Hence,

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Singapore constructed a national “hegemonic masculinity,” a masculine dynamism characterized by rugged individualism, instrumental rationality and pragmatism.

Given the majority Chinese population and the Chinese-dominated political leadership, the paradigm of Chinese masculinity was also influential in shaping Singapore’s national masculinity. Chinese conceptions of normative masculinity are characterized by the dyad *wen-wu*; *wen* refers to scholarly mastery of cultural works, and *wu* refers to martial prowess and physical strength. In the Singaporean context, the constitution of a hegemonic Chinese masculine identity lies somewhere along the continuum of economic success as a modern form of *wen*, and the *wu* of compulsory military training service.<sup>15</sup>

The link between masculinity and nationhood in Singapore is only one-way: masculine discourses are constructed in the nation-building project to provide a common narrative and values for the population to work towards. As masculinity and nationhood were not mutually reinforcing, as seen in Israel, some argue that the link between masculinity and nationhood is weaker in Singapore.

## **The Military**

Armed forces protect a state from internal and external threats, and the idea of protection is also the nexus between masculinity and nationalism. The institution of the military forms and reinforces the link between masculinity and nationalism. The institutionalization of masculine norms in nationhood through the military is seen in both Israel and Singapore.

### *Israel*

Israel’s sovereignty as a state was hard-fought, won after the War of Independence in 1948. This feat created a basic sense of shared destiny among Israel’s population, making the military a key part of Israeli identity. The link

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between nation, military, and masculinity was institutionalized in the state's early years with the establishment of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as the central institution of the new state, cementing the definition of the New Jew as the active male soldier's body.

Since Israel's foundation in 1948, there has been a huge focus on self-defense, and the country has had mandatory conscription beginning at the age of 18 for its male and female Jewish citizens. Males are required to serve in the military for 32 months, and females for 24 months.

The government, led by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, elevated the status of the IDF soldier to become the symbol of the modern Israeli state, masculinized and militarized. The concept of an Israeli soldier-citizen, a "natural body" that seamlessly shifts between battlefield and civilian life, emerged over time, reflecting the blurring distinction between the civilian and military spheres in Israel and degree to which Israeli society has been militarized.

### *Singapore*

In Singapore, all male citizens and permanent residents who reach the age of 16 ½ years are liable for two years of compulsory military service, better known in Singapore as National Service (NS), and thereafter join the reserve forces, attending in-camp training for several days each year until the age of 40.<sup>16</sup>

Even in today's geopolitical context where direct armed conflict with regional neighbors is unlikely, the Singaporean state uses the vulnerability narrative to justify the necessity of the National Service policy. National Service "has become and will continue to be the most non-negotiable aspect of Singapore citizenship."<sup>17</sup>

National Service is regarded as a masculinizing activity in Singapore. Since only male citizens serve, it is an exclusively masculine expression of citizenship. It is also viewed as a rite of passage for boys. This rite is

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encapsulated in *Ab Boys To Men*, a movie chronicling the journey of several Singaporean males throughout their basic military training. The immense popularity of the movie, which became the highest-grossing Singaporean film of all time, goes to show that National Service is a key feature of the Singaporean identity, which many males identify as their greatest act of service to the nation.

Hence, Singapore's national service policy can be seen as the institutionalization of the hegemonic national masculinity of *wen wu*<sup>18</sup> through military service to the nation. What types of masculine norms exactly? This will be explored later.

### **Comparing Military, Masculinity and Nation-Building in Israel and Singapore**

Although Singapore and Israel have several similarities, they have an extremely different relationship between military, masculinity, and nation-building, which I will analyze in this section.

Israel has a far stronger sense of nationhood than Singapore. The Zionist nationalism project started in the 19th century, and the fighting and efforts of the Zionist Jews directly led to the establishment of the state of Israel. Statehood is considered an achievement for the Jewish people. Additionally, the ethnic commonality between Jews has an extremely long history stretching back two thousand years. In contrast, Singapore was an "accidental" nation, and the sense of nationhood was constructed by the government through nation-building processes. When comparing a deeply-rooted ethnic national identity with an authoritarian constructed civic national identity, one could predict that Israel's national identity would be stronger than Singapore's.

With a greater sense of nationhood comes a greater willingness to fight for the nationhood and protect the country from danger. Interviews with IDF soldiers show that the reason for their high motivation to enlist and risk their lives is that they are contributing to the country.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, a survey on

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Singaporean youths showed that 58% thought that most Singaporeans would not be willing to risk their lives to protect the country.

Israel faces a far more urgent threat to its nationhood than Singapore does. Israel is not recognized as a state by 32 United Nations member states, mostly Muslim states, and these states treat Israel as an enemy. Israel is constantly being threatened by Palestine, with Palestinian terrorist group Hamas frequently launching rockets into Israeli territory. The most recent military conflict between Israel and Hamas was the seven week-long 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, during which 73 Israelis were killed and 469 were wounded. On the other hand, Singapore faces little to no deaths from conflict or terrorism, with a handful of military deaths solely due to training incidents. Singapore has peaceful diplomatic relations with South-east Asia through the ASEAN, an organization billed by many as “a miracle, a catalyst for peace.”<sup>20</sup> ASEAN includes Malaysia and Indonesia, the very countries that were deemed most threatening to Singapore in the early nation-building days. Chiang, an ex-Brigadier General of the Singapore Armed Forces, acknowledges that “at an ideological level, Singaporean males do not regard NS as a necessity because they do not think there is an existential threat to Singapore.”<sup>21</sup>

With a greater threat to nationhood, there is a greater perception of danger accompanying military service. The risk of injury or death of soldiers due to combat is significant in Israel, and this a huge emotional burden that parents face when raising their sons in Israel. Israeli parents dread the “three knocks on the door,”<sup>22</sup> referring to when army representatives come to inform a family of their son’s death. Even though military service generally exposes one to more safety risks, the lack of conflict and combat means that the risk of death is almost non-existent in Singapore.

As a result of the differing perceptions of danger accompanying military service, Israelis and Singaporeans have different perceptions of the extent to which they are willing to protect their country from danger through military

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service. As mentioned earlier, the notion of protecting involves putting oneself in danger to prevent others from having to face that danger. Israeli soldiers are “highly motivated” and “willing to give their lives, as they know their actions are directed toward saving their family and country.”<sup>23</sup> In the case of Singapore, with the lack of serious conflict, the main role of military service is deterrence from foreign threats; therefore, the link between serving NS and protecting Singapore is tenuous.

The link between the military and nationhood depends on both the willingness to protect and the perception of protecting a country from danger. Firstly, according to the republican notion of citizenship, serving in the military is regarded as one’s contribution to the nation and one’s expression of citizenship.<sup>24</sup> One’s interest in contributing to his nation is dependent upon his sense of national identity. Hence, the strength of one’s national identity determines his willingness to serve in the military. Secondly, since the role of the military is to protect the sovereignty of the nation-state against threats, the extent to which citizens view military service as protecting the country affects the military-nationhood link in that country.

Due to its greater willingness to protect, as well as its greater sense of protecting the country from danger, Israel has a stronger military-nationhood link than Singapore.

### **Masculine Norms in Israel and Singapore**

As we have established, protecting and providing are two key masculine norms. Due to the stronger military-nationhood link in Israel, there is a greater importance of protecting the hegemonic masculine norms of Israel, where the role of the provider is more significant than in Singapore.

In Israel, the military is very closely linked to masculinity due to the clear relationship with the masculine role of protecting. Sasson-Levy<sup>25</sup> found that combatant roles are regarded as a prestigious contribution to the community and a proof of an individual’s masculinity. Since military service is perceived

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as the fundamental expression of an individual's commitment to the Israeli state, the rank that a soldier achieves during his military service affects his sense of belonging to Israel, and also determines one's accessibility to different social resources after release from the army. The masculinity of the combat soldier has achieved hegemonic status, becoming a social ideal and an emblem of masculinity and citizenship in general. This hegemony is expressed through a wide range of phenomena, such as economic benefits for combat soldiers, their symbolic social power, and their political power.

In contrast, hegemonic masculinity is constructed around the role of the provider in the more materialistic society of Singapore. A survey on Singaporean university students found that being the breadwinner for the family is an important masculine norm, among other traits perceived to be associated with or desirable for men in Western cultures, including responsibility, determination, and decisiveness. A survey of Singapore males who had just finished their military service revealed that 57% believe that serving NS contributes significantly to masculine norms in Singapore. Considering these males had just finished their military service, this weak majority is expected to further weaken over time as they enter university and the workforce, and face economic concerns that further affect their masculinity. In an interview, Chiang confirmed this sentiment, saying that "at 30, nobody cares what you did during NS."

### **Hegemonic Masculinity and The State**

Currently, the hegemonic masculinity in Israel leads to greater willingness and motivation of boys to serve in the military to protect the country. Kolonimus and Bar-Tal's research on 100 combat soldiers<sup>26</sup> found that Israeli combat soldiers were determined and highly-motivated to enlist in combat units, listing the opportunity for contribution to the country as the key motivating factor.<sup>27</sup> Viewing violent action as a factor that confirms their masculinity, these soldiers symbolize the full connection between masculinity

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and nationality with their bodies through combat.

Hence, we see that the military-nationhood relationship and masculine norms are mutually reinforcing. When the military-nationhood relationship is stronger, Israel's hegemonic masculine norms are constructed to a greater extent around the role of protecting. Since hegemonic masculinity is a normative ideal that males strive for, Israeli males will have greater motivation to protect the country, reinforcing the military-nationhood relationship.

This mutually reinforcing cycle is beneficial for states like Israel, which need to continuously recruit motivated men to serve in the military. Politicians worldwide have utilized ideologies of hegemonic masculinity to encourage young men to join the army.<sup>28</sup> The state has a vested interest in maintaining strong ideological links between masculinity and militarism. If the relationship between masculinity and the military is weakened, so too is the state's power to motivate young men to serve in the army, leading to defense concerns for the country.<sup>29</sup>

Chiang observes that Singaporean youth, in contrast, "generally view national service negatively, unlike Israeli youth."<sup>30</sup> This is corroborated with interviews with recently-discharged Singaporeans, who were not "particularly motivated to enlist" due to the lack of conflict and also due to the fact that NS is an obligation.

The Singapore Army recognizes that role of protecting in Singapore's hegemonic masculine norms is weak. Despite this, National Service is still considered a key masculinizing exercise, being a "rite of passage into both adult manhood and full citizenship." Another way to interpret the response of the survey on Singaporeans mentioned earlier is that a majority (57%) feel that NS contributes to masculinity, which agrees with the view presented above. These two seemingly opposing perspectives can be reconciled by the conclusion that NS cultivates masculine values that are distinctly different from protecting the country which we see in Israel. In an interview, Chiang outlined the military leadership and government's aims of NS: to develop

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Singaporean males on a personal level – inculcating values such as mental strength, responsibility and self-reliance, social level – fostering teamwork and care for others, and national level – building loyalty and patriotism to Singapore. Undeniably, many of these traits are masculine, but few of them are directly related to combat and protecting the country. In fact, these characteristics are not unlike the Western masculine values of responsibility, determination, and decisiveness,<sup>31</sup> which are associated more with economic success than military success and hence the masculine notions of providing rather than protecting. Interestingly, this shows that the military in Singapore institutionalizes a hegemonic masculinity consistent with non-militarized society.

Hence, the way that the military serves to perpetuate masculine norms is different between Israel and Singapore.

### **Israel Risks Becoming Like Singapore**

In recent years, Israel has witnessed a cultural shift away from combat roles – materialism is more pronounced and there is a lower tolerance from the public of the loss of life. Another catalyst for this shift is that the army no longer makes combat service compulsory for cadets, and prestige has been added to army roles which are less dangerous.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, parental intervention and scrutiny on the army has increased. Recent interviews with commanders show their frustration with constant calls from anxious parents worried about their sons' safety. The need to allay parents' anxiety has led to many training procedures being altered to increase safety, but to the point where training is "overly safe," inhibiting realism. This is similar to Singapore, where safety has a foremost priority for the Army. Safety was added as an Army Core Value in 2013, and numerous detailed safety frameworks and procedures have recently been implemented.

Furthermore, Mann-Shalvi has observed that many Israeli parents raise their sons to adopt feminine traits, "unconsciously combating their sons'

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masculine qualities by encouraging traits diametrically opposed to bravery and courageousness,” with the aim of directing their sons away from combat units.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, we see the hegemonic masculinity of the combat soldier which emphasizes the role of the protector is being increasingly challenged, due to the steady deinstitutionalization of the link between masculinity and the military through the removal of compulsory combat roles for males. With the lower tolerance of danger and life-risking behavior, I posit that in the long-run, Israel may become increasingly like Singapore – a materialistic society where the role of the protector has decreased significance in the society’s hegemonic masculinity. This will decrease the motivation for Israeli boys to serve in combat roles in the military as they conflict with their attainment of the other masculine norm – that of the economic provider – through recruitment into technology-savvy combat vocations that prepare them better for their career.<sup>34</sup> There are already signs of this happening, the percentage of Israeli males showing motivation to serve in combat units has dropped from 80% in 2010 to just 67% in 2017.<sup>35</sup> And sure enough, the IDF has in recent years faced increasing difficulty in enlisting soldiers for combat units – in 2004, 77% of Jewish boys enlisted, compared to only 72% in 2016.

Compared to Singapore with a much lower tangible threat to the nation, Israel faces serious danger if it fails to recruit enough motivated combat soldiers to protect the country due to its ever-present security threats. Israel’s enemies would definitely be ready to capitalize on any weakness in Israel’s defense to threaten the country’s sovereignty.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the comparison between Singapore and Israel shows that hegemonic masculinity is culturally constructed and is indeed changeable over time. Israel has a stronger sense of nationhood and a greater threat to its nationhood than Singapore, so Israeli males are more willing to

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protect the nation, as well as have a greater perception of protecting the nation from danger through compulsory military service. This stronger military-nationhood link explains why the hegemonic masculine norms in Israel revolve around protecting, as opposed to providing in Singapore. Furthermore, this feeds a mutually reinforcing cycle which ensures a constant stream of males motivated to protect Israel through military service, which is beneficial to Israel. However, this cycle is showing signs of breaking down due to cultural changes that threaten to make Israel's state of hegemonic masculinity converge toward Singapore's. Singapore's military reinforces a hegemonic masculinity constructed around the provider role consistent with a non-militarized country, which is fine for Singapore, but not for the far more vulnerable state of Israel, and the attendant consequences of lower soldier motivation and willingness to serve will be detrimental to the state's security.

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Isaac Tham is a freshman from Singapore. He is not a crazy rich Asian, though by studying economics he hopes to become one some day.

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