

Israel's Information Policy During the Iraq War

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America's military campaign in Iraq came as no surprise to Israel. In consequence, the country had time to make preparations at many levels, including plan for a coordinated information policy that was designed to keep citizens informed of the situation, present Israel's case to the outside world should Israel lose its bystander status and become involved in the war, and most significantly, ensure that the government's positions came across with one voice. At the heart of the plan lay the decision to appoint a "National Explainer," or more idiomatically, a National Commentator.

Potential Added Value

The decision was in part prompted by a State Comptroller report in 2002 that was highly critical of the lack of coordination among the government bodies charged with managing Israel's information effort, which resulted in disseminating mixed messages on several key issues. In order to avoid a recurrence of this phenomenon in the impending war with Iraq, the decision was made to appoint a National Commentator who would have sole authority, both domestically and abroad, for presenting Israel's positions. The Commentator was to head the organizational infrastructure that would ensure that the correct information reach the Commentator in real time, that s/he would have the means to disseminate this information in a timely and efficient way and, most critically, that it was clear that s/he was speaking with full government authority.

In December 2002, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon decided to name Major General Amos Gilad, then IDF Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, to the post. This immediately created several problems. By appointing an active-duty general in uniform and emphasizing that he had the full support of the prime minister and the Cabinet, which approved the appointment, the unprecedented and unusual situation was created whereby a serving general wielded authority over the Chief of Staff, the Head of Military Intelligence, and the Head of the National Security Council as the government's voice on national security issues. The appointment also ranked Gilad over the existing spokespeople in the government's security and foreign affairs hierarchy, including the IDF Spokesperson, the spokesperson in the Prime Minister's office, and the Deputy Director General for Information in the Foreign Ministry, who were now effectively sidelined unless they spoke on authority of the National Commentator.

The Comptroller had demanded greater coordination between these bodies, not their marginalization, as was now de facto the case. This caused deep alienation between the Commentator and those neutralized by his appointment, specifically the IDF Spokesperson's office, the military high command, and, to a lesser degree, the foreign ministry. In consequence, material from government departments that could have benefited a coordinated national information effort was not circulated. For example, the IDF Spokesperson's unit did not coordinate messages regarding civil defense with the National Commentator's office, and there were many other instances where information was not properly shared.

In a presentation to the Cabinet before the war in March 2003, Gilad accurately described the existing system as a "multiplicity of bodies dealing with government information and doing so in an uncoordinated manner, which causes duplication of work and prevents each body from fulfilling its comparative advantage."¹ It was this absence of a centralized mechanism that resulted in the information failure in April 2002, in which allegations of an Israeli massacre of civilians in Jenin surfaced and spread, in part because available credible information to the contrary was not made public in an organized fashion.² The appointment of a National Commentator was intended to ensure that a similar information failure would not recur in the upcoming conflict with Iraq, where there was a degree of expectation that

Israel could be the target of an Iraqi attack. If Israel was attacked, how the government addressed the public and how it explained to the world Israel's response or lack of response would be a critical task. Since neither the attack nor the response materialized it is difficult to judge the National Commentator's performance, but this in itself does not detract from the problems created by the appointment and the consequences thereof.

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The construction of a central information mechanism with the full authority of the prime minister behind it is a model that has worked well for other countries. In Britain, until the latest fiasco between the Blair government and the BBC over whether the government "sexed up" its reports on Saddam's weapons of mass destruction in order to justify going to war, information policy was tightly controlled by the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman, Alistair Campbell. Campbell has since resigned, but the model he created to ensure that the government, the defense establishment, and other

services came out with a single, credible, and consistent message is still in place and still effective.

Australia as well devised a centralized system of managing defense information after it became apparent that the country was developing an image problem over the issue of incoming illegal refugees and how the Royal Australian Navy was dealing with them. Here too information policy was written up as a central doctrine with the primary purpose of sending out a message consistent with the government's interests. Similarly, the US, as it prepared for the war in Iraq and after studying information failures in other conflicts, including what went wrong for Israel media-wise in Jenin, combined the practice of embedding reporters with troops in order to provide continuous reportage from the field with a system of briefings, predominantly by the defense department and senior military, where centralized information was disseminated. While not all information on the war was dominated by the Pentagon and the military, focus was placed on consistency of message and this was, to a large degree, achieved.

Actual Weaknesses

In Israel, however, notwithstanding that the National Commentator enjoyed the full support of the Prime Minister and the government, a unified message was not achieved. Thus, in the weeks leading up to the war in late February and early March, the Chief of Staff and the military were

sending a message of low Iraqi capabilities and high quality Israeli defenses, defining the actual threat to Israel as very low. The message from the National Commentator, however, was pessimistic, portraying Israel as vulnerable, Saddam as ruthless and willing to use WMD against Israel, and warning the public to expect the worst. What the military broadcast was designed to calm the public and prevent panic, yet the National Commentator's agenda seemed bent on preparing the country for a worst-case scenario. Although the two messages are not necessarily mutually exclusive, they do indicate a basic lack of communication and coordination of the national information effort.

Another prominent example of the lack of consistency of message was the confusion around the directive to the public to open the gas mask and personal protection kits. On the evening of Wednesday, March 19, the IDF Chief of Staff convened a General Staff meeting in which it was decided to issue the order. At that point, the order was approved by the Defense Minister, but still awaited final authorization by the Prime Minister. Shortly before 8:30 P.M., as Channel 2 News finished its evening broadcast, Military Affairs Correspondent Roni Daniel, having received word of the decision from his sources in the defense establishment, dictated the update to the news editors, who broadcast that the IDF Homefront Command had ordered that the kits be opened. On hearing the Channel 2 report, editors at Channel 10 News assigned their defense correspondent,

Alon Ben-David, to check the information. He spoke to the IDF Homefront Commander, who said that there was no such order. Other journalists too were told that there was no change in the instructions to civilians. Channel 10 and National TV Channel 1 denied the Channel 2 report and urged civilians not to open their gas masks. But at 8:55 pm the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, on receiving

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approval from the Prime Minister, ordered the nation to open their gas masks. What is striking in this example is that nowhere in the communication process between the country's three primary sources of news was any question directed to the National Commentator's office which, according to a decision of the Cabinet and on the Prime Minister's instructions, was the only authoritative voice on all issues pertaining to the war. The Commentator's office was specifically created to prevent such confusion, but at a critical moment failed to do.

There was also a credibility problem. Even if Iraq did possess

missiles, these had to be fired from the western desert in order to reach Israel. As part of its operational plan and in order to minimize the chances of an attack on Israel, coalition Special Forces, together with local Kurdish forces and an Iraqi opposition expeditionary force, secured control over the region in the very early days of the war. This notwithstanding and despite formal intelligence estimates that at this point rated the chances of a strike against Israel as negligible, the National Commentator's message continued to be pessimistic and negative, insisting that an attack was still possible, perhaps even imminent.

Furthermore, even with the dramatic progress of the war and the total collapse of the Iraqi command structure and Iraqi army, the National Commentator contended that the threat of attack was not over, arguing in radio and television interviews that Saddam, in an act of revenge, might undertake one last act of madness, namely, an attack on Israel. At no point in the war, however, did the public seem inclined to accept the stance of the National Commentator, perhaps given the multiple sources of information available, the number of respected analysts projecting their contrary opinions about the situation, and the flood of reportage from the field indicating a quick and total Iraqi collapse. One indicator of this was how few people carried their gas masks with them during the war despite the official instructions to do so.

In conclusion, it seems that while the concept, in theory, of having a National Commentator or National

Spokesperson who enjoys the support and approval of the prime minister is a good idea, the choice of person and that person's position in the hierarchy is critical. In the 1967 Six Day War, Chaim Herzog, a former head of Military Intelligence and a private lawyer at the time (and a future president of Israel) explained the situation to the nation in a daily radio briefing. This role was filled in the 1973 Yom Kippur War by Aharon Yariv, also a former head of Military Intelligence and later information minister in the Israeli cabinet. No organizational changes were made to accommodate these functions, nor was any Cabinet approval necessary. Both men filled the role naturally and, unlike in the recent Iraq war, had a developing and unfolding actual war situation to explain. In the 1991 Gulf War the task of explaining the course of the war and civil defense

procedures was left to Nachman Shai, the IDF Spokesman. In 2003, however, primarily it seems that the goal of a unified, consistent, and credible

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These less than optimal results, however, should not deter Israel from continuing to coordinate its information efforts, and indeed, not all aspects

of the National Commentator experience were negative. For example, the creation of an organized hierarchical structure for the flow of information was a welcome effort. Mistakes were made in implementation of the structure, but a national coordinated effort with a credible and articulate spokesperson at its head with the full support of the prime minister, the government, and its various branches as was attempted here is still very much a goal to strive for.

1. Quoted in Amnon Barzilai, "The Explainer against the Spokeswoman," *Ha'aretz*, May 16, 2003.
2. Goodman and Cummings, eds. *The Battle of Jenin: A Case Study in Israel's Communications Strategy*, JCSS Memorandum No. 63, February 2003.