Israel's Need for an Information Strategy

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The relationship between governments at war and the media has always been complex. The government's instinct to disclose details of military-related activities only selectively and its desire to garner public support for these activities often conflict with the media's drive to air an entire story, even if the resulting coverage is critical as well as factual. Pivotal points in the history of military coverage were the war in Vietnam, when television brought the war back home so dramatically and almost in real time, and the 1991 Gulf War, when battlefield coverage was instant, incessant, yet tightly controlled by the both the Allies and the Iraqis.

Since then much has changed. Reporters can get to the battlefield with greater ease and independence than ever before. It has become much less complicated to broadcast, with correspondents having light portable equipment and access to satellite communications. The demand for news has become insatiable with dozens of 24-hour news channels created and servicing virtually every point on the globe.

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problematic. Israel is portrayed, correctly, as a country with a well-equipped and vastly superior army fighting irregular Palestinian resistance forces dedicated to ending Israeli occupation. Yet because much of the fighting takes place in densely populated urban environments, which is dramatically different from traditional army-to-army conflict, the quintessential image is that of a state-of-the-art army advancing on a beleaguered civilian population. Also, because of the dangers inherent in covering high density urban conflict and restrictions placed on the press by the Israeli authorities for operational

considerations, much of the footage broadcast by the international media has been provided by Palestinian camera crews equipped with light video cameras and, often, an agenda.

Complicating the situation is that while Israeli society is divided over the issue of continued occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and openly expresses its diverse views to the media, Palestinian society is uniformly against the occupation. Perhaps also because of its undemocratic nature, it generally speaks with one voice and is uncritical of its leadership in public. The Palestinian Authority is likewise not above using threat and sanction against journalists who do not toe the line and cover a story as it sees fit. The result is a blatant disparity between Israeli and Palestinian versions of events.

Israel and the foreign press have had a tense relationship since the war in Lebanon began in 1982, when the traditional portrait of Israel as victim was replaced by Israel as aggressor. The relationship deteriorated further in the first Intifada (1987-1993), when Israel's image as a conqueror dominated the coverage. During the current conflict, however, Israel and

the foreign press have reached a point of open hostility, with many in Israel tending to believe that the international media has an anti-Israel bias.

While there may be an element of truth in this, much of the problem seems to be of Israel's own making. That this may indeed be the case was suggested by a highly critical report issued by the State Comptroller in 2002. In a chapter on Israel's information policies and practices, relations with the foreign media were judged to be unfocused, lacking in coordination, and at times, because of contradictory messages that were broadcast, counterproductive.

What has also become apparent over the past 28 months of conflict is that while there have been no major changes in the fundamental policies of countries toward Israel, Israel's international reputation has been harmed, sometimes seriously. This is especially the case in Europe, where attitudes toward terror are different from those in post-September 11 America. What is also clear is that often this damage had more to do with Israel's inability to explain itself than with its actual policies.

At no time perhaps was this more vividly demonstrated than during the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) incursion into the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002 as part of Operation Defensive Shield. With no credible information forthcoming to counter rampant allegations, Israel was widely believed to have massacred hundreds in the camp. In fact, as was later documented, 23 Israelis and 56 Palestinians were killed in Jenin, most of the Palestinians armed gunmen. The reason the world believed a massacre had occurred in Jenin was that rumor was allowed to replace credible information, and there was no information sharing among various government departments themselves and between the government and the foreign media. Little or no thought was given to documenting the terrorist infrastructure in Jenin before it was

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destroyed, and this lack of evidence lent credence to allegations of a massacre.

The battle at Jenin is but one example of why Israel needs to develop an information strategy which would authorize one inter-departmental body to coordinate Israel's relations with the media, articulate what its message should be, and advise how best to disseminate it.

A Government Information Strategy

Israel's challenges, while different from those in other countries, are not unique. Significantly, more and more countries over the past decade, particularly in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, have realized the need to put order in their media policies given the changing nature of the relationship between the government and the media.

Upon assuming office, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair and his influential media advisor Alistair Campbell commissioned a report on improved management of government communications. The Mountfield Report, submitted in 1997 and accepted by the Prime Minister, suggested that government ought "to retain a politically impartial service and to sustain the trusted values of the service embodied in the rules of guidance" as well as "improve co-ordination with and from the Centre [the government], so as to get across consistently the Government's key policy themes and messages." This was to be achieved through the establishment of a new strategic communications unit serving the entire government, improvements to the Cabinet Office's existing information technology system, and clearer rules on attribution. The report also called for the establishment of a round-the-clock monitoring unit, a quick response mechanism, and a framework that would "offer high-quality management and leadership, staffing and training and development tailored to meet the needs of the 24-hour media world." The report's recommendations led to the "Government Information and Communication Service Handbook,"

a manual for the civil service on how to manage its work with the media.

On the other side of the world, Australia's Ministry of Defence produced the "Defence Overarching Organisational Communication Strategy," to "guide public affairs and corporate activities across Defence, 2001-2004." The impetus for the document was a series of public information blunders in the way the government managed its military-humanitarian operations in East Timor and the influx of illegal immigrants that followed. The 193 page document is in essence a detailed manual that ensures that at every stage of operational, tactical, and strategic planning in the Defense Department, media issues are assessed according to a defined, comprehensive, and structured information strategy. Unlike the British paper which extends to all branches of government, the Australian effort is exclusively defense oriented and aims at "developing a reputation management capability that represents inter-national best practice."

The Government of Israel has no comprehensive information strategy. The Prime Minister's office, the Foreign Ministry, and the IDF all have separate mechanisms for dealing with information in their own sphere, as do the other ministries and government agencies. But there is no single voice, attitude, or operation that can offer the "reputation management capability that represents international best practice" the way the Australians are striving to do. Some argue that this is

healthy, as it serves the cause of pluralism in a democratic society where messages are mixed and opinions varied. They see a national media policy as some form of "Big Brother" mechanism designed to issue singular messages and create "spin" in order to detract from the real issues of the day.

The contrary is true. An effective information strategy is a mechanism to govern the complex relations

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between government and the media, intended to ensure that the media receive credible, accurate, and reliable information in real time; that the media and the government agencies they work with enjoy a professional if not a cordial relationship; and that since both sides understand that the relationship between government and media is by definition symbiotic if at times antagonistic, they share the need to inform the public honestly and accurately, and hence have good reason to cooperate.

There is a danger of over-control, and in the UK one has seen a questioning of centralized information

management, largely because of the particular dominant personality at the helm. In the US there is a fair amount of resentment that the United States Information Agency (USIA) has been attached to the State Department, so that its role has changed from information facilitation through cultural exchanges, journalists' delegations, libraries, and similar measures to serving the needs of hard diplomacy.

Neither of these examples, however, fundamentally detracts from the point that in this day and age governments need a mechanism for working with the media in a systematic and structured way so as to ensure the flow of accurate information. The alternative is that rumor and speculation will take its place, which is not good for either the governments trying to present their policies, or journalists whose professional skills are judged by their ability to provide reliable and credible information. It is possible to attain an accurate, reliable flow of information by insisting on credibility, accountability, and perhaps legislative shields that ensure the principle of free speech.

Principles
The following are some of the basic tenets that Israel should take into account when planning an information strategy:

■ The media is all intrusive and it will cover the story. It is up to the government whether it will have any input in that story or not.

■ Since the media ultimately cannot

be excluded entirely from the battleground, it is best to consider how to include it in covering operations. There are inherent tactical problems in Israel, for example the fact that Palestinian camera crews work for foreign television stations, but these can be resolved. Experience has shown that excluding the press, even in pool form, has resulted in rumor replacing truth.

■ The common wisdom that the "underdog automatically gets media sympathy" is not necessarily correct, as proven by NATO in the former Yugoslavia and by the United States during the campaign in Afghanistan against the Taliban.

■ Credibility is the heart of the matter. Any doctrine must stress this over and over again. Once credibility is lost it is nearly impossible to regain it.

■ No one department of government or branch of the military has all the information, ascertains what information is needed, or knows what can be useful. Inter-departmental information sharing, therefore, has to be a critical component of the country's information effort.

■ The strategy must rest on an organizational structure dedicated to processing and disseminating credible information in real time, and contextual information in either briefings or backgrounders. Globalization has made time zones irrelevant.

■ Media must be taken into account as an element of planning at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, and has to be factored in as is any other element of a military operation. This entails that a check list

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be drawn up ensuring that all angles have been covered, considered, debated, and decided on in the best interests of the country's overall policies and not one department or ministry in particular.

■ Extensive research with important ramifications for Israel has been conducted in the field of public policy over the past decade. Israel's problems are not unique and it does not have to re-invent the wheel.

While Israel has yet to develop a comprehensive policy governing its relations with the media, some work has gone into learning from the past and modifying practices. Personnel changes have been made; inter-departmental committees have been set up for information sharing and strategy planning; both the IDF and Foreign Ministry are in the process of writing manuals to govern their relations with the media; the army, police, and others have become more aware of media needs and attempt to accommodate them; and an effort has been made to rebuild Israel's credibility with the foreign press, by providing background briefings with people in positions of authority, organizing tours to disputed areas, and providing footage and other documentary materials.

To give shape to what is still an amorphous policy sphere, however, what remains is to devise a comprehensive strategy for government-media relations.