

Operation Cast Lead: The Test of Public Diplomacy

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An examination of Israel's public diplomacy for Operation Cast Lead reveals an ironic disparity between a carefully planned and implemented wartime media policy and the net result, which has been extremely damaging for Israel's international image and standing. While this has not yet manifested itself in any major diplomatic crises, questions about Israel's disregard for human rights, excessive use of force, possible war crimes, and indiscriminate attacks on international facilities are high on the international agenda.

Though the public diplomacy machine ran smoothly before and during the operation, the shocking post-war situation in Gaza was largely ignored by those responsible for Israel's public diplomacy. Whereas during the campaign Israel's relationship with the media was tightly controlled, on the morning after, when reporters from all over the world converged on the Gaza rubble, Israel had no convincing message that could explain the dimensions of the devastation, and no acceptable rationale for what the world perceived to be an excessive use of force and disregard for international convention. Consider the case of Dr. Ezz el-Din Abu el-Aish, a well-known Gaza doctor with strong ties in Israel, whose three daughters were killed by an Israeli tank shell directed at their house. Weeks after the incident, no clear explanation was offered; the cooperative effort between the Foreign Ministry, the IDF, and the Prime Minister's Office that was so evident during the campaign did not produce an answer to persistent questions from journalists on the subject.

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Whereas during the campaign messages to the media were clear cut, well documented, and prepared in advance, subsequent charges that Israel was guilty of war crimes were not met with a strong, focused, defense. Instead, the government responded by offering soldiers accused of such crimes legal protection, while the military censor ordered that faces of soldiers in photographs be blurred – both actions amounting more to a de facto admission of guilt than a refutation or strong defense against these charges. That these charges would be made the day the guns fell silent should have been known in advance. Materials should have been prepared, documenting pre-battle briefings by commanders to the troops on the use of force and possible civilian casualties; legal papers should have been prepared and briefings for the media done on the precautions taken in this regard. The same zealousness displayed at explaining why Israel had to attack mosques during the campaign should have been applied here. No spirited defense, however, against charges of excessive use of force or war crimes was provided. This is a major departure from the confident, competent, and effective way Israel dealt with thorny issues during the campaign, which gives rise to the question whether those responsible for Israel's public diplomacy in Operation Cast Lead were so focused on the operation itself that they gave little or no thought to the morning after the guns fell silent.

There is no question that those responsible for Israel's public diplomacy prepared carefully for this conflict.¹ At the heart of this effort was the establishment of a centralized body in the prime minister's office charged with coordinating the public diplomacy effort across the board, which it did effectively during planning stages and the campaign itself. Applying lessons learned from the second intifada and the Second Lebanon War, Operation Cast Lead saw strong cooperation between the IDF, the Foreign Ministry, and the Prime Minister's Office, the sharing of real time intelligence to bolster claims made by Israeli spokesmen, and a real effort at curbing problems that caused intelligence security issues.

In addition, during the Second Lebanon War the army spokesman's policy toward the media was one of openness. This was subsequently judged a failure (including by the Winograd Commission) and one of the operational conclusions in preparing for Operation Cast Lead was that the conflict areas would be media-free. This was done from interests

of both information security and “message control” as to the reasons for the campaign and its goals. It was also understood that the more the devastation in Gaza became known to the world, so international pressure on Israel to end the hostilities would increase.

Israel closed the border to Gaza to the foreign media two months in advance of the fighting. The only images emerging from Gaza were gory pictures broadcast by al-Jazeera that were understood to be authorized by Hamas, and a smattering of other pictures and reports. The mainstream media, however, was initially completely barred from the battlefield, and subsequently admitted under tight and controlled pool arrangements. The extent of the operation only became apparent on the morning after the campaign, when the world was allowed to enter Gaza and see the scope of the destruction for themselves. The cumulative pictures have been devastating for Israel’s international image and raised huge questions that Israel has been hard pressed to answer. As such, it seems that Israel’s public diplomacy’s planners saw their first and foremost mission to give the IDF the time it needed to complete its military mission before international pressure set in. This they managed to do, albeit to the chagrin of the foreign media who successfully petitioned the High Court to gain entry to Gaza, which the military denied for “temporary security reasons.”

The question now arises whether this was the correct decision given the massive negative fallout after the campaign. If the international media were given ongoing access to the battlefield during the fighting, the world might not have been so shocked when the curtain was finally lifted once the combat ended. Had foreign media crews been embedded with Israeli forces from the beginning, able to follow the dilemmas facing the soldiers in fighting an elusive enemy that used human shields of all ages and schools, hospitals, and mosques for military purposes, perhaps the overall impression the world is now getting would have been different. Had the foreign media been allowed into the battle zone, perhaps the disastrous consequences, particularly in the Arab world, of al-Jazeera’s exclusive pictures would have been mitigated. So too, perhaps the casualty figures, medical needs, and human rights issues would have taken on a different perspective than those now in play.

A strong case can of course be made why it was wise to close the battlefield to the international media. Correspondents could have been

hurt if not killed, especially if not embedded with Israeli troops – which would clearly have been a public relations disaster for Israel – and they could have hampered the military’s freedom of movement. Overall, however, a total closure of the battlefield, while yielding Israel short term benefits, may have long term negative effects. Thus precisely because of this decision, more careful attention should have been paid to preparing the aftermath. In other words, while efforts were made to hide the destruction during the campaign itself, little or no structured preparation seems evident to explain to the world the pictures it is now seeing, why the IDF is not guilty of war crimes, and why the use of such massive force was necessary. Instead, the country’s reaction has been defensive, with Israel, and not Hamas, being in the dock of world public opinion.

A country’s public diplomacy is judged by the end result. Usually its major battle begins when the war on the ground is over. There is no doubting the competence of the effort during Operation Cast Lead, but Israel now stands at a low point in the eyes of the international community. The world acknowledged – at least formally – that Israel could not live with the continued rocket fire, and even understood that a school can be attacked by mistake in high density urban conflict. But it has not come away convinced that Israel handled this complicated situation in the best way possible, nor in line with normative international behavior.

There were no surprises in this campaign. It was inevitable that when the dust settled it would require a tremendous public diplomacy effort to try and explain what the world was seeing and why. This was not done and the full price for this failure has yet to be exacted.

Notes

- 1 Hirsh Goodman, “Israel’s Public Diplomacy in Operation Cast Lead,” INSS Insight No. 90, January 15, 2009.