

Dealing with the Foreign Media: The IDF Perspective

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This article will seek to examine the Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) handling of the international media during the Palestinian-Israeli crisis that began in September 2000, with an eye to pointing out lessons and possibilities for improvement. In doing so, however, a basic distinction must be made between those problems that can be solved – notwithstanding whatever difficulties may be involved – and those that cannot. This distinction is extremely important: without it, one might be tempted to argue that, in light

of the fact that Israel is the stronger side and the Palestinians are the weaker, the foreign media is always going to be unsympathetic to Israel. This article shall claim that attempts to improve the IDF's handling of the media should focus on those areas in which there is a possibility of making a positive change. In that regard, it should be noted that some lessons have already been drawn from mistakes made since the beginning of the crisis with the Palestinians, and there has already been some improvement.

The Six 'Untouchable' Factors

There are six basic realities which influence how the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is perceived internationally, and which must be accepted as immutable. These will be presented here, along with some discussion as to their ramifications.

1. *Israel is perceived internationally as the occupier, while the Palestinians are perceived as the occupied.* This

perception is not limited to political and historical issues – it is the standard by which each and every incident is measured. Thus, an incident in which a Palestinian woman is killed next to her house is perceived as a human tragedy. By contrast, the attitude toward an incident in which an Israeli female settler is killed next to her house is that she should never have been there in the first place – her death is seen as the result of Israel's policy of occupation and settlement. This differing standard exists in both

Europe and the US: the word "occupation" serves as a reference-point that frames issues to Israel's detriment.

2. *The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is perceived internationally as a David-and-Goliath story.* Israel is seen to be large and strong, while the Palestinians are perceived as weak. This perception accounts for the natural sympathy that the Palestinians enjoy internationally.

3. *The initiating side usually enjoys the advantage.* The Palestinians are those initiating violent incidents, both on a strategic level and on a day-to-day one. These incidents usually take the

This article is adapted from comments made by Maj. Gen. Eiland at a JCSS conference on "The Media as an Element of Strategy: The Israel-Palestinian Conflict 2000-2001," held on July 9, 2001.

IDF by surprise, and hence it is difficult to prepare for them. From Israel's standpoint, the difficulty is not only in providing media lines (that is, brief media messages which reflect Israel's official position) after a confrontation, but also in getting a photographer to the site of the incident while it is taking place. By contrast, the Palestinians find it much easier to get photographers to the right place at the right time.

I was witness to this when I served as a member of the Higher Security Committee, established at the initiative of CIA Director George Tenet as a mechanism for calming tensions and easing the transition into a cease-fire. The first meeting of the Israeli and Palestinian teams was set for 1:00 p.m. on a Friday afternoon, at the liaison office of the District Cooperation Office (DCO), between Israeli and Palestinian-controlled territories. Our experience has taught us that military actions need to be completed before the onset of the Sabbath [which begins at sundown] so this hour did not seem suitable. The Palestinians then asked for a postponement until 3:00 p.m., which would have made the meeting even closer to the onset of the Sabbath. We asked why they needed a postponement. They responded that at 1:00 there would still be violent incidents taking place in the area of the intersection. *In other words, they had a clear timetable for when incidents were set to take place.*

4. *Lies and fabrications are in widespread use.* Both sides spread a fair amount

of mis- and dis-information. However, the Palestinian Authority (PA) makes systematic use of outright fabrications even at the most senior levels. Some of these have included claims such as the IDF's supposed use of poison gas, poisoned candies, or shells containing depleted uranium. Such fabrications pose a tremendously difficult problem, because they eventually filter into international public awareness.

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5. *The nature of the electronic media.* Unlike the print media, the electronic media is comparatively superficial and even somewhat cynical. By its nature, broadcast news focuses relentlessly on the bottom line, without delving into the reasons or context in which incidents take place. I do not mean by this that the electronic media is endemically or intentionally hostile to Israel, but rather that their basic approach is characterized by a tendency to focus on outcomes, without relating to the circumstances that generated those

outcomes.

Two months after the initial outbreak of the present crisis, I met with a senior BBC staff member, who was responsible for foreign broadcasts, and who had come to Israel to examine how their broadcasts were being handled. I asked him, in his estimation, what percentage of the violent incidents that had taken place here had been initiated by the Palestinians and what percentage had been instigated by Israel. He answered that he thought that the Palestinians had probably initiated almost all of them. If this was so, I asked him, then why does this never find expression in BBC broadcasts? He replied: "Who cares? What difference does it make?"

Another example of this tendency to focus overly on the bottom line can be seen in the news summaries that networks give toward the end of their broadcasts. One day, when there was an exchange of fire, the casualty figures were summarized as follows: "three people were killed today, the majority of them Palestinians." There was no mention of the fact that the two Palestinians that had been killed were planting a bomb, while the Israeli who had been killed was an innocent civilian. Since this was not mentioned, the impression that was created was that there had been exchanges of gunfire, in which two Palestinians and one Israeli had been killed.

6. *Blurred distinctions between the military and political arenas.* The present crisis is not a military operation in the classic sense. Rather, it is a deep

conflict between two political entities. It is extremely difficult for military personnel to explain the significance of this kind of conflict while upholding their obligation to remain outside the political debate. This is particularly difficult when dealing with the international media, which is not interested in internal Israeli problems, or understanding the divisions of power as they exist in the Israeli system of government. When describing an incident between Israeli security forces and Palestinians, there may be much deeper political issues at work, which military personnel are not permitted to discuss, because they are considered partisan. This was especially problematic when the violence first erupted.

Mistakes in the Communications Sphere

The IDF's first mistake in the present confrontation was its lack of preparedness. The relative importance of the international media was not understood. Shortly before the outbreak of the crisis, the idea was raised in the IDF Spokesman's Office to eliminate the branch dealing with the international media, based on the contention that it was superfluous. That such a suggestion was even raised demonstrates how lacking the IDF's understanding or interest was *vis-à-vis* the international media prior to the outbreak of the conflict. Israel was not prepared for a media-based confrontation – neither in terms of the organizations that were in place, nor

in terms of general awareness.

The second mistake – perhaps the IDF's greatest – was that, before the outbreak of these incidents, it had neglected the foreign correspondents based in Israel. When incidents took place, the correspondents naturally viewed them in the context of a particular day's events, and had no interest in the roots of the Israel-Arab conflict. In their eyes, the question of what Israel's security situation would

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be within the 1967 borders and without security agreements was either irrelevant or unimportant. Correspondents did not necessarily understand that Israel's neighbors were not Belgium or the Netherlands, and that, in addition to the Palestinians, Israel had to cope with other potential enemies. Moreover, it proved extremely difficult to explain these things in the heat of an ongoing conflict. The IDF's mistake was that background discussions had not been conducted with correspondents prior to the outbreak of the crisis in September. Correspondents are

generally very willing to listen, but many of them had never received any historical orientation from the government of Israel.

The third mistake was in that we neglected the effects of pictures reaching television screens around the world. Israel tried countless times to explain that a helicopter gunship firing a guided missile into a building or car is not only an extremely effective weapon, but also the one that causes the least possible collateral damage. Yet when French President Jacques Chirac saw such attacks on television, he saw first and foremost the gunship itself – a weapon of potentially enormous destructive power – and concluded that Israel was using force indiscriminately. It was extremely difficult to persuade viewers that such a fearsome-looking weapon was chosen by virtue of its ability to inflict limited damage.

The fourth mistake was in that there was no coordinated or prepared mechanism in place to present Israel's stance. On the Palestinian side, fluent English speakers communicating a uniform message usually presented the PA's view of events on international networks. By contrast, there was no functioning apparatus in Israel to set guidelines for interviewees. The officials that wound up serving as spokespeople were sometimes politicians, who did not present Israel properly – neither in terms of what they had to say, nor in terms of their command of the topic at hand, nor even sometimes in terms of their command of the English

language. This last issue – fluency in English – should not be slighted, as it sometimes has a greater influence than any other on how issues are perceived.

In terms of forming this kind of mechanism, the IDF may have a somewhat easier time than do other bodies. It already has a spokesman, and it has an organization in place that is better able to control both the messengers and their messages. The IDF is, however, only part of a larger system. Since Israel is a democracy, and since the journalists working here are living in an open environment, it is impossible to control other sources to whom journalists may turn with requests for presenting Israeli perspectives.

The dissemination of Israel's 'take' on events is an important component in ensuring military victory. While we understood this principle in theory, we made a mistake in not finding a way to implement it at the start of the crisis in September 2000. Timing often has phenomenal importance. For example, there was the attack in Kfar Darom: a bus carrying Israeli schoolchildren was attacked, resulting in two deaths and three children permanently maimed. Israel rushed to retaliate, without offering any explanation for its response. All of the pictures shown by the international media were of the helicopter attack (i.e., the retaliation); the bus attack itself was not even mentioned. It turns out that on that particular day, Israel did not brief the media at all from 7:30 a.m. until the evening. As a result of this, its side of the story was initially

not presented, and when it finally did present its side regarding these events, it was forced to do so from a defensive position.

Another example is the case of Netzarim junction and the military post there, which was under siege for 11 days because of Palestinian gunfire in the vicinity. One foreign journalist asked to be permitted into the area with his crew, in order to photograph Netzarim and the IDF post from the

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Israeli perspective. Since the IDF was entering the area only via helicopter, I tried to persuade the division commander in Gaza to forego three soldiers, to make room in the helicopter so that a team of journalists could visit the site. He told me that he would not give up a single soldier, because operational needs overrode every other consideration. I could not persuade him that in the greater scheme of things, there might be more importance in three journalists than in three soldiers.

Lessons and Improvements

Over the course of time, a number of lessons have been learned in key areas. We have learned the importance of communications *vis-à-vis* those outside the IDF. However, this does not take into account the fine line that exists between what is permissible and what is prohibited for army personnel to say about a given situation. It should be borne in mind that, despite the desire to keep the IDF out of partisan political issues, this is not always possible in this sort of work. IDF personnel must therefore know how to speak not only about the Palestinians whom they face in conflict, but also about higher-echelon matters. Otherwise, they will not be able to explain Israel's positions well. To an extent, this is true for on-camera work, but it is especially so when giving background briefings. In these background briefings – the importance of which took us a long time to appreciate – there is no alternative but to explain issues in depth and get into a discussion of the roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

When trying to communicate a specific message, it is necessary to give international journalists the appropriate background. In the context of the present crisis, this includes pointing out the differences between the present conflict and the first Intifada. It had to be explained to journalists that whereas the events of 1987 started at the grassroots level and filtered upward, today's events originated at the top; that they were

the product of a strategic decision by the PA to instigate an armed conflict. Another difference was that much of the first Intifada revolved around stone-throwing against IDF soldiers, while the current conflict includes many instances of intense armed combat – far more serious than mere disturbances of the peace. Furthermore, during the 1987 Intifada, Israel was in complete control of the Occupied Territories. Today, there is a Palestinian Authority, with a chairman, a legislative council, and a 30,000-member armed force. The PA has diplomatic representation throughout the world, and is a member in numerous international organizations. What is taking place now is not simply a confrontation between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian demonstrators, but this is how it is often presented on television.

In addition to all this, in 1987, the Palestinians did not have any specific political agenda guiding their actions. By contrast, the present Intifada commenced immediately after a meeting between then-PM Barak and PA Chairman Arafat in the home of the Israeli Prime Minister, and following the Camp David talks, when the political process was at its height.

All of this goes to show that it is impossible to explain events to international correspondents exclusively in military terms, disconnected from politics. Most of the issues involved in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians are not strictly political or strictly military; rather, they exist somewhere in the

gray area between the two. In the context of background briefings for international press, there was no alternative but to widen the subject areas about which military personnel were permitted to speak, thereby making the communication of Israel's message more effective.

An additional problem in the media relations effort was that Israel, as the stronger side, was perceived as a kind of bully. In terms of an overall

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paradigm, it would have been better to present the conflict in terms of 'the sheriff and the bad guy.' Because he is on the side of justice, it is legitimate for the sheriff to be stronger than the bad guy without coming across as a bully. This was the communications strategy employed by Norman Schwarzkopf during the 1991 Gulf War. He was definitely on the stronger side, but also on the just side.

Another lesson we have learned is that these actions have to be carried out in real time. When working with the media, one needs to remember that releases or items circulated after

deadline are worthless. Israel still needs to improve in this regard, since – having to coordinate the activities of the Prime Minister's Bureau, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the IDF, and other elements – it does not always provide information or press lines with the necessary dispatch.

A lesson that remains to be properly internalized is that certain institutions need to be taught to think in different terms than those to which they have been accustomed. For example, information relating to activities among the Palestinians is concentrated in the hands of the General Security Service (GSS). The primary role of the GSS is to prevent terrorist acts, not to involve itself in media relations. Unfortunately, much of the information about what the enemy is doing or planning exists only in the hands of the GSS. They have a monopoly over this information, and over the decision as to what can be vetted for release and what cannot. Since sometimes events or actions cannot be explained without specific items of information, this creates a potential friction point. Those dealing with media relations have no desire to harm national security by publicizing state secrets, or to operate without the co-ordination of the GSS. With that, it has proven difficult to explain to the GSS that the needs of the day may demand the release of what was until recently a state secret.

An example of incorrect handling of relations with the media is the case of Muhammad a-Durra, the 12 year-old who was shot to death in

September 2000, when he and his father were caught in crossfire between Israeli forces and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. It should be stressed that there is no way of knowing with certainty whether he was killed by Israeli or Palestinian fire.

A day or two after the incident, I made an assessment on the basis of information we had at the time that a-Durra had evidently been hit by Israeli fire. After a thorough examination which, to my mind, took entirely too long, a preponderance of question marks piled up over this assessment, but it was impossible to prove anything with certainty. All we could say was that it now appeared more likely than before that a-Durra had been killed by Palestinian fire.

Two mistakes were made in this case. The first was my statement to the press: it would have been better to say that we did not yet have any hard information, and that any comments would be made only after a thorough investigation of the events. The second mistake was that the investigation took two months when it should have taken only a week – the period within which media attention was still focused on the incident.

Summary

There are those who are opposed to the very appearance of army personnel in the media, contending that it projects an image of militarism. There is some merit to this contention: such appearances should be limited only to relevant cases. Sometimes, however, there is no alternative, either

because military personnel know best what is happening on the ground, or because of their general command of the subject. Moreover, at times the media insists on speaking with them. I have often negotiated with international correspondents, telling them I would send a representative to present Israel's position, and they have refused, saying they were only interested in interviewing someone in a position of responsibility.

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Consequently, IDF representatives have appeared at times because otherwise, no Israeli would have been interviewed at all.

It is also important to understand that, despite the superficiality and cynicism attributed to the electronic media in my earlier comments, the correspondents themselves are not bad people, and they do have an interest in cooperation. For example, during the second week of the violence, I was briefly interviewed about a specific subject in the BBC studios in Jerusalem. At the end of the interview, the correspondent turned to

me and proposed that I present the Israeli side for another story she was preparing about Palestinian children that had been killed during recent incidents. She added that she had interviewed another Israeli for the story, but that in her opinion he had not presented Israel's case well, so she was offering to interview me instead. I considered her request, and ultimately gave a 10-minute interview. Upon its conclusion, I told her I had three requests. The first was that, knowing she would use only a brief excerpt from what I had said, I wanted her to let me select what would be broadcast. She refused, but promised to select a statement which faithfully reflected my comments.

My second request was that her report include not only footage of the children, their mothers, and the hospitals, but also of the demonstrations themselves, to illustrate that these children had been wounded after being sent by the Palestinians to the front lines. I told her that if she lacked such footage, I would supply it to her. She agreed, noting that she had not thought of doing this, and that she would include images in the report showing the circumstances in which the children had been injured.

The third request was that a captain from the IDF Spokesman's Office, accompanying me, be shown the report prior to its broadcast. She replied there was no value in that, since she was not going to change anything in any event. I requested that the officer nonetheless be permitted to

remain in the studio, and she acceded. It seems that this officer's presence exerted some sort of pressure, and the topic was ultimately presented in a fair and balanced manner. The conclusion to be drawn is that there is value in dealing directly with correspondents.

Another more significant example is of a report prepared by a CBS crew, headed by Bob Simon, which dealt with a sensitive aspect of our activities – targeted killings. Simon said he would be preparing the report in any

event – with our cooperation or without it. He asked me to arrange for him to accompany a unit involved in actions in the field. I deliberated over this request extensively, consulting with several people. Ultimately, I decided to accede to it: Israel had nothing to hide, its conflict was just and correspondents covering it needed a sense of what was really going on. We also assumed that if correspondents met these 20-year-olds and spoke with them, they would

realize that they were not a gang of heartless murderers. The results, in my opinion, bore out the correctness of this assumption.

Many complaints can be made about the media, and it is extremely difficult to influence the way in which events are covered. Nonetheless, it is possible to improve things, if only to a degree, in order to ensure that the Israeli side is presented in a more balanced manner.