

The Disengagement and Israel's Media Strategy

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Implementation of the disengagement from Gaza in August 2005 had all the ingredients for a media extravaganza that would be disastrous for Israel's image. Scenes of soldiers and police having physically to drag settlers from their homes; preparations for possible armed resistance by those opposed to the decision; the specter of Jew fighting Jew; Israeli bulldozers leveling the settlements after their evacuation as if a scorched earth policy was in progress: all these were images that might well cast Israel as a warring, militaristic society, even toward its own citizens.

And then there was the relatively high probability that the pullback would take place under a hail of Palestinian rocket and mortar fire, to make it look as if Israel was withdrawing under fire, leaving Gaza with its tail between its legs with the same potentially negative strategic consequences created by Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon on May 24, 2000. It was claimed that Hezbollah's perceived armed victory against Israel in southern Lebanon encouraged the Palestinians to launch their intifada four months later in September 2000 – and even if most analysts in Israel are highly skeptical of the theory, it has had its proponent nonetheless.

The threat of a media fiasco was by no means overblown. In the almost five years of conflict with the Palestinians that preceded the Gaza pullback, Israel's media relations were, to put it mildly, not successful. With the Gaza disengagement, however, the way in which the move was portrayed both inside Israel and to the world indicated that clearly something very fundamental had changed in Israel's media policy. Instead of excluding the media, as was Israel's general policy to date, media access was fa-

cilitated and encouraged, and the branches of government involved in the evacuation and the security forces cooperated fully in this effort.

Behind the New Media Policy

Prior to the implementation of the disengagement, workshops on the media and its importance were conducted with those charged with carrying out the evacuation. Brig. Gen (res.) Eival Giladi, the coordinator of the disengagement in the prime minister's office, proved a highly articulate spokesperson as he briefed the press in a systematic and ongoing manner, and he was perceived as a voice of authority on the issue. Army Spokesperson Brig. Gen. Miri Regev was able to persuade many in the General Staff, particularly O.C. Southern Command, Maj. Gen. Dan Harel, who had overall responsibility for the operation, to take a chance on a policy of openness with the media even though the presence of the media could complicate his mission. "He thought that the media should not be in or near the homes but at least 100 meters away from there. Harel understands the importance of the media but his first commitment is to his mission and I can appreciate his position. The media can escalate a situation," Regev told *Yediot Achronot* on August 12, three days before the disengagement began.

The incident that tilted the command toward a policy of media openness came on June 30, 2005, with the decision to evacuate hard-line disengagement opponents from the hotel at Neve Dekalim. Given the fanaticism of those who had holed themselves up in the hotel, the army assumed with a high degree of certainty that a confrontation, possibly even with life threatening consequences, could

erupt between those at the hotel and the evicting forces. Those in charge also assessed that the presence of media and cameras would serve to incite the opponents even further. It was thus decided that the media would be exposed to the evacuation in a controlled, phased manner whereby they would be kept at a distance during the actual first stage of the evacuation and then, when the situation had settled down, be brought to the scene under the auspices of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit. The orders then changed and instead of watching from a distance, the reporters were ordered back to the Kissufim checkpoint, some ten minutes drive from the hotel, and from there the army's Spokesperson's Unit was to drive them to the hotel when operational conditions permitted.

"And then began to unfold the worst nightmare a spokesperson can have," said Regev in a September 15 lecture delivered on the Army Radio's Open University program. "The buses never arrived on time due to bureaucratic reasons and then when they finally arrived they were blocked on the roads to Neve Dekalim by protesting settlers. Some media personnel who had managed to get into the closed military area were injured while being forcibly made to leave the area." (Two were arrested and led away with their hands cuffed behind their backs.) "And cameramen who were in the hotel without permission caught this all on camera and, in the end, the media who were there illegally were able to document the event the responsible media was barred from."

The whole operation was over in fifteen minutes, which meant that those journalists who had cooperated with the IDF Spokesperson's Unit were penalized and furious. Worse, what the media got was neither the message nor the impression that the army and police wanted to create. That night the news focused more on the tensions between the media and the army than on the fact that in a brilliant, disciplined, well-planned move, the evacuating forces managed with skill and dexterity to deal with a potentially explosive situation. In short, from a spokesperson's view, everything that could go wrong did go wrong, leaving Regev's personal relations with

the media in tatters, and this after only a month on the job. "I came to a fundamental conclusion," she said, namely, that angry and frustrated media is bad media. The fact is that the reporters who were in the hotel illegally did not interfere with the force's carrying out its mission, proving that fears of media presence were exaggerated.

The way the Gaza disengagement was portrayed both inside Israel and to the world indicated that clearly something very fundamental had changed in Israel's media policy.

As a result of the incident, the disengagement planning team headed by Giladi fundamentally re-examined its media policy. The lesson of Neve Dekalim was that the media has a presence everywhere. In this day and age of new technologies, where cell phones have global transmission capabilities, the media is omnipresent. Also, in the specific case of the disengagement, the media crews had months to prepare and plan their coverage. Understanding that the authorities might prefer that they not be on site, reporters had been building up a steady presence in the Gaza Strip for weeks. In all, some 2000 foreign journalists and hundreds of local journalists were on hand to cover the event. All the major news chains had rented homes in Gush Katif for their reporters and crews and linked them to satellite hookups and the like. Hundreds of cameras and telephones had been distributed to local residents to document the event. Clearly if the Neve Dekalim fiasco was not to be repeated a new media policy was needed.

Managing the Message

The planning team came to several conclusions, most importantly, if the IDF and police wanted to control the message they had to control the media. They could not allow settlers with cell phones to dictate the disengagement narrative. This lesson had been dramatized three years earlier, in May 2002, when Israeli forces were reported by the international me-

dia to have committed a massacre in the Jenin refugee camp when, in fact, no such massacre had taken place. The reasons for this, it was later determined, were twofold: one, a breakdown in communications between the military conducting the operation and the Foreign Ministry, responsible for explaining the action to the world; and two, the decision to ban the media from covering the event under terms agreed upon with the IDF led to the world's airwaves being dominated by rumor and Palestinian propaganda, causing tremendous damage to Israel's image and foreign relations.

Drawing on this lesson and the experience of Neve Dekalim it was decided to facilitate as much media coverage as possible through agreement between representatives of the press and the IDF Spokesperson's Unit. Some limits were set, but generally a policy of total openness was declared and a massive logistics campaign was launched in order to ensure that full media coverage occurred. A press center was established, transportation was provided for all, and the media was present with both the evacuating forces and the families in their homes, if the families did not object. The limitations included that media could not move from settlement to settlement freely (this being so as not to clog the evacuation routes) and that in certain instances when human lives were threatened or it was judged that the media would inflame the situation, some areas could be temporarily declared closed military areas.

In tandem, commanders, soldiers, and police who would be charged with carrying out the evacuation underwent intensive media sensitivity training. They would operate according to strict guidelines set by the IDF Spokesperson's Unit and also learn about how to present themselves to the media. Critical here was training the forces not to be provoked by incendiary behavior, displayed subsequently by some disengagement opponents who called soldiers Nazis or spat at them. "Keep cool; the cameras are watching every move," was the message inculcated systematically into the forces. Also, a rule was set

whereby media could be excluded only based on consultation between the highest ranking officer in the field and Regev herself, and only enforced in extreme cases, for example, a group of people threatening to blow themselves up. Charles Enderlin, the veteran correspondent for France-2 Television and a harsh critic of the IDF's policies in the past, told *Haaretz* on August 28 that "the organization worked as never before. Somebody planned this carefully with the intention of changing Israel's image in the international media and it worked."

The careful planning was the result of several factors:

- A clear understanding of what the IDF wanted to achieve in terms of its message was formulated early on and was flexible enough to be constantly updated and changed according to need.
- Giladi, as head of planning the disengagement, had the strong support of the prime minister and therefore the authority of the prime minister.
- The lessons of the past, particularly an appreciation for new media technologies that make it impossible to hide the story, led to a situation of non-confrontation with the media that facilitated Israel's ability to convey its message rather than having the airwaves dominated by rumor and propaganda
- The disengagement was an "easier sell," particularly for the foreign media, as it portrayed Israeli against Israeli and the uprooting of Jewish settlements, without having to "sell" Israel's occupation of the Palestinians and its conflict with them.
- Though only in her job for three months, Regev had extensive media background, having served in the IDF Spokesperson's Unit for twenty years, including as deputy; in the prime minister's office; and as the chief military censor. She had been appointed to her position by Chief of Staff Dan Halutz and, like Giladi with the prime minister, was understood to speak on his authority.
- Extensive media planning for the operation was undertaken by the IDF Spokesperson's staff under the previous spokesperson, Brig. Gen. Ruth Yaron, which al-



Maj. Gen. Dan Harel with Brig. Gen. Miri Regev

lowed for a smooth transition between the unit commanders.

According to Regev in her lecture on Army Radio, she and the others responsible for determining the IDF's information policy during the disengagement were guided by the following principles:

- The disengagement was being conducted under intense public debate, with the opponents well-organized, vociferous, and unwilling to resign themselves to the move even though it was passed into law in February 2005.

- The IDF's image and role as the people's army in the service of democracy was threatened by the strong attempt of the anti-disengagement camp to involve the IDF in the political debate. In consequence a cardinal rule was set whereby the IDF would explain only how the disengagement was taking place and not why.

- Some rabbis and settler leaders who rejected the legitimacy of the disengagement and threatened to de-legitimize anyone associated with it called on soldiers to disobey orders. The IDF, therefore, had to establish beyond any doubt its determination to execute the mission handed down by a democratically elected government in Israel.

- At the same time the mission the army was being asked to conduct was qualitatively different from other missions, including forcibly removing people from their homes, most of them law abiding citizens, some of whom had lived in Gush Katif for thirty years. Therefore in carrying out this mission the IDF had to show sensitivity as well as determination. Indeed, those two words, sensitivity and determination, became the working title of the IDF's media plan for the disengagement itself.

- Insubordination and the pressure to refuse to fulfill orders had to be quashed with an iron fist given the potential strategic harm to the IDF, its image, and self-confidence. Hence the messages through the media and a very intensive campaign headed by the chief of staff, who made it clear that anyone refusing to obey orders would be judged with the full letter of the law. In the end the number refusing to serve was less than a hundred out of some 18,000 forces involved in the evacuation.

These principles were designed to create a public image that would allow the IDF to carry out the government's decision with only minimal damage to the IDF's image as the people's army, with its unique and unifying element in Israeli society. This was to be achieved through a policy of openness with the media and media training with the evacuating forces. Journalists were embedded with the evacuating forces and, if families agreed, entered the homes of the settlers to be evacuated. Shuttle bus services were set up to ferry the thousands of journalists to and from Gush Katif. There was a defined chain of command when changes to the open policy were necessary. In addition, the IDF spokesperson's office created twenty video documentation teams of its own to provide visuals for those news stations not able to have coverage everywhere at once. And, at all times, sensitivity and determination would guide the actions of the evacuating forces.

The first direct dividend from this policy of cooperation, openness, and heightened media awareness came on July 13, when tens of thousands of settlers and their supporters tried to penetrate the Gaza Strip, declared a closed area by order of the IDF, in order to make the evacuation of the 8,000 residents there near impossible. The world's cameras caught solid, unflappable, neatly dressed, disciplined, and courteous Israeli soldiers and police keeping their cool though at times insulted and degraded. The soldiers also withstood calls on them to disobey the orders of "the army of evacuation." The scenario had been anticipated and planned for accordingly, both in operational and media terms, whereas a policy of closing the media off from the potential confrontation would probably have led to an entirely different type of coverage coming from the area. Throughout the disengagement, the IDF and the other security forces came across as professional, well-trained, and disciplined personnel representing a government in the cause of democracy. From a media point of view, the mission was accomplished. Whether that will remain the situation as the story slides back into the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and whether this was a one-time success rather than an illustration of new thinking, remains an open question.