



The Israeli Media Enlisted for War

Interim Conclusions From the Behavior of the Israeli Media and Press in the Aftermath of October 7, 2023

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The Swords of Iron war has created a complex reality for most of the Israeli public, as well as for media personnel and journalists. Various media outlets—from editors to the last reporter in the field—adopted the national narrative immediately after October 7 and “recruited” themselves to the battle against the cruel enemy in the South. Along the way, they abandoned journalistic and classic norms, which were replaced by unity, patriotism, and a lot less criticism of those in the field. Will these journalists be found to have been correct from a historical perspective and in terms of the outcome? It is still too early to say, but the phenomenon is fascinating and raises many questions about the role of the media in wartime and at any other time.

Keywords: Operation Swords of Iron, Gaza war, Hamas, media, influence, October 7

Introduction

The morning of Saturday, October 7, 2023, witnessed a massive shift in the tectonic plates in Israel. Not only was the Israeli defense establishment overwhelmed by a terrifying tsunami, and not only was the public sphere trampled under the weight of a massive failure that turned into a horrific tragedy, but the independent Israeli media was also overrun by an unprecedented wave of conformism unseen in the past 15 or 20 years. Many Israeli media outlets became part of the ongoing influence campaign that the State was waging through its various branches. To be clear: this was not a case of journalists being recruited by the Israeli establishment; it was a case of voluntarily serving as part of the psychological, social and public-opinion campaign that was launched within Israel the moment the war broke out. In other words, journalists did not

become employees of the state, although their behavior and actions aligned perfectly with the national interest as it was perceived in the first weeks of the war.

In this article, we will examine the argument that the war in Gaza has had a significant and profound influence on the way Israeli media outlets have conducted themselves and continue to conduct themselves. Due to the enormity of the trauma caused by the events of that “Black Saturday,” members of the media and journalists chose to become “agents of unity,” whose goal was to unify the Israeli people, maintain national morale, and provide full support for the operations of the IDF and other branches of the Israeli security establishment as they sought to topple or eliminate the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip and ensure the return of the hostages.

To examine the conduct of the Israeli media during the war, we conducted a closed-door session with senior Israeli journalists, in which they expressed their opinions on the subject.* The session became a kind of “reckoning,” during which participants expressed a degree of self-criticism regarding their performance throughout the war, alongside an understanding that the dramatic context required them to act differently than in normal times. Although the participants were representing only themselves in the round-table discussion, they spoke at length about the media outlets with which they are affiliated and the editorial, writing, and presentation considerations that have changed so dramatically since October 7. Representatives of the IDF, experts, and researchers from the field of media influence also participated in the discussion, and anonymity was guaranteed.

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The Media Protects the People

Let us start by going back to the morning of October 7: As news began to emerge about Hamas’s terror attack against communities in the South, Israeli media outlets immediately started live and uninterrupted broadcasts from various battle scenes. Even at the earliest stages, when the situation was unclear, some of the reporters conveyed the horrors that were unfolding in towns, cities, and kibbutzim, where terrorists were freely roaming the streets and butchering Israelis almost undisturbed. Residents of the Western Negev were interviewed, one after another, speaking in hushed voices about what was happening just outside their safe rooms. Journalists, for many hours, tried to assist the people under siege by providing them with a

platform to express their anguished cries of having been abandoned by the state; they even helped direct security forces to those locations.

It is our contention that, from that moment on, the Israeli media became an integral part of the Israeli establishment, which was on a mission to dismantle the terrorist organization that had attacked Israeli citizens. The majority of diplomatic, military, and political correspondents aligned themselves with the unequivocal demand for “the dismantling of Hamas at any price” and wholeheartedly supported the IDF’s need and desire to make the terrorist organization pay a heavy price. Israeli airstrikes, artillery attacks, Special Forces operations, and tank convoys, all received favorable media coverage. In the meantime, reporters continued to amplify voices and images from the South, while refraining from showing what was happening in Gaza, images that were inundating social media platforms, especially Hamas’s Telegram channels. Their primary concern, it seems, was to avoid disturbing their Israeli audience and spare them from images that would undoubtedly be difficult to watch.

The media was the first to serve the public during the critical first hours of October 7 and in the weeks that followed. It also provided nonstop coverage of the mass mobilization of Israeli civil society, filling the governmental void that existed when the war erupted. The operational goal to achieve unity and the ability to portray it among the people was clear. Images of citizens driving back and forth with countless packages of supplies for soldiers were published endlessly on all channels, as were the “war rooms” set up by civilians who joined the public diplomacy effort and operations to purchase and import tactical equipment for IDF soldiers.

It is safe to say that, during the first weeks of the war, the Israeli media worked tirelessly to heal the deep rift that was created in Israeli society by the judicial reform the government had been advancing since the beginning of 2023. Given the massive rifts that emerged in

* This session took place at the Institute for National Security Studies on December 28, 2023, and was attended by media figures, experts, and researchers of media and influence from Israel and overseas.

Israeli society, the media tried to create a new image—a refreshing and optimistic image of Israelis from all parts of the country coming together to save the nation and the homeland. Images of this kind are common during times of conflict, but the unity of rank that Israeli citizens demonstrated in their actions and their voluntary enlistment appears to be an exception and was significant on a national level. Previous military operations in Gaza—and even all-out wars against Arab states—did not generate the same intensity we have witnessed since October 7. It is important to note at this stage that the understanding that this was “something different,” a war and not an operation, quickly seeped into the consciousness of most of the Israeli public, and the media was quick to adopt and even spearhead this new narrative.

Although in the initial hours of previous operations in Gaza in recent years support for the IDF was generally widespread as people rallied around the flag, that support very quickly cleared the way for criticism regarding the way the campaign was being conducted, its goals, and the destruction that was being wreaked over the border. In this context, we can unequivocally say that not only has the Israeli media refrained from criticizing the extent of the devastation in the Gaza Strip, but it has also been careful to avoid airing disturbing imagery showing “the real situation” in Gaza, the extent of the destruction, or anything that could be seen as aiding and abetting the enemy’s psychological warfare or undermining public support in Israel for the war.

In fact, most Israelis have not been exposed at all to the outcome of Israel’s heavy bombardment of the Gaza Strip or to the fact that hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced. These images, which in the past were controversial and the subject of debate in television studios or on the editorial pages of newspapers, have become a rarity in the Israeli media. It is our contention that the editors of various media outlets made a deliberate decision to focus on unity and on the painful attack on the Israeli people, particularly on

the communities in the Western Negev and the Supernova Music Festival. This decision is consistent with other decisions made by these editors such as displaying the Israeli flag onscreen at all times, airing countless articles a day about the atrocities of October 7, and keeping tabs on the families of the hostages, the displaced Israelis, and the fallen soldiers—in pain, empathy, and sympathy.

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Israeli media consumers rewarded the television channels and newspapers by paying them a great deal of attention; the number of people watching the news on television, listening to news on the radio, and visiting internet sites also rose significantly in the first weeks of the war. According to surveys conducted since October 7, while the public’s faith in Israel’s political leadership showed a marked decrease, trust in the media experienced a sharp and impressive increase. This is not something that we can simply ignore: for years, both the media and politicians faced a complete lack of trust from the Israeli public, and against the backdrop of polarization in Israeli society, trust in both has steadily declined in recent years. However, for journalists, this decline was halted along with the sound of roaring cannons, thanks to the patriotism displayed by many of them.

Media Impressions: An Initial Reckoning

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of October 7 radically altered their approach to what was happening and to the enemy. In their view, Hamas had turned into a murderous organization similar to the Nazis or ISIS, and reporters did not hesitate to use that framing in their various reports. One senior journalist from one of the broadcast media shared that this war had changed her personally as well as her attitude towards the issue she covers. She said that the objectivity to which she had adhered throughout her lengthy career was no longer relevant to her work. The significance is that the emotional involvement of the journalist in her work had increased and influenced her reporting. She pointed out that she understood that since the war erupted, she could no longer be objective in her interactions with politicians serving in the current government and regarding events in Israel since she now believed that part of her role was to represent a certain set of values that she believed exemplified Israel's essence.

A senior editor from a different outlet said she felt that her place of work joined the war effort from the very first day. She demonstrated it by saying that the outlet and its editors consciously decided to be a platform for delivering the daily messages from the IDF spokesperson without any real editorial process, to conceal what was happening in Gaza from Israeli readers and viewers, to not ask too many questions about what the IDF was doing on the other side of the border (on the assumption that "the army knows what it is doing"), and to not be overly critical of the army and its commanders, especially given the need to fully support the soldiers on the front line. At the same time, criticism of the

government and the dysfunction of the various ministries on the civilian front has been a key element of that outlet's reporting.

Another senior editor from the broadcast media said that the program she worked on had been harshly criticized for its coverage of the inadequate treatment of people who had been wounded and released from the hospital due to shortage of medical personnel to care for them. The need for public discourse about the lack of adequate treatment of wounded soldiers, as opposed to the desire of some citizens to sweep the nation's troubles under the rug, often leads to criticism and conflict during wartime. The editor stressed that she and her colleagues had no editorial dilemma over how to handle the story and whether to air it. However, reactions following the broadcast were furious, accusing the outlet of "harming national morale."

At the same time, participants also spoke about the dilemma they faced when it came to interviewing Arabs and Palestinians who identified with Hamas. In the past—and not at a time of war—it was acceptable to broadcast interviews with people who represent the enemy's positions. However, during the war, it is no longer the case, and journalists have repeatedly been asking themselves whether to provide a platform for these messages. For the most part, the answer has been negative, and therefore the voices from the other side remain unheard. It appears that this attitude stems from a sense that Israelis' trauma is different, from frustration, and from an ardent desire not to "spoil" the atmosphere of unity that has gripped the Israeli public. Showing the suffering of the other side would not only infuriate many Israelis, who see themselves as the aggrieved party that has the right to "revenge," but could also raise questions about the long way to toppling the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip.

A senior researcher based in Europe, told participants that, from the outside, the Israeli media seems to be extremely mobilized and pro-Israel. While this feels good for Israelis, who

experience the entire country as united, it also leads to confrontations with the international media, which does not see the war in the same way as Israelis and their media outlets. She added that even the IDF spokesperson, who has become a much-admired figure in Israel and one of the most trusted, has not managed to deliver the message across to the rest of the world or provide a satisfactory response to the allegations that Israel has used excessive force in Gaza. While Israelis view a uniform-wearing spokesperson as a reassuring figure of authority, the rest of the world views the spokesperson as bellicose and biased, heightening concerns over Israel's militarization. The researcher also pointed out that the Israeli media has a vital role to play not only in raising national morale, as it has done during this war, but also in promoting a liberal worldview. She added that the Israeli media, in part, should continue insisting on "the public's right to know"—even during wartime.

One senior journalist who worked for several media outlets said that on one of his shows, he tried to avoid interviewing "extremist figures" who used to be a main component of the show and even generated most of his headlines. He said that the war has sidelined petty politics and extremist politicians, who will say anything to get a headline. However, if the overall picture of the war were to change, the political coverage would increase, and it would be impossible to entirely ignore those extremists.

One participant argued that the Israeli media has been traumatized since October 7. Journalists are wondering among themselves whether they were critical enough of the war or whether they were asking the wrong questions for the longest time. Many journalists are now engaged in self-reflection regarding the content they have published. Among other things, media outlets are shifting responsibility for some of the sensitive material they publish onto government officials to avoid angering the public and to not be perceived as violating the code of secrecy during the war. In other words, if publishing certain information is likely to enrage the public,

editors ensure that the item is accompanied by a clarification that the information has been officially cleared for publication. This is done so that the public recognizes that they are playing by the rules, even in cases where no such approval was needed for publication.

The videos of Israeli hostages published by Hamas are another example of the dilemmas with which the Israeli media has been grappling. Some media outlets decided in principle not to air the first video that was published, as they believe that only the families of the hostages have the right to decide whether the images are aired. In this instance, too, what is interesting is not just whether the videos were aired, but the fact that journalists, who do not see themselves as subject to officials or external directives during normal times, agreed to restrict themselves in wartime due to a powerful desire to operate within the national consensus. We contend that this represents a significant and even dramatic change in the relationship between the media and the state—a change that is the direct outcome of the horrific events in southern Israel on October 7.

Many people at the colloquium said that the behavior of the Israeli media during the first days of the war was in all likelihood the result of the general trauma that gripped the entire country. Many also pointed out that this war saw civilians attacked in their homes, which meant that the response of Israeli society was deeply connected to previous traumas, including the Holocaust. At the same time, they also said that, given the length of the war, journalists and media personnel must return to the ethical norms of their profession and criticize the IDF and the defense establishment, and they must also report on what is happening on the enemy's side.

A Return to Routine?

After a certain period of time, the media did indeed start—gradually and only partially—to return to its critical role. The same criticism that was leveled during the first two months of

the war at the government, over the ministries' dysfunctional response to a national emergency, started to be directed against the IDF as well. In this context, it is worth noting that most military correspondents have not been critical of the IDF, just as they are not critical during normal times; rather, they played the role of intermediaries between the military and the public. Moreover, most of the reporters who were embedded among the troops were not military correspondents, but they played a key role in building public trust in the IDF, which was severely damaged during the first days of the war because many believed the army had abandoned the communities along the Gaza border. They covered events from a perspective that squared completely with the IDF's perspective ("the reporter in the tank"). The turning point, it seems, in coverage of the army's operations in Gaza came when three Israeli hostages—Alon Shamriz, Yotam Haim, and Samer Talalka—were accidentally killed by the IDF after managing to escape their captors. This incident began a new stage in the media's coverage of the war. Although coverage became more critical, the events of October 7 still held a central place in the Israeli media—especially in the evening news—as part of an effort to forge a collective Israeli memory.

Conclusion

Did the Israeli media pass the tests of objectivity and professional ethics during the war in Gaza? Did journalists faithfully perform their job, according to the classic parameters of the type of journalism that apparently no longer exists? It is still too early to answer these questions, but we must look at the events of October 7 as a turning point for Israeli journalists. When we come to examine the professional considerations that should guide journalists in their work, we must not ignore the ramifications of the atrocities committed by Hamas. Israeli journalists are also citizens of the country and every reporter and every editor knows at least one person affected in some way by October 7. This fact has a direct

impact on how journalists cover reality, as well as the filters through which they process the information they gather. Moreover, in addition to being Israelis, journalists see themselves as representing values that are the antithesis of those espoused by Hamas and the atrocities it committed and they felt a moral duty to expose those horrors.

This intimate colloquium with senior Israeli journalists, convened at INSS, raised the question of whether the Israeli public receives all the relevant information about the war from the media. Objectively speaking, it seems that this is not the case. Intentionally or not, a substantial number of Israeli journalists chose not to present the full picture for an extended period of time. The suffering of the people of Gaza was not a top priority for Israeli journalists, including both reporters and editors, perhaps out of a desire to avoid upsetting the Israeli public who has been largely oblivious to the suffering of the Gazans, or out of a deep sense of solidarity with the Israeli casualties and shock that has deeply affected them since October 7. The desire not to anger the public, coupled with complete identification with Israeli citizens during such a traumatic time, led to a significant shift in the worldview of many journalists, some of whom abandoned journalistic principles, including the requirement to present a balanced view or, at the very least, a portrayal that reflects as much of reality as possible. Instead, they presented what they and almost all Israelis perceive as the greater tragedy.

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