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Operation Protective Edge: Hamas' Propaganda War Ofir Winter

In the course of Operation Protective Edge, Hamas used several media to disseminate propaganda, including al-Aqsa and al-Jazeera television, websites, Facebook pages, and text messages. These have served as a platform for messages to four target audiences: an internal Palestinian audience, an Arab audience, an international audience, and an Israeli audience. Indeed, the struggle for public opinion plays an important role in efforts by Hamas to mobilize domestic, Arab, and international support for its actions, shape awareness of the campaign in accordance with its objectives, and influence the relevant actors.

Hamas' propaganda maneuvers vis-à-vis the various target audiences reveal tensions between the group's drive to appear to the outside world as the victim and its effort to maintain the appearance of strength, control, and ability to govern domestically. It also points to the thin line that separates Hamas' interest in incurring harm to Palestinian civilians, which strengthens its image as the victim in the eyes of Arab and international public opinion, and the risk of damage to its domestic status and its responsibility for the Gaza population. In addition, Hamas is required to balance several identities – a trans-state actor that relies on cross-border support as the representative of the Palestinian people and a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood; a semi-state actor that controls Gaza and fulfills the functions of a state for the local population; and a violent resistance movement that challenges the existing political international status quo. In a further contradiction, the movement's declared ambition is to raise its status in the eyes of the international community, Egypt, and Israel and be recognized as much as possible as a legitimate state actor. At the same time, Hamas rejects international rules that require it to retreat from its ideological principles and violent practices.

Hamas' Propaganda Messages

Messages aimed at the domestic Palestinian audience:

1. Hamas is responsible: Hamas and the resistance are defending the Palestinian people from Israeli aggression. Hamas' leaders do not hide behind civilians and are even prepared to sacrifice their lives. Hamas is in control of the security and administrative

situation in Gaza, and the mechanisms of government continue to function effectively and provide services to citizens even during the war.

2. Operational achievements: Hamas stopped air traffic to and from Israel, imposing “a siege for a siege.” Hamas inflicted heavy losses on the strongest army in the region and abducted a soldier. The tunnel weapon surprised Israel. Hamas missiles reached Tel Aviv and beyond. The Palestinian problem is once again the focus of Arab and international public discourse. Israel is concealing some of its losses. IDF soldiers are frightened, and many of them have deserted because they fear for their lives or are afraid of being kidnapped. The IDF is powerless against Hamas fighters, and therefore, it has been forced to target civilians. Israel's deterrence has eroded.
3. Future achievements: Hamas will impose its terms on Israel. The emerging victory in the current campaign is a first step in fulfilling the movement's strategic objectives. These include lifting the blockade of Gaza, the release of the prisoners, the return of refugees, and finally, the liberation of all of Palestine, above all, Jerusalem.
4. Criticism of the Palestinian Authority, along with unifying messages: If the PA is not able to fight Israel by itself or is not interested in doing so, at the very least it should allow Hamas to do so. Hamas represents the Palestinian people as a whole and is fighting for all Palestinians. The PA's support for Hamas' terms for a ceasefire is praiseworthy. The residents of the West Bank should assist Hamas and continue to escalate their protests against Israel. Hamas and Fatah have proven in the past that they are capable of fighting side by side.

Messages directed at Arab and international public opinion:

1. Victims: Israel started the campaign, and the Palestinian people are victims of its aggression. Israel violates human rights and perpetrates war crimes by intentionally targeting hospitals, mosques, and schools, using uranium bombs, shooting at ambulances, and slaughtering entire families.
2. Double standards as to attacks on civilians on both sides: Hamas does not hide behind civilians; these are false claims that intend to lend legitimacy to Israeli aggression. Hamas does not seek to harm Israeli civilians. It is a national liberation movement and not a terrorist organization. It aims at military targets in Israel, such as Ben Gurion airport, which is also used by the IDF. On the other hand, Hamas missile strikes against Israeli civilians are justified, or at least tolerable, since the people live in “settlements” on occupied territory, and insofar as Hamas is the weaker party in the military equation, harm to civilians sometimes remains the only means of defense available to it.
3. International action against Israel: Human rights organizations are asked to aid Gaza. Israel's leaders, especially Netanyahu, should be put on trial in the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes against the Palestinians.
4. Criticism of Egypt: The Egyptian regime is deliberately preventing the passage of people and humanitarian aid to Hamas through the Rafah border crossing. It gives its

stamp of approval to Israeli aggression against Gaza, conspires with the “Zionist enemy” against Hamas, and seeks to impose an unbalanced ceasefire agreement on the movement. Contrary to claims by Egypt, Hamas is not threatening it, since the movement’s objectives are Palestinian nationalist objectives. The “Egyptian revolutionary government,” as it is sometimes called by Hamas, is tyrannical, undemocratic, and subservient to foreign actors, and does not reflect the true feelings of the Egyptian people, who support Hamas’ struggle against Israel.

The messages directed at Israeli public opinion are intended to intimidate, demoralize, spread disinformation, and undermine Israel’s internal strength and confidence in the IDF. In practice, this is information warfare and its purpose is clear.

Analysis of the Messages

Hamas’ propaganda walks a fine line. On the one hand, if many civilians are wounded, this strengthens Hamas’ image as the victim, i.e., the national liberation movement of an oppressed people fighting a strong and cruel occupying army. It helps improve the organization’s standing in Arab public opinion, arouses empathy for the Palestinian struggle, and restores the centrality of the Palestinian problem in public discourse in the Arab world. On the other hand, an excessive focus on victimhood could undermine Hamas’ attempt to present itself as the organization that is protecting the Palestinian people from Israel using the weapon of resistance. Potential damage to Hamas’ ability to govern, which would undermine its image at home, could serve as a restraining factor.

Furthermore, Hamas is a trans-state actor that relies on cross-border public support in two senses. It is part of the Muslim Brotherhood movement, that is, part of a worldwide Islamist ideology. In addition, it is a principal representative of the Palestinian cause, which is traditionally perceived as a major concern in the Arab world. In spite of this duality, Hamas’ propaganda has played down its close relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, the parent movement, given the struggle against the movement throughout the Arab world, particularly in Egypt. On the other hand, it has found greater propaganda benefit in emphasizing that it represents the Palestinian national issue. It is not for naught that the slogan shown behind Khaled Mashaal at the press conference in Doha was “Palestine is resisting, our people are victorious.” This slogan is not Islamist-religious. Rather, it aims to give Hamas a monopoly on representing the Palestinian issue; specifically, it did not mention that the struggle focuses on Gaza alone and lacks participation by the Palestinian Authority.

Hamas propaganda has highlighted the contradiction between the group’s ambition to achieve recognition that is close to that of a state and its radical ideology, objectives, and practices. On the one hand, Hamas seeks to force Egypt and Israel to lift the blockade and open the border crossings, receive permission to establish sea ports and airports, and earn respect for its sovereignty over Gaza’s land, water, and airspace. On the other hand, these

demands – which, if met, will bring Hamas close to the status of a sovereign state – are not accompanied by a parallel commitment to comply with international demands, led by the conditions of the Quartet.

In order to reconcile this contradiction, Hamas propaganda aimed at international public opinion emphasizes the humanitarian goal, which is generally acceptable, of lifting the economic and political blockade of Gaza, and downplays the long term objective of destroying Israel through the violent struggle. In contrast, the goal of lifting the blockade is presented to Arab-Palestinian public opinion as a platform to achieve future goals. Thus, Hamas is attempting to attain international legitimacy without paying its due: It demands that the international community assist it in its struggle to force Israel and Egypt to recognize “legitimate Palestinian rights,” which in practice means strengthening its autonomous governmental status in the Gaza Strip. At the same time, it refuses to fulfill the international community’s demands that it renounce its violent objectives and practices.

