

Is Israel Winning the 'Media War' over Gaza?

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"We are all Hamas," screamed a scrawny Mauritanian, repeatedly, as he determinedly drew his face closer to a TV camera. Behind him, thousands more tunefully chanted similar words, chants that were heard in different Arabic dialects, in fact in many different languages all across the globe.

Yet, Israel, somehow is claiming victory in the media war, which it calculatedly unleashed weeks before its most violent attack on Gaza yet. Thousands have been reportedly killed and wounded in the first two weeks, starting Dec. 27, in the tiny stretch of land (roughly 140 square miles), yet densely populated Gaza Strip of 1.5 million people.

"Whenever Israel is bombing, it is hard to explain our position to the world," said Avi Pazner, former Israeli ambassador to Italy and France, and "one of the officials drafted in to present Israel's case to the world media," according to the Jewish Chronicle. "But at least this time everything was ready and in place."

"Fewer military officers; more women; tightly controlled messages; and ministers kept on a short leash. This was Israel's new media game plan in Operation Cast Lead," the newspaper reported.

It's always difficult to fathom Israel's giddiness and sense of triumph as defenseless civilians are pulverized by mostly U.S.-supplied warplanes and bombs. Even if one chooses to empathize with Israel's dodgy claim, parroted endlessly by the George W. Bush administration, that the Israeli army is in a state of self-defense, one can never fully grasp the wisdom of its military tactics.

"Fatalities in Gaza are already over 400 and injuries close to 2,000 so far as is known. Total Palestinian civilian casualties are 400 times greater than the casualties incurred by Israelis," wrote three-time presidential candidate Ralph Nader in an open letter to Bush, five days into the Israeli onslaught. Nearly one week after the devastating airstrikes, Israel unleashed a ground offensive which is pushing the causality figures to unprecedented heights, made mostly of civilian victims, which by January 9, reached 795 dead and over 3,000 wounded.

Much of Israel's war machine is financed, manufactured and supplied by the United States. U.S. financial and military generosity has served as the backbone of all of Israel's wars against its neighbors, including the Palestinians. In Israel's war against Lebanon in the summer of 2006, lest it runs out, the U.S. rushed 'emergency' military supplies, including cluster bombs to the Israeli army, allowing the latter to ensure the demise of its arch enemy: thousands of dead and wounded Lebanese civilians.

In the ongoing war against Gaza, neither the U.S.' "dedication to the security of Israel," nor

Israel's dedication to inflicting maximum harm on civilians have been in any way altered. While Bush brazenly chastised Hamas and the Palestinians for the death wrought on them by Israel, U.S. President-elect Barack Obama had nothing to say.

"The scale of bloodshed in Gaza over five days is the same as if almost 2,000 Israelis had been killed and 9,000 wounded in the same period. Imagine the consequences for Israel in such an event," wrote author and former BBC correspondent Deepak Tripathi. Would Obama find the staggering number worthy of cutting short his Hawaii vacation, even for a brief comment, if the tables were turned? Candidate of change, he said.

But Israel is winning the media war, reports Israel; a peculiar claim by any standards. If the reference is made to a "victory" that helped win over mainstream U.S. media, one has to wonder if the corporate media has ever expressed any sympathy for Hamas, or any resisting Palestinian faction, be it secular, socialist or Islamist?

The opposite has always been true. Any violent Palestinian response to the Israeli occupation and its inherent violence has been dubbed "terrorist" for decades, even if Palestinians were targeting Israeli soldiers or paramilitary settlers. Aside from allowing a 'moderate' Palestinian commentator an occasional limited space to write a watered down op-ed, now and then - which serves as a feel-good moment that demonstrates the 'objectivity' of U.S. media - the pro-Israel mantra has defined every major American newspaper in every city in every state. That requires a separate discussion, but the persistent question remains: what is Israel winning exactly?

More Israeli women are stating Israel's case to the media, according to reports. The strategy is both sexist and underhanded. Following the Lebanon war, Israeli bikini models flooded U.S. men magazines exhibiting their barely covered bodies. Former Miss Israel, model Gal Gadot defended her nude photos, promoted partly by the Israeli consulate in New York as her attempt to help "improve Israel's war-torn image," reported the New York Post in June, 2007. Now as Israeli bombs are lightening the sky of Gaza, similar tactics are underway, in Maxim and other magazines.

Kadima leader and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni took its message to YouTube, conveying the same redundant but "tightly controlled" misinformation, that attempts to explain why imprisoning, starving, then senselessly bombing 1.5 million Palestinian Muslims and Christians is good for world peace, for democracy, for security, for the future of the region and the world.

But the fact is, Israel never won the media war in the United States for, frankly, there was never one to begin with. Yet somehow, millions of people around the world managed to read through the filters, the propaganda, the perplexing logic, the Maxim cover pages, and took to the streets in a collective act of passion and dismay, without billion-dollar media crafters "tightly controlling" their every move, scripting their chants or directing their hoarse voices: We are all Palestinians and "with our souls, with our blood, we will die for you Gaza."

What has Israel won exactly, aside from the haunting images of Palestinian youngsters in UN schools, homes and hospitals, mutilated, some silent and others screaming? This is no victory, but a brief illusion of one. As for the long-term repercussions, that is a whole new story. Israeli bombs over Lebanon in 1982 gave rise to Hezbollah, and its war of 2006 turned a small, resisting militant movement into a major powerbroker that will certainly help shape the future of Lebanon. Israel is now doing the same in Gaza. A victory, indeed.

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