



PERSPECTIVES

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The Absence of an Israeli Voice in Arabic

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: An Israeli voice in Arabic was entirely missing during the recent confrontations along the Gaza Strip-Israel border. The media spectrum visible to Palestinians is controlled by Aljazeera as well as Palestinian radio and TV propaganda and indoctrination broadcasts. The Israeli State Comptroller has severely criticized this shortcoming and urged the government to fill the gap, noting that Israel consistently fails to produce an Israeli official broadcast to targeted audiences in Arabic – not even during crises like Operation Cast Lead. Israel must correct this failing in order to deliver direct messages to Palestinian audiences, as well as to function as a psy-op tool.

The recent tensions on the Gaza Strip-Israel border were the result of an organized protest initiated by the Hamas administration. It was not a spontaneous popular response to a deep humanitarian crisis or miserable life conditions.

Hamas, the terror organization that forcibly gained control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and pushed out the PA, manipulates the Palestinian civilian population. It indoctrinates them and glorifies the “right of return,” the Palestinian euphemism for Israel’s destruction through demographic subversion, which was the main slogan of the demonstrations along the border with Israel.

Hamas oppresses the civilian population in the Gaza Strip and systematically diverts the massive financial aid delivered by the EU as well as Iran and Qatar towards military projects, particularly the terror tunnels. It intentionally thwarts international efforts at rehabilitating housing and infrastructure damaged during rounds of hostilities with Israel. Hamas takes advantage of the local media to keep the people inflamed against Israel rather than against itself.

In the case of the organized “Great March of Return” riots along the Gaza-Israel border, in which Palestinian rioters were encouraged, both symbolically and literally, to breach the border fence into Israel’s sovereign territory, Hamas won the media battle. It turned the world’s attention towards the alleged misery of the Palestinians and the (supposed) brutal behavior of the Israeli military, which was accused of using snipers against “peaceful civilian demonstrations” and killing innocent people, including infants.

Israel was duly blamed and faced diplomatic protests and public condemnation, the facts notwithstanding. No credit was given to the IDF for the strict restraint it exercised in the use of live ammunition in extremely complex circumstances.

This was hardly the first time that Israel, which has a strong cause – the need to defend itself against the aggression and provocations of Hamas, a recognized terror movement – lost the PR battle. In these scenarios, Hamas manages to be accepted as an underdog whose every action is justified while facing the Israeli “war machine.”

Israeli powerlessness in the PR field reflects a dangerous lack of urgency about the need to present its point of view to the world. This is a fundamental failure, as it neglects the main sphere of the modern battlefield.

This lacuna is apparent not only in terms of *hasbara* (public diplomacy) but also in terms of the requirements of basic psychological warfare, which is a force multiplier on the tactical level.

Israel has no reliable conventional media means in Arabic with which to counter the propaganda campaigns run by Hamas (and the PA more generally) in either the Gaza Strip or the West Bank. The media spectrum is completely controlled by Palestinian radio and TV propaganda vehicles that are accessible to the mass population at all audience levels.

Israel has not bothered to try to compete in this field, focusing instead on more “sophisticated” means – namely, social media channels like Facebook and Twitter. Occasionally, Israeli officials as well as scholars are interviewed on Aljazeera TV, which by definition offers a hostile framework for Israeli public diplomacy. This cannot be considered the smartest means by which to access the mass populations in the refugee camps and other ordinary people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli public broadcasting corporation runs a dedicated radio station in Arabic, but its coverage range is very limited – so much so that it is dismissively described as broadcasting in a “closed circle.” The same applies to the limited

resources devoted to Israeli public TV in Arabic, which cannot compete with Arab TV stations.

This irresponsible situation might be a follow-on effect of governmental negligence dating back to the 1990s. The euphoric atmosphere generated by the Oslo Accords prompted the degeneration of Israeli Arabic broadcasting, which had the characteristics of a propaganda network.

The lack of any means of direct Israeli communication with the Palestinian Arab population was one of the causes of the repeated unsuccessful military encounters with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, in all of which civilian casualties were the main reason for international pressure on Israel to end its campaigns before its goals had been achieved.

This consistent failure was first brought to the attention of the Israeli State Comptroller in 2008. He investigated the matter seriously and came to stark conclusions. In his special report issued in 2009, he used severe wording to highlight the gravity of the problem:

The State Comptroller's office has remarked time and again to the Prime Minister's office as well as to the Foreign Minister's office about the long-lasting national failure in the domain of *hasbara* towards targeted audiences who speak Arabic. This systematic failure was demonstrated with great vigor during the period of the "Cast Lead" operation and its follow ups...It is not acceptable that there is a situation in which there is not in practice an adequate response within the communications-public diplomacy front, in the sense of effective broadcasts designed to present the situation reflecting the Israeli standpoint to targeted audiences in Arabic, with an emphasis on emergency occasions. ...The continuation of this long-lasting failure of the absence of an Israeli official broadcast to targeted audiences in Arabic, even during the "Cast Lead" operation in the Gaza Strip, demonstrates even more forcibly this concrete need.

In a second dedicated report (January 2010), the State Comptroller emphasized that "Israeli Arabs are exposed to anti-Israeli propaganda deriving from Arab TV networks with an emphasis on Aljazeera, as well as Hamas and Hezbollah... As for Israeli broadcasting in Arabic, there is a continuous failure in accessing the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as the citizens of the Arab states and the whole Arab world...Israel is not active in this critical arena."

Israel must acknowledge that it is judged according to broadcasted images and TV clips, regardless of actual facts and circumstances. In an asymmetric

confrontation, any military operation or incident can be subjected to manipulation and distortion by the side considered to be the underdog. As the Chinese military strategist and philosopher Sun Tzu wisely asserted in his masterpiece *The Art of War*, "One need not destroy one's enemy. One need only destroy his willingness to engage."

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