



Israeli Public Diplomacy Must Improve to Counter Palestinian Misinformation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israeli public diplomacy is often severely lacking in the face of Palestinian propaganda campaigns designed to blame Israel for collateral damage that sometimes occurs during surgical counterterrorist operations in the West Bank. In the case of several recent tragic incidents in which civilians were killed, Israel missed the opportunity to leverage the dimension of doubt to its own benefit. Israel must be ready to refute and contain biased Palestinian propaganda campaigns before they become rooted in the international consciousness.

The State of Israel has suffered several recent propaganda defeats that continue to reverberate in the international arena. They concern targeted counter-terrorism operations at the northern West Bank refugee camp in Jenin, where Israeli forces encountered furious fire from armed Palestinian elements.

There is no disputing that when Israeli security forces operate in an area saturated with Palestinian militia members who are firing against them without an orderly battle procedure, there may be operational failures, including civilian casualties.

Two such incidents were the killing in Jenin of Al-Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh on May 11, 2022, and the death on December 12, 2022 of a local 16-year-old girl, Jana Zakharna, on the roof of a building in the Jenin refugee camp. This camp, which is outside the scope of control of the Palestinian Authority, is essentially a safe haven for non-organized Palestinian terrorist elements or militias. It is a veritable no-man's land.

In wartime, collateral damage accidentally caused during military activity in which the circumstances are clear and proven generally results in an expression of sorrow and apology from the responsible party, a response usually deemed sufficient in view of uncertain battlefield conditions. Events of this kind are well documented involving US forces fighting in Iraq during Operation Desert Storm and the Second Gulf War, as well as in Afghanistan.

The IDF, too, has found itself apologizing for operational failures, whether in Lebanon or during military operations in the Gaza Strip. On some occasions, unfortunate events of this type have hastened the end of military operations before their goals were achieved.

Given that the IDF's activities in the West Bank are under a global magnifying glass, and every incident, however limited, receives a disproportionate response, the army does its best to avoid unnecessary embarrassments.

With that said, Israeli public diplomacy has consistently failed in its mission to cushion the army from international opprobrium. This failure paves the way for diplomatic and political blows, even when the actual circumstances of the events absolve the IDF of the accusation of having deviated from norms.

The Israeli security system must proactively thwart imminent terrorist threats from the Palestinian side. This is entirely clear and appropriate. Such action is required to address the threat from radical and Islamist elements whose charters expressly call for the annihilation of the State of Israel. The working assumption is that the driving forces of terrorism in the West Bank are the Hamas movement and Islamic Jihad, either from the Gaza Strip or from abroad.

This reality is enough to justify Israel's countermeasures, and should be the primary argument of Israel's public diplomacy. Israel must convey the fact that the IDF, a regular army, is facing wild and disorganized terrorist elements, a state of affairs that places Israel on the right side of the equation.

Unfortunately, the Israeli political and security leadership was careless in its handling of the incidents in which Abu Akleh and Zakharna were killed in Jenin. For some reason, a progressive approach to the crisis was chosen: namely, admitting responsibility for the accidental killings despite the operational uncertainty that prevailed on the ground when they occurred. The logic of this approach, presumably, was that because taking responsibility is the privilege of the stronger side, doing so fosters Israel's image as a responsible country.

This liberal approach was spectacularly counterproductive. The killing of Abu Akleh, who was a US citizen, found its way to the UN Security Council (May 4, 2022) and was later subject to a Palestinian complaint at the International Criminal

Court in The Hague (September 19, 2022). It was also put on the official White House agenda, leading to a request that the FBI open an independent investigation of the incident.

These international initiatives clearly illustrate the failure of Israel's public diplomacy. There is almost certainly no precedent in the history of international relations in which a one-off incident, however unfortunate, became an issue at the top of the world's agenda.

This resounding diplomatic failure could have been prevented. Through a rational and well-planned campaign, Jerusalem could have neutralized much of the anti-Israel bias behind these hostile moves and even foiled them while they were still in progress.

The incident during which Abu Akleh was killed occurred in the narrow alleys of the Jenin refugee camp. Israeli soldiers, on a mission to thwart a tangible and imminent terrorist threat, were confronted by wild shooting from Palestinian terrorist elements. That being the case, the presence of journalists in the very heart of the battle, where Palestinian militants were shooting in all directions, was a form of defiance. Abu Akleh's protective helmet and vest with the word PRESS prominently printed upon it could not grant her immunity from gunfire -- particularly before sunrise, when it was difficult to see her vest.

When confronting terrorism in the fog of battle, there will always be doubt about who is responsibility when innocent people are injured or killed. This is particularly the case in view of the improvised and spontaneous nature of shooting by the fanatical militia forces compared to the orderly operations of the Israeli military forces, who are compelled to respond to wild shooting in the environment of the military operation.

In such circumstances, the dimension of doubt is essential ammunition in public diplomacy that addresses the question of responsibility for harm that befalls the uninvolved. The weaker side is to be expected to accuse the stronger of deliberate killing. This is a longstanding tactic of Palestinian propaganda, which is highly adept at manipulating the media to broadcast and endorse a false story.

In information warfare, the advantage is in the hands of the first to get its story out to the international media. Experience shows that the first version, however false, will be broadly accepted as true. It is very difficult for the other party, the "accused," to alter that first impression, even if it has conclusive evidence of its falsehood.

Whenever there is objective doubt about the circumstances of an incident, it is incumbent upon the Israeli military command to amplify that doubt without

stammering and shifting its own version of events. This is particularly true when the incident in question, like that of the death of Palestinian-American journalist Abu Akleh, represents a gold mine of explosive propaganda for the other side.

It should be noted that the Arab media attributed the claim that the IDF likely bears responsibility for the fatal shooting to a statement by the Israeli spokesman. Palestinian humanitarian groups, as well as the B'Tselem organization, published a statement on July 21, 2022 claiming that Shireen Abu Akleh had been deliberately killed by the IDF. They said investigations had determined that the shots that killed Abu Akleh were fired from a spot where Israeli military vehicles were standing, about 200 meters away.

It would have been better for Israel to emphasize doubt about these findings rather than concede the media victory to the Palestinian version, which incriminated the IDF for the deliberate killing of both Abu Akleh and Zakharna. The media arena abhors a vacuum, and the speed and volume of reactions to events shape the perception of reality. Only a quick and full-throated rebuttal in which doubt is expressed about the truth of the other side's claims can help the blamed party refute responsibility for having harmed innocents.

In the Abu Akleh case, an objective examination of the bullet that was removed from her body did not remove the question marks from the facts of her death. This should have been amplified by Israel to strengthen the dimension of doubt. The United States announced on July 4, 2022 that even after ballistics tests on the bullet that struck her, it was not possible to determine who had shot her. The State Department said the projectile was severely damaged, making it impossible to reach an unequivocal conclusion as to which side had caused her death.

The American announcement, which appears to have been neutral and balanced, contained further potential to assist the Israeli argument. The projectile was in the hands of the Palestinian side and was apparently intentionally damaged. Logic suggests that the Palestinians had an interest in making the ballistics test more difficult, which casts doubt on their version of events.

This was a golden opportunity to tilt international sentiment in favor of the Israeli narrative. Unfortunately, the Israelis missed it completely.

Notwithstanding the uncertainty deriving from the American ballistics test, it should be noted that the US security coordinator came to the conclusion that the bullet was likely fired from the direction of IDF forces. However, it was also stated that there is no reason to believe that this was intentional, but rather the result of tragic circumstances during an IDF military operation against Islamic Jihad following a series of terrorist attacks in Israel.

Instead of leveraging these facts to remove the cloud of responsibility from the Israeli side, top Israeli security officials rushed to accept responsibility for the killing of Abu Akleh. This is puzzling. It basically assumes that from the point of view of the strong side, an admission of accidental killing will anchor the convention that the IDF is the most moral army in the world. In other words, preference was given for a progressive approach -- even when such an approach is not required by the circumstances -- in order to satisfy American and European liberal sentiment. In practice, this actually served Palestinian propaganda and increased pressure on Israel regarding the occupation of the West Bank.

Experience shows that the Palestinian side gains propaganda dividends by exploiting and manipulating the media whenever civilians are injured or killed during Israeli counterterrorist operations. It is no wonder that the official statistics dispatched by the Palestinian Authority regarding the number of dead on its side draw no distinction between gunmen and innocent civilians, when in practice over 90% of the dead are terrorists with organizational affiliation or ties to Hamas or Islamic Jihad. It is disappointing that this is not highlighted by Israeli public diplomacy, a failure that allows a negative image of Israel to persist around the world.

Israeli spokespersons in the IDF and the relevant government ministries must leverage the dimension of doubt whenever there are conflicting versions of deadly incidents, especially when the Palestinian narrative incriminates Israel for intentional harm to innocents. The fact is that Israeli forces do their best to ensure a sterile area during any surgical operation. Appropriate preparations must be made for swift and strong media responses to Palestinian distortions before they become established in the international consciousness.

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