

## The news media and the second intifada

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*The role of the news media in violent conflicts, from Iraq and Afghanistan to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, is a major concern to combatants, publics, and media professionals alike. A scholar who has closely followed news coverage of the second Palestinian intifada which broke out in September 2000 draws three significant lessons from the way the issue has been depicted on both sides.*

### The first lesson: adapting to the needs of the media

The first lesson of news presentation of the second Palestinian *intifada* has to do with the increasingly powerful belief on both sides of this conflict that the struggle over the news media can be just as important as the battle on the ground. Israelis and Palestinians are both very aware that they are playing to an international audience and, as always, there is a major struggle over who should be cast as aggressor and who as victim.

The dependence on the international news media is especially strong for the Palestinians. As the weaker side, the media is one of the only means they have of convincing other countries to intervene. One of the most powerful roles the news media can play in such conflicts is when they become “equalisers” by allowing the weaker party to enlist the support of third parties. This was certainly what happened in the first *intifada* (from 1987) in which the Palestinians were extremely successful at placing their plight on the international agenda.

Israel's major goal on the other hand, is mostly damage control. Media images of Palestinian dead and wounded are a direct threat to Israel's relations with the US, Europe, and the rest of the Arab world. The goal for Israel is to convince the world that the Palestinians are using terrorism to obtain what they could not achieve at the bargaining table. Because most Israelis believe that the international press is against them, conventional wisdom holds that no news is good news.

Perhaps the most macabre effect of this mutual concern with the media is the ongoing contest for visual supremacy in the presentation and promotion of pain and suffering. The early stages of the second *intifada* (from 1990) produced two very powerful images. The first was the dramatic pictures of Mohammad al-Durrah being shot and killed as he and his father attempted to shield themselves from the crossfire. The second were the scenes of Israeli reserve soldiers being lynched by an angry Palestinian mob in the city of Ramallah. Each of these scenes became

powerful icons for the two societies; leaders from both sides attempted to exploit these images in an effort to demonstrate the enemy's brutality.

The Israelis and the Palestinians have set up structures to increase their chances of winning the battle over the news media. The Palestinian Authority brought the always-eloquent Hanan Ashrawi back as a major spokesperson to the western news media. The Palestinian opposition movements – especially Hamas and Islamic Jihad – adopted media tactics employed by Hizbollah in Southern Lebanon. Filmed interviews with suicide bombers and dramatic footage of attacks on Israel are sent to many journalists soon after the incidents. Revealingly, the Israeli news media also sometimes broadcasts these tapes despite the chilling effect these images have on the audience.

Israel has also invested considerable time and resources in finding better ways to win the battle over world opinion. One of the most interesting developments has been the decision to set up a new combat unit composed of “fighting cameramen”.

These soldiers carry video cameras into the field with them with the explicit purpose of providing visual evidence to support Israeli claims. Efforts are also being made to ensure that soldiers going into territories are given special training in dealing with the news media. These sessions place a special emphasis on the enormous damage that can be done to Israel's image if acts of brutality are captured on film.

There is also clear evidence of the increasing importance attributed to media considerations in planning Israeli military operations. Indeed, such efforts have produced a new term in military parlance: “low signature” operations. The term originates in the field of radar, but has now come to refer to actions that will not be easily captured by the press.

One of the fears of using helicopters against Palestinian positions is that they can lead to extremely damaging pictures that will be shown on international television news broadcasts. Camera crews however are much less likely to capture the moment when individual terrorist leaders are killed.

Another important indicator of this tendency is the growing discussion about the importance of “news cycles”. In the early stages of the second *intifada* an increasing number of public figures in Israel were arguing against any immediate military reaction to

terrorist attacks. The logic was that the armed response quickly dominates international news coverage and Israel then loses any international sympathy linked to the initial act of terrorism.

Perhaps the most dramatic example of this strategy was the government's surprising lack of military response to the suicide bombing at the Dolphinarium Discotheque in which over twenty young Israelis were killed. It was reported that concerns about conflicting news images were one of the major reasons for the decision to show restraint at that time. Many people in Israel believe this incident was one of the few occasions when Israel did indeed receive a certain amount of sympathy in the international press.

#### The second lesson: demonising the enemy

The second major lesson is that in both democracies and dictatorships, the news media remains a powerful tool for the demonisation of the enemy. One of the most significant news routines is that ‘our’ deaths are tragic while ‘their’ deaths are

either meaningless statistics or even causes for celebration. Our deaths are considered front-page news, while the circumstances of their deaths are of no real interest at all.

A joint study I carried out with Mohamad Dajani examined some of the journalistic routines used by the news media in the two cultures to reinforce hatred towards the other side. When one's own people die they have names and faces, they have grieving families; they have lives. The media also provides a tremendous amount of detail about how one's own victims were killed. Victims from the other side remain, for the most part, anonymous statistics. The use of dramatic language and visuals further reinforces hatred towards the enemy. The other side is much more likely to die off-camera.

While our study focused on newspaper coverage, television is by far the most powerful tool of demonisation. Bloody images of the dead and wounded on television are accompanied by the constant screaming of those left behind. Some of the worst images and sounds are shown repeatedly, as well as the cries for revenge. A raw and instinctive anger inevitably rises up in even the most tolerant of viewers.

The power of these routines comes from the fact that they go unnoticed and unquestioned. The outrage and

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anger expressed by leaders across the internal political spectrum reinforces the certainty among both populations that they are victims of brutal aggression. These emotional news stories serve as a central catalyst for intensifying and perpetuating the cycle of hatred and violence.

It is true that neither Israelis nor Palestinians are completely isolated from external news sources. Many Palestinians are exposed to news on Israeli television and radio, and some Israelis occasionally tune in to foreign news stations such as CNN. However, given local prejudices, most people conclude that such broadcasts are biased against them.

There are both similarities and differences in the ways in which the Israeli and Palestinian press demonise the enemy. On the one hand, the gap between a free and controlled press tends to narrow during time of crisis. When journalists in democratic countries “rally round the flag” to confront the enemy, they voluntarily surrender their ability to serve as effective watchdogs. Nevertheless, the coverage of the violence in the Palestinian press is much more graphic, horrifying, and ideological.

The media within the Palestinian Authority is fully mobilised for the cause. In the Israeli media one can find alternative voices. A few Israeli journalists have made a point of presenting the Palestinian perspective. In addition, Palestinian spokespeople are regularly interviewed on Israeli news programmes. Such sessions are often confrontational, but they do provide some Palestinians with an opportunity to make their points.

### The third lesson: the tensions between media and peace

The third lesson comes from taking a longer-term view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While the news media make an extremely important contribution to the cause of war, they contribute almost nothing to the establishment of peace.

A central component of the Oslo process was the assumption that trust was best built in stages. Compromises that appeared impossible in 1993, when the first accords were signed, were supposed to become easier after the parties had spent years cooperating with each other. It certainly did not work out that way

and at least part of the reason for this unfortunate outcome can be attributed to the Israeli and Palestinian news media.

The Oslo process was plagued with violence, and these events provided journalists with ample opportunity to return to more traditional modes of reporting. The media’s emphasis on drama provided important strategic advantages to peace opponents on both sides. The news media do not initiate violence, but they can often play an important role in intensifying it.

There is only one area in which one could argue that the media’s emphasis on drama worked in favour of the Oslo peace process. The extensive media coverage of the signing ceremonies – carefully orchestrated

media events designed to provide thrust to the ongoing efforts to bring peace – provided Palestinians and Israelis with real hope that the conflict might be coming to an end. But such occasions were few and far between and almost immediately replaced with new crises.

Meanwhile, before the outbreak of the second *intifada*, Israel enjoyed almost two years of relative quiet with virtually no violence whatsoever. Ongoing cooperation

between the two security forces prevented almost all terrorist attacks. But there were no banner headlines announcing such successes, no major news stories talking about the many benefits calm had brought to the area. There were also no in-depth news stories about the “other side”, nothing that could have led to greater understanding or empathy. News about peace is in many ways almost as ethnocentric as news about war.

### Can the role of the news media change?

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the role of the news media in such conflicts can never change. A rather hopeful example can be found by looking at the case of Northern Ireland, where the news media in Ireland and the UK played a much more constructive role. There were at least three major reasons for this.

First, and perhaps most importantly, there was a high level of political consensus among both Protestants and Catholics in support of the 1998 Good Friday agreement. In these situations, the news media not only reflect the consensus, they help solidify it.

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Second, a good deal of the news media in Northern Ireland is “shared media”, Protestants and Catholics receiving much of their news from the same sources. An important consequence of this is that these media have a commercial interest in bridging the gaps between the two sides. Unlike in the Middle East, citizens are not forced to spend their whole lives in separate caves.

Third, the press in Northern Ireland is much less sensationalist. This lowers the level of emotion that can be so destructive in such conflicts.

The comparison tells us something about the circumstances under which the news media might play a more positive role in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. If

a broad consensus emerged in both societies in support of a peace process, the news media could become important agents for reconciliation. Editors could invite journalists from the other side to contribute both news and editorials. This would certainly provide a wider dialogue between the two societies. Sadly, there is very little reason to believe that any of these changes are likely to take place in the near future. The news media on both sides will probably continue to play their usual role of fanning the flames of hatred.

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