

War Propaganda: Western Media, Not Israeli Hasbara

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With the dreadful threat of yet another Israeli war in the Middle East looming, Israeli propaganda machine is likely to go into full gear.

In fact, trial balloons have already been sent out bearing supposedly unrehearsed comments by former Israeli Army general and current Minister Yossi Peled, suggesting that another war is on its way. More recently, Israel's ultra-right and unabashedly racist Foreign Minister Avigador Lieberman threatened to topple the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad in case of a war.

And so it begins.

Historically, Israel has, with one understandable exception, determined the time and place of all of its wars with the Arabs. The only time Israeli forces were attacked in 1973 involved an Arab attempt to regain territories that were captured by Israel in 1967.

When Lieberman uttered his "message that should go out to the ruler of Syria from Israel" to an audience at Bar Ilan University, he was effectively saying that Israel will topple the Syrian government when it decides the time was ripe for war. And considering Peled's earlier statement that war was imminent, the only possible conclusion would be that a "regime change" in Syria is high on the Israeli agenda. It also perhaps represents the last chance of fulfilling the US neoconservative vision – that of "A New Strategy for Securing the Realm".

This inference should have been evident and thus sent shockwaves throughout the world, and especially through the US media which now know fully the price of the Israeli-neocon folly.

So why do Western mainstream media, especially in the US, continue to guard Israel's image so protectively, at times even devotedly, when the country's belligerence is so blatant? And if some in the media are indeed well intentioned in their coverage, why do they continually miss the many clear signs pointing to Israeli criminality and aggression?

A growing reference that is once again floating among political and media analysts is that Israel has greater mastery than the Arabs over fighting media wars. Often cited, for example, is the National Information Directorate, an Israeli propaganda center that was established a few months prior to the devastating war on Gaza last year. Ironically, the center was established after recommendations made by an Israeli inquiry into the equally bloody Israeli war against Lebanon in 2006 – ironically because independent war inquiries often chastise the army for violation of human rights, as opposed to recommending the

establishment of a “hasbara” – more like propaganda – body to justify the crimes committed against civilians.

Still, even such “hasbara” should have had little impact on the Western media’s depiction of Israeli crimes and hostilities toward its neighbors.

One could possibly consider the claim that Israel’s media success story is the brainchild of Israel’s own media expertise under very specific circumstances: That Israeli spokespersons are icons of articulation and charm; that Palestinian retaliations to Israeli crimes in Gaza were vile and gruesome; that the Israeli media blackout was so successful that Western journalists had no other way of finding any credible, decipherable facts; that there are no Arab spokespersons who are well-informed and articulate enough to present even a semblance of a coherent narrative to challenge the one offered by Israel.

But none of these scenarios are convincing. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak is as faltering in English as he is in his mother tongue. The Palestinian resistance merely killed 13 Israelis, 10 of whom were soldiers – and recently “regretted” the killing of the three civilians – while Israel killed over 1,400 Palestinians, mostly civilians, and remains unmoved. The Israeli media blackout of Gaza during the war – which continues even now – hardly prevented footage and reports from beaming to all corners of the earth, thanks to the valiant efforts of Arab media and independent reporters, photographers and cameramen from all over the world, supplemented by the United Nations and other independent groups’ findings. All of this made the scope of the tragedy known to all. And finally, the most eloquent and involved Palestinian and Arab academics, diplomats and activists can be found in every major Western city and reputable university or research institute.

Yet somehow it was Israel that “claim(ed) success in PR war”, according to Anshel Pfeffer in the Jewish Chronicle, days after the initial Israel attack on Gaza. Pfeffer quoted Avi Pazner, Israel’s former ambassador to Italy and France, and “one of the officials drafted in to present Israel’s case to the world media,” as claiming that “whenever Israel is bombing, it is hard to explain our position to the world ... but at least this time everything was ready and in place.”

Utter nonsense. As someone who has been grilled and challenged in the media for making such outrageous statements as “Israel must learn to respect international human rights,” I cannot take seriously the media’s claims to “objectivity”. If this were the norm, no Israeli hasbara campaign would have even dented public perceptions of the criminal war. No unfeeling Israeli Army spokesperson could possibly explain the logic of the wanton destruction of Gaza, as hungry civilians were chased in an open-air prison with nowhere to escape and no one to come to their rescue.

Israeli officials continue to congratulate themselves on a job well done, and must be preparing yet another marvelous hasbara campaign to justify the killings that are yet to follow. However, there are some things that are becoming increasingly obvious, at least to the rest of us. First, the secret of Israeli “success”, if any, was not its own doing, but rather stemmed from the media’s decision, made years ago, to protect Israel’s image. Second, despite the fanfare and self-congratulating commentary, Israel has now largely lost the media war, and the tide since the Gaza war has been turning, thanks to the underfunded, but solid and increasingly determined efforts of independent media groups, intellectuals, citizen journalists, civil society activists, artists, poets, bloggers, ordinary people and those

in the media who possess the courage to challenge Israeli hasbara and its devotees.

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