

Image is everything: The importance of public diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

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The power of image is important to anyone who is concerned about how others view them. The way one is perceived, especially on first impression, is integral to the opinion of the outside world and their reaction/action towards them. This, it seems, is no different for a government or a whole nation. Politicians strive to perfect their image on behalf of their party in order to secure more votes, and whole countries put across a global image in order to attract people to their shores and boost their tourism industry. But the global image of a country is significant in other, more politically-driven, ways. This essay will look at how Israel understands the importance of its' image in shaping other countries' foreign policy towards it and how it manipulates the media in order to refine and justify the actions of the military in news reports, focusing particularly on the 2010 Gaza flotilla raid coverage.

Background: Propaganda, public diplomacy and soft power

In order to disseminate such an image, a government can employ what was originally labeled as propaganda. Following the harmful yet effective propaganda that was in circulation throughout the Second World War and the following Cold War, such image-shaping efforts have now been renamed in order to avoid the negative connotations. Governments now talk about 'public diplomacy'.¹

¹ The term public diplomacy was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Studies surfaced in the 1960s which noted the growing importance of dialogue between people rather than between governments and the sway of public opinion on government policy. From <http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/1.htm#defined> "Public Diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest of the United States through understanding, informing and influencing foreign audiences."

Public diplomacy can affect the foreign policy of another country and thus influence their treatment towards one's own country.² While this can be done through diplomatic, economic and military means, it can also be achieved through 'soft power'. Therefore governments target civilian audiences whose opinion has a bearing on the government's policy. As the academic Manheim points out 'public relations are more likely to have effect in foreign affairs than in domestic affairs because there is less knowledge and experience on part of the citizens', therefore the coverage of foreign affairs becomes tantamount.³ In this way, outside governments began to realize that they can have a positive effect on the opinion of civilians and, in turn, on that country's foreign policy through carefully grooming their public image and explaining their actions to the rest of the world through information.

As governments acknowledged the importance of such 'information activities', they began to devote more and more resources to the endeavor. The United States has the Office of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs which is dedicated to 'supporting the achievement of US foreign policy goals and objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security by informing and influencing foreign publics...'⁴ The British government also employs their own methods of public diplomacy through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which undertakes 'a process of achieving the UK's international strategic priorities through engaging and forming partnerships with like-minded organizations and individuals in the public arena.' According to the FCO, 'it's not just about delivering messages but holding a two-way dialogue, listening to and learning from audiences around the world, in order to get a better understanding of the changing perceptions of the UK and its policies.'⁵

² "...the way in which both government and private individuals and groups influence directly or indirectly those public attitudes and opinions which bear directly on another government's foreign policy decisions" – Delaney 1968

³ "As a result, media coverage of foreign affairs is particularly significant in framing public perceptions and policy actions" Manheim

⁴ <http://www.state.gov/r/>

⁵ <http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/what-we-do/public-diplomacy/>

Following suit, the Israeli government takes the role of public diplomacy very seriously and as such devotes a number of resources to educating and influencing foreign audiences, particularly those in the United States.⁶ The Israeli government has its own word that has been used since the 1970s in relation to their own public diplomacy work. *Hasbara* is roughly translated as ‘explanation’ and is used under the context of Israeli policy and actions. Along with the work undertaken by the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and Diaspora Affairs, the government has created other ways in which the image of Israel can be explained and promoted around the world, from person to person.

Public diplomacy and *hasbara* are employed as tactics of ‘soft power’.⁷ When Hilary Clinton became Secretary of State, she remarked on the importance of a ‘smart power’ strategy, that being the attention to both hard and soft power. While hard power concerns military prowess and financial coercions, soft power deals more with development and education.

For example, the *Hasbara* fellowships bring young people from the US to Israel to learn more about the country so that they may become ‘effective pro-Israel advocates on their campuses’.⁸

Perhaps, one of the most challenging obstacles to the image of Israel is the action of its military in respect of the occupation. For this reason, the Israeli Defense has its own department which deals with media relations concerning their own actions. The IF Spokesperson’s Unit is organized into a number of branches ranging from international media, strategies, public

⁶ This undoubtedly due to the amount of support, both financially and politically, that Israel receives from the US government.

⁷ This concept was originally penned by Joseph Nye, who described it as ‘the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments’

⁸ <http://www.hasbarafellowships.org/israel-program/about-the-fellowship> - “*Hasbara Fellowships, a program spearheaded by Aish International, was started in 2001 in conjunction with Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Hasbara brings hundreds of students to Israel every summer and winter, giving them the information and tools to return to their campuses as educators about Israel. So far, Hasbara Fellowships has educated over 1,800 students on over 250 campuses.*”

affairs and film. The last mentioned produces films and footage about the Israeli military and will be looked at more closely further on in this essay.

Such efforts of public diplomacy have been developed and stream lined so that, following Israeli military action, the appropriate process of 'explanation' and justification can be put into place. In order to show how the Israeli public diplomacy or 'PR' machine works, I will look at the media coverage following the Gaza flotilla incident in May 2010.

Case study: Gaza flotilla raid coverage

As is now widely known, a flotilla of boats left for the Gaza Strip in May 2010. On 30th May, three passenger ships and three cargo ships left the coast of Cyprus. According to the organizers, Free Gaza Movement and the Turkish humanitarian relief agency IHH, the ships were carrying around 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid, including medicines, food, clothing and building materials. The flotilla had made it clear that they wished to break the Gaza blockade imposed by Israel as another means to prevent arms reaching Hamas. The Israeli government reacted to the news of the Gaza flotilla with condemnation. Israeli foreign ministry Director General Yossi Gal denied that the coastal enclave suffered from an aid shortage and declared the flotilla an 'absolute provocation'. Israel had offered to accompany the ships to Ashdod from where their cargo would be transported to Gaza but the flotilla refused, believing the aid would not find its way to those in need.

There are conflicting opinions concerning the intention of those on the flotilla but I will not use this essay to question the intentions of the flotilla, nor the reasons for those on board to take part. In this section, I will discuss how media manipulations and the use of 'public diplomacy' were put into effect in the immediate aftermath of the incident.

After declining the Israeli offer to dock in Ashdod, Israeli aircraft and boats were dispatched to flank the flotilla while it was still in international waters. At some point in the early hours, Israeli commandos abseiled from helicopters onto the ships and boarded from speedboats. While the majority of the ships did not engage with the Israeli military, violent clashes broke

out on the Mavi Marmara, which was carrying around 600 passengers. As a result of these clashes, nine Turkish flotilla activists were killed and dozens injured from both sides.



Media organizations were understandably chomping at the bit for information about the incident. The most important question being asked was who had initiated the violence. Just hours after it had taken place, the Israeli military issued a video of footage which had been shot by one of their soldiers. This footage purported to show those on the flotilla attacking the soldiers as they tried to board the ship. The video circled individual attacks and had written commentary of what could be seen. This video was used by almost every news department across the globe which, at that point, did not have access to accounts from the passengers. It was available on the Israeli army's 'youtube' page.

<http://www.switched.com/2010/06/02/video-footage-holds-sway-over-public-opinion-in-israel-flotilla/>

Once the boats involved in the flotilla had been boarded by Israeli military, the activists were taken to Israel where they were detained until 2nd June. For over 48 hours, as news bulletins around the world reported on the incident, it was only the Israeli army's perspective which could be heard. As with all news stories, most attention is given in the immediate aftermath of the incident when interest is most high. News agendas can change in a matter of hours so the initial reports and footage are integral to the public understanding of a situation. Therefore the Israeli footage, which appeared

to show their military being attacked as soon as they boarded the ship, was extremely significant in shaping the international opinion towards the incident. The heavily-edited video, however, did not deal with the claims that shots were fired by Israeli soldiers before they boarded, which would go some way in explaining the reaction of the passengers.

Once those detained were released and permitted to speak to the press, a different picture began to emerge. Although most of the footage was confiscated by the Israeli military (in the form of cameras, memory cards, filming equipment and laptops), there were some that managed to hide theirs from security searches. For instance, the Brazilian-American filmmaker Iara Lee published footage taken before and during the raid which shows graphic images of those injured during the clashes.⁹



From Iara Lee flotilla footage

However, by the time this was in circulation the global media had, as a whole, moved on from the story. Therefore the coverage received for the new footage was minimal compared to that of the Israeli army video which dominated headlines directly after the incident.

⁹ <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/11/unedited-video-of-israeli-raid-posted-online/?scp=25&sq=gaza%20flotilla&st=cse>

Media commentators have pointed out that this use of public diplomacy and media control was particularly noticeable in the United States where American audiences were given one-sided accounts of the raid.

The US journalist Glenn Greenwald expressed his opinion on the coverage as such: *“This campaign of suppression and propaganda worked to shape American media coverage (as state propaganda campaigns virtually always work on the gullible, authority-revering American media). The edited IDF video was shown over and over on American television without question or challenge.”*

Greenwald goes on to argue that the commentators and guests chosen to participate in on-screen discussions of the event were never chosen from a Turkish/Palestinian or even Muslim background in order to give a different perspective.

The day after the activists were released from Israeli detention, the Fox News presenter Glenn Beck questioned the intentions of the Free Gaza Movement and the links allegedly found between IHH, one of the Turkish humanitarian organizations that took part in the flotilla and terrorist organizations.¹⁰ This followed comments from the Israeli government serving to justify its attack on those aboard the Mavi Marmara. Andy David from the Israeli foreign ministry told the BBC in Ashdod, *“We have to understand what happened, we are talking about an organization, the IHH, who was on this ship... [which] is a radical Muslim organization with ties to al-Qaeda and to Hamas.”* This essay will not attempt to challenge these accusations however, it must be pointed out that the integrity and intentions of the activists on board were questioned before they were able to give their own account, making it less reliable to audiences. By linking those on board to al-Qaeda, whether it was true or not, the Israeli government spokesman immediately provokes the connotations and fear in people’s minds, particularly amongst the American audiences, since the attacks on September 11th.

¹⁰ <http://video.foxnews.com/v/4223912/inside-the-freedom-flotilla>

How effective was the Israeli media mission concerning the flotilla raid?

While the efforts of the Israeli government may have succeeded in getting their version of events broadcast across the world first, and arguably, when it was most important, it would seem that many media commentators and journalists were, in hindsight, aware of the public diplomacy operation underway.

Talking to journalist and activist John Pilger in his December 2010 program 'The war you don't see', British channel ITV's Editor-in-Chief, David Mannion, admitted that both his channel and the BBC had 'fallen into a trap' laid by the 'Israeli propaganda machine'.¹¹

Author and ex-CNN reporter Tony Collings quickly predicted the usual media battle that often occurs following a story about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which proved to be very accurate. On May 31 2010, he said, *'Based on my experience covering the Middle East for Newsweek and CNN, we are likely to see the Israelis make full use of their communication skills to spin the story their way. If the past is any guide, the Palestinians and their supporters will put out a confusing, conflicting story, will fail to provide English-speaking spokespersons who give a clear account, and may miss an opportunity to influence public opinion in the United States...'* Due to the nature of the flotilla, there was indeed no central spokesperson to which news organizations could turn to in order to provide a perspective. In this way, the coherent and organized Israeli response to media demands became even more effective, and essentially, unchallenged.

Despite the sophistication of the Israeli media operation, international leaders could not neglect the fact of nine deaths and they condemned the actions of the Israeli commandos.¹² There were repeated calls for further investigation following the 'excessive force' used by the Israeli commandos.

¹¹ youtube excerpt available here <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7MfWmVRgKQ>

¹² e.g. French President Nicolas Sarkozy accused Israel of a "disproportionate use of force"./UK Foreign Secretary William Hague said he "deplored" the loss of life on the flotilla and was seeking more information and urgent access to any UK nationals./Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak condemned Israel's "excessive and unwarranted use of force" in its raid on the flotilla.

A UN enquiry into the incident last year concluded that the naval officers had shown ‘an unacceptable level of brutality’ and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has ordered a further enquiry into the incident to be published later in 2011, following internal inquiries by both Israel and Turkey.¹³

Despite the criticism from both international leaders and high-profile journalists, it seems that the general public had, in fact, been swayed by the Israeli army’s account of events. According to a reader’s poll carried out by ‘The Week’, the majority of readers in the US still viewed the incident with sympathy for the Israeli perspective.¹⁴

Therefore, despite Joseph Nye observing that “*actions speak louder than words and public diplomacy that appears to be mere window dressing for the projection of hard power is unlikely to succeed*”¹⁵, it seems that when the actions are distorted by sophisticated media campaigns, the ‘window dressing’ can be upheld. Despite the excessive force used by Israeli commandos, which resulted in the death of nine people and the countless injuries to others, the speed and efficiency of the Israeli media machine ensured that even this could be portrayed as a cause for Israeli sympathy.

Conclusion

In the wake of the flotilla raid, due to their quick response and organized media relations team, the Israeli government and military were able to dominate the worldwide media output with their own perspective. Not only was their edited footage picked up and repeated by all the major news organizations, they were also able to provide coherent and well-prepared spokespersons to explain the Israeli narrative of events. Despite their efficient media operation, the actions of the Israeli naval commandos were condemned throughout the world. However, the damage was already done and the Israeli military had succeeded, in many ways, in portraying the image of a defensive operation that was provoked by ‘terrorist’ activists.

¹³ Israel’s enquiry, published in January 2011, concluded that commandos had acted lawfully during the raid)

¹⁴ When asked if the US should distance itself from Israel in the wake of the flotilla massacre, 58% said ‘No, Israel was right to enforce the blockade, and the US needs to support them tooth-and-nail.’ Around 35% believed the US should distance themselves for different reasons. <http://theweek.com/article/index/203752/whats-your-opinion-on-israels-flotilla-raid>

¹⁵ Joseph Nye – Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics

Like most countries in positions of power and military superiority, Israel is acutely aware of the importance of public diplomacy in order to balance out their image in the eyes of the world, and thus ensure the relationship between themselves and other governments is favorable. In this act of education and 'soft power' coercion, they are not alone. However, until the international media ceases to wholeheartedly trust and use the material fed to them by the Israeli *hasbara* crew and begins to question their sources, as they would in any other situation, it seems that the image of Israel will be dictated by their PR team and not their actions. It is imperative that civil society has access to fair and balanced information through the media so that people may adequately and individually form their own opinions and, in turn, affect their country's foreign policy as they see fit. The image of Israel should be shaped by their actions towards others and not by the speed with which they can put a video package together.

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