

Show of Force

On June 9, 2006, a beach in Gaza was rocked by an explosion that killed seven members of a Palestinian family. Shortly afterward, Palestinian Authority television released a horrific video showing a 10-year-old girl shrieking amidst the dead bodies on the beach, and Palestinian hospital workers and spokesmen angrily blamed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) artillery fire for the deaths—even though no investigation had been conducted, and the Palestinian accusers had no way of knowing what caused the explosion. The exultant declarations of an Israeli massacre were reported as fact in newspapers and television broadcasts around the world; human rights groups joined in the condemnations; and once again Israel found itself the object of international outrage over the issue of civilian casualties.

If this story and its origins fit a predictable pattern, so did Israel's reaction to the crisis: The IDF immediately ceased military activity in Gaza, and Israeli officials at the highest levels reflexively assented to the IDF's culpability and promised an investigation of the incident.

The last chapter of the story is equally familiar: It was ultimately determined that the Palestinians on the beach were not killed by the IDF. Rather, Hamas had mined the section of beach where the explosion occurred, hoping to defend their arsenal of Kassam rockets against Israeli commando missions. After the explosion, Hamas men combed the beach, removing shrapnel that could be used as evidence. The sensational video that captured the sympathies of credulous journalists and set off a wildfire of opprobrium turned out, upon objective evaluation, to be a mangled skein of spliced

footage and puzzling anachronisms. It was, in other words, a fake. The explosion itself occurred some ten minutes after the last IDF artillery shell had been fired into the area, and the shrapnel found in the victims' bodies was not from Israeli munitions. Hamas, in a sloppy attempt at defending Gaza, had almost certainly killed its own citizens.

In the end, none of the exculpatory evidence mattered in the least: Israel had been tried and convicted in the court of world opinion in the first few days after the incident. And, as has happened so often before and since, Israeli officials had helped their enemies make their case.

Israel has an image problem. Beginning with the 1982 Lebanon War, and accelerating rapidly after the start of the second Intifada in 2000, the Jewish state has come to be viewed in many quarters of enlightened opinion as a sinister presence on the world stage. Founded on principles of human rights, Israel is now seen as the oppressor of another people; once considered a courageously open society in a region of tyrants, Israel today is portrayed as a brutish garrison nation; once lauded as a beacon of civil rights and democracy, Israel is called an apartheid state. Zionism itself has become an important target of this rhetorical violence. At one time considered a heroic answer to pogroms and genocide, Zionism is now blamed for granting ideological absolution for the perpetration of those very crimes. All of these caricatures aim to redefine the basic character of Zionism and the state it helped create, thus undermining both the legitimacy of the Jewish state in its current form and the moral and ideological basis for its creation. And this re-definition has most assuredly been successful: In a 2007 BBC World Service poll, respondents in dozens of countries were asked to rank 27 nations according to their positive or negative influence on the world. Israel ranked dead last—even lower than Iran—with only 17 percent saying that they viewed Israel as a “mainly positive” influence. Among Western countries, Israel barely fared better: In Australia, Italy, the United Kingdom, France, and Greece, Israel is viewed as a “mainly negative”

influence by almost two-thirds of the people, and in Germany by over three-quarters of the people. Similarly, a 2003 poll found that, among Europeans, Israel is considered the most dangerous country in the world.

The handmaiden of this phenomenon is what could be called, if one wishes to be polemical, the anti-Israel lobby, or, more accurately, a dominant culture of opinion shared by human rights organizations, NGOs, Middle East Studies departments and campus groups, the United Nations, “progressive” Christian organizations, and the overwhelming majority of the British and European media and cultural elite. These factions operate in a state of more or less permanent antagonism to Israel, and in no previous era of the Jewish state’s history has such a lavishly funded, mutually reinforcing international axis existed to challenge its very legitimacy. Today, in much of Europe and the UK, and in some parts of America, a caricature of Israel that once flourished only on the ideological fringes has been mainstreamed: Israel is believed to be a sadistic oppressor, a wanton slaughterer of civilians, a relentless Middle Eastern warmonger, and a grave strategic liability for the United States and the Western world.

The popularity of this way of thinking did not evolve naturally. It has been assiduously cultivated over the course of several decades, with the many battles waged against Israel during that time serving as important opportunities for those whose goal is the delegitimization and isolation of the Jewish state. The death of twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Dura in the opening weeks of the second Intifada was a first salvo and a defining one. Al-Dura was killed in a Gaza crossfire between IDF troops and Palestinians who opened fire on their position. A Palestinian cameraman working for the French news station France 2 captured the firefight on film, and this video was edited by France 2 and then released, free of charge, to other media organizations, accompanied by the declaration that the IDF not only had killed al-Dura but had done so intentionally. How did France 2’s reporters know this? They did not. Their claim was based on the statement of one

man, the cameraman, who could not have known whose bullets actually struck al-Dura, much less whether he was intentionally targeted. Not surprisingly, al-Dura was buried before an autopsy, bullet removal, or ballistics tests could be performed.

Also not surprising was Israel's handling of the crisis. The IDF, itself having conducted only a most cursory investigation, announced that it was "probably responsible" for the killing. Amnesty International blamed Israel as well, giving an imprimatur of objectivity to the Palestinian and French accusations. Largely owing to the cinematic sensationalism of the incident, images of al-Dura's death were seized upon in the Arab world and by the European media as icons of Palestinian victimhood and Israeli cruelty, as distilled truths revealing the entire character of the Arab-Israeli conflict in a single, frozen moment. Governments throughout the Middle East stoked the crisis by issuing postage stamps, commissioning poems and songs, and re-naming roads in al-Dura's honor. Even Osama Bin Laden recognized an opportunity to contribute to the firestorm, warning a month after the 9/11 attacks that "Bush must not forget the image of Muhammad al-Dura." Subsequent investigations have shown that the carefully edited France 2 video was wholly inconclusive, that al-Dura could not have been hit by Israeli fire, and that, like so many incidents that would follow, the galvanizing story of his death was in fact a ghoulish fabrication, intended as one more barrage in the larger war to destroy the moral standing of Israel and the IDF.

Less than two years later, Israel once again found itself the object of an Orwellian Two Minutes' Hate over another invented atrocity, this time in the West Bank city of Jenin. At the height of the Intifada, during Operation Defensive Shield, IDF forces entered a section of Jenin in order to clear it of terrorists who were responsible for sending a disproportionate number of suicide bombers into Israel. Intense house-to-house fighting ensued. Over fifty residences had been rigged with explosives, and while the obvious tactic would have been to follow recent examples set by other Western militaries fighting in Somalia, Bosnia, and Afghanistan and use artillery or air strikes to neutralize the threat, the IDF chose instead to press on with ground

forces—at the cost of the lives of twenty-three of its infantrymen—all in order to minimize Palestinian civilian casualties. Fifty-two Palestinians were killed, almost all of whom were armed combatants. (For a detailed analysis of the battle, see Yagil Henkin, “Urban Warfare and the Lessons of Jenin,” *AZURE* 15, Summer 2003). But in the aftermath of the battle, none of these facts were considered by the media or the international establishment to be of the slightest relevance.

The narrative of what happened in Jenin had already been decided upon, and it demanded stories of mass slaughter and war crimes. The official Palestinian news agency declared that the “massacre of the twenty-first century” had been perpetrated. The UN envoy to the Middle East, Terje Roed-Larsen, described Jenin as “horrifying beyond belief” and concluded that “Israel has lost all moral ground in this conflict.” Derrick Ponder, an Amnesty International “forensic expert,” commented upon entering Jenin that “the evidence before us at the moment doesn’t lead us to believe that the allegations are anything other than truthful and that therefore there are large numbers of civilian dead underneath these bulldozed and bombed ruins that we see.” In America, National Public Radio, CNN, and *The Los Angeles Times* breathlessly repeated stories of atrocities, and in the *New York Times* ex-president Jimmy Carter accused Israel of “destroying” Jenin “and other villages.” In Britain, the press was the most gratuitous. “The sweet and ghastly reek of rotting human bodies is everywhere, evidence that it is a human tomb,” effused Phil Reeves in the *Independent*. “The people say there are hundreds of corpses, entombed beneath the dust.” The *Daily Telegraph*’s David Blair reported that IDF troops had summarily executed nine men, who were stripped to their underwear, “placed against a wall and killed with single shots to the head.”

In the end, the only massacre that had been committed was conducted by the UN, international aid organizations, and the international press—a massacre of the truth that was intended, exactly as the UN envoy had so smugly declared, to destroy Israel’s moral standing in its fight against the Palestinian terror offensive.

Most recently is the case of the Second Lebanon War, the fallout from which has concentrated Israeli attention on military and political failures. This self-criticism has largely ignored a third failure, namely the ease with which Israel was once again defeated in the media. Within days of the start of the war, and without conscious coordination, Israel's enemies set about undermining Israeli self-defense: Kofi Annan announced, with no evidence whatsoever, that Israel had intentionally killed four members of UNIFIL; human rights groups such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) churned out scores of reports condemning Israel's war effort, alleging war crimes, and largely ignoring Hezbollah (Kenneth Roth, the executive director of HRW, accused Israel of waging "indiscriminate warfare" and added, with no credible substantiation, that "In some instances, Israeli forces appear to have deliberately targeted civilians"); and journalists gave flood-the-zone coverage to Lebanese civilian casualties, producing false reports on the Qana bombing, doctored photographs, and news stories that were arranged and directed by Hezbollah. In its battlefield tours for reporters, Hezbollah went so far as to fabricate ambulance drive-bys, as apparently the payoff from using these vehicles as props for the international press was preferable to using them to help wounded Lebanese.

The Israeli response to the calumnies so predictably sent its way was sometimes adept, but too often fell back on familiar and self-destructive tactics: Gratuitous apologies and self-criticism, servility in the face of hostile journalists, and an inability to make the basic case that Lebanese civilian casualties were one of Hezbollah's central goals in the conflict, precisely because of their propaganda value. Astonishingly, after the Qana bombing Israel pledged to suspend its air campaign for 48 hours, a gesture to its enemies and allies alike that at the highest levels of government there festered a deep ambivalence about the war effort.

By the halfway point in the conflict, the narrative of the war had been skewed from one in which Israel was defending itself from attack by an Iranian-backed terrorist organization to one in which Israel was, once again, savagely killing civilians. A survey by Harvard University's Shorenstein

Center found that of the 117 stories the BBC ran during the conflict, 38 percent identified Israel as the aggressor, while only 4 percent identified Hezbollah as such. As Harvard's Marvin Kalb reported in a recent study, "On the front pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Israel was portrayed as the aggressor nearly twice as often in the headlines and exactly three times as often in the photos."

The pattern revealed by these events displays a disturbing record of Israeli failure, but also suggests a course of corrective action. Whether the crisis was al-Dura, Jenin, Lebanon, or the Gaza beach explosion, the Israeli response distinguished itself by the same blunders: A reflexive assumption of guilt; pre-emptive apologies, unnecessary self-criticism, promises of investigation, and suspension of military action; a weak-kneed treatment of precisely the kind of incendiary charges that require a forceful response; the assertion of innocence only after the media storm had passed; and finally, the refusal to push back rhetorically or otherwise against the individuals and organizations who have turned slandering Israel into such a disgracefully undemanding sport.

Several reforms, both conceptual and structural, are imperative. The first is in regard to the IDF Spokesperson's Unit, the small group within the Israeli military that handles media relations. In wartime, its citizen soldiers are charged with the weighty responsibility of explaining Israeli military actions to the world. More than any other, the Spokesperson's Unit is in desperate need of expansion and improvement. It must become one of the most elite units in the IDF, proactive, creative, and aggressive—in other words, a match for Israel's equally determined foes. A branch office should be created in Jerusalem, where a large contingent of the foreign press corps is located, in order to encourage the cultivation of relationships with journalists. Its staff should be re-configured to consist of professionals who have extensive experience in the media, journalism, and public relations. Currently, the unit is composed largely of young conscripts and older reservists who, to

put it bluntly, are simply out of their league. The new Spokesperson's Unit must include a task force dedicated to aggressively—and very publicly—debunking false and biased media coverage. Finally, a liaison office should be created in order to coordinate media strategy and message between the IDF and the government, with the goal of crafting a unique communications strategy to complement every major military operation.

For these changes to leave their mark, the Israeli government itself must adopt a more disciplined communications process. Today, Israel has no united communications infrastructure; each government ministry and branch of the IDF offers up its own spokespeople to the press, and the result is an anarchy of statements and messages that frequently leave Israel on the defensive and appearing guilty in the face of unrefuted accusations.

On the conceptual level, Israeli strategists and spokespeople must come to understand the immense influence of symbolism, theater, and the repetition of defining anecdotes in modern warfare. This means that Israeli war planners must consider the role played by those NGOs and news organizations engaged in deliberate false reporting. These actors can no longer be conceptually grouped as third parties or neutral observers during conflicts; they are deeply implicated in the warfare itself, and as parties to a conflict their presence must be treated with the utmost seriousness.

For over a year, the IDF has been conducting air strikes in Gaza that are intended to thwart Kassam rocket fire into Israel, and because Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists intentionally operate among civilians, these strikes invariably kill bystanders and create damaging news stories. It would be extraordinarily easy for the prime minister, for example, to hold a press conference in Sderot in front of a school destroyed by Palestinian rocket fire and explain to the cameras that while Israel is striking Hamas in order to protect the lives of Israeli children, Hamas is sending *its* children on suicide missions to operate those very same rocket launchers. Every time thereafter that Israel strikes at terrorists in Gaza, Israeli spokespeople could hammer home the damning fact that Hamas uses children in terrorist attacks. Repeated often and forcefully enough, the average Westerner may not be inspired to

like Israel, but at least he will come to understand the nature of its struggle—and the macabre reality of Palestinian “resistance.”

Finally, it is long past time that Israel pushed back against the worst of the journalists, activists, and NGO employees who have made a cottage industry out of operating in the Jewish state under false pretenses. More disturbing than the fraudulent coverage of al-Dura, Jenin, Lebanon, and the Gaza beach explosion is the fact that Israel did nothing to punish those who so eagerly participated in the dissemination of propaganda. The journalists who wrote sensational fabrications of an Israeli massacre in Jenin kept their press passes, and the offices of the news organizations for which they worked remained open. In the same manner, the human rights and NGO activists who provide journalists and the UN with their fig leaf of false objectivity consistently retain their work visas. In refusing to hold this rogues’ gallery of repeat offenders responsible, Israel succeeds only in emboldening the ambitions of those who have made careers out of working to destroy Israel from within its own borders. Should Israel expel journalists simply on the basis of negative coverage? Absolutely not; the freedom to criticize remains the essence of democratic debate. But there is a fundamental difference between criticism and defamation, and the Israeli government should make no apologies for refusing to make its country a haven for unscrupulous activists masquerading as reporters.

At the heart of the problems of organization and discipline that are so prevalent in Israel’s failure to address its image problem, there is ultimately a conceptual failure in the inability to recognize the changed nature of modern warfare. In our age of global communication and the disproportionate influence of easily manipulable photographs and video, a new theater of war has been created, one in which the battle is not fought over territory or against armies and terrorists. The battle is over images, narratives, and beliefs, and the tactics and strategies required to fight it bear little resemblance to conventional war. The stakes for Israel are far greater than the repercussions of one particular crisis; what hangs in the balance is Israel’s strategic position among democratic nations; its ability to sustain its own sense of

moral clarity and national confidence against its enemies; the perseverance of Zionism as the animating ethos of the Jewish state; and the fulfillment of the central aspiration of creating a country in which Jews no longer feel intimidated by their assailants. Israel cannot change its enemies, but it must change how it fights them.

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Clarification: Shortly after the publication of the essay “The Photograph: A Search for June 1967,” by Yossi Klein Halevi in *AZURE* 29, the photographer David Rubinger contacted us, concerned that the article might be interpreted as implying he had improperly directed the subjects of his photograph. We would like to clarify that neither the author nor the editors intended any such implication, nor any other inference that could undermine the professionalism of the photographer or his work. The article referred solely to a work that meets the highest standards of photojournalism. Rubinger remains one of the great Israeli photographers of our time.

Correction: In James Kirchick’s essay, “Going South,” which appeared in our last issue, it was implied that South Africa’s minister of intelligence, Ronnie Kasrils, praised Hezbollah during a visit to Tehran. In fact, Kasrils made this comment while in Pretoria. Our apologies for this error.