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The Israeli Media and the War in Gaza: First Review

"DIRECT HIT": Israeli Newspaper Coverage of the First Two Days of Operation "Cast Lead"

Media coverage of the military operation currently taking place in the south is characterized by flaws similar to those that appeared in coverage of the Second Lebanon War as well as patterns of coverage not seen in the earlier conflict. In both conflicts, the Israeli media's coverage of the first days of the fighting were characterized by feelings of self-righteousness and a sense of catharsis following what was felt to be undue restraint in the face of attacks by the enemy, along with support for the military action and few expressions of criticism. Below, is the first review by Keshev of Israeli media coverage of the war in Gaza.

Banging the War Drum: Let's Fight

In a manner that recalls the first days of the Second Lebanon War, it appears that the print media in Israel refrained from raising questions about the necessity of the military operation and supported the decision to launch it. Just as in the Second Lebanon War, the headlines after the first two days emphasized euphoria and banged the drums of war:

FIGHTING BACK: PRECISE INTELLIGENCE * DECEPTION * AND AN UNPRECEDENTED AIR ASSAULT CAUGHT HAMAS UNPREPARED * OPERATION "CAST LEAD" BEGINS: 225 PALESTINIANS KILLED IN BOMBING OF ORGANIZATION'S HQ THROUGHOUT GAZA STRIP (*Ma'ariv*, main headline, Sunday)

SHOCK THERAPY: THE SURPRISE WAS PERFECT * SUCCESSFUL DIVERSIONARY ACTION COMBINED WITH PRECISE INTELLIGENCE GATHERED ALL YEAR LED TO AN EXCEPTIONAL AIRSTRIKE ON ABOUT 170 TARGETS * AT LEAST 225 PALESTINIANS KILLED IN MOST SEVERE IDF BOMBING EVER OF GAZA; HAMAS LEADERS GO UNDERGROUND (*Ma'ariv*, page 6 headline, Sunday)

The headlines in *Yedioth Aharonoth* were similarly enthusiastic. The banner headline of the Sunday edition read:

SURPRISE ATTACK ON GAZA: HAMAS ASTOUNDED, 225 PALESTINIANS KILLED * NETIVOT RESIDENT KILLED IN REPRISAL BARRAGE * IDF PREPARES FOR GROUND ENTRY: "THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING"

The headline of the *Ha'aretz* edition on the same day was more restrained:

IDF LAUNCHES SURPRISE ATTACK AGAINST HAMAS: ABOUT 100 TARGETS DESTROYED IN LARGEST AIR ACTION SINCE 1967

On Monday, the next day, the headlines' enthusiasm for the results of the operation till then intensified. The main headline of *Yedioth Aharonoth* presented the achievement with two words in giant print: **TUNNELS ERADICATED.**

The war coverage employed terms that were competitive, euphoric and disconcerting. A headline on page 4 of *Yedioth Aharonoth* reported on a sense of enthusiasm and competition among the military corps about the possibility that infantry forces would enter the campaign.

BATTLE FOR PRESTIGE: GOLANI VS. PARATROOPERS: TWO BRIGADES FIGHT OVER WHO WILL ENTER GAZA * SOURCES IN IDF REASSURE: THERE WILL BE ROOM FOR EVERYONE

The headlines in all the front pages of *Yedioth Aharonoth* on Monday completely ignored the shocking number of Palestinian victims of the bombings, which at that point had reached about 300.

Besides the headlines and enthusiastic reports on the operation's justness and its achievements, some criticisms also appeared. But these appeared mostly on the margins of the coverage – in opinion columns by B. Michael and by Yehonatan Geffen. Opinion columns are usually perceived as the private opinions of their authors and not as actual “news”. Their influence is therefore limited.

“DIRECT HIT”: Coverage of Attacks on Palestinians

In the first two days of the bombing the media coverage framed the rapidly growing number of deaths on the Palestinian side mostly as strategic and tactical successes for Israel.

HAMAS ASTOUNDED: 225 PALESTINIANS KILLED (*Yedioth Aharonoth*, banner headline on front page, Sunday)

SHOCK THERAPY (*Ma'ariv*, page 6 headline, Sunday)

IN LESS THAN 4 MINUTES MOST HAMAS BASES OBLITERATED (*Ha'aretz*, page 2 main headline, Sunday)

The killing of dozens of Palestinian police cadets was described in most places as a great success. A giant headline spread over pages 10-11 of *Yedioth Aharonoth* declared: **HAMAS FELL ASLEEP – AND TOOK A HIT**. A similar tone was used in a boxed feature that the newspaper put together to tell the story of the bombing of the police graduation assembly: **ELEMENT OF SURPRISE: ATTACK ON GRADUATION ASSEMBLY**. Criticism of the killing of the cadets, who reportedly were not involved in attacks against Israel, could be found only in marginal places, far from the news headlines. Thus, for example, in a television critique that was published in *Ma'ariv* on Monday:

The day before yesterday, under the strong impression made by the surprise attack, one bombing slipped under everyone's radar, which we can expect will be much discussed: The bombing of the graduation assembly of the Hamas police... Shlomi Eldar of Channel 10 is currently the only one broadcasting who thinks differently. Eldar insists that the 155 persons killed in the bombing were entirely civil police, who direct traffic and write reports, who had just completed their course. They weren't armed and they weren't terrorists...

Criticism of the attack on the police cadets could also be found in testimonies gathered by Amira Hass from Gaza residents, which were published on page 3 and page 5 of *Ha'aretz* in the first two days of the coverage.

In general, in the first days of the operation the coverage of Palestinian civilian casualties was less extensive than the coverage of Lebanese civilian casualties during the Second Lebanon War. As it was during the Second Lebanon War, coverage of civilian casualties was characterized by what can be called the “principle of separation”: In the front pages of the newspapers the IDF was described as fighting Hamas; the fact that this fighting inflicted heavy casualties on the civilian population appeared relatively out of sight, in the inside pages of the newspapers or deep in the texts of the articles.

For example, the main headline in *Ma’ariv* on Sunday reported: **225 PALESTINIANS KILLED IN BOMBING OF ORGANIZATION’S HQ THROUGHOUT GAZA STRIP**. A map on page 3 showed the strikes on Hamas police buildings and on storehouses of war materiel and training facilities. Another enthusiastic headline declared: **DIRECT HITS – PLANES ACHIEVE 98 PERCENT PRECISION**.

Only deep inside the newspaper did the planes’ degree of precision become apparent:

DESPARATE CIVILIANS SCAMPER IN HOSPITALS LOOKING FOR THEIR DEAR ONES WHO WERE HARMED, OTHERS PRAY FOR QUIET KNOWING IT’S FURTHER AWAY THAN EVER.

In the text of the articles it was revealed that according to Palestinian sources 60 percent of those killed in the attacks on the first day were civilians.

Yedioth Aharonoth presented a similar picture, based on the “principle of separation”: A page on page 3 of the Monday edition showed a strike on a Hamas government building. The headline reported: **FOR THE SECOND DAY IN A ROW IDF CRUSHES TERROR TARGETS IN GAZA**. Only deep inside the text could readers discover that this crushing of terror targets led to the killing of 20 children and ten women. The coverage lead readers to assume that anyone who is not a woman or child is a terror activist.

Unlike *Ma’ariv* and *Yedioth Aharonoth*, *Ha’aretz* devoted prominent space to coverage of harm to civilians. For example, the newspaper’s front page headline on Monday reported:

NO MORE AVAILABLE GRAVESITES IN GAZA CEMETERIES; RESIDENTS REPORT FROM THE STRIP: THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH BEDS IN THE HOSPITALS AND SURGERIES ARE PERFORMED WITHOUT GENERAL ANESTHESIA.

“OUTSTANDING IN THEIR WRETCHEDNESS”: Coverage of Arab Public Opinion

On Monday, the three newspapers reported in large headlines about demonstrations against the action in Gaza by the Arab public in Israel, which included stone-throwing. Quieter demonstrations, in which Jews also protested, did not make it to the headlines and were mentioned in only a few lines within articles. A large headline in *Ma’ariv*, which dramatically reported on demonstrations by Israeli Arabs, cried: **NEARLY A LYNCH**. On the same day, *Yedioth Aharonoth* reported: **ATTACK ON ROAD 6**. A large banner headline told of a Molotov cocktail that was thrown on the highway. Only those who read the actual article learned that the road was empty at the time, which suggests that the headline was formulated with excessive zeal. The headline in *Ha’aretz* was more restrained: **WAVE OF DISTURBANCES IN ARAB COMMUNITIES**. This harsh coverage was complemented by a column by Ben Caspit that was featured prominently in the same edition. Caspit’s column carried aggressive and racist overtones, in a manner very similar to a column that he wrote during the Second Lebanon War (headlined “**A LETTER TO AHMED TIBI**”). As before, here too, Knesset Member Ahmed Tibi served as a proxy for Caspit’s anger at the Arab public in Israel, as though

nothing has been learned and nothing has changed. The relevant passage in the column was highlighted in a headline that read **ISRAELI ARABS – OUTSTANDING IN THEIR WRETCHEDNESS**:

[...] Tibi, from now on, will be called Hamas spokesman. There's no other choice. That's what he is. Not long ago, Tibi and his friends in Ramallah wailed about what Hamas had done to them [...] "Panic in Sderot," said Dr. Tibi. Let him come see it from up close. Let him live fifteen minutes under a hail of rockets; to say nothing of eight years. When he is compelled to spend a needless fifteen minutes at an IDF checkpoint, he loses his head and goes wild. Then, they wonder where Avigdor Liberman came from and how he will soon have the support of 15 seats in the Knesset.

"THE APPEAL OF A BROAD OPERATION HAS DISSIPATED": What has changed since the last war?

Despite the criticism, it is evident that the newspapers learned at least one important lesson following the Second Lebanon War. Coverage of the Second Lebanon War gave the impression that the war had clear objectives and that it would end only when those objectives were completely achieved. This time, the newspapers warned against getting carried away with unrealistic objectives and debated the point at which it would be advisable for Israel to end the military campaign. In the current confrontation, the debate has been carried out from day one of the operation. Though the debate has not challenged the justification for the operation and though the debate has mainly taken place in opinion columns, different viewpoints have received prominence in the front pages of the newspapers. Such debate did not exist at all in the first days of the Second Lebanon War so the existence of such a debate at present should be regarded as a positive development.

For example, on the front page of its Sunday edition, *Ma'ariv* published a column by Ofer Shelach under the headline **REMEMBERING THE EUPHORIA**. In it, Shelach wrote:

The Second Lebanon War also began with a successful and intelligence-rich air campaign. Under the spell of that euphoric atmosphere Olmert gave his lauded speech in the Knesset on July 17. Under the spell of that euphoria, when the aerial operation ended Israel did not immediately seek a proper mechanism for ending the conflict, which might have made it possible to preserve what had been achieved and not to get dragged into a protracted campaign.

Ha'aretz, too, raised the question of the "exit point" in a sub-headline on page 2 of its Monday edition:

TODAY'S BOMBINGS WILL SIGNIFY THE NEARING END OF THE AERIAL PORTION OF OPERATION "CAST LEAD" AND ISRAEL WILL HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN TWO OPTIONS: TO OPEN A GROUND ACTION THAT COULD GET COMPLICATED OR TO END THE OPERATION.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

These preliminary findings do not purport to make any absolute or final determinations about the media's coverage of the current operation. Given the short amount of time since it began, that is neither possible nor warranted. These preliminary findings are meant to provoke a discussion among

the public and in the media about the media's conduct during the current confrontation, while it is still ongoing. In its coverage of the Second Lebanon War, the Israeli media did a disservice in its initial mobilization to justify the war and its failure to present critical viewpoints and alternatives that could have argued against the mistakes made by the leaders. Now – not later, after the war – is the time to demand of editors and managers, reporters and analysts in the Israel media: Uphold your professional and civic responsibilities, lest you repeat the failures in coverage of the last war, with all their ramifications for the well-being and strength of Israeli society.