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“WAR TILL THE LAST MOMENT”

ISRAELI MEDIA IN THE SECOND LEBANON WAR

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*This report is dedicated
to the memory of Uri Grossman,
who was killed in the Second Lebanon War,
on August 12, 2006*

1. Preface: “We’ll Win”

In the year since the Second Lebanon War, Israeli society has experienced an unprecedented tidal wave of criticism against decision makers in the government and the IDF. In contrast with previous wars, many of the basic facts regarding the war reached the public several months after it ended, thanks to the publications of the interim report of the Winograd Committee and its protocols. This atmosphere has made it seem as if the Israeli media, which led this wave of criticism, was also critical of the war while it was in progress.

This report asks to put the record straight: Aside from a few extraordinary cases specified in this report, the major Israeli media all covered the war in an almost unequivocally mobilized manner – even as its own reporters brought forth news materials encompassing nearly everything that the Winograd Committee discovered months later in its investigations. These news items were marginalized during the editing process. The media created a general atmosphere of full and unqualified support for the war and its justness, systematically suppressing questions that arose from day one of the war. Occasionally, alongside this support there appeared certain criticisms of some tactical aspects of the war’s management, criticisms that grew louder toward the end of the war, as it became apparent that the IDF was unable to prevail. But the overall tone resonating from the war coverage was clearly uncritical, from the beginning of the war till its end.

This report is based on analysis of the entire coverage of the war in the news broadcasts of the three major channels, Channel 1, Channel 2 and Channel 10, and the three major newspapers – *Yediot Aharonot*, *Maariv* and *Haaretz*. The scope of the coverage was immense: over nine thousand articles. It is important to note that not all media outlets covered the war in the exact same manner. Channel 2 and *Maariv* provided their consumers, in the majority of the cases, with patriotic coverage, inflamed and overtly mobilized. *Yediot Aharonot* and Channel 1 were also mobilized, but in a more moderate fashion. *Haaretz* and Channel 10 frequently provided their audiences with more critical and in depth coverage – and at times the coverage by Channel 10 was critical and courageous in the fullest sense of the word. This is commendable. It is important to acknowledge these differences between the media outlets, but also to understand that both *Haaretz* and Channel 10, much like the other media outlets, behaved as mobilized media in many significant respects.

From the time the war ended till now, we at “Keshev” received more than a few testimonies, second and first hand, from within the media industry, recounting the winds of war that swept through the news rooms during the war. Most of these media personnel asked to remain anonymous and for that reason we are unable to publish some of these testimonies as their content might reveal their source. Nonetheless, the testimonials we received were very much alike: they told of a sense of zealousness, of getting carried away emotionally, of self censorship and instructions from higher up, and of fears of expressing views in opposition to the uniform and unequivocal viewpoint manifested daily in the coverage itself. The overall picture arising from these testimonies is harsh: this is not the way the media should conduct itself in a democratic country.

Of the materials we received, we have published two items in this report: One is a testimony by Yael Gvirtz, a reporter for *Yediot Aharonot*, who was a member of the newspaper’s rotating staff of editorial writers. On August 9, she wrote a pointed article under the headline “Kidnapped in the Tank’s Turret,” in which she cautioned against an irresponsible military operation. The next day the editor-in-chief of the newspaper, Rafi Ginat, suspended her from her post. The second document is an internal unsigned memo circulated to workers at *Maariv* after the war, by the newspaper’s vice president for marketing. The document describes how the paper conducted itself during the war. Among other thing was written:

Once again *Maariv* proved during the Second Lebanon War that it is the most patriotic paper among the three major newspapers. Unlike *Yediot Aharonot* and *Haaretz*, which acted in wartime the same way that they do every day of the year, without formulating a distinct editorial line, *Maariv* continued as it proudly did in the difficult days during “Defensive Shield” (the Jenin operation) and the Disengagement – supporting the army, standing fast by the state, and holding back criticism as long as the fighting continues.

Even when difficult material came into our hands regarding the management of the war – the poor condition of the emergency storage units, the problematic appointments in the Northern Command, the embarrassing arguments between senior officers and the heartrending complaints of army reserve soldiers going into battle with partial and tattered equipment – we restrained ourselves. To a certain extent we betrayed our

journalistic duty, but we did so because we made the national and patriotic consideration and decided that when it comes to war, let alone a war that does not proceed according to plan and goes wrong, we are part of the country, so we are allowed to, and in fact we should, reject the controversy and criticism, and not be ashamed nor apologize for supporting the army and the government, backing them up.
[...]

This is corroborated by testimonials of workers at *Maariv* who did not necessarily identify with this editorial perspective.

In this sense, one could and should look at the Second Lebanon War as a unique opportunity. Today, a year after the war, following the interim report of the Winograd Committee and the public outcry, we all know pretty much everything there is to know about this war. That is why it is possible to go back to the media coverage of the war, as it occurred in real time, and examine the patterns of coverage, what was included and what was left out, in order to understand the public significance of these patterns – and to start working for change.

2. The Coverage of the Goals of the War and the Decision Making Process: “Consensus around the Government Table”

The media’s full support for the Second Lebanon War, from its early days and till the end, manifested itself, more than anything, in the way it conveyed to its viewers and readers the goals of the war, and the decision making process that led to its outbreak. Today, after the interim conclusions of the Winograd Committee have been published, we all know a thing or two about that. It is hard to find a more unequivocal statement than the Winograd Committee’s conclusion that **“the manner in which Israel went to war is unacceptable, must not recur, and should be remedied quickly.”** Yet throughout the war, the media outlets presented their consumers with the impression that it was a well thought-out plan, whose objectives are distinct, and welcomed by Israel. Thus, the media outlets gave a false impression of clarity and purposefulness that did not exist in reality.

A meaningful discussion of the decision making process during the first few days of the war almost never appeared in the media. In the absolute majority of instances, the decision to wage war was covered in a nationalistic, almost festive manner: We are about to do what needs to be done. The government meeting was described as a dramatic and historic event, and the consensus among the ministers was emphasized time and again. Only on the margins of the coverage was it revealed that there was not perfect agreement. The army chief of staff, Dan Halutz, when asked about the goals of the war, dodged the questions, and the government in fact authorized the war without seeing any concrete plans.

The media presented the war goals as well-defined and clear-cut, even as these goals changed from day to day; even when different groups presented different goals, sometimes on the same day; even when it was obvious from day one that some of the goals were unrealistic; and even when the goals stood in contradiction with one another. The most important contradiction of all was between returning the Israeli captives and striking at Hezbollah. It was not hard to realize, even at the beginning of the war, that an operation with a goal of “changing the rules of the game” in Lebanon, would make the safe return of the captives nearly impossible. However, this basic flawed understanding was never given a thorough and serious discussion, nor did it receive any real headlines.

3. The Coverage of the Decision Makers: “A Backbone of Steel”

The uncritical coverage of the of decision making process in this war manifested itself, almost ludicrously, in the manner in which the media outlets chose to portray Ehud Olmert and Amir Peretz at the beginning of the war. Instead of asking the two leaders the difficult and obvious questions, the media outlets celebrated their transformation from civilian leaders to tough military leaders who speak fearlessly, act with confidence, are in control of the situation and enable the IDF to act against Hezbollah with an iron fist.

This illusion was maintained until the campaign in Lebanon began to get complicated. Then, voices within the army claiming that the political establishment was preventing the IDF from operating freely and would not let it win began to be heard more often. These voices dominated the headlines in all of the media outlets.

Throughout the fighting, reports of the political establishment's idleness in its dealings with the military were marginalized, as were the scandalous working relations between the two ranks. This was extremely newsworthy material, yet it was emphasized significantly only on Channel 10, and to some extent in *Haaretz*. The other media outlets ignored it completely.

Reports of controversy within the military establishment appeared only rarely during the war, and were almost always highlighted when the critics called for the use of more force. This topic dominated the headlines for two or three days when the Chief of Staff decided to appoint his second in command, Major General Moshe Kaplinsky as his representative in the North, in effect removing Major General Udi Adam, from his post as the high commander of the Northern Command. However, even in this instance, the reports on the dismissal of Major General Adam refrained, for the most part, from thorough examination of the way the war was managed, focusing instead on the personal relationship between Adam and the Chief of Staff.

4. The Fear of Defeat: “The Countdown for the Entire Zionist Enterprise”

As the war was prolonged, and especially near its end, a harsh sense of disappointment came over the media. The difficult incidents during the war, the kidnapping of the soldiers, the direct hit sustained by a navy warship off the coast of Lebanon, the fierce battles in which dozens of soldiers lost their lives, and the problems with supplies, were all covered in a way that did not attempt to conceal the fact that the IDF had troubles functioning, and most significantly, that it was unable to prevail. This mode of coverage engendered some complaints towards the media, as though it were covering the war in a manner that was too critical. This coverage needs to be examined more closely. Criticism of the IDF by the media outlets always originated, with nearly no exceptions, from their declared and unwavering support for the war itself. The criticism demanded tougher, more effective action, sometimes out of vengeance, even more massive damage to Lebanon, and most importantly, more results on the battlefield. That is, more victories. The criticisms that were published in the different media outlets ultimately conveyed the following message: The war is both right and just, but the decision makers are not conducting it properly, so we are losing. None of them said: Something is fundamentally wrong with this war.

When the media outlets despaired of the decision makers, the Prime Minister, the Defense Minister and the army Chief of Staff, they clung to the soldiers in the field who had grave complaints against the highest ranks and divulged stories of failures that prevented them, the soldiers, from defeating the enemy. The media outlets repeatedly posed the demand on their behalf: “Let Us Win”. These reports on disgruntled soldiers and officers in the field joined the many hundreds of articles that told the story of the heroism of these same soldiers and officers, and of their utter devotion and dedication. These reports, taken as a whole, created the feeling of total mobilization by the media in favor of the war.

The overall feeling raised by this coverage was not one of criticism, but one of defeat. This feeling continued to grow in light of the media’s coverage of the other side, the Hezbollah organization and its leader Hassan Nasrallah. Like Yasser Arafat and Bin Laden, before him, Nasrallah was depicted as a character from the realm of fairytales, an evil genius; a sophisticated devil who time and again is able to strike at us and survive.

All of the above ultimately accumulated into a nearly hysterical sense of existential war, a war of kill or be killed. The IDF’s failures were deemed to mean only one thing: Israel is losing its deterrent power. Hence, the war should not have been stopped. Not before victory was achieved. This apocalyptic vision left no room for real critical coverage, the kind that seeks to examine the practical, political and moral justifications for the war.

5. The Israeli Home Front: Jews “Don’t Crack Under the Pressure” – Arabs “Believe Nasrallah”

Today, after the publication of various research studies, we know that the state failed to care for the citizens of the North during the war. This state of affairs was known even at the beginning of the war and the media outlets could have been expected to seriously consider the relevant questions and pose them, in real time, before the decision makers: Is there an operational defensive system? Are the shelters ready for use? What is being done to protect the citizens left in the North? Are there any guidelines for civilians on how to react in a state of emergency? Is the country prepared for the evacuation of civilians if the necessity arises? Were these details taken into account when the decision to go to war was made?

But this was not how the media outlets covered the story of the home front during the war. They chose to present their readers and viewers with a different story, a mobilized one. The suffering of civilians in the North was harnessed to support to the war, and was therefore told in two parts. One part focused on the *Jewish* citizens, whose daily routine conveyed a clear message to the enemy, the government and the IDF: We cannot be broken. We are strong, and thereby strengthen the government and the IDF. The other part focused on the *Arab* citizens, and dealt almost obsessively with the question of their loyalty: Are you with us or against us? This state of affairs left almost no room for reporting on the actual condition of the citizens of the North.

The reports on those citizens of the North who were less stalwart, the ones who needed help but did not get it; and those who did not necessarily support the military action, were all marginalized in the coverage. In addition, the crucial fact is that the state, which embraced the citizens of the North on a declarative level, in effect abandoned them on the ground: It did not lend them assistance; it did not care for adequate shelter; nor did it prepare a plan for their evacuation. In this respect, *Haaretz* and Channel 1 did a better job than the other media outlets, but even in their coverage, these reports were drowned out in a sea of mobilized reporting.

6. The Damage to Lebanon: “As if Hit by an Earthquake”

The civilian population in Southern Lebanon and Beirut sustained severe damage during the war – much harsher than that sustained by the citizens of Israel. According to various reports, the air strikes against Lebanon killed over eleven hundred people, a third of them children. More than four thousand people were injured. About a million civilians were forced to flee north, becoming refugees. It goes without saying that the vast majority of casualties in Lebanon were not related to Hezbollah.

The coverage of the massive damage to Lebanon reveals a fascinating pattern: Before the aerial bombardment of Kafr Qana, on July 30, in which dozens of civilians were killed, the media outlets, in most cases, worked according to a principle that we term in the report “the principle of separation”. The suffering of

civilians in Lebanon was given relatively comprehensive, at times even empathetic, coverage. But it was kept almost completely separate, by every editing means available, from the IDF actions that caused this suffering. The IDF was portrayed as busy fighting Hezbollah, hitting only terrorist infrastructure and avoiding damage to the civilian population. The Lebanese suffering was depicted in isolation, as a disaster befalling the citizens of Lebanon out of nowhere, as if inflicted upon them from out of the blue. Beirut, for instance, appeared in these articles, as one reporter put it, “as if hit by an earthquake”. In combination, these two descriptions severed any causal connection between IDF actions and their tangible effects on the ground.

Critical reports on the massive bombardments by the air force on civilian population centers in Lebanon, especially in Beirut, were marginalized in the coverage. By the same token, reports on deep disagreements on this issue within the security establishment were also suppressed. These reports cast an extremely heavy shadow on the IDF’s recurrent claim that it “did not know” about the civilian presence in bombed locations. This question arose explicitly in meetings among security officials, about which reporters were clearly notified. This pattern was amplified by the enthusiastic coverage given to the international support for Israel. The overall feeling was: If the world does not admonish us, we certainly should not admonish ourselves.

After the incident in Kafr Qana, things changed. At this point the vast majority of media outlets mobilized to prove by diverse, and at times peculiar, means, that Israel was not to blame for the killing in Kafr Qana. The coverage reflected, more than anything, the defensive public stance of the official establishment and the IDF following the incident. International criticism against Israel was labeled as anti-Israeli propaganda, and the coverage itself focused on familiar claims: The IDF is the most moral army in the world; it does whatever it can to avoid hurting civilians; and Hezbollah is the one using civilians as human shields. One day after the bombing of Kafr Qana, it turned out that there was not any specific intelligence on the building that was attacked. From the thicket of excuses weaved by the IDF in order to exonerate itself, utterly important, newsworthy information was revealed regarding the way the IDF chose its targets in Lebanon. The IDF did not hit the building in question by *accident*: The selected targets were originally defined broadly and ambiguously and included all of the residential buildings inside the area marked as the target. It also turned out that Defense Minister Amir Peretz “removed the restraints on the army with respect to hitting the civilian population.” But this information was drowned out by the mass of excuses and denials and never fully reached the awareness of the Israeli public.

7. Diplomatic Contacts: "We Won't Stop Firing Now"

This general mode of coverage, in all its components, had a decisive influence on how the media covered the various diplomatic efforts to arrive at a ceasefire and end the war. Throughout the war a variety of proposals for diplomatic resolutions were raised by various sources. Different ideas for compromise were raised at the summit of the eight industrialized states, held in St. Petersburg in mid-July, at the Rome summit at the end of July and throughout the duration of the war by the President of Lebanon, the American Secretary of State, the United Nations and the European Union. During most of this period, official spokespersons for Israel – Olmert, Peretz and military commanders – were openly dismissive of these proposals. But ultimately, when the ceasefire agreement was signed, on August 14, many sources both inside and outside the ruling establishment estimated that Israel could have achieved better political terms if it had been more attentive to these proposals at the beginning of the war and at its later stages. It goes without saying that such attention could have saved many lives on both sides. Today, following the Winograd Committee, we know how deeply decision makers were caught up in the frenzy of the war and that they embarked upon it without really knowing what its goals were; therefore, they also did not know in what circumstances it could be ended.

In a decisive majority of cases, the media covered the diplomatic option in a way that reflected decision makers' scorn for it. Reports on diplomatic contacts appeared in the inner pages of the newspapers and deep within the TV news editions, where they were drowned out in a sea of headlines that were mobilized in patriotic frenzy for the war effort. Offers by the Lebanese President were interpreted merely as "Signs of Breaking in Lebanon", while diplomatic proposals by the great powers were seen as granting approval for Israel's continued actions on the ground. Voices that maintained that a diplomatic solution would serve Israeli interests, including that of Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, were minimized, clearly showing that the media preferred a military resolution over a diplomatic one. Throughout the war, this coverage of diplomatic options, more than anything else, reflected the IDF's fear that a diplomatic arrangement would only hinder its ability "to get the job done".

Growing frustration with IDF's performance in the field in the second half of the war only increased opposition to a diplomatic resolution. During the first half of the war the message was: "This is no time for talking; it's

time for striking". During the second half the message was "Now that we're being accused of war crimes, or when the IDF's weakness is evident, we must strike even harder". In the end, when a formula was found for ending the war, the media responded with a general sense of defeat. Now, once the war was over, voices suddenly appeared in the media saying: We should have accepted earlier diplomatic proposals at the start of the war.

On Friday, August 11, 2006, when the U.N. Security Council was poised to vote on the ceasefire resolution, the security cabinet decided to embark on a wide-scale ground operation in Lebanon. Its declared objectives were to seize territory up to the Litani River, to eliminate more Hezbollah personnel and Katyusha launchers and to try to tilt the draft resolution, as much as possible, in Israel's favor. The operation ultimately cost the lives of 34 IDF soldiers. Considerations surrounding the launch of the operation were not a secret on that day or in the days that followed, but even now they are consigned to the margins of the coverage. Only Channel 10 asked courageous critical questions about the reasons for approving this scandalous operation – including the possible influence of the Prime Minister's approval rating. The other media outlets, almost without exception, called for "War until the Last Minute".

8. Conclusion

Of all the feelings, opinions and habits that mobilize the media when war breaks out, one of the most tenacious attitudes is that you cannot criticize during wartime – you must wait until the war ends. Of all the feelings, opinions and habits, this attitude is also the most absurd.

Courageous critical journalism is meaningless when offered *in retrospect*. Truly difficult questions must be posed during wartime because that is when there is still a chance to effect change. Had the media elevated to the headlines facts such as that many communities had no shelters and that the state was not helping residents – the state might have been compelled to act in real time, instead of leaving the work to Arkady Gaidamak. If the media had given greater prominence to the fact that various international actors raised good proposals for a cease fire already in the early days of the war, we may not have had to discuss later, in retrospect, why Olmert and Peretz ignored these proposals. If the media had given greater prominence to principled criticisms of the war, to indications that the war never had defined objectives and to the fact that it was waged out of a sense of insult and

frustration – it might have been shortened. Perhaps then, political actors who opposed the ground operation to the Litani, could have prevented this miserable decision, which cost the lives of 34 more soldiers. If the fact that Defense Minister Peretz released the IDF from its restrictions on opening fire had made it to the headlines, as it should have, perhaps that might have prevented some of the terrible destruction that was sown in Lebanon. Critical coverage that appears when it is no longer current is something of a meaningless formality. The media criticizes, promotes, and uncovers – and then it moves on, to the next subject. That is precisely why Olmert, in the days of the harshest criticism against him, following the Winograd Committee's report, could decide to remain in office. He knew very well that the wave of public criticism would die out. It was not current from the moment it started.

For all the aforementioned reasons, the question is not only how the Israeli media covered the Second Lebanon War. The truly important question is how the media will cover the next war. Media professionals, editors and managers, reporters and analysts, must carry out the self-searching that they demanded, quite justifiably, of decision-makers in the government and the IDF. This must happen. And it must happen now: Before the next war breaks out. Not afterwards.