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Easing the Civilian Blockade on Gaza: How the Media turned Security into Surrender Questions the Israeli Media did not Ask

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Introduction

On June 20, 2010, the Israeli Government announced a change in its policy of blockading the Gaza Strip and announced the opening of crossings for civilian goods that had been forbidden for the past four years. This radical change in government policy, which came on the heels of the Turkish flotilla incident, raises some serious questions about coverage of the blockade policy in the main Israeli media outlets.

Analysis of coverage of the government's decision in four major Israeli newspapers (*Yediot Aharonot*, *Ma'ariv*, *Ha'aretz* and *Yisrael Hayom*) on June 21 and June 22, 2010, the first two days after the policy change was announced, brings these questions into sharper relief.

The Prime Minister and his associates claimed that the far-reaching civilian blockade of more than a million and a half people, a blockade that lasted for four years, did not achieve any positive result for Israel and even harmed Israel's interests. Now seems like a fitting time for the Israeli media to raise questions about the wisdom and responsibility of the decision makers who decided to carry out the blockade. Now is a proper time for the major media to ask whether the Prime Minister is correct in his current estimation. More importantly, the press should ask, if indeed the blockade brought no security benefits why was the decision to ease the blockade only made after Israel became entangled in the Turkish flotilla imbroglio?

An examination of coverage during this period reveals that the Israeli media did not deal with these questions at length. Instead, the media outlets preferred to focus on another aspect of the government decision:

- The headlines presented the government decision as a victory for the instigators of the flotilla and as surrender to international pressure that was brought to bear on Israel. Such coverage conveyed an emotional message against the government decision, focusing on the emotional aspect of the flotilla incident.
- Serious discussions of the essence of the decision, justifications for it and arguments against it by its opponents, were rare and appeared far from the headlines. Only deep in the texts of articles could readers learn the considerations that motivated the government decision. Only deep in the texts could readers learn that Prime Minister Netanyahu is now convinced that the blockade, which was imposed on Gaza for the past four years, was actually damaging to Israel.
- Important information that was marginalized in the coverage raised the possibility that easing the blockade would have only a limited effect on humanitarian conditions in the Gaza Strip. Relegating such information to marginal places can bias the picture of reality that newspapers make available to their readers. In the event that international criticism of Israel resumes concerning the humanitarian situation in Gaza, Israeli newspaper readers will have a hard time understanding the context in which such criticism is made.

Coverage after the Decision to Ease the Blockade

Coverage in *Ma'ariv*

The front page headline in *Ma'ariv* on June 21 read **FLOTILLA EFFECT: ISRAEL EASES GAZA BLOCKADE**. The main headlines on page five drew a link between the eased conditions on Gaza and the increased international pressure after the flotilla was intercepted:

THE INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE WORKED;

SIEGE BROKEN (main headline)

The sub-headlines pertaining to this item presented material in support of the government decision, but did not clarify the motivations behind the decision:

NETANYAHU—OF ALL PEOPLE—THE PRIME MINISTER WHO DECLARED WAR ON HAMAS, WAS THE ONE WHO LIFTED THE SIEGE ON GAZA * THE SIEGE WAS IMPOSED AFTER SHALIT'S KIDNAPPING FOUR YEARS AGO * NETANYAHU ASSOCIATE: "WE MADE THE RIGHT DECISION" (sub-headline)

Only deep in the text of the article could readers discern that the decision was also motivated by security considerations. Easing the "civilian" blockade, according to the government, would make it possible to strengthen the "security" blockade. Only deep in the article could readers learn that sources in the Prime Minister's Office believe that the policy implemented until now was decisively mistaken:

"The meaning of the decision is that there is no civilian blockade of Gaza, but there is a security blockade. The security blockade is tightening now because we have taken away from Hamas the ability to blame Israel for harming the civilian population and because our friends in the world are lining up behind our decision and are giving international legitimacy to the continuation of the security blockade of Hamas. We made the right decision for Israel, in terms of security and diplomacy."

A source close to the Prime Minister added, "The new policy, which allows pasta to enter the Strip freely, strengthens our ability to appear before the world and obtain legitimacy for the security blockade and it also strengthens our moral position in demanding that the international community act determinedly to free Gilad Shalit. The fact is that the blockade that was imposed until now did not help to gain his release."

The same source added, "The earlier policy, which blocked the entry of coriander, made it hard for Israel to carry out the security blockade because even our friends in the world criticized this. The new policy is more correct, more precise, and more in line with our real objectives – preventing security threats to Israel's citizens and returning Gilad Shalit home".

These weighty explanations, from the Prime Minister and his close associates, which cast doubt on the wisdom of the blockade policy that was carried out by Israel's governments over the past four years, including Netanyahu's government itself, did not appear in the headlines. The newspaper editors preferred to emphasize in the headlines the story of surrender to international pressure.

The next day *Ma'ariv* continued in a similar vein. A referral on the front page of the edition showed a caricature of Prime Minister Netanyahu squatting beneath a giant weight upon which was written "International Pressure". Beside the caricature a headline declared: **A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP—BEN DROR YEMINI, OFER SHELACH AND YEHUDA SHARONI ON NETANYAHU AND BARAK'S FAILURE**. In their columns in the opinion section Shelach and Sharoni called on Barak and Netanyahu to take responsibility for the failed handling of the flotilla, but they did not at all discuss the essence of the blockade policy or the decision to partially ease it. Yemini argued in his column that "the blockade on the Gaza Strip was one of the most justified things that Israel has done in its struggle against Palestinian terror" and portrayed the decision to modify it as a defeat.

Coverage of the subject on page eight also presented international pressure as responsible for the change in the blockade policy:

QUARTET MIDDLE EAST REPRESENTATIVE LEADS ISRAELI PROPAGANDA
(banner headline)

ISRAEL PRESENTS: SPOKESMAN BLAIR

ISRAELI POLICY HAS A NEW REPRESENTATIVE IN THE MEDIA: FORMER BRITISH PRIME MINISTER TONY BLAIR WHO ENLISTS HIS VAST EXPERIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL STANDING TO EXPLAIN THE DECISION TO EASE THE BLOCKADE OF GAZA * AND MEDIA WHIZ NETANYAHU? HE CONTINUES TO HIDE BACKSTAGE

In the two days of coverage that were investigated, *Ma'ariv* refrained from engaging in a critical discussion of past and current Israeli governments' policies of blockading Gaza, and the newspaper not give prominent space to coverage of the reasons behind the decision to ease the blockade. The newspaper preferred to give emphasis to a story that maintained that the decision amounted to surrender to international pressure.

Coverage in *Yediot Aharonot*

On June 21, *Yediot Aharonot* chose to downplay significantly the change in the blockade policy, referring to the decision only on page eight of its edition. Its coverage of the actual decision to ease the blockade was similar to the coverage in *Ma'ariv*. The headlines of the article on the subject read:

**TWO WEEKS AFTER THE FLOTILLA: NETANYAHU APPROVES EASING
GAZA BLOCKADE**

BLOCKADE LIGHT (main headline)

**FROM NOW ON EVERYTHING CAN BE BROUGHT INTO THE STRIP EXCEPT
WEAPONS AND "COMBAT SUPPORTING" MATERIEL * PM'S ASSOCIATES:
THIS IS THE RIGHT DECISION, WE CONSIDERED IT EVEN BEFORE THE TURKISH
FLOTILLA * CAMPAIGN TO FREE SHALIT: "THIS SHOWS HOW EASILY WE GIVE IN
TO PRESSURE" (sub-headline)**

Here too, the motivations behind the government's decision did not make it into the headlines. The main headline, **BLOCKADE LIGHT**, and the response from the Campaign to free Gilad Shalit that is quoted in the sub-headline, are critical of the decision and present it as surrendering to pressure. Only deep in the text, the article offers explanations by associates of the Prime Minister who reflect on the essence of the decision and on the "stupid" restrictions that underlay the earlier policy:

[...] the Prime Minister's associates added that "the restrictions on coriander and pasta were stupid; they didn't return Gilad Shalit and they didn't stop the Qassams. This is the right policy that we should have adopted irrespective of the flotilla. When you cancel the restrictions on pasta and coriander you can focus on the Qassams and gain support from around the world".

On June 22 as well, *Yediot Aharonot*, continued to emphasize surrender to international pressure as the main motivating factor in the decision to change the blockade policy:

**NOAM SHALIT: NETANYAHU SURRENDERED TO INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE
(banner headline)**

WHAT ABOUT GILAD?

**AFTER THE PRIME MINISTER REMOVES BLOCKADE ON GAZA: GILAD SHALIT'S
PARENTS REMOVE THEIR GLOVES * HAGGAI HADAS AGAINST THE FAMILY:
YOUR STRUGGLE PLAYS INTO HAMAS' HANDS**

It should be mentioned, however, that beside coverage that framed the decision as an Israeli surrender, *Yediot Aharonot* is the only newspaper that also prominently and significantly criticized the sudden change in Netanyahu's position and criticized the decision-making process of his government and of previous Israeli governments with respect to their blockade policy. A commentary that appeared beside the main headline of the edition, under the headline **CORIANDER AND GRAVEL**, put it this way:

If the blockade of Gaza was necessary, what suddenly made it unnecessary, if not our failed handling of the flotilla and its aftermath?

Later in the same item, on page 3, an important follow-up question was asked:

If this is the right thing to do, what didn't we do it a year ago? Why has this blockade lasted three years and why was a failed operation like intercepting the flotilla and massive international pressure needed in order to drag Israel to decide that it doesn't really need it?

The broadsheet across pages 2-3 presented criticism of the sudden change in government policy:

**HOW THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION ON THE BLOCKADE OF THE GAZA STRIP
FLIP-FLOPPED IN LESS THAN ONE MONTH**

BLOCKADE YES, BLOCKADE NO

**WHAT IS THE PRIME MINISTER'S POSITION ON THE BLOCKADE OF THE GAZA
STRIP? DEPENDS WHEN YOU ASK * IN EARLY JUNE NETANYAHU SAID THE
BLOCKADE WAS CRUCIAL * TODAY HE SAYS RESTRICTIONS SHOULD BE EASED**

This critique is noteworthy. Though, as stated above, in the two days of coverage examined here the message that *Yediot Aharonot's* editors emphasized regarding the decision to ease the blockade was clear—Netanyahu's decision constituted surrender to international pressure—here too there was no true serious discussion of the costs and benefits of the blockade of the Gaza Strip and its easing.

Coverage in *Israel Hayom*

A headline on the front page of the June 21 edition of *Israel Hayom* recounted the decision to ease the blockade without explaining the rationale behind it:

CABINET DECIDES TO EASE GAZA BLOCKADE

ENTRY OF GOODS AND BUILDING SUPPLIES APPROVED * EUROPEAN OBSERVERS WILL BE POSTED AT CROSSINGS * US COMMENDS * PM: WE WILL PREVENT ENTRY OF COMBAT MATERIEL (sub-headline)

The subheading of an article on page 7 conveys a picture that is similar to what was described in the headlines in *Ma'ariv* and *Yediot Aharonot*. Netanyahu, it seems, was compelled to make the decision:

GOODS YES, CIVILIANS NO (main headline)

BLOCKADE EASED: THE GOVERNMENT WILL ALLOW ENTRY OF ALL KINDS OF GOODS INTO STRIP, EVEN CONSTRUCTION MATERIALS * ENTRY OF CIVILIANS IS STILL FORBIDDEN * NETANYAHU IN CLOSED TALKS: WE HAD NO CHOICE (sub-headline)

A lone sentence that appeared in the last paragraph of the article hinted obliquely at the critical discussion that was missing from the coverage:

MK Nahman Shai (Kadima) attacked the decision and said that the blockade policy on Gaza was bankrupt: "Now it is clear that the government's decision-making processes on the eve of the flotilla and afterwards must be swiftly investigated".

Though *Israel Hayom* delivered this sentence to its readers the newspaper hid it deep in the text, thus diminishing its importance. As with the other newspapers, in *Israel Hayom* the truly important questions were not asked: What does Netanyahu's current decision suggest about earlier decisions that he himself made and about decisions that previous Israeli governments made?

Dan Margalit's column, which was published at the bottom of the page under the headline **BETWEEN EASING THE BLOCKADE AND PREVENTING THE FLOTILLA**, also suggested that the blockade that had been imposed on Gaza for the past four years is damaging to Israel:

In its present scope (the blockade) is a cause of tremendous international harm and it is not advancing the release of Gilad Shalit and should therefore be brought back to its original scope: Preventing entry of weapons and terrorism supplies into the Strip, without Israeli intervention in the movement of food and other civilian goods.

Margalit limited himself to this critique and did not take it one step further. If indeed, this is the situation, why did Netanyahu wait until the flotilla incident had passed to reach this decision? Why did previous Israeli governments pursue a policy that was damaging to Israel?

The next day, Dan Margalit's commentary column, published on the front page under the headline **FOR THE PUBLIC'S TRUST** mentioned in a solitary sentence that Netanyahu's decision contradicts his government's policy and those of previous Israeli governments. Nevertheless, the column conveyed a clear message: The only benefit that resulted from the current decision pertains to the international arena.

After Olmert, Barak, Livni and Netanyahu justified the blockade, with great fanfare, its rapid abandonment now will damage the public's trust in its leaders' claims. In the move approved yesterday, Israel gained only one benefit—and that is the satisfaction that was expressed in Western capitals.

The public's trust in the government's position may now be capricious and uncertain, which is precisely why the next flotilla—which has set sail from Lebanon to Cypress on its way to Gaza—must be blocked.

Later in the same column, on page 2, Margalit argues that it is too early to judge whether the blockade policy as it was conducted to that point was correct, or whether easing the policy would be beneficial. This discussion was presented in a single paragraph, deep in the text of the column on page 2.

The headlines of news reports on the subject also focused on the international pressure on Israel:

"THE EASING OF RESTRICTIONS WILL CANCEL OUT HAMAS' CLAIMS"

NETANYAHU EXPLAINED THAT THE CHANGE IN POLICY IN THE STRIP WILL IMPROVE ISRAEL'S STANDING IN INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC OPINION * "HAMAS AND ITS PATRONS IN IRAN WILL NO LONGER BE ABLE TO CLAIM THERE IS A HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GAZA"

In the two days of coverage that were examined, *Israel Hayom* also refrained from asking the truly important question: What does Netanyahu's current decision suggest about previous decisions that he himself made and about decisions made by previous Israeli governments? *Israel Hayom*, like the other newspapers that were examined, did not stress in its headlines the basic debate for or against the decision to ease the blockade. The headlines simply told of a Prime Minister who makes unavoidable decisions under international pressure.

Coverage in *Ha'aretz*

The main headline in the June 21 edition of *Ha'aretz* also told of the government decision: **NETANYAHU ORDERS REMOVAL OF BLOCKADE ON GOODS IN THE GAZA STRIP**. Here too, the sub-headline framed the decision as surrender to international pressure, though indirectly: **AFTER THREE YEARS ISRAEL DECIDES TO ALLOW FREE ENTRY OF GOODS AND BUILDING MATERIALS INTO GAZA. SENIOR NETANYAHU OFFICIAL: "FROM NOW ON THE FOCUS WILL BE ON THE QASSAMS AND NOT ON THE CORIANDER THAT ISRAEL DOES NOT LET IN"**.

As with headlines in *Ma'ariv*, *Yediot Aharonot* and *Israel Hayom*, the headline of an adjacent commentary column framed the decision as the outcome of a struggle between the Israeli government and the organizers of the Turkish flotilla—which the flotilla organizers won. The column's opening passage, which was published on the front page, presents the decision as a victory for the Prime Minister of Turkey:

The Prime Minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, can jot down for himself a big "V" checkmark. The Turkish flotilla to Gaza may not have reached the Strip and nine Turks were killed in the attempt, but it did achieve its goal: It collapsed the Israeli siege of "Hamastan". The Cabinet's notice yesterday brought an end to the civilian blockade of Gaza, which was imposed three years ago following Hamas's takeover of the Strip.

Nevertheless, *Ha'aretz* did provide space for criticism of the Prime Minister's dawdling in easing the restrictions. One difficult question was indeed posed: If the siege was damaging to Israel, why wasn't the decision to ease it made before the Turkish flotilla? This criticism was not given prominence in headlines and was suppressed deep in the text. It appeared inside a commentary column by Aluf Benn on page 2. This criticism did not refer to the policies of all Israeli governments over the past four years, but rather framed the decision as surrender to international pressure:

[...] Netanyahu now needs to explain why he waited until Israel became embroiled in the flotilla imbroglio instead of announcing the eased restrictions a few weeks ago. He has an explanation, which he is certain to present to the Terkel Committee: Israel began reviewing the blockade before the Turkish flotilla set sail and Netanyahu all along supported the policy that was approved yesterday.

In the debate that was held before the flotilla, Netanyahu said that the blockade regime needs to be changed and that instead of a "white list" of everything that can be brought into Gaza – the situation until now – there should be a "black list" of what is forbidden. He estimated that the restrictions on the entry of civilian goods and toys are not putting pressure on Hamas and, rather, they are wearing down Israel's interests, which include preventing arms smuggling and maintaining moral

superiority. Netanyahu then estimated that the blockade is not helping Gilad Shalit because it is creating moral asymmetry. Hamas can justify his lengthy captivity without visitation by invoking the crisis caused by the blockade. Shalit's release will depend on other factors.

But in life it isn't enough to be in the right, or to correctly estimate the situation. Timing is no less important. The political echelon in Israel was in no hurry to decide on a change in policy and certainly did not estimate that the action to stop the flotilla would end with nine Turks killed. The debate proceeded slowly, the blockade continued as it was – and now it is clear, to the Israeli leadership as well, that the Turkish flotilla expedited the decision to change the policy.

Now, sources in Israel anticipate the coming flotillas and hope that the eased restrictions will give Israel diplomatic cover to stop them. But even if this optimistic scenario materializes, the government has lost points and Netanyahu again looks like someone who makes decisions only under duress and after he has paid a political price.

Ha'aretz continued in a similar vein the next day as well. A commentary column by Amos Harel, published on the front page under the headline **RESTRICTIONS EASED FURTHER ON GAZA SIEGE**, presented the decision as "more than a victory in points for Hamas or the government of Turkey. This is a real achievement for what is known as the *muqawama* (resistance), the radical alliance that brings together Iran, Syria, Hamas and Hezbollah, and which has lately also annexed Turkey."

The rest of the commentary was published on page 2 under a different headline that bore a clear message: **ACHIEVEMENT FOR HAMAS – MORE THAN A VICTORY BY POINTS**. Only a small headline at the bottom of the page reported that **FORMER PRIME MINISTER OLMERT WANTED TO LIFT THE BLOCKADE, BUT BARAK OPPOSED**. It turns out, according to this item, that the debate about the benefit of the siege took place long before the flotilla incident and was not necessarily tied to calculations of image, victory or loss, or surrender to foreign pressure. There were those who favored its continuation and those who wanted to lift it. The article itself reported laconically on the differences of opinion and barely dealt with the arguments of each side. There was almost no real discussion of the rationale behind the siege. Instead, the editors of *Ha'aretz* chose to emphasize the story of surrender to Hamas and to international pressure.

Food for Thought in Anticipation of More Flotillas

Aside from the critiques presented here, one article by Amira Hass in *Ha'aretz* deserves special mention. It dealt with another important aspect that was missing almost entirely from the coverage in the other newspapers. The article, which appeared on page 2 of the June 22 edition, examined the effects that the eased restrictions Israeli declared have on civilians' daily live in Gaza. The text of the article refers to the bad state of the economy in the Gaza Strip, not only as it relates to the eased restrictions on the entry of goods but also with respect to existing limitations on export of goods:

Skyek [a Palestinian economist] says that an additional question is whether Israel intends to allow exports of Palestinian goods from the Gaza Strip: "Even if it allows entry of raw materials and a certain amount of manufacturing (such as the textile industry which was always highly developed in the Gaza Strip, until it was completely shut down three years ago), there is no point in ordering materials if manufacturers cannot market their wares as they have in the past (to Israel and the West Bank)". In other words, producers may hesitate to buy raw materials if there is no guarantee they can market their products outside the Strip. This is true of the furniture industry, the food industry and agriculture. Attorney Bashy [from Gisha, an NGO] says that if the possibility of marketing outside the Strip is not guaranteed then producers' earnings will be low, which will also affect their willingness to employ workers. Workers' employment and unemployment affects purchasing power in the Strip. "Without an increase in purchasing power in the Strip the expansion of the list of permitted items is meaningless because merchants won't order additional goods if they know that people can't afford them," says Bashy.

The headline of the article – **NOT SATISFIED WITH EASED RESTRICTIONS IN GAZA: "KETCHUP WON'T BRING CHANGE"** – makes the issue seem like a complaint, but the sub-headline underscores the subject's importance:

IN THE STRIP IT IS SAID THAT IT IS NOT CLEAR HOW MUCH THE ENTRY OF GOODS WILL CHANGE THE SITUATION SINCE THE CROSSINGS NEED TO BE OPENED FOR EXPORTS TOO SO THAT RESIDENTS' PURCHASING POWER CAN BE REHABILITATED

This important information was left out of the other newspapers.

In the three other newspapers, in the margins of the coverage, isolated sentences appeared reporting that the international community praised the easing of restrictions but at the same time also called for further measures because the condition of civilians in Gaza was still difficult. However, Israeli readers could not understand the significance of these demands because they did not receive information or explanations about the difficulties facing civilians in Gaza. Since the headlines told of Israel's surrender to international pressure and about the lifting of the siege,

the message conveyed to readers was that after the easing of restrictions the humanitarian situation in Gaza should improve significantly. The explanations that were published in favor of easing restrictions explained that now the claims against Israel would be moot and that once the humanitarian siege was lifted attention could be directed at the security siege. Given the near total absence of information on the humanitarian effects that easing restrictions would have, it seems that readers of these newspapers were presented with a partial and incomplete picture of reality.

In the event that international criticism of Israel resumes over humanitarian conditions in Gaza, readers of Israeli newspapers will have difficulty understanding where these criticisms are coming from and the context in which they are made.

The Questions that Were not Asked

In a debate before the flotilla Netanyahu said that the "blockade regime" and—in the words of one of his associates, "stupid restrictions"—needed to be changed. This fact raises serious questions about decisions made by the Netanyahu government and by other Israeli governments over the past four years. But as this report has shown, these questions were rarely asked.

The state of affairs described in this report raises penetrating questions not only about media coverage of the decision to ease the blockade of Gaza, but also about coverage of the Gaza flotilla, which led to the decision to ease the blockade. Now that it turns out that the Prime Minister of Israel himself had doubts about the benefit of the siege policy—a policy that was one of the main reasons for Israel's opposition to the flotilla—it is fitting to ask a few central questions about how the Israeli media covered the subject:

- Was there a debate in the media about the siege policy, its costs and benefits?
- Did media outlets make the public aware of the details of the civilian blockade?
- How were international criticisms of the Israeli policy covered? – Criticisms to which the Prime Minister of Israel now at least partially subscribes.
- How was the rationale for stopping the flotilla covered?
- How did the media cover alternatives to the policy that was selected?
- Was there a critical debate about the decision to stop the flotilla, after the fact?

Keshev is currently conducting an in-depth study of coverage of the flotilla incident in the printed press. Preliminary findings suggest that there were problems in the coverage: The newspapers almost completely overlooked many aspects of the siege policy, its features and its consequences. The use of force to stop the flotilla was regarded by the media as necessary and little consideration was given to possible alternative courses of action. International criticism of Israel was framed as evidence of the world's hypocritical stance towards Israel.

The full report will be published in the coming months.