

January 2009

The Israeli Media and the War in Gaza: Second Review

"What Next, a Humanitarian Lull or a Ground Operation?": Coverage of the Diplomatic Options for Ending the Fighting in Gaza

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 a second review by Keshev of Israeli media coverage of the war in Gaza.

This update examines coverage of the diplomatic options that were raised in the first week of the fighting in the major Israeli media: the three newspapers *Yedioth Aharonoth*, *Ma'ariv* and *Ha'aretz* on December 31 and January 1, and the nightly news editions of the three television channels on December 30-31. This time, in contrast with the coverage of the Second Lebanon War, there have been positive developments in the Israeli media's approach to this issue.

On December 30, 2008, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner presented a proposal for a humanitarian cease fire that would last 48 hours. In contrast with the media coverage during the Second Lebanon War, which was dismissive of diplomacy and minimized its value, this time, most of the media outlets prominently covered the proposal and discussed its advantages and disadvantages seriously and in-depth. The debate over the political options for ending the fighting took place alongside a meaningful discussion of the goals of the fighting and at what point the operation ought to end. However, when the Cabinet decided to dismiss the French proposal almost all the main headlines supported the move and did not criticize it. Still, even then, meaningful discussions of issues related to a ceasefire continued, in a scope and manner that were not seen during the Second Lebanon War.

YOU CAN'T COMPARE LEBANON AND GAZA, BUT NEVERTHELESS...

On the day that the proposal was raised, it appeared in the main headlines of most media outlets. For example, the main headline of the December 30 "Mabat" news edition on Channel 1 announced:

**FOUR DAYS INTO IDF ATTACK ON GAZA A DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVE IS ON THE TABLE;
THE PROPOSAL: A HUMANITARIAN LULL; THE CABINET TRIUMVIRATE IS NOW
CONSIDERING A PROPOSAL THAT HAS DRAWN CONSIDERABLE OPPOSITION; IN THE
BACKGROUND, PREPARATIONS FOR A GROUND CAMPAIGN CONTINUE. WHICH WILL
HAPPEN FIRST?**

In the tenth minute of the broadcast, political correspondent Ayala Hasson discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the proposal:

[...] From here, there could be a positive development and the cease fire will continue because the operation's objective has always merely been to find a political way out; or, if the sides don't keep the cease fire they can always go back to fighting.

Now of course, [anchor] Merav [Miller], the advantages and disadvantages are on the table, and so is the matter of who is for, who is against and who supports whom. In my estimate it will be hard for Israel to object to this proposal. At exactly this stage of the Second Lebanon War there was sort of an opportunity to get out of the operation after the Air Force landed its blows, took its action. It's true that this is a completely different arena; you can't compare Lebanon and Gaza, but still, at the same exit point then, many people in hindsight regret that they did not take

the opportunity. It could be that we are in a similar type of situation where we can take the opportunity, because otherwise, once things get rolling, you never know how things could turn out. Good things can happen and bad things can happen. Merav, we know the reality in the Middle East. Besides, when you are struggling with an enemy and you've subdued him and crushed him, and harmed Gaza very badly, you can leave him some kind of tiny outlet for the possibility of entering into a worthwhile dialogue [...]

While Hasson spoke, bold lettering appeared on the screen that displayed the view opposed to accepting the proposal: **AGAINST: ISRAEL WILL LOSE MOMENTUM AND THE ACTION WILL MISS ITS OBJECTIVES.**

In contrast with a main feature of the coverage of the Second Lebanon War, when diplomatic moves were presented as obstacles that got in the way of the army, the news reporting this time raised questions and repeatedly presented opinions that questioned the operation's objectives, its management and the diplomatic process. For example, the same broadcast brought this from Maj. Gen. (res.) Eyal Ben-Reuven, who recommended that the political echelon consider whether the military action has run its course:

Look, a war against terror has an interesting characteristic. In terms of success, there is a very short time dimension for succeeding. That is why today we are in a position, after a very successful air strike, whose time is limited, and that is why today the role of the political echelon is to go think about whether it's at a point where the army has provided an opportunity to think about a way to emerge from this toward a cease fire, on the basis of the goal that was set for this campaign. And the army, in parallel, must prepare for its next move, which also, by the way, will have to be short – because once again the time dimension for success will be short. [...]

DEBATE AMONG ISRAELI LEADERSHIP: LULL OR GROUND ATTACK?

A similar picture could be seen in the Channel 2 news broadcast. The main headline of the edition placed the proposal atop the agenda, while pointing out the controversy surrounding it: **IN THE NEWS TONIGHT – DEBATE AMONG THE ISRAELI LEADERSHIP: A LULL OR A GROUND ATTACK?** Channel 10 also opened its edition with a report on the French proposal. The main headline of its broadcast said **THE SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT ADVISES THE PRIME MINISTER TO CONSIDER A CEASE FIRE IN GAZA.** Later in the broadcast there was a studio discussion in which Major Generals (res.) Giora Eiland, Israel Ziv and Shmuel Zakai expressed differing views on the matter:

Ziv: I think that the debate is a proper one. [...] I think that our wisdom is in our flexibility in managing and keeping the initiative; the decision on the cease fire is also part of keeping the State of Israel's legitimate initiative.

Anchor Yaakov Eilon: I have a feeling that Maj. Gen. (res.) Eiland doesn't exactly agree that this flexibility is a good thing.

Eiland: I will explain. The debate, we've already discussed this subject a number of times this week, is really over the main question of whether Israel wants to reach a cease fire and be satisfied with that, or whether Israel want to destroy all of Hamas's capabilities – in which case more is required, including a ground action. That's the real debate...

Zakai: [...] I see the point that we are at as a point where there is a chance of reaching a stable cease fire. It could be that this cease fire won't be a written agreement, and I'm not sure that there needs to be some kind of political guarantee. [...] Let's tell the truth: This operation was a punitive operation, it achieved its effectiveness. When you see all the destruction there is in Gaza, Hamas, as a rational movement, and I believe it is a rational movement that wants to preserve its rule, I think they got the message.

Compared with the coverage of the Second Lebanon War, this is a dramatic change. Similar coverage could be seen the following morning in two of the three major newspapers. A headline on the front page of *Ma'ariv* on December 31 read:

THE BATTLE OVER THE LULL (main headline)

THE DEFENSE ESTABLISHMENT DECIDED TO SUPPORT THE INITIATIVE REVEALED YESTERDAY IN MA'ARIV * DISAGREEMENTS IN THE TRIUMVIRATE FORUM BETWEEN OLMERT, BARAK AND LIVNI * CABINET DISCUSSION TODAY

The article headline on page 6 continued:

CEASE OR FIRE (main headline)

OPINION DIVIDED AMONG MEMBERS OF THE "TRIUMVIRATE CABINET" ON WHETHER TO ACCEPT THE FRENCH INITIATIVE FOR A 48 HOUR LULL, WHICH WAS REVEALED YESTERDAY IN MA'ARIV * THE SECURITY ESTABLISHMENT SUPPORTS IT AND TODAY THE POLITICAL-SECURITY CABINET WILL DISCUSS IT * MEANWHILE: PREPARATIONS FOR A GROUND ACTION CONTINUE (subheadline)

On page 7 a detailed chart was published regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the French proposal.

The main headline of *Ha'aretz* also emphasized the controversy surrounding the French proposal: **BARAK SUPPORTS FRENCH INITIATIVE FOR LULL IN THE FIGHTING; OLMERT OPPOSES: THERE IS NO HUMANITARIAN CRISIS IN GAZA.**

Yedioth Aharonoth was the only media outlet whose editors continued with coverage similar to that of the Second Lebanon War, taking a clear position against the diplomatic initiative. While the other media outlets presented the controversy, the banner headline of *Yedioth Aharonoth* on December 31 read: **ISRAEL REJECTS PROPOSAL FOR 48 HOUR CEASEFIRE * 200 THOUSAND PUPILS AT HOME: NO SCHOOL IN BE'ER SHEVA EITHER.** The main headline, which read **AND NOW: BE'ER SHEVA**, appeared above a picture of an empty kindergarten where a Grad rocket had hit. The caption was **GRAD IN A KINDERGARTEN.** Placing the headline that reported the rejection of the initiative next to the picture of the rocket strike on Be'er Sheva and the threat posed by Hamas intensified the danger presented by the rockets and transmitted a clear message of total rejection of the cease fire option. Though the front page of this edition contained a column by Amos Oz calling to **CEASE FIRE NOW**, it was placed next to an opposing column that balanced this call. The headlines on page 4 continued in a similar vein:

NOT READY FOR A CEASE FIRE (main headline)

OLMERT, BARAK AND LIVNI YESTERDAY REJECTED THE "FRENCH PROPOSAL": THE IDF WOULD CEASE ATTACKS FOR 48 HOURS TO SEE IF HAMAS WOULD STOP FIRING * PM AND LIVNI CRITICIZE BARAK FOR PUBLICIZING THE CEASEFIRE (subheadline)

We cannot know all the factors that led Israel to reject the cease fire proposal, but the messages proffered by *Yedioth Aharonoth* and by the government of Israel were similar. Political sources justified the decision to reject the proposal by referring to the rocket that fell on the kindergarten in Be'er Sheva. "If there are rockets all the way to Be'er Sheva, then Israeli deterrence is still insufficient," Prime Minister Olmert was quoted as saying.

ISRAEL IS NOT CEASING FIRE: IDF PREPARES FOR GROUND MOVE

The next day the media outlets reported on the rejection of the French initiative by the political-security Cabinet. The main headlines in most of the media outlets did not challenge or criticize the decision. The

main headline of the Channel 2 news edition on December 30 declared: **THE CABINET DECIDED TO CONTINUE THE OPERATION, THE CEASE FIRE INITIATIVE WAS RULED OUT**. On the same evening, an opening headline of the Channel 1 newscast reported: **THE PRIME MINISTER DECIDED: THE MILITARY OPERATION WILL GO ON**. An opening headline on the Channel 10 news broadcast on the same night said **ISRAEL IS NOT CEASING FIRE, THE IDF PREPARES FOR A GROUND MOVE**. The main headline of *Ha'aretz* on January 1 read **CABINET APPROVES CONTINUED FIGHTING; IDF SEEKS QUICK MOVE**. On the same day, the main headline of *Yedioth Aharonoth* reported on the dispute between Olmert and Barak. The phrasing of the headline took a position that upheld Olmert's view opposing a cease fire:

DANGER ZONE GROWS: NO SCHOOL AS FAR AS GEDERA (banner headline)

OLMERT REBUKES BARAK: YOU WENT BEHIND MY BACK (main headline)

PM ENRAGED OVER TALKS WITH FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER ON CEASEFIRE *

BARAK'S OFFICE: HE HAS THE RIGHT TO TALK TO LEADERS (subheadline)

Beside these headlines the coverage still made space available for a debate about the diplomatic process that was taking place alongside the military action and for substantial questions about the goals of the fighting and its possible end points. This contrasted with coverage of the Second Lebanon War, which was generally dismissive of reports on the diplomatic process and suppressed them. This time, even after the decision to continue the operation, the message transmitted by most of the media outlets was: We are continuing to fight – but at the same time there must be room for diplomatic moves. The Israel media gave its backing to the fighting but in parallel it continued to raise questions about a possible exit point. For instance, on December 31, Channel 1 emphasized the diplomatic moves in its opening headline: **TURKS AND EGYPTIANS PROMOTE CEASE FIRE**. In the 23rd minute of the Channel 2 news edition on the same day, Maj. Gen (res.) Eitan Bey-Eliyahu was shown explaining that the final goal of the operation is a political agreement:

In general, in this campaign there isn't the usual situation where the politicians give the army time to complete its action, but rather the opposite. The army is paving the way, urging patience until the political process ripens.

On the Channel 10 news edition, in the 29th minute of the broadcast, on the same day, Raviv Drucker warned of complications:

Defense Minister Barak, is in one of the hardest dilemmas he's faced in his political life: On the one hand, what he really believes: That after the blow that he landed on Hamas this needs to be ended with some sort of tahadiyya (calming), more improved, or less improved. [...] And he knows that that second option – if it doesn't lead to that improved tahadiyya, which apparently the public won't be very fond of – so the second option is to be drawn in, meter by meter, step after step, into a much more massive military operation that might even lead to the conquest of Gaza, the collapse of Hamas, and then continued presence there while looking for someone that will agree to take it off our hands.

A similar debate, which raised different options for the continuation of the action, was held in the main headlines of *Ma'ariv* on January 1, after the decision was made to continue the operation:

ISRAEL MOVES TOWARD GROUND OPERATION IN THE STRIP BUT IS STILL EXAMINING DIPLOMATIC MOVE FOR A CEASE FIRE (banner headline)

GAZA JUNCTION (main headline)

THE GROUND STAGE OF "CAST LEAD" LOOKS UNAVOIDABLE * BUT JERUSALEM HASN'T GIVEN UP ON POSSIBILITY OF A DIPLOMATIC INITIATIVE THAT WILL END THE OPERATION AND IMPOSE THE CEASE FIRE ON HAMAS * MEANWHILE: 200 THOUSAND PUPILS REMAIN AT HOME TODAY (subheadline)

At the bottom of the page there were references to two opinion columns. One called for avoiding an expansion of the operation under the headline **CEASE FIRE** and the other supported the expansion under the headline **PUT IN THE GROUND TROOPS**.

The manner in which the French proposal for a cease fire was covered shows that most of the major media outlets in Israel, except for *Yedioth Aharonoth*, learned important lessons from coverage of the Second Lebanon War, at least with respect to diplomatic issues. However, as the military operation in Gaza continues and becomes more complicated the larger test still remains.

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.