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Hamas cheerleaders: Professional failures of the Western media in Gaza

AUGUST 14, 2014, 11:37 AM 16

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Media framing of wars and military operations can significantly influence world public opinion, leaders and policymaking. Coverage may determine the results of an operation as much as the objective situation on the battlefield.

Since the 1982 Lebanon War, the Western media have criticized Israel and focused on collateral damage in all violent exchanges between Israelis and Palestinians. In the present crisis, world leaders have widely agreed that Israel has the right to defend itself, but they have also warned against disproportional responses and high levels of civilian casualties.

The media are the main source of information about damage to infrastructure and casualties, especially civilian. Western media coverage of Operation Protective Edge in Gaza has been marred by an anti-Israeli bias and professional and ethical failures. They have been visible in print and electronic media: pictures, videos, headlines, reports, statistics, editorials, op-ed articles and cartoons. This was particularly noticeable in the European media, especially in British newspapers such as the Guardian and the Independent.

This phenomenon is not new – it appeared in the 1982 Lebanon War and has appeared ever since.

Fear and Censorship in Gaza

Hamas has terrorized foreign journalists in Gaza and imposed harsh censorship on them. Hamas only permitted the broadcasting of photos and videos depicting destroyed buildings and killed civilians, primarily of women and children. Hamas also staged scenes in order to obtain more favorable coverage. The Western media did not broadcast videos of rockets fired from heavily populated areas,

UNRWA schools, mosques and hospitals. Hamas allowed media coverage of destroyed mosques, but not the rockets that were hidden inside and fired from nearby. They allowed coverage of the funerals of women and children, but not of combatants. All of this was done in order to create the impression that Israel is deliberately targeting civilians.

In several cases, foreign journalists working in Gaza reported having been harassed, threatened or questioned over stories or information they reported through their news media. Only after leaving Gaza did a few journalists dare to reveal the truth about the war crimes committed by Hamas. Harry Fear, a freelancer for the Russian-owned RT TV revealed that Hamas security officers asked him to leave Gaza within 24 hours after he tweeted about a rocket launch near his location. He also revealed that the Gaza Interior Ministry posted media guidelines that warned against publishing information about rocket launches or other military activities. The Western media has failed to disclose the conditions under which it has been allowed to cover events in Gaza. This has made accurate reporting impossible.

A few more journalists provided information about Hamas's practices, usually ignored by most of the Western media. Aishi Zidan, a Finnish journalist for Helsingin Sanomat, wrote about the launching of rocket attacks from Shifa Hospital; and Gallagher Fenwick of France 24 exposed the extensive use of civilians as human shields. Italian journalist Gabriele Barbati admitted that only after leaving Gaza, "far from Hamas retaliation," was he able to speak freely about witnessing a Hamas misfire that killed nine children in the Shati camp on July 28, confirming the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) version of the incident. These revelations confirm the Israeli claims about Hamas committing war crimes, and demonstrate

the ethical failure of the Western media to report the truth and present a fair and balanced account of the events in Gaza.

The Daily Casualty Competition

The Western media has compared the number of civilian casualties and the level of destruction in Gaza and Israel, to determine whether the Israeli response to Hamas aggression is just and proportionate. Newspapers, such as the New York Times, the Guardian and the Independent, published daily the large disparity in casualty numbers in favor of Israel, creating the impression that the Israeli military response was not proportionate. Moreover, the newspapers also cited claims made by Hamas, the UN and human rights organizations that 75% to 80% of those killed in Gaza were civilians. To buttress the case against Israel, the New York Times and most newspapers and television stations in Europe continuously published and aired photos and videos of civilians suffering from the war. This framing created the impression that Israel was ignoring international humanitarian laws and was guilty of war crimes.

The media obsession with the “casualty competition” represents an invalid principle for determining blame or victimhood. Writing in the Wall Street Journal, one of the few balanced newspapers on Gaza, Bret Stephens observed: “Does this mean the Palestinians are the chief victims and Israel the main victimizer, in the conflict? By this dull logic we might want to rethink the moral equities of World War II, in which over one million German civilians perished at Allied hands compared with just 67,000 British and 12,000 American civilians.” The comparison of casualty numbers promoted by the Western media is logically and morally wrong. It constitutes an ethical failure.

Reporting Civilian Casualties in Earlier Palestinian-Israeli Warfare

The Western media should have known that the casualty figures provided in previous instances of Palestinian-Israeli violence by the Palestinians, UN agencies, human rights organizations and even the International Red Cross, were highly exaggerated.

For example, during most of the 1982 Lebanon War, most media outlets reported the grossly exaggerated figures provided by the Red Cross, which relied on Palestinian sources: 10,000 Palestinians and Lebanese casualties, 40,000 wounded, and 600,000 – 700,000 left homeless. Those were absurd figures in light of the fact that the population of Southern Lebanon, where Israel's military operated, numbered only 500,000 inhabitants. Figures provided by the Israelis were ignored. When the Red Cross realized it had disseminated false data it issued a correction. Yet, only a small portion of media outlets published the correction (in small font on the back pages). The number of civilian casualties in this war was only half the number cited by the Red Cross and the Palestinian sources.

Similarly, in April 2002, during Operation Defensive Shield in the West Bank, Palestinian and UN sources accused Israel of “massacring” between 500 (Saeb Erekat, April 7, 2002) and 900 (Yasser Abd Rabbo, April 13, 2002) civilians in Jenin. Despite Israel's denials, the Western media reported the “massacre” and these numbers without checking the facts. Later the UN and human rights organizations conducted official investigations and found only about 52 dead Palestinians; more than half of them were terrorists.

In previous military operations in Gaza, Palestinian and UN sources continued to provide false information about civilian casualties. For example, during Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), Hamas said that most of the 1,330 fatalities were civilians. After the operation, it gave several figures (1,414 and 1,452) without any explanation of why the numbers were increasing and continued

to claim that the majority of them were civilians. In November 2010, however, Hamas Interior Minister Fathi Hamad admitted that the number of killed Hamas fighters was approximately 700, a figure very close to the IDF estimate and about half of the total number of fatalities.

Civilian Casualties in Operation Protective Edge

Despite the record of misleading statistics by the Palestinians, the UN, and the Red Cross, compared with the accuracy in the IDF reports, the Western media did not learn their lesson and once again chose not to use Israeli accounts. Instead, the Western media continued to disseminate unreliable data on civilian casualties received from the highly suspect Palestinian and UN sources.

The infamous anti-Israeli UN High Commissioner for Human Rights claimed that as of August 6, 1,843 Palestinians had been killed, 1,345 of whom were civilians and only 498 were fighters. The UN evaluation was based on the Gaza Health Ministry, a Hamas-run organization. In contrast, the IDF claimed that 1,068 of the casualties were combatants, twice as many claimed by Hamas, the UN and several human rights organizations. The Western media ignored the IDF evidence about combatants that were brought to hospitals in civilian clothing, which was later verified by several foreign reporters who were in Gaza.

Only about a month after Hamas latest aggression against Israel began, the New York Times and the BBC, which systematically and prominently displayed the number and identity of Palestinian casualties received from Hamas and UN sources without question, began to raise reservations about the data. The BBC found that among civilians, more than three times as many men were killed as women, disproving the thesis of indiscriminate Israeli shooting. The

New York Times examined the names of 1,431 casualties and found that “the population most likely to be militants, men ages 20 to 29, is also the most overrepresented in the death toll. They are 9% of Gaza’s ...residents, but 34% of those killed whose ages were provided.” These statistics clearly negate the vicious claim made by Hamas, the UN and human rights organizations that Israel deliberately targets civilians. It may also prove that the ratio between civilian and combatant casualties is closer to the IDF estimate. Unfortunately, such late discoveries do not erase the initial perceptions of Israel as a villain.

Conclusion

The continuous dissemination of inaccurate data on civilian casualties by the Western media represents a major professional failure. Interestingly, Chinese and Indian networks exposed the relevant context so missing from the Western media coverage – the Israeli unprecedented efforts to minimize civilian casualties and the systematic use of civilians as human shields by Hamas. They even reveal firings of rockets from populated areas. Who would believe that CCTV, the communist run Chinese television network, would cover Gaza in a more balanced way than the British BBC? This highly surprising fact suggests that the Western media is biased against Israel and elements of this may be driven by latent anti-Semitism.

The distorted and misleading coverage of the Gaza conflict contributed to the hasty calls made by political leaders, UN officials and NGOs to prosecute Israel for war crimes. It also contributed to the mass hate demonstrations in Europe and to the sharp rise in anti-Semitic incidents. Given the highly systematic biased and inaccurate coverage of Gaza in the Guardian and the Independent, it is not surprising that Britain has become the world center for hatred and anti-Israeli demonstrations and boycotts.

The Western media betrayed their audiences who deserve receiving accurate information on Gaza. They should be held accountable for their skewed coverage, but it is doubtful whether they have the courage to heed to the advice they so often offer to governments – to investigate their professional and ethical failures and put their house in order.