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Media as a Theater of War, the Blogosphere and the Global Battle for Civil Society

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The paper reflects the opinion of the author only

I. BACKGROUND: ISRAEL'S DETERIORATING SITUATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY GLOBAL COMMUNITY

▪ Global Success of Demonization of Israel

The campaign to de-legitimize Israel has made astonishing advances since the outbreak of the second Intifada (October 2000), legitimizing public violence and verbal abuse of Jews and Israel in public venues unheard of since the German occupation. It has animated world-wide outbursts of public hatred of Israel and the US, from Durban to the current boycott and divestment movements which promise esterners that if they dismantle "apartheid Israel," they will solve their basic problems with Arabs and Islam. The sudden popularity of comparisons of Israel with the Nazis among European intellectuals, which serves as the driving motor of this campaign points to a radical disorientation in European moral thought, a kind of moral hysteria in which coverage of dozens dead in Lebanon or Gaza vastly outweigh thousands and even millions of dead in Africa or Asia.

▪ Spread of Global Jihad and Vulnerability of Europe

This demonization of Israel has gone hand in hand with a remarkable turnaround in the fortunes of Europe. At the end of the 20th century, Europe looked like a possible dominant force in the 21st century, and talk of Islam trying to take over was dismissed as sheer folly unworthy even of consideration. In the past six years, however, perception of the forces has shifted rapidly: there are now serious thinkers looking closely at the situation who wonder whether a secular, democratic Europe can survive the next two decades. Part of this turnaround that so astonishingly favors the forces of a resurgent, demographically powerful, Jihadi Islam aimed at global Dar al Islam, has to do with the consistent misreading of this phenomenon. Decision-makers have misread problems with Muslim immigrants to Europe in secular democratic terms, precisely the way they have insisted on misreading the Arab-Israeli conflict; and just as they have insisted that Israelis placate the (secular democratic demands of the Palestinians), they have adopted a policy avoiding confrontation (Danish cartoons, Pope's remarks) that has encouraged the increasingly aggressive behavior of Muslims.

▪ Israel's Straightjacket: Between Outside Pressure and Inside Morality

As a result Israel finds itself in a particularly dangerous straightjacket. On the one hand, outside pressure (both from a media eager to accuse the Israelis of "disproportionate response" and diplomatic channels who echo press outrage) restricts the Israeli ability to respond to aggression, on the other, Israel's own moral standards make them incapable of the kinds of measures that would discourage such aggression. This summer's war illustrates how this situation has become particularly dangerous since the failure of the "Oslo Peace Process" because the restraint Israel exercises now only clearly encourages further aggression.

▪ Mainstream Media as Theater of War

For a variety of reasons Israelis have not yet taken cognizance of this phenomenon. And yet this summer's war showed the worsening situation: how extensively the

Arab/Muslim world uses media as a theater of war, how easily the MSM (Mainstream Media), allows itself to be manipulated, and how what a negative impact this has on Israel's ability to act in its own defense. The outright hostilities began with the footage from Gaza Beach, and climaxed with the extensive staging of footage of Israeli aggression from Lebanon including Qana and the Red Cross Ambulance attacks. The readiness of the Western MSM to publicize these claims of Israeli aggression without any care to the reliability of the sources (number of dead, source of the explosion, staging of photo-ops, etc.) represents a major failure of their own journalistic ethics, and a major threat to Israel's security. By now the modus operandi of the adversary is clear: use of such shocking "lethal narratives" of wanton Israeli aggression to a) trigger their own aggression, b) end Israeli responses when needed, and c) intensify hostility to Israel and the Jews around the world. The spiking of anti-Semitism in Europe after Qana illustrates the global effect of this strategy, and means that long after the initial impact, the poison continues to work.

- **Hasbarah Failures**

Israel's record of coping with this extensive failure of the MSM to protect the media from being exploited by Arab-Muslim manipulation represents a clear and present danger. Starting with its "strategic" decision not to challenge the Muhammad al Durah footage – perhaps the most damaging of all "lethal narratives" – the official government spokesmen have shown consistent readiness to apologize without examining the footage, and reluctance to question these narratives even when the evidence suggests staging. The inability of the Israelis to develop a defense against this phenomenon represents one of its greatest vulnerabilities in the 21st century. More broadly, Israel's ignoring the media as a theater of war and its reluctance to challenge hostile Western journalists has contributed to a dramatic loss of prestige both in public opinion and in diplomatic circles. The widespread belief that Israel is the source of the conflict represents a catastrophic underestimation of the situation that not only imperils Israel and Jews in the Diaspora, but threatens the very fabric of civil society under attack around the world by forces of religious imperialism.

II. ISRAEL'S STRATEGIC ASSETS

- **Blogosphere**

The single most important new player in the global scene is the blogosphere, in particular the region of the political blogosphere that responded to 9-11 with a thorough re-examination of the straightjacket into which the MSM had fallen into reporting on Islamism and Jihad and its reflexive anti-Zionist coverage. This conversation is now taking place in the part of the blogosphere that has reformulated the "right-left" political axis. By acknowledging that anti-Zionist progressives had betrayed their own values with their moral equivalence, these bloggers became unapologetically pro-Israel; hailing a democratic country with progressive values fighting a violent authoritarian culture. These bloggers have demonstrated their ability to catch the MSM in flagrant violations of their own professional standards, from uncovering the forgery that Dan Rather ran (2004), to their immediate reception of Pallywood (2005), and then, this summer, their extensive critique of the MSM's acceptance of Hizbollywood, which led to the firing of Adnan Haj (2006).

Given how new and expansive the blogosphere is, this function can only grow over time. In general cyberspace offers an entire region of information communication that allows Israel to bypass the MSM. To date Israel has so far largely missed this development, ignoring the results, and leaving the bloggers to work without help that could spread their messages further. One of the most common complaints of the bloggers during the recent war was how little cooperation they received from Israel, despite a sense that we are all fighting for the same goal – civil society and responsible freedom.

▪ **Awakening Audiences Around the World**

Every day brings new evidence that people are awakening to the tragic error of combining tolerance with moral equivalence in responding to Islamic cultural currents. This error – no moral demands of the Arab-Islamic world – which has induced systematic misreporting on the Arab-Israeli conflict, also underlies the error of offering “human rights” without demanding appropriate reciprocity to European Muslims. Thus the awakening we now see to what has happened “as Europe slept” offers an extremely valuable (if probably brief) window of opportunity to get Westerners to reconsider how they view Israel. Instead of Israel as the source of the problem, Israel may well be at once a symptom of the broader problem (which they now face), and a guide for how to – and how not to – deal with 21st century Islam.

▪ **Grassroots Israel Advocacy**

The notable failure of both Israel’s official Hasbarah and the established Jewish organizations in the Diaspora to respond to the wave of anti-Zionism and Judeophobia since 2000 has led to a widespread grass-roots mobilization which is belatedly coming into its own. This broad and complex set of responses represents a whole army of people ready to engage in public diplomacy for Israel. They have arisen *despite* the reluctance of the established leadership to share the podium. With coordination rather than opposition, they can do a great deal of good.

III. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: MEDIA AS THEATER OF WAR

1) **Budgetary Implications From \$10-\$200 Million In 5 Years**

Israel spends 10 of billions of dollars a year on her theaters of war. The media theater – tens of millions at best – is under funded by over a thousandfold. The result that we see responding to the challenges of the last 6 years is the slow dinosaur being sliced by a thousand cuts from raptors all around it. And what is true for the Israelis is true for Diaspora NGOs, who have reacted slowly and ineffectively to the sudden shift in tone since 2000. Given both the needs and possibilities of the 21st century, Israel has invest hundreds of millions at least, to completely overhaul its Hasbarah and. Right now Hezbollah alone spends several times more than Israel on its media operation per year.

2) **Rebranding Israel in an Age of Global Jihad**

Of all the rebrands of Israel in the coming years, two seem most urgent. First, it should be possible to document in some very compelling ways how over the last six years Israel as offered the most reliable information about the Middle East to the West, and the stark contrast with how the media has treated its information.

Second, Israel stands as the harbinger of what is now happening to Europe, object of sophisticated asymmetrical warfare by forces driven not by a local secular democratic agenda, but by a global religious imperialism.

3) Speaking in all Languages, including Arabic

Until quite recently, Israel has aimed most of its Hasbarah efforts at the West, in particular at its most important ally, the USA. It has done little to address the third world and the Arab world. And even these efforts are minimal and dramatically under funded. Israel should have a series of 24-hour news and feature satellite stations in English, French, Arabic, Spanish, and Russian. Israel should be training Arabic speakers and recruiting among their own Arabic population, those who are willing to publicly appreciate the freedoms they have in Israel.

4) Modern media: Cyberspace and the Blogosphere

This is the single most important element of 21st century Hasbarah. For once Israel not only has a medium to get its information out that does not depend on the “good will” of the MSM, but it has a large group of intelligent commentators, gentile and Jewish, who are unashamedly on her side. Israel can and should act in ways that both use and strengthen the blogosphere, especially in Europe where it is still not as organized as in the US. As for cyberspace, Israel should publish extensively in cyberspace, where people now spend more time getting their news than from hard-copy sources. Finally, Cyberspace and the blogosphere are relatively new phenomena, and should be understood as new and expanding players.

5) Taking the Offensive: Holding Journalists to their own Standards

Israel is stuck between a rock and a hard place. They must maintain good relations with the MSM in general, and dare not confront them directly since, in any “war” with the media, Israel will presumably lose. On the other hand, given the current situation, that puts Israel at the bottom of a particularly noxious hierarchy of misinformation: as the MSM behave as dhimmi to the Arabs (avoiding confrontation and criticism), so the Israelis behave as dhimmi to the MSM. Israeli officials must sit down and think about how to re-evaluate this situation and give themselves options, even if that consists primarily of empowering non-officials to attack. In any case there are flagrant violations of the most elemental demands of modern journalism going on all the time (Pallywood), that Israel must challenge in some way. This is an urgent issue that has to be brainstormed. Solutions that consider a wide range of possibilities need to be thought of, rather than sticking within the old parameters.

IV. SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Coordinating Committees

Israeli officials have access to extensive and valuable information. For reasons that involve national security, some of this material is not available for publication. But for reasons that have to do with bureaucratic practices and a lack of overall perspective, incredibly valuable information either comes out too late or never at all. Coordinating committees should bring independent Hasbarah groups,

including bloggers, together with officials, especially in Dover Tsahal, to review the available information and get input on what material needs, if possible, to be passed through channels and released as soon as possible. This process could make an enormous difference in terms of Israel's capacity to have a rapid impact on public opinion.

2. Video Review Committee and the Procedure for Lethal Narratives

Israel needs to establish a committee that would meet on a few hours notice to review the "lethal narrative" footage that comes in from Arab sources (e.g., Al Durah, Houda Ghalia, Kafr Qana). The committee would inform Israeli officials of its findings, and coordinating with other investigative committees. Ultimately this committee would be a standing challenge to the MSM to have their own experts examining the footage from Palestinian cameramen for evidence of staging. Israeli officials should take no responsibility for killing Arab civilians until this committee has reported.

3. Data Collection

Israel needs to undertake a major effort regarding data collection, in particular on the way the media handles the conflict. We need an equivalent of Palestinian Media Watch for all the major western media outlets (BBC, CNN – US and International, France2, ABC, NBC, and so on). The media is extremely vulnerable to criticism because they are "on record." Israel advocates should be able to do both in-depth and statistical critiques of the media at all times. This raises legal questions as well as financial ones; and both questions need to be addressed as aggressively as possible.

4. Journalistic Standards Review Committee

Israel cannot and should not declare war on the MSM, but it can and should make clear that it holds the media to their own formal professional standards. A thorough review of the impact of both intimidation and access journalism needs to take place, and a series of criterion established whereby egregious violations of journalistic standards are punished. If Israel doesn't have the self-respect to demand minimal standards, why should the foreign press care?

5. Real-Time Review of Intifada Coverage

The coverage of the Intifada II by the media represents one of the most spectacular failures of modern media news coverage, and its effects on civil society around the world have been almost universally negative, encouraging the spread of global Jihad and suppressing the ability of Western countries to resist. One of the best ways to illustrate how bad and how harmful this press coverage was would be to establish a website that would review coverage *in real time* seven years later (i.e. beginning in September of 2007), with

- a) what the media reported;
- b) what Palestinian sources claimed;
- c) what Israeli sources claimed;
- d) what "turned out to be true";
- e) a running tally of the relative reliability of these sources; and
- f) a running tally of the reliance of the media on various sources.

6. Counter-Attack in Europe

Israel needs to counter-attack. It cannot continue to play reactive damage control. It must identify journalistic targets on the basis of their prominence and their failure to abide by their own standards, and expose them to the public. This needs to take place on a wide range of venues, from academic (conferences), to mainstream media (exposés) to websites (present the evidence). Israel should probably identify three or four major journalists whose techniques would not stand up to public scrutiny, prepare a counter-attack, and go after each one in rapid succession, using the revelations of each case to illuminate the next. Europe is at once the most important theater on which to carry out this counter-attack and their journalists are the most vulnerable. All over the West the public has developed a profound suspicion of their MSM. It is time for Israel to help people understand just how dangerously unprofessional some of their journalists are.

We cannot afford complacency. The next outbreak of hostilities is around the corner. We know the enemy's techniques. It would be inexcusable to fall into the same traps again. If the media war in Lebanon has taught us anything, it's that we must learn its lessons and prepare NOW.