

Information warfare: A strategic imperative for Israel

Israel needs an information agency that will create long-term strategy to beat Hamas's PR, shape global opinion, and win the world's hearts and minds

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Protesters display images on a lower Manhattan courthouse during a pro-Hamas rally outside the New York Stock Exchange in New York on October 26, 2023. (Bryan R. Smith / AFP)

By Raphael Benaroya

Hamas's brutal October 7th attack, targeting Jewish civilians, evoked memories of Holocaust savagery and existential fears in Israel.

The impact of Hamas's attack rippled across the Middle East. It returned the Palestinian-Israeli conflict to center stage, disrupted a potential Israeli-Saudi détente, retrogressed the Abraham Accords, energized Islamic extremists, and increased the risk of a wider armed conflict with Hezbollah and Iran.

These ripples threaten to swell into a tsunami that affects the entire world. The US has diverted military assets to the Middle East, potentially reducing its focus on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, as well as China's expansionist agenda in the Pacific.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7th, Israel earned the world's sympathy and support. Israel's decisive reaction against Hamas seemed justifiable to all — moral clarity was on Israel's side.

But not for long!

Anti-Israel and antisemitic sentiment has grown virulent in the US and around the world, as reflected in media depictions, widespread protests, and threats and acts of violence against Jews. Even some in the US Congress have been complicit in criticizing Israel and supporting anti-Israel demonstrations.

Has Israel lost the moral high ground? Has the world lost focus on Hamas's atrocities? Has the world turned a blind eye to Iran's network of terror proxies?

Surely, some seeds of anti-Israel and antisemitic sentiment have been buried, dormant, and the Israel-Hamas war has caused them to sprout. Apparently Hamas and its affiliates have long helped sow them.

Dr. Lorenzo Vidino, a George Washington University expert on Islamic extremism, points out that Hamas is a savvy political and media manipulator that has spent 30 years building support in the US among Muslims, university students, the media, political activists, and policy makers. Their strategy is to frame the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a Muslim-Jewish religious matter and, in so doing, distract attention away from Hamas's designation as a terrorist organization.

According to Dr. Vidino, Hamas and its agents have cannily, albeit falsely, labeled Israel as a colonizing, apartheid state that perpetrates “the same type of racism that killed George Floyd.” The public's acceptance of these tropes, including in US media, academia, and politics, is dismaying, as are widespread, pro-Hamas calls for a Palestinian state “from the river to sea” — a euphemism for the destruction of Israel. But it is evident that Hamas's spin and talking points are, at least for now, trumping Israel's narrative in the battle for public opinion.

Hamas and its ideological allies have mastered a public relations strategy to emphasize Palestinians' “victimhood” rather than Hamas's commitment to Israel's destruction. This PR

campaign has been delivered effectively through tailored messages to different target audiences. The public sympathy for Palestinians and Hamas might appear spontaneous, but it reflects years of planning, in anticipation of inevitable armed conflict between Hamas and Israel.

Strategic Islamic messaging has been especially effective at targeting young people receptive to “social justice” activism. On TikTok, for example, pro-Hamas videos outnumber pro-Israel videos 30-to-1, and US universities have become fertile ground for cultivating Hamas’s “victimhood” message.

The university environment has become biased and intolerant. College teaching, events, and campus media have fostered sensitivity to the Muslim community while fomenting anti-Zionism (the modern version of antisemitism). Students are taught to cancel materials and people they disagree with, and have shouted down speakers who express alternative views. Administrations and professors preach one-sided political views and social values, with little room for discourse and debate, and discourage the expression of so-called “triggering” opinions.

Muslim nonprofit organizations also work tirelessly to raise US awareness and sympathy for Islamic causes. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), to name two, have penetrated their narrative deeply into American society.

To be sure, promoting extremist Islamic ideology at the expense of Israel is not just an Israeli problem. This ideology remains a grave threat to freedom and democracy in the United States, as evidenced by the side-by-side burning of American and Israeli flags in street demonstrations. Israel’s 10/7 and America’s 9/11 are both examples of how radicalism rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood — which gave rise to Al Qaida, ISIS, and Boko Haram, as well as Hamas — has inflicted evil on the world.

Unfortunately, compared to Hamas and its ideological allies, Israel has fallen short in the battle over public opinion, as has the US.

So what should Israel do?

Israel must wage a wider war — a war that goes beyond military confrontation, to include framing issues in the public eye and positioning a strategic narrative for a global audience. Winning the information war should become another strategic imperative for Israel. Regaining the moral high ground in the world’s eyes is just as important as decimating Hamas terrorists on the physical battlefield.

Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Herzog have made efforts to state their case, including in editorials in *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. (Netanyahu, for example, aptly stated that “victory over these enemies begins with moral clarity...with

knowing the difference between good and evil.”) But Israel’s public relations efforts were late in getting off the ground, initially disorganized, and not as successful as Hamas in getting “ink” in the media. In contrast, Hamas and its affiliates have been preparing for and fighting the information battle for many years, and doing better at it than Israel.

Hamas surely anticipated Israel’s forceful response to the October 7th attacks, and expected that calls for “proportionality” and a humanitarian cease-fire would pressure Israel into stopping its military campaign — enabling Hamas to survive and rise yet again. Hamas also clearly anticipated that Israel’s ferocity would become a rallying cry for the Palestinian cause, shifting the narrative away from the atrocities of Hamas’s instigating attack. Indeed, calls are rising around the world for a unilateral Israeli cease-fire, as Israel is being solely blamed for the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, which some even call a genocide.

Israel should have expected and prepared in advance for this chain of events. Attacking Israel periodically and hiding behind ordinary Palestinians have always been central elements of the Hamas playbook.

Going forward, Israel must broaden the very definition of warfare to include information warfare — in public opinion, political discourse, diplomacy, policy influence, and economics. Israel must formulate a long-term strategy and invest heavily in shaping global opinion and winning hearts and minds.

Specifically, Israel should establish a unified, standing “information agency” that works intensely before, during, and after conflicts. Currently, that role is shared across Israel’s Prime Minister’s Office, Ministry of Defense, Foreign Office, other ministries, and outside pundits — often not in a harmonious chorus.

This new information agency must be proactive, not just reactive, to tell Israel’s story effectively and counteract the false narratives of Israel’s adversaries and detractors. The agency should be staffed with top marketing, PR, and communication experts who have an “outside-in” (not “inside-out”) perspective, a clear understanding of different target audiences, and the skill to define and execute precise messaging targeted at each key audience segment.

This agency should identify and prioritize messaging targets that would generate the greatest benefit. The agency’s organization should be analogous to a military command in developing capabilities, methods, and warriors to win the narrative framing war. The agency must take a long-term perspective, gather knowledge about adversaries’ means and methods of information warfare, and develop countermeasures against threats as they develop.

This agency must also ensure that Israel’s spokespersons (especially during war) communicate to the outside world in harmonious voices to deliver accurate, well-timed responses and put aside internal political rivalries. Israel’s message, delivery methods, and target audiences must

be aligned, and repetition of that message must be planned to generate positive emotions — just as a consumer goods marketer would craft an advertising/PR/social media influence campaign to build brand preference. Israel must convince the public, policy-makers, and institutions to understand and accept Israel’s just narrative.

For example, responsibility for the tragic situation in Gaza must be shifted to Hamas — and it should have been shifted long before the current armed conflict. Israel’s fire will cease as soon as Hamas accepts Israel’s demand to lay down arms and surrender unconditionally — just as the allied forces demanded of Japan and Germany in World War II, and the North demanded of the South in the US Civil War.

The world also needs to know that Hamas governs Gaza as a jailor oversees prisoners, exploiting them for financial gain and using them for cover. Hamas’s senior leaders have become billionaires on the backs of Gazans, and many of those leaders do not even live in Gaza.

During Israel’s 2006 conflict with Hezbollah, I traveled to Israel with a retired US general, visited the battlefield, and met with members of Israel’s high command. To both the general and me, it was clear that Israel was ill-prepared then to win the information war against Hezbollah. Our impressions aligned with the findings of Dr. Anthony H. Cordesman, who wrote a paper for the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) titled “Preliminary ‘Lessons’ of the Israeli-Hezbollah War.” Dr. Cordesman presciently identified lessons that Israel needs to heed today:

- “Wars against political and ideological enemies are almost impossible to win by attacking [only] their combat forces. Such enemies do more than fight wars of attrition, they carry out ideological, political, and media battles of attrition. There are always more leaders and volunteers. They can disperse, pause, outwait, and adapt.”
- “Whether it is true or not, the Islamic world believes that the lessons of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon are that the Western world is vulnerable. The Islamic populations — formerly torn by the clash of cultures and chagrined by their powerlessness — now have heroes.”
- “The definition of warfare has to be expanded...to emphasize the economic, political, diplomatic, and informational. Requirement must dictate mission, mission must dictate plan, and organization must follow all.”
- “The problem of fighting an enemy like Hezbollah [or Hamas] is... fighting such an enemy in ways that [do not] give it religious, cultural, political, and perceptual advantages.”

Clearly, Israel must engage in the battle for information with the same rigor that it applies to the physical battlefield. And this vital, strategic lesson applies beyond Israel’s current war against Hamas. Going forward, Israel must do a much better job to guide the narrative about its position, help people better understand its justifications, and perhaps, in so doing, even blunt the rise of anti-Semitism in the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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