

The Other Gaza War: Hamas' Media Strategy during Operation Cast Lead and Beyond

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A simple search in Google for the word “Gaza” will yield over 67 million results, while a search for its neighboring Israeli city of Sderot—located just a few miles away from Gaza City and a target of the last few rounds of confrontation between Israel and Hamas—will yield a little over a million (a ratio of 60:1). A more interesting comparison demonstrates that a search for “Hamas,” a local terrorist group, receives twice the number of “hits” (27 million) as a search for the international terrorist network “al-Qa’ida.” These results can be explained by a number of factors, including the high level of interest in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the way different terms are coded on the internet. But the rather impressive Hamas media presence that was apparent during the recent campaign in Gaza can also be attributed to the calculated and successful media strategy implemented by Hamas and some of its supporters.

The notion of a “media war” is nothing new when it comes to terrorist groups. Ayman al-Zawahiri, al-Qa’ida’s second-in-command, declared in 2005 that: “We are in a battle, and more than half of it is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our *umma* [nation].”¹ Relating to al-Qa’ida’s media efforts, in 2007, Hanna Rogan outlined a detailed strategy that was directed by an experienced media team, and noted the establishment of a number of media vehicles and the proliferation of these efforts in a number of countries. She concludes that “there appears to be not one jihadist media strategy and one media campaign, but rather a number of strategies, leading to a number of campaigns that coexist on the jihadist web.”²

Hamas' media strategy has not yet been studied in full. A recent attempt was that of Moeen Koa, a Palestinian journalist who wrote a thesis on the subject at the University of Westminster. Koa writes that " Hamas has a PR-conscious strategy which serves its strategic goal," and that " Hamas' PR was a major factor in their recent election victory." Two other interesting findings were that " Hamas did not appear to suffer from financial limitations while conducting its public relations campaign," and that after it won the general elections in January 2006, Hamas' media campaigns and the focus of its PR shifted from internal to external and from national to international.³

The structure of the Hamas movement, which extends to a number of countries inside and outside the Middle East, was able to significantly advance that strategy. Hamas is particularly accomplished in establishing affiliated institutions that could, in turn, provide a " public face " for the movement. In fact, foreign charities provided a great deal of Hamas' annual budget and until 9/11, a significant portion of it was actually raised in the United States.⁴ Seized documents and intelligence reports have already identified a series of front organizations located in countries such as Italy and the UK.⁵

Hamas' Media Operation during Operation Cast Lead

The Hamas network was further mobilized during Israel's Operation Cast Lead in January 2009. A first example is the case of al-Aqsa TV (Hamas' official TV network). Understanding the importance of this station, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) decided to launch an air strike against it and partially destroyed the network's main building in Gaza during the first week of the operation, on December 28, 2008. A week later, IDF soldiers entered the structure and seized the remaining equipment. The Israelis even hacked into the station's signal and broadcast an animated clip of Hamas' leadership being gunned down.

Nevertheless, despite these losses, Hamas moved quickly to reinstate its broadcasting capability, which was partially restored by al-Aqsa's mobile vehicle. In the first few days of the fighting, the Palestinian news agency Ramattan, which took over the al-Aqsa frequency, continued to broadcast pictures and interviews. Although the station was not able to maintain a full broadcasting schedule, its signal remained active and it succeeded in providing exclusive interviews, such as the speech by Mahmoud al-Zahar on January 5, 2009, in which he claimed that the IDF attacks provided Hamas with justification for attacking Israeli hospitals and ambulances.⁶

Subsequently, as reported by the Lebanon-based Naharnet website,⁷ the station was able to broadcast in Lebanon, receiving assistance from Hizbullah's al-Manar

team. It is interesting to note that just a month before the anticipated Gaza campaign, Hamas was able to establish a second TV channel, al-Quds, which went on the air on November 11, 2008 from Lebanon. According to its director general, Nabil al-Otaibi, the channel will embrace “the fundamental principles and rights of the Palestinian people, mainly the right for liberation and resistance.”⁸ With another backup station, the remaining al-Aqsa team continued its work while maintaining its ability to broadcast to Gaza and beyond. On December 31, 2008, it was able to transmit Ismail Haniyeh’s speech, which was filmed in his hiding place. Two weeks later, al-Fahura [pride] channel started broadcasting an ongoing telethon with news presenters from al-Jazeera on the al-Aqsa wavelength as a fund-raiser for al-Aqsa TV.⁹

Parallel to this, Fathi Hamad, director of al-Aqsa TV and a member of the Hamas parliament in Gaza, took some further action in order to maintain his international broadcasting ability. He contacted his Bahrain-based supplier, Noorsat,¹⁰ and was able to secure al-Aqsa’s Europe feed via another satellite. After forty-eight hours and action taken by several NGOs, the French authority decided to shut down this link because the TV network was directly tied to Hamas, which is on the EU list of terror organizations. The same day, the “journalists” of al-Aqsa TV (who are Hamas activists) were able to secure a twenty-minute interview on the edition of the “Weekend Journal,” which was broadcast on France Television to a prime-time audience. They used that occasion to denounce Israel; for example, Fathi Hamad’s position regarding IDF retaliations against Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza was: “It is every Palestinian’s duty to seek vengeance. Kill the occupiers. Murder them with suicide bombings or bullets. It does not matter how.”¹¹

Cyber Strategy

Hamas and its proxies have been very resourceful in using web platforms. The unofficial Hamas website¹² “Palestinian Information Center”¹³ (hosted in the UAE) is translated into eight languages, including English, French, Urdu, Turkish and Farsi. The site is stored on a server that hosts a number of other Hamas-related websites, including “al-Fateh,” which is Hamas’ site for children that features monthly bulletins with “pages discussing Jihad [holy war], scientific pages, the best stories not be found elsewhere, and unequalled tales of heroism.”¹⁴ Additional Hamas-related domains include “Palestine-info” and twelve other internet and television sites that are served by a number of US-based domains.¹⁵

The contents of some of these websites demonstrate that the Hamas staff, in charge of producing these materials, has reproduced for its own ends a whole array of tools that can actually be found on the web. Pal-Tube—a Palestinian-dedicated

video-sharing website—is a recent illustration of this. This well-made platform operates as a file-sharing website, such as YouTube, in which users can upload video clips. The clips featured include incitement against Israel, the preaching of terrorism and glorification of Hamas and terrorism. Posters or clips pertaining mostly to Operation Cast Lead, portrayed as a “holocaust,” can also be found.

Similarly, on the official website of the Ezzedine al-Qassem Brigade (Hamas’ military wing),¹⁶ you can easily find a section with a list of “martyrs” and footage of their funerals. An in-depth analysis of the architecture of this website reveals a very well-defined strategy to reach the people who would be interested in having direct contact with the movement. A section of the website offers the possibility of discussing, through a chat room, issues connected with the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

The war of ideas is active on other fronts as well, and certainly on online networks like Facebook and videos sites such as YouTube. During Operation Cast Lead, one of many new videos that surfaced was one featuring a young girl explaining that she was caught by Israeli soldiers and used as a human shield.¹⁷ Although no evidence is presented to prove this claim, a heavily edited clip incorporates pictures of Israeli soldiers juxtaposed against images of the girl in order give credence to her message.

It can also be observed that various NGOs are disseminating official Hamas propaganda in France. These organizations have a very well-defined media strategy to support this effort. Among their tools is a series of websites and video resources disseminated in cyberspace. A recent example is a video posted on YouTube showing a group of twenty to thirty people going to Carrefour (the French equivalent of Walmart), while asking on camera, “Do you think, as French citizens, that it is appropriate to see products from Israel in our supermarkets? We want these products to be boycotted.” It is worth noting several other statements made by these activists, after they had searched for Israeli-made products in every corner of the supermarket. One of the activists claimed that they found items that are actually from Israel, such as Jaffa oranges, and other things “supposedly being produced by Israelis.” This video is posted on various blogs and social platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) where these NGOs have opened accounts. The group of activists also sends messages during this video, such as: “These are fruit produced with our Palestinian water,” or “We can’t accept Israeli products for children in our country [France] while they are killing our children.” The same NGOs are also organizing campaigns aimed at sending these images directly to email inboxes in places of employment.

A Real War behind the Virtual War

Despite the pervasive presence and rapid growth of media in our daily and academic lives, research has been slow to grasp the extent of its influence on current political dynamics. The internet has already established its place as a major theater of war that focuses on public opinion as well as on mobilization, recruitment and fund-raising. These agendas, including advocating and supporting terrorist activities, suicide operations and subversive actions, can be readily promoted and promulgated by the new technology, which enables and facilitates the establishment of terrorist networks across borders and continents. The spread of technology, contrary to the predictions of some, has not weakened these trends but, rather, has strengthened them by expanding the reach of radical messages, while providing cover and mobility for those who produce these messages.

It is also important to note that information and communication technology (ICT) has become extremely crucial, particularly among opposition groups that seek to influence political dynamics in closed and centralized societies. In every region where citizens are oppressed, the internet often becomes the only way for dissidents to raise their voices outside their country. This is true even in tightly controlled Gaza. A recent message posted on a blog saying that Gazans had decided to go on strike to protest the violence caused by Hamas-linked groups¹⁹ helped trigger the compilation of a detailed 113-page paper on Hamas human rights violations produced by Human Rights Watch.²⁰

The study of Hamas' propaganda and messaging is critical and relevant in the context of a public discussion that raises the possibility of engaging with Hamas. Europe and the United States should carefully study these materials before any attempt is made to engage and give credence to this terrorist group. It should be apparent that no eventual possible reconciliation with Fatah is likely to change the essence of Hamas' discourse. This brief survey of ongoing Hamas propaganda should demonstrate that nothing will change the fundamental aim of an organization that seeks to glorify martyrdom and deny the right of Israel to exist.

Until the time when technology is used solely to advance life and not to promote terror and destruction, the war, unfortunately, will continue—and not only in the virtual world.

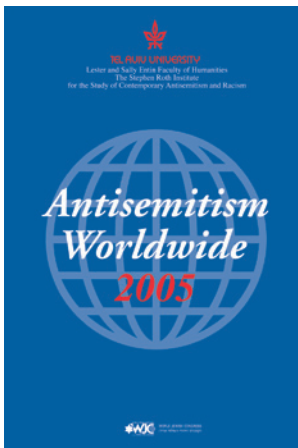
Notes

- ¹ Untitled letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi, intercepted by US intelligence, July 2005.
- ² Hanna Rogan, "al-Qa'ida's online media strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007,"

- FFI Research Report* No. 2007/02729, <http://rapporteur.ffi.no/rapporteur/2007/02729.pdf>.
- 3 The thesis has not yet been published. The information is based upon a conversation with the author and a synopsis that was published here: <http://www.albawaba.com/en/countries/Palestine/215990>.
 - 4 David H. Gray and John Bennett Larson, ""http://www.eurojournals.com/rjjs_8_12.pdf" "Grass Roots Terrorism: How Hamas' Structure Defines a Policy of Counterterrorism," *Research Journal of International Studies*, VIII (November 2008), 125–131.
 - 5 Jeff Cary and Matthew Levitt, "Ban Hamas in Europe," *Policy Watch* #430 (2003), Washington Institute for Near East Policy.
 - 6 "Eurobird Satellite Carrying Hamas Al-Aqsa TV: Paris, France," Report by the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage & Commemoration Center (IICC), January 9, 2009.
 - 7 <http://www.naharnet.com/domino/tn/NewsDesk.nsf/getstory?openform&3FF98F1378C6ECC1C225754F003B095D>.
 - 8 Al-Jazeera Net, October 27, 2008.
 - 9 Interview with Ya'ara Firon of Palestinian Media Watch, March 31, 2009.
 - 10 Noorsat is a branch of Eutelsat Group—a European company based in Paris.
 - 11 http://www.adl.org/terrorism/profiles/al_aqsa_tv.asp.
 - 12 There are a number of sources linking the Palestine Information Center (<http://www.palestine-info.info/>) to Hamas. See Gabriel Weiman, "Online Terrorists Prey on the Vulnerable," *Yale Global Journal*, (March 2008) (<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=10453>). See also the work of Aaron Weisburd, director of the Society for Internet Research, Carbondale, Illinois, US, who has established the link of the site to the Hamas organization. Also see Orly Halpern, "Hamas denies running kids' suicide Web site," *The Jerusalem Post*, March 16, 2006.
 - 13 <http://www.palestine-info.net/> among a few other domain names.
 - 14 Jon Dougherty, "Hamas launches webzine for kids, Journal praises martyrs, encourages children to follow example," *World Net Daily*, November 5, 2002; also, "Hamas kids' website incites against Israel," *Ynet News*, December 5, 2007 <http://www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3398894,00.html>.
 - 15 These include palttime.net; palestiniangallery.com; alresalah.info; fm-m.com; felesteen.ps; al-fateh.net; mujamaa.org; islamic-block.net; alkotla.com; palestinianforum.com; aqsatv.ps and tanfithya.com. The US network-access and domain-name register companies selling services to these Hamas websites include: Domainbank.com; register.com; Network Solutions LLC; OnlineNIC, Inc.; GoDaddy.com; eNom, Inc.; Defender Technologies Group; and Oversee.net. Also see "Facilitating Hamas Propaganda in North America," http://www.terrorfinance.org/the_terror_finance_blog/2007/08/facilitating-ha.html.
 - 16 <http://www.alqassam.ps/english/>.
 - 17 <http://video.google.fr/videosearch?q=boycott+israel+carrefour+youtube&hl=fr&emb=0&aq=f#q=young+children+shield+gaza&hl=fr&emb=0>.

- 18 <http://video.google.fr/videosearch?q=boycott+israel+carrefour+youtube&hl=fr&emb=0&aq=f#>.
- 19 <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2007/09/09/palestine-protesting-violence-and-the-art-of-resistance/>.
- 20 "Internal Fight: Palestinian Abuses in Gaza and the West Bank," Human Rights Watch, July 29, 2008, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/07/29/internal-fight-0>.

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