

Israel's Propaganda War in Gaza: Once David Now Goliath

Ong Weichong

Khaleej Times, 24 January 2009

When called to respond, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) has always done so with overwhelming retaliatory force. Operation Cast Lead, the military campaign to cripple the infrastructure and capabilities of Hamas in Gaza is no different.

The theory is that without the policy of disproportionate retaliation, Israel's future deterrent credibility would be severely undermined. What differentiates Operation Cast Lead from previous operations is the IDF's explicit intent to dominate the information space. One of the lessons drawn from Operation Change of Direction in the summer of 2006 in Southern Lebanon is the need to manage and exploit the information space. That would allow Israel to retain support on the home front, keep the lid on potentially hostile public opinion both at home and abroad and persuade fence-sitters to its banner. Despite its cognizance of the importance of words and images and the moral factor, the IDF's current propaganda war is a military-centric approach rather than a credibility-centric one.

Truth in the YouTube age

Amongst other means, Israel has tried to achieve 'information superiority' by restricting the access of foreign correspondents into Gaza. However, sources within Gaza and the ubiquity of Internet access prevent Israel from controlling, much less dominate the information battle space. Michel Foucault contends that "we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth...Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth". Indeed, the power of propaganda and its ability to persuade lies in its perceived truth and the ability to maintain that truth.

C.C Too, a psychological warfare expert of the Malayan Emergency era (1948-1960) developed the following fundamental rules in psychological warfare: 'don't preach', 'don't theorise', 'never say I told you so' and 'no propaganda based on hatred'.

Too further believed that every item of propaganda must be 'factual and true', to the extent of admitting in a leaflet that a Communist insurgent whose death he had publicised was alive due to an error in identification. This emphasis on the truth had the intended effect of boosting the credibility of government propaganda not only in the eyes of the population, but those of its opponents. In short, any mismatch between words and deeds will discredit the message, particularly in a 'broadcast yourself' age where the Internet is a readily accessible conduit of instant information. In the battle to establish a credible version of the truth, the IDF has taken its fight onto YouTube. Images of precision strikes on seemingly legitimate Hamas targets are constantly updated and available on a YouTube site maintained by the IDF. On December 28, 2008, the IDF released a video of an air strike on a truck allegedly loaded with Grad rockets. However, the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem challenged the IDF's account of events. According to B'Tselem's website, the so-called rockets were oxygen cylinders from a civilian workshop, not Grad Missiles as claimed by the IDF, and innocent civilians, not Hamas militants were killed in the air strike.

In an age whereby anyone with a camera-phone and Internet access can instantly propagate his or her version of 'truth' to the world at large, militaries and governments must realise that it takes more than fuzzy images of so-called precision strikes to win the propaganda war. Images of dead and severely wounded women and children in distinctly non-military settings have seriously undermined the IDF's claim to pinpoint accuracy. As such images increasingly fill the airwaves and bandwidths in the coming days and weeks, the Israeli version of truth will ever more sound and look like 'Zionist claptrap' to the casual observer.

Military Solution to Nowhere

The fundamental drawback of Israel's efforts in Gaza is that its overall strategy is military-centric rather than population-centric. Without a political solution, military operations that seek to decapitate the Hamas leadership and reduce its capabilities and infrastructure are counterproductive. For every key militant or network node that the IDF neutralises, there will be another to plug the gap. More significantly, the overwhelming military response has done Israel no favours in the garnering of international opinion.

Military-centric creep has pervaded the Israeli propaganda effort. Instead of focusing on winning the credibility war, the IDF propaganda machine has largely been directed towards the issue of the military threat posed by Hamas (particularly the Qasam and Grad rockets) and knee-jerk reactions to allegations of human-rights abuses with questionable success. As demonstrated earlier, what the IDF hailed as a successful precision strike has been contested by B'Tselem as an attack on innocent civilians and that is only the tip of the iceberg on the subject of contested narratives. On January 13, 2009, the very same NGO reported that Israeli soldiers in Gaza shot a woman in the head bearing a white flag. On the home front, the relenting missile and mortar barrages into Israel is a case in point that for all its smart-bombs and military prowess, the IDF has been unable to neutralise the homemade rockets of Hamas.

The painful learning experience of Summer 2006 demonstrated that any future campaign for the IDF will involve fighting in the information domain. Compared to the sophisticated media operations of Hezbollah, the IDF's lacklustre performance in the public relations sphere was partially to blame for the lack of support from the home front as the conflict dragged on into late August 2006. The IDF seemed to have embraced the notion and importance of fighting the information war but any further militarisation of the current propaganda effort will only lead to cognitive malaise and divergence from the key issues of credibility and legitimacy. The military-centric approach and knee-jerk reactions of Israel's propaganda Goliath suggest the lack of a clear credible strategy. Military means can only hold the Gaza cordon for so long. With every bomb dropped and tank shell fired, Israel's moral force is slowly being bled dry. Hamas might be structurally battered, but its moral force is clearly on the ascendent.

Ong Weichong is Associate Research Fellow with the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is attached to the Military Transformation Programme at the school's constituent unit, the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies. He is also a Doctoral Candidate with the Centre for the Study of War, State and Society, University of Exeter, UK.