PUBLIC RELATIONS WAR BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE PALESTINIANS

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts Israeli and Palestinian approaches to the public relations (PR) war between the two sides. It reflects on the use the parties are making of public relations to advance their interests and assesses the relevance of their efforts for public relations teaching.

The paper’s background is published criticism of Israel’s public relations effort. The critique comes from both academic and official sources – the chair of the communications department at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the Israel State Comptroller. While the Government of Israel has established a co-ordinating body modelled on the American Office of Global Communications, supported by three international public relations firms, the debate about effectiveness remains.

Official Palestinian responses to the Israeli communication effort appear rudimentary in comparison, but there are signs the need for a public relations strategy is recognised. Non-official pro-Palestinian advocates have developed sophisticated electronic media to counter the perceived dominance of media messages favouring Israel – and are now themselves being confronted in cyberspace by pro-Israeli websites.

The public relations contest between these warring parties highlights a number of principles relevant to public relations teaching, including the importance of message consistency and of communication planning.

PUBLIC AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STREAM

1. Background

This paper identifies public relations (PR) as an under-recognised aspect of international relations, highlighting PR as a key variable in shaping both diplomacy and public opinion. Large gaps remain in research focusing on image cultivation by states (Kunczik, 1997, page 16). Image is the “total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure of [a] behaviour unit, or its internal view of itself and the universe (Boulding, 1969, in Kunczik, 1997, page 48).
The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has its origins long before the foundation of Israel in 1948 – arguably back in ancient history BCE. More recently, it has been the spark for wars in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973 and for innumerable violent incidents.

Because major powers such as the United States and Europe are involved in the region, this localised conflict is inevitably freighted with wider international implications – both for Western public opinion and for Arab and Muslim interests. Mass media reports of international developments often influence what kind of image of a country or culture predominates: although news media are not the only influence on image-shaping, Kunczik (1997) can claim that “international actions are based on the image of international reality” and that the news media are “first-rate competitors for the number-one position as international image-former” (page 20).

Public relations on behalf of nations or nationalist causes is not new, with a history antedating World War I (Kunczik, 1997) or even – arguably -- going as far back as Biblical times (ibid, p. 153, citing Paneth, 1926). Kunczik defines public relations by a nation-state as “the planned and continuous distribution of interest-bound information by a state aimed (mostly) at improving the state”s image abroad” (ibid, page 12). Today such efforts are typically directed at promoting a country”s economic success (Lesly, 1978, in Kunczik, 1997, page 62), such as the tourism focus at the heart of New Zealand”s “100% Pure New Zealand” campaign (www.purenz.com).

However, the web of global complications that envelops the Middle East means that a PR “war” or contest based there is fought for high stakes measured in money, military strength and territory. Kunczik (1997) spells it out:

“The main objective of international PR is to establish (or maintain an existing) positive image of one”s own nation, that is, to appear trustworthy to other actors in the world system. Trust is no abstract concept. In the field of international policy, trust is an important factor in mobilizing resources, for example, in receiving political and/or material support from other nations. In other words, if other actors in the world system place their trust in one”s nation, in her future because of her reliability, trust becomes the equivalent of money (page 74).

This is what is at stake in the Israel-Palestine PR war: trust, closely related to the concept of regime or governmental legitimacy – translating into money (and territory, from which money can be made). According to the late Palestinian academic, Edward Said,


Never have the media been so influential in determining the course of war as during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, which, as far as the Western media are concerned, has essentially become a battle over images and ideas (2001, page 1).

The battle represents a return to the early, rough days of public relations when PR was “not expected to build relationships but to exploit them” (Heath, 1997, page 7). This emphasis differs from the two-way communications and relationship management approach favoured by contemporary writers on public relations such as Wilcox, Ault, Agee and Cameron (2001, page 6).
Said”s “battle over images and ideas” is taken very seriously by the Israelis in particular, with *The Jerusalem Post* commenting that “Israel is entangled in a war on two fronts: on the ground and in the media” (Friedson, 2001, page 1). The outcome is not just target audiences feeling more or less positive towards Israel or its Palestinian foes. Jewish writer Tom Gross”s assessment is that, “A distorted picture of events is helping to produce correspondingly distorted policies, particularly in Europe”(2001, page 1).

Recent research has shown that contrary to an earlier consensus on the point, governments and administrations do take public opinion into account when developing foreign policy and policymakers do not see themselves as exempt from taking into consideration their constituencies” preferences when shaping national policies (Wittkopf, 1990, cited in Hermann, T. in Everts, P. & Isernia, P. [eds], 2001).

Against this background, both Israel and the Palestinians see public relations as a key strategic weapon: a weapon to influence government decision-makers in their development of positions towards the warring parties and governing the provision of tangible support that may flow from these positions.

**2. Introduction**

The Arabic word *tafseel* has two meanings. One is to go into detail; the other is to tailor or cut according to the shape (Khatib, 1999, page 1).

This paper is about the battle between Israel and the Palestinians to tailor (*tafseel*) perceptions about what is happening in the conflict between them – a battle that may influence future understanding of the theory and practice of public relations. It considers the significance of the public relations war to both sides, traversing commentaries from both camps as to the effectiveness of their efforts. Interestingly, both Israeli and Palestinian voices decry the supposed failure of their cause”s public relations, an example of the hostile media perception, which indicates that partisans systematically perceive information in the mass media as hostile to their own opinions (Gunther and Schmitt, 2004).

The question of whether propaganda is a more appropriate term than public relations is raised – and the paper goes on to examine possible implications of the PR conflict for contemporary public relations teaching.

**3. The “media battle”**

Late in December, 2003, an online Israeli nationalist information outlet, the Arutz Sheva News Service, ran an item in its newsletter called, “Lesson in PR from the PA”(or Palestinian National Authority)[Israel National News, by email, Tuesday, December 30, 2003, page 3].

The story played up the supposed success of the Palestine National Authority”s official news agency, WAFA, in turning a minor gaffe it had made into an attack on the United Kingdom and on those observers making public warnings about rising anti-Semitism.
The issue was nothing more significant than whether UK Prime Minister Tony Blair had sent official holiday greetings to Palestinian National Authority President Yasser Arafat -- and in doing so expressed his wish that hopes of realising an independent Palestinian state are fulfilled.

Apparently no such greeting was sent, but in retracting its story, WAFA took some effective swipes at Britain and the West. Arutz-Sheva drew a contrast with Israel’s performance. It commented, “Israel, on the other hand, suffers from a dearth in public relations efforts” and reported that the Director-General of the Foreign Ministry had announced that the Ministry’s annual public relations budget of under 40 million shekels (approximately $AUD12.2 million) was “not enough for an efficient international information campaign” (ibid).

The news service’s comment echoes the analysis of two Hebrew University of Jerusalem academics, Tamar Liebes (who is chair of the university’s Department of Communication) and Menachem Blondheim. Writing in The Jerusalem Post in December, 2003, they said Israel had been “routed” in the television war with the Palestinians.

Even the Israeli government is finally coming to realise that its defeat in the media battle may well be decisive to the ultimate outcome of its war”, they said, criticising “the pathetic incompetence of the Israeli government in presenting its cause and selecting passable, let alone credible, spokespersons (page 1).

Their argument that Israel has lost the television battle comes down to the idea that it is contest that grabs viewers’ attention. This view is supported by Hough (1984, in Conley, 1999, page 61):

Readers relish news of conflict and violence. Stories about violent crimes, murders, battles and wars...attract readers to newspapers and hold their attention.

Conley suggests this is true even if “some conflict reportage appears to be more theatre than journalism, especially when factual issues are submerged by rhetoric” (ibid).

Confrontations between heavily armoured soldiers and stone-throwing children are gripping, whereas there is no drama of contest with a terrorist attack: only the bloody aftermath, and local cultural conventions forbid visual representations of corporal atrocities.

The discussion that follows is based on Naveh’s view (2002), that foreign policy decision-making processes take place in an environment partly created by the media. Naveh notes that

Media performance in this environment is dictated by the state’s political communication regime, government communication policy, the political-economy structure and by the specific channels which perform the relevant
media functions. This media-created atmosphere reflects foreign-policy events through the agenda-setting perspective, influencing decision-makers and compelling them to respond through the media, with their specific characteristics (page 10).

4. Discussion

In some cases, the audience for Government communications may stretch beyond a particular region of the world. Jack Trout, the marketing expert who co-developed the notion of “positioning” (Ries & Trout, 2000) is working for the US State Department training new diplomats on how to project a positive image of the US. Here’s what he has to say, in the context of branding the war in Iraq:

What we are really laying out here is that all the world has become a press conference. This is a battle for perception (Paul, 2003, page 1).

The battle involves two main types of international public relations. Kunczik (1997) identifies structural (emphasis in the original) international PR as aiming to correct images previously created by the mass media and considered to be false. Manipulative PR seeks to build a “positive image that, in most cases, does not reflect reality, including lying and disinformation” (page 25). Kunczik points out the contrast between the values orientation of science and what he calls the “pathology” of the international system:

Whereas secrecy in the sciences is condemned and love of truth is the highest virtue – the spreading of lies and the falsification of data is a scientific deadly sin – in the international system, under the pretext of national interest or national security all secrecy and every lie can be legitimated (ibid, page 51).

Israel’s “Quandary”

Liebes and Blondheim’s analysis is not entirely new and is supported by writers such as Adar, who earlier (2002) lamented that, “Almost on a weekly basis, we miss some opportunity to get our [Israel’s] side of the story out and seemingly witness one public relations blunder after another” (page 1). It does, however, raise questions about why an existing nation state with considerable resources and historical capital, confronting an aspiring “state” facing economic collapse (vide Lussier, 2004) is struggling to win over public opinion. As Van Teeffel (2003) notes

The official Israeli PR is logistically better equipped and better staffed in terms of checking out or following up stories than the Palestinian PR, which has only recently become more helpful, and then primarily at the NGO level (page 3).

Liebes and Blondheim are drawing on a long-standing Israeli strain of thought centred on the idea that in media as well as in physical terms, Israel is in danger of being submerged by a tide of Arab voices: the wide net of Arab interests is a potential noose around Israel’s neck.
Davis is representative of this strain. Writing in 2002, in an article titled “Israel”s Public Relations Quandary”, Davis – who uses the phrase “verbal combat” to describe taking on the Palestinians in the media - claimed that

Arab propagandists, utilizing extensive commercial contacts with Western power-holders and media executives have for years plied Western airwaves with disinformation, employing eloquent retired statesmen and commentators to canvass their positions. The Israelis, either through lack of awareness, talent or resources are constantly playing catch-up, forced to react to bad press, rather than initiating aggressive positive spin of their own (page 1).

The director of the Israel Government Press Office, Danny Seaman, has reflected this willingness to attribute Israel”s PR challenges to Arab machinations. The Israel News Agency (not an official body) reported:

Seaman has a clear understanding about how the Palestinians succeeded in seizing control of the television screens. He said that in the 1980s the Palestinians began to nurture young people who would work with the foreign press. He also alleges that all of the Palestinians who work with the media took a course in media manipulation at Bir Zeit University (“GPO”s Danny Seaman”, 2003). [Bir Zeit is the oldest, and regarded as the most prestigious, Palestinian university].

As far back as 10 years ago, in 1993, there were calls for a new approach to Israeli public relations. Shapiro recalls that in the 1950s, when Israel was criticised, Prime Minister Ben Gurion used to say, “It”s not what the world thinks, but what the Jews do that is important.” He continues: “It is a different world now and for every Israeli policy, the public relations aspect must be examined. I am definitely not calling on Israel to submit to public opinion but instead to organise and mould it for their benefit” (date, page 1).

Shapiro”s call to “mould” public opinion echoes early public relations practice, which to use Grunig”s terminology (vide “The Importance”, 2004), was “asymmetrical” public relations. The asymmetrical view of public relations is that public relations is much more about having publics adjust to an organisation (or in this case, the positions taken by a country) rather than the reverse (Baskin et al, 1997). Shapiro”s call also reflects more modern conceptions of propaganda.

**Propaganda**

The terms “propaganda” and “public relations” appear to be interchangeable in contemporary journalistic usage. For example, on 28 October, 2001, the New York Times published an article titled, “US Appears to Be Losing Public Relations War So Far”. Written by Susan Sachs, the article begins,

CAIRO – The Bush Administration has belatedly deployed its forces for a propaganda war to win over the Arab public (page 1).

Kunczik (2000) agrees that “public relations” and “propaganda” may be seen as synonymous: “Trying to distinguish among advertising, PR and propaganda in foreign
image cultivation is merely a semantic game” (page 12). Propaganda has been recognised as “an instrument of aggression” and “a surrogate for fighting on the battlefield” (ibid, pp. 12-13).

Public relations is a phrase and an idea already embedded in the discourse of Israel-Palestinian politics. For example, in November 2003, the Palestinian Prime Minister, Ahmed Qorei, commented on unilateral moves being considered by the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, to kick-start the peace process. “We hope that there will be serious and tangible steps,” he said, “and that it will not be mere public relations”. In implying that public relations is about appearance rather than substance, Qorei echoes the concerns of corporate managers as well as those of his colleagues in government, as Fergusson (1991) points out

Corporate managers still view public relations with scepticism. Although the public relations professional’s role is to cast doubt on assumptions, business still interprets this as a lack of belief in the product.

Sitting on the other side, the media - and to some extent the public - still see you as serving the interests of your paymasters (page 1)


Qorei’s words could be seen as a response to, or in themselves part of, a propaganda effort – remembering, however, that “One person’s propaganda is another’s cogent discourse” (“Propaganda”, 2003).

The current NATO definition of propaganda is this:

Any information, ideas, doctrines or special appeals disseminated to influence the opinion, emotions, attitudes or behaviour of any specified group in order to benefit the sponsor, directly or indirectly (Taylor, 1999).

Such efforts have to do with more than fostering the desired behaviour with rewards or punishments: Taylor (1979) draws on Fraser (1957) to make the point that

The central element in propagandist inducements, as opposed to compulsion on the one side and payment, or bribery on the other, is that they depend on “communication” rather than concrete penalties or rewards.

Fraser comments that the analogy is with how the owner speaks to the donkey to motivate its behaviour rather than with whether he whips it or offers it a carrot.

Paluszek (2003) cites a more contemporary assessment: that of Sha and Meyer (2000), in which they note that

“Propaganda” may simply be viewed as another term for “communication”. When the communication is being executed by communicators who do not
share our views about government, the nature of humankind or the world in
general, we call their efforts “propaganda”. However, when we try to share
our own views, we are “communicating” or “informing” or “educating” our
audiences (page 1).

Are public relations and propaganda indeed interchangeable terms? Writers such as
Khatib (2003) see a “fine line” between them, others, such as Richard Swift, editor of
the New Internationalist, see no difference at all. Swift’s view is that, “The new
development this century is that propaganda has become a profession. It is now called
public relations” (1999, page 1).

Public relations writers such as Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron (2003, 2000)
implicitly acknowledge a close relationship when they describe propaganda
techniques and add

A student of public relations should be aware of these techniques, if only to
make certain that he or she doesn’t intentionally use them to deceive and
mislead the public (page 230).

In a world in which ethics, rightly, is seen as an essential element of public relations
practice (at least one chapter on ethics seems to be mandatory in modern public
relations texts), propaganda is seen as shot through with lies and therefore beyond the
pale. According to Paluszek, its emphasis on one-way, uncompromising
communication is one factor that distinguishes propaganda from PR, which has a
“readiness to compete in the marketplace of ideas”(2003, page 3), engaging in what
Heath calls “the wrangle in the marketplace” (1992).

Propaganda can be defined as having usually “political and/or nationalist themes”
(“Propaganda”, Word-iq, 2003). Its conscious use of deceit may be a distinguishing
element:

What sets propaganda apart from other forms of advocacy is the willingness of
the propagandist to change people’s understanding through deception and
confusion, rather than persuasion and understanding (ibid).

We are, I suggest, used to thinking of propaganda in the same sceptical light in which
the Palestinian PM speaks of “public relations” moves. We associate it – and public
relations – with artful gilding of the lily, with “spin” that develops messages that work
like that the trickiest googly in a cricket match, slipping past honest citizens holding
straight bats.

Speaking at the 1934 Nurenberg Sixth Party Rally of the National Socialist Party, one
of the master propagandists of all time, Joseph Goebbels, said this about propaganda:

Good propaganda does not need to lie. It has no reason to fear the truth. It is a
mistake to believe that people cannot take the truth. They can. It is only a
matter of presenting the truth to them in a way that they will be able to
understand. Propaganda is still necessary if a good cause is to succeed. A good
idea does not win simply because it is good. It must be presented properly if it
is to win. But a good idea is itself the best propaganda (page 1).
As an aside, it is interesting that Goebbels’ commentary is reminiscent of Abraham Lincoln’s statement that

> I am a firm believer in the people. If given the truth, they can be depended upon to meet any national crisis. The great point is to bring them the real facts ([http://www.biz-community.com/Quotes/196/18.html](http://www.biz-community.com/Quotes/196/18.html) retrieved 5 January, 2004).

In Goebbels’ view, propaganda is indispensable in building a modern state (*ibid*), a view that is echoed in the battle for minds being waged by Palestinians and Israelis.

A cynical view of public relations advocacy has been associated with the industry since its early days. Edward Bernays, one of the founders of public relations as we know it today, supposedly an inspiration to Goebbels (Ewen, 1996) and the author of a 1955 book called *The Engineering of Consent* – had this to say:

> The only difference between propaganda and education, really, is the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don’t believe is propaganda (In Becker, 2002, preface available online).

Bernays also wrote a book called *Propaganda* (1928) which is, perhaps significantly, about to be reprinted (the new edition is due in September). In it he says

> The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country (“Public Relations”, 2004).

In the light of Bernays’ comments, we can understand the Israeli Foreign Ministry wanting more money to invest in information, or education, campaigns. It doesn’t entirely matter what the truth is: a market can be found for the information product, something the editor of the *Chicago Times* understood. Briefing a reporter during the American Civil War, he instructed: “Telegraph fully all news you get and when there is no news send rumours” (“Propaganda”, Turner Learning, 2003).

Bernays and his colleague, journalist Walter Lippman, have been identified as the first to codify and apply propaganda techniques in a scientific manner (“Propaganda”, Word-iq, 2003). Today’s public relations industry is a “direct outgrowth of Lippman”s and Bernays” work”(*ibid*, page 3).

**Critique of Israel’s PR**

From the Israeli perspective, there is a need for a public relations (note the term) response to propaganda (again, note the term) from the Arab world, including the Palestinians – a thrust summed up by one Jewish author as, “Palestinian sob stories have to be matched by Israeli sob stories” (Forman, 2003).
In October, 2002, the State Comptroller of Israel released a report containing unprecedented criticism of the country’s public relations work.

The Comptroller found that since the state was established in 1948, its intelligence organs had not succeeded in responding to “the broad-based propaganda and incitement by the Arab world”. His report emphasised that the lack of a central authority to direct and co-ordinate all government information bodies to execute a public relations policy was “the main factor accounting for Israel”s longstanding failures in this field”.

It also found that

- There was no overall strategic public relations conception and objective
- Co-ordination between government PR offices was lacking
- Areas of responsibility between different arms of government that operate public relations activities were ill-defined.

Bureaucratic and political problems in responding to anti-Israel media reports have led to one commentator, Lenny Ben-David, going so far as to call for the privatisation of Israel”s information and public relations efforts (Cashman, 2003).

In an article titled, Why are Israel”s Public Relations So Poor, Diker (2002), focuses his critique on more immediate matters, claiming there is a “systemic problem” with Israel”s information efforts during the armed conflict with the Palestinian National Authority. His analysis is couched in dramatic language:

Despite the onslaught of Palestinian and Arab incitement and frequent cases of imbalanced and biased international news reporting, Israel”s government information policy has been largely ineffective in both countering Palestinian propaganda and cogently presenting Israel”s case to the international community. Israel”s public relations have suffered from a fundamentally defensive PR posture, lack of co-ordination between PR offices, inconsistent and often-conflicting messages from a politically fractured national coalition government, decentralized and uncoordinated PR crisis management and untrained government spokespeople (2002, page 2).

Diker”s comments sound like the obverse of the advice public relations practitioners often give to clients: ensure your messages are consistent -- and co-ordinate your activity so your organisation speaks with one voice.

In Diker”s view, Israel faces a special challenge in the public relations war: an average of one terror attack every two hours since September, 2000 “places an overwhelming burden on government officials to respond in real time to events on the ground and leaves little opportunity for strategic media policy planning and execution”(2002, page 3).

**Branding the Conflict**

Diker raises the question of branding the conflict. In his view, naming the present war the “Al Aqsa Intifada” was “a stroke of Palestinian PR genius, as much of the
Western news media adopted this Palestinian brand name that casts the conflict internationally in the image Arafat sought”(2002, page 4).

Writing from an Israeli perspective, Diker says Israel’s failure to rebrand the conflict to reflect what he sees as its true nature – a pre-planned war of terror against Israelis – “placed the Jewish state on the defensive in the international court of public opinion from the first day of the conflict”(ibid).

In the past, Israel had succeeded in naming its wars. Names such as the Six-Day War of 1967 and the 1973 Yom Kippur War achieved international currency. This time, however, Israel hesitated to brand the outbreak of violence in its own terms. Diker believes there were two reasons: Few military and government officials expected the development of a major confrontation, and Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and his officials held back from calling the conflict a war of terror because they felt to do so would be an admission of the failure of Peres’ own political vision, summed up in the Oslo peace process.

One key example he cites is that of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) operations in the Palestinian city of Jenin. Much of the international media reported atrocities being committed by the IDF in the city; according to Diker, Israeli military spokespeople did not successfully counter these “mendacious claims” (2002, page 4), in large part because the Defense Minister unilaterally barred foreign media from reporting operations without first consulting his PR advisors and the IDF spokesman, so possible negative media fallout could be assessed. The fallout came anyway and afterwards, the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University noted that the army “has still not integrated public relations in its strategic assessments” (2002, page 5).

Palestinian Efforts

What of the Palestinian efforts to present their point of view? Some Arab-Muslim public relations scholars argue that Mohammed was the first public relations practitioner in their culture (Badran et al, 2003).

There is no effective Palestinian central co-ordinating point, although the Palestinian National Authority maintains an information service and a Ministry of Information. Comments from Dr Nabil Khatib, Director of the Media Institute at Bir Zeit University, are instructive: opening his presentation to a seminar, he said

When I was asked to speak about the Palestinian media-communication strategy, I said that according to my understanding it does not exist and that it would therefore be extremely hard for me to talk about it! (2003, page 1).

During a recent visit to Palestine, I encountered the same derisive response towards the concept of Palestinian PR. Khatib’s bafflement finds some support in the writing of a Palestinian-American commentator, Ray Hanania. He is very blunt: “The official representatives of the Palestinians are being ignored because they just don’t know how to get the right kind of attention”.

His critique indicates a big gap between understanding and practice:
While the Palestinians do understand the concept of media relations and public relations spin as a necessary part of their war against Israeli oppression, they still do not grasp the process of PR spin. It’s not enough to recognise what the issue is. You need to be able to quickly and effectively take that message to the primary media audience in the United States (2001, pp. 2-3).

Hanania believes that the Palestinians do not understand how to identify their key messages, nor do they know how to convey them in a Western-based media that, he claims, “is dominated by Israel’s friends”. Calling for the introduction of communications expertise to the Palestinian leadership, he suggests that “if the Palestinians have an edge, it is purely accidental. Palestinians are killed at a ratio of five to one in comparison to Israelis. That ratio comes across in the images, even if the Palestinian deaths are downplayed in the news reporting and Israeli deaths are given greater coverage” (2001, “Israel is right”, page 1).

Edward Said is passionate about Palestinian failure to confront Israeli hasbara (a Hebrew word which once had a connotation of propaganda but is now used to mean “explaining Israel’s case”):

Fifty years of unopposed Israeli propaganda in America have brought us to the point where, because we do not resist or contest these terrible misrepresentations in any significant way with images and messages of our own, we are losing thousands of lives and acres of land without troubling anyone’s conscience (2001, page 2).

Why is the Palestinian effort, by their own assessment, so lacking? Part of the answer is provided by Ghassan Khatib, who is Minister of Labour in the Palestinian Government. He says that for a long time, Palestinians thought the justness of their cause was so obvious as to need no explanation. They were, in his words, “completely ignorant of the importance of media and public relations” (2003, page 2) until they began to see that Western eyes, conditioned by the horror of the Holocaust, saw Israel as the victim, despite the fact that it is the region’s strongest military and only nuclear power. Since then, Khatib says, “Palestinians have recognised the need to compete at public relations, but are still light years away from succeeding in the field” (2003, page 2).

Evidence that progress is needed in official Palestinian PR is not hard to find. When writing this paper in January, 2004, I visited the website of the official Palestinian news agency, WAFA (http://english.wafa.ps/). I found that the most up-to-date item available was the text of an address by Yasser Arafat on the occasion of Palestine National Day, 1 January, 2003. (The Israelis were only slightly better: the website of their National Information Center led with a story dated 13 April 2003, although the Israel Defense Forces website offered current details of the latest Palestinian attacks and casualties).

It can be a different story at the website of the Palestinian National Authority’s Ministry of Information (http://www.minfo.gov.ps/english.htm). The visitor is pointed to several websites, including one called www.stopthewall.org, which contains fresh material focused on the fence Israel is building to separate itself from the Palestinians.
Stopthewall.org describes itself as “the grassroots Palestinian anti-apartheid wall campaign”. There is no indication of any link, official or otherwise, to the Palestinian National Authority, to the PLO or any other official Palestinian body.

**Alternative Media**

This website is one example of the rise of alternative media promoted by pro-Palestinian activists to counter what they see as the dominance of the Israeli perspective in international media – a dominance which (if it exists) is – as we have seen – under question in Israel itself. The best executed of these alternative media is the *Electronic Intifada* ([http://electronicintifada.net/](http://electronicintifada.net/)).

This describes itself as

> A not-for-profit, independent publication committed to comprehensive public education on the question of Palestine, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the economic, political, legal and human dimensions of Israel’s 37-year occupation of Palestinian territories. It provides a needed supplement to mainstream commercial media representations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (“Introducing”, page 22004).

The website, which receives around 250,000 visitors each month and many more in times of increased conflict, consciously sees itself as confronting “the prevailing pro-Israeli slant in US media coverage by offering information from a Palestinian perspective”(*ibid*). It claims that its commentators’ views are “based firmly on universal principles of international law and human rights conventions” and that its reportage is based on “a solid foundation of documented evidence and careful fact-checking”(*ibid*). Over 18 sections are offered, ranging from Opinion/Editorial to the Role of the Media to Arts and Culture. Pro-Israeli sites have also emerged to join battle in the infosphere. One of them is HonestReporting.com, which says it has 85,000 members helping to fight anti-Israel bias in the media (“About Us”, 2004).

**The Key Audience**

It is relevant that *Electronic Intifada* aims to counter what it sees as a pro-Israel stance in American news coverage. European opinion tends in the other direction and is much more open to Palestinian interpretations. This in line with the findings of a Jewish Anti-Defamation League survey which concluded that

> Overall the data indicates that Israel has a major perception problem in Europe. Respondents, regardless of gender, age, education or income level possess extremely negative views about Israel (2002, page 11).

The audience for the public relations work of both sides, then, is American public opinion – as the Lebanese newspaper, *Daily Star*, editorialised, “The primary consumers of Israeli propaganda are the citizens and leaders of the United States”(“Israel’s daily lecture”, 2003, page 1).

Here is where the fundamental principle in public relations – of understanding who your audience is (Lindemann, 2001) – really counts. According to an American public
relations and political consultant, Stephen Abbott, Palestinians for a long time thought their audience was the Muslim world, while some thought it was the Israeli Government. On the contrary, says Abbott,

The audience that must be convinced is the audience in the West, primarily the United States. The US has enormous political and economic influence in the region, and while that often leads to resentment, it should instead be seen by the Palestinians as an opportunity for achieving statehood. The Israeli government long ago seized that opportunity, and it shows (2001, page 1.).

Abbott points out that the result is huge foreign aid for Israel – but adds that there is nothing wrong in this: it is simply the way things work in the US.

A movement either gets its message out or it fails. It convinces its audience, or it fails. Israel has succeeded, but there is no reason why the Palestinian cause is predestined to fail. It simply needs to re-think its approach (ibid).

However, for all the advantages it may have through the large Jewish constituency in the US, Israel has not been doing as well as it might. A private organisation, Israel21c, has been set up to complement the government-funded efforts. Established soon after the start of the intifada as “a reaction at the way Israel”s image was being destroyed in the media in the eyes of the (American) public”, it hopes to convey the image that “Israel stands for good things” such as democracy (Cohn, n.d.).

The organisation will need to counter difficulties generated by the stances taken by some Israeli government spokespeople. Diker quotes media experts, Dr Frank Lunz and Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, as criticising many Israeli spokespeople for engaging in diatribes against Arafat and the Palestinian leadership”s (alleged) role in terror instead of concentrating on words such as “peace, democracy, security and freedom”(2002, page 6). Diker criticises some spokespeople for failing to refute the Palestinian claim that Israel is an illegal “occupier” and the government for the fact that most of its spokespeople do not have English as their mother tongue. Since 1999, Israel”s Foreign Ministry has worked with a public relations agency, New York-based Howard Rubenstein; presumably the difficulties Diker highlights are among those the agency is tasked to rectify.

It may be that Israel”s media management has more success in the UK. An analysis by the Glasgow University Media Group found that

Words such as “murder”, “atrocities”, “lynching” and “savage cold-blooded killing” were only used to describe Israeli deaths but not those of Palestinians. Terrible fates befell both Israelis and Palestinians but there was a clear difference in the language used to describe them. This was so even when the events being described had strong similarities (Philo, n.d., page 2).
Shift in outlook

In Diker’s analysis, there was a fundamental shift in Israel’s PR outlook as a result of the 1993 Oslo peace accords. The Foreign Minister of the time, Shimon Peres, noted that the policy of territorial concessions to the PLO within the framework of the Accords would do away with the need to explain Israel’s position. Diker notes, “For Peres, good policy was good PR. Ironically, though, Peres” conciliatory policies would put Israel on the PR defensive once Israel stopped making territorial concessions to the PLO” (2002, page 9). He describes Israel’s international image as being “at an all-time low” (2002, page 10).

An appropriate response – as seen from the Israeli viewpoint – is given by Friedson, writing in *The Jerusalem Post*. Because he is so representative of the Israeli position, he is worth quoting at length:

As often as not, on the Palestinian Arab side the ground war is more an attempt to use the streets of Gaza and buildings of Ramallah or Beit Jala as a sound stage for filming tonight’s footage rather than as a staging area for strategic gain. In the head-to-head media war versus the enemy, Israel’s best option – indeed, its only option – is not one of duelling images fought with photographs and press releases. Rather, it is the display of consistency, unity of purpose and outrage that transcends the transparency of public relations and leaves no doubt about Israel’s resolve as a nation, the justice of its position and the righteousness of its actions (2001, page 1).

5. Implications for teaching Public Relations

What has all of this to do with teaching public relations?

I suggest it is relevant in a number of ways:

(a) The case of the Israeli-Palestinian PR war illustrates that some public relations principles are valid whether one is promoting nations or neighbourhoods, organisations or armed offensives. For example, messages need to be consistent, delivered by trained spokespeople who are supported by co-ordinated organisational systems. The audience needs to be identified carefully and messages tailored to its communication preferences.

(b) Images are powerful – but words count, too. Messages need to be crafted strategically – a sound maxim of good public relations practice. As *The Jerusalem Post* editorialised

Arguments matter. For years, Palestinian spokesmen have made an argument about ends: ending the occupation, creating a Palestinian state. And for years, Israeli spokesmen have argued about means: they object to the terrorist means the Palestinians have employed to achieve their stated ends. From this opposition, the best conclusion that can be drawn for Israel
is that while Palestinian goals are just, their choice of means isn’t (Israeli PR, November 13, 2003).

(c) The most recent example of the importance of words is a report that Israel is considering a name change for the fence it is building to separate its people from the Palestinians. The fence may be called the “terror prevention fence” rather than the “security fence”. Palestinians call it the Berlin Wall or the apartheid wall. Israel’s consideration came before a World Court hearing on the wall’s legality (http://www.cbc.ca/cp/world/040118/w011840.html Retrieved 28 January 2004). An Israeli embassy website shows both the new terminology, and sensitivity to the Palestinian labels: it says the fence/wall is “a temporary and reversible line of defense - not a “Berlin wall”; a necessary life-saving fence that takes into account humanitarian considerations - not an ”apartheid wall” (“The fence that makes the difference”. Retrieved 10 March 2004 from http://www.embassyofisrael.org/articals/The_fence/main-fence.htm)

(d) Strategic issues management, a core public relations function, is about managing what Heath (1997) calls “legitimacy gaps” between what an organisation does and what its stakeholders expect it to do (page 119-20. Just as organisations need social legitimation in order to fulfil their mission and advance their notions, so do nations. Heath points out that when firms” operations offend stakeholder expectations, legitimacy gaps foster the desire by stakeholders to correct those operations (ibid). In the same way, political entities who see themselves as stakeholders in the affairs of other entities will seek to correct behaviour they regard as unacceptable – witness the Coalition invasion of Iraq, or the multilateral effort to get North Korea to abandon its nuclear aspirations. Gross highlights the issue for Israel: “The systematic building up of killer of babies and children, is helping to slowly chip away at Israel”s legitimacy” (2001, page 15) retrieved 1 January, 2004.

Again, public relations principles that apply at an organisational level are relevant also on a macropolitical plane.

(e) Ground “won” or “lost” in a battle to win an audience is never secure. Just as in a physical battle, the strategic PR situation is dynamic, ever-shifting and often fragile and cannot rely on popular memory of former tragedy. Trained leadership is required, provided by people whose responsibilities are based on merit. This is true whether the arena of conflict is Bethlehem or Bendigo, Gaza or Goondiwindi.

(f) If advertising involved paid promotion by an identified sponsor, public relations activities” sponsors are not always obvious. In the case of international public relations, there appears to be good reason for this: Janis and Smith (1965, page 265, in Kunczik, 1997, page 106) found that “attempts at producing changes in political prejudices and stereotypes generally meet with an extraordinarily high degree of
psychological resistance”. This prompts Kunczik (ibid) to recommend that nation-state image cultivation should be carried out indirectly so that the communication source is not evident. PR practitioners will recognize the strategy instantly; they should also be encouraged to confront the ethical issues that arise from its adoption.

(g) Public relations is being recognized as a strategic weapon as (if not more) important than the physical weapons employed on the ground. It has this importance because it can influence public support for policies that aid one side or the other in the conflict in tangible ways. We are familiar with considering public relations as a strategic tool of business: here it is a strategic tool of nationalist causes (the Zionist and the Palestinian). This is not only interesting for students: it is part of the context in which PR is being practised internationally, a context of which they should be made aware.

(h) Planning is vital: without it, one is perpetually in reactive mode. Adar (2002) questions whether Israel has a communications strategy and argues strongly for the country to develop “a cohesive media communications plan that will incorporate a crisis communications component” (page 3). He contends that the lack of such a plan is “at the very heart of our successive hasbara failures” (ibid, page 1).

(i) Resources alone do not guarantee success: if the Israelis can be concerned about the value they are getting for their $12 million PR effort, the Palestinian advocates – operating on a shoestring by comparison – are doing rather well. One element in their success may simply be the unequal nature of the contest: the recognition by international media audiences that the Palestinians are playing David to Israel’s Goliath – something the Israelis themselves acknowledge. Speaking to Agence France Press on 7 August, 2001, the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s deputy spokesperson, Emmanuel Nahshon, said television reports of the conflict were “portraying a David versus Goliath syndrome. Israel is being portrayed as a strong side and the Palestinians the weak side. We believe this is not a full picture” (“Israel to launch”, 2001). Nahshon announced that Israel intended to launch “an unprecedented global propaganda blitz” to restore its diminishing image. It’s quite a challenge: the people do love an underdog (Adar, 2002).

6. References


¹ The university offers courses in print, radio and television journalism, including Bachelor of Arts degrees in Journalism or Radio. Its Media Institute is supported by sponsors as diverse as the Ford Foundation, USAID and the Finnish Government (http://home.birzeit.edu/media/about/about.html retrieved 10 March 2004).

² Qorei’s ministers echoed the theme: referring to reported statements by the Israeli Prime Minister, Ariel Sharon, about dismantling Jewish settlements, the Minister of Negotiations Affairs, Sa’eb Eriqat called them “merely public relations moves”, while the Minister of Labor, Ghassan Alkhateeb, described the statements as merely “public relations maneuver”(Palestine Doubts Sharon Will Dismantle Settlements. Palestinian National Authority press release, 24 November, 2003, retrieved 8 December 2003 from http://www.scoop.co.nz/mason/stories/WO0311/S00232.htm).


⁷ The website has since been updated. Accessing it on 9 March 2004, the most recent item was a brief news report dated two days earlier.

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