

Research Events

Previous Meetings

Gideon Meir: Israel and the Media Challenge

9 October 2002

Meeting Summary

Summary of Gideon Meir's remarks

Israel is doing a 'lousy job' in terms of Public Relations (PR). Whereas the Arab world is well equipped to deal with the PR challenge, and is able to launch a 'PR war' through its major television networks covering the Arab world, Israel has not fully understood the extent of this media battle. In fact the very term for PR in Hebrew, meaning simply 'information' or 'explanation' has an almost apologetic meaning, and therefore Mr Meir prefers the American term 'public diplomacy' to describe his work.

The PR challenge facing Israel is highlighted by the fact that 60-70% of Israel's image abroad is shaped by media reporting on the conflict in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Mr Meir argues that 95% of these images are controlled by the Palestinians, and that the reporting does not always conform to journalistic standards.

To illustrate his point, Mr Meir provided several examples of Palestinian 'intimidation' of the media. He claims that the Palestinians confiscated footage showing the lynching of Israeli soldiers in October 2000, and the images were only aired as a result of an Italian television channel's journalistic honesty. When a number of Palestinians danced in the streets following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the media did not air the images as they feared Palestinian intimidation. Reporting standards are further compromised by journalists' sympathy with the Palestinian cause, with some correspondents allegedly claiming that 'we are fighting shoulder to shoulder with our Palestinian brothers'.

Israel's media challenge is compounded by the fact that Israel is a democracy with a free press, an active opposition and a coalition government encompassing many different views. While the Palestinians speak with one voice in opposition to Israeli occupation, Israel has no such unified message. Therefore Israel is 'paying a price' for her democracy and the plurality of views that exist in the country – a state of affairs which is used and abused by the media in its unbalanced reporting.

This was demonstrated by reference to events in Jenin, where Palestinian claims of a massacre were later discredited by a UN report. Therefore Jenin represents a false attempt to portray something which never happened. By way of contrast, Mr Meir highlights the credibility of Israel's PR strategy. For instance, Israel was unable to claim that it had no responsibility for the death of Muhammed Al-Durrah as there remained some doubt as to the IDF's role in his death. In this way, Israel pays the price for its credibility by losing the media battle with the Palestinians.

Israel is further disadvantaged in its media strategy by the ability of the Palestinians to manipulate images in their PR war. Images of young children injured or killed in the conflict are particularly powerful, and subject to manipulation on the part of the Palestinians. It is no surprise therefore that Israel is particularly vulnerable in PR

terms when it comes to television coverage, as this is the medium through which images have the most impact.

Israel's media challenge is further compounded by the necessity of prioritising security and operational decisions over PR concerns. Mr Meir admits that it is difficult to win the PR battle when Israel has a strong army battling a civilian population harbouring terrorists. The decision to station Israeli tanks outside Palestinian towns is clearly an operational rather than a PR strategy, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs battles with the IDF to stress the negative media impact of such images.

Finally Mr Meir touched on the twofold media challenge posed by Palestinian terrorist attacks on Israel. Firstly, the media attention that results from such attacks is actively sought by the terrorist in order to enhance his image. However, Mr Meir predicts that terrorist attacks will gain less rather than more media coverage in the future, as their 'shelf life' is limited to 1-2 hours, after which life returns to normal. The second aspect of the challenge relates to the portrayal of the effects of terrorist attacks which Mr Meir believes have led to the strengthening and unifying of Israeli society. The difficulty lies in communicating this message without detracting from the suffering caused by terrorism.

Discussion Points

- **Future media challenges for Israel**

Gideon Meir focused on the medium of radio, television and the internet as shaping future challenges for Israel, in particular the challenge of reaching Palestinian and Arab audiences. Although Israel has an Arabic language radio service – Voice of Israel – technical and budgetary constraints are preventing transmission. In terms of television, Israel lacks a counterpart to the Arab network – Al Jazeera – although Israel is now beginning to air via satellite to the Arab world. Israel is also preparing to launch an official government website in Arabic, and hopes that private bodies will launch similar sites in Arabic.

- **The role of the media**

Asked whether the media had the potential to be a showcase for accountability, Mr Meir answered in the affirmative, arguing that fairness and balance are essential aspects of media reporting. He also argued that there was a need to show the context in reporting – for instance reporting on Palestinian suffering was not enough – it is necessary to explain why they are suffering. Asked whether the media also had a role to play in capturing hearts and minds, and promoting the cause of peace, Mr Meir argued that the media's role was to report the facts.

- **Issues of accountability**

Discussion focused on the problems of ensuring accountability in internet reporting, an issue which Mr Meir believes will become increasingly salient. Internet sites do not have the same responsibility to be accurate as the more traditional media in which journalists must be held accountable for their work. This led to discussion of the role of propaganda and spin in reporting. Mr Meir observed that spin was simply a means of sending out a message and therefore information on the government's website is unlikely to represent a balanced account of events.

- **A question of means**

Responding to a comment that the Palestinians did not have the necessary means to send out their message in the media, Mr Meir argued that in fact Israel did not have the necessary means or budget. Israel's media budget is only \$8.5 million, of which approximately 50% is allocated to salaries.