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Israel's military public diplomacy evolution: Historical and conceptual dimensions

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ABSTRACT

This study provides an historical overview of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit (ISU) from the early years of the State of Israel until 2009. Analyzing five periods during which the ISU played a key role in Israel's public diplomacy, this research sheds light on the challenges the ISU faced in different periods and circumstances and examines how the ISU tried to modify its methods and actions in response to geopolitical changes and media development, albeit not always successfully. The study suggests better understanding the adaptation process by applying a three-layer framework for analysis: the tactical layer, the strategic layer and the perceptual layer. The findings of this work demonstrate that in adapting to new circumstances, the ISU focused mainly on the tactical response level, with the result that it did not undertake any review or debate over the need for deeper perceptual changes in ISU policies.

1. Introduction

For many years, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Spokesperson's Unit (ISU) has served as an integral factor in Israel's public diplomacy (Limor & Nossek, 2006; Yehezkeili, 2009). Public diplomacy is defined as “direct communication with foreign peoples, with the aim of affecting their thinking and, ultimately, that of their governments” (Malone, 1985, p. 199). Since Israel's inception as a state, influencing Israeli and international public opinion was and remains an integral and key factor in the state's war management. These military efforts to influence public opinion are also known as Military Public Diplomacy (Tal-Saranga, 2012). This study examines different eras in the ISU's history, covering over 60 years of its existence. The ISU has frequently coped with complicated situations arising from the geopolitical reality of the Middle East. Since its first days, the ISU has always operated in an environment of permanent military conflict (Alovich, 2013; Catignani, 2009; Limor, Leshem, & Mandelzis, 2014). Former IDF Spokesperson Nahman Shai depicted the complexity of the position of the unit. “In times of crises he/she is sent by the military and the government to meet the media on the public relations battlefield and ends up standing in the middle ground, caught in the crossfire” (Shai, 1998, p. 3). The constant conflicts in this region create intense interest among the foreign media, resulting in approximately 350 foreign reporters being permanently situated in Israel. During periods when tensions escalate, it is estimated that over 1000 foreign journalists arrive in Israel to cover events (Katz, 2012). This research examines the ISU's evolution within the context of Cutlip and Center's “Adjustment and Adaptation Model” while seeking to clarify both the main challenges the ISU faced throughout the years and how it responded to them.

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2. The military-media relationship

In the modern era, military leaders have always sought to influence public opinion (Hallin, 1986; Morrison & Tumber, 1988; Tumber & Palmer, 2004). The factor of public relations was a key component in war efforts long before President Dwight D. Eisenhower acknowledged that “public opinion wins wars” (Parry, 2014, p. 23). Numerous studies have analyzed different zones of war and conflict, frequently addressing similar dilemmas, such as credibility, ethics, patriotism, morale issues, freedom of press vs. national security, professionalism, objectivity, military media strategies, manipulations, spins and their implications on democratic societies, etc. (Adams, 1986; Allan & Zelizer, 2004; Andersen, 2006; Hiebert, 2003; Kamalipour & Snow, 2004; Maltby, 2013; Segal, 2009; Taylor, 2003; Wyatt, 1995). The extensive research on the military-media relationship consistently indicates that military forces are not eager to adopt two-way communications and dialogue, especially during wartime (Miller, 2004; Rid, 2007; Solomon, 2005).

Several important studies have provided overviews of the military-media relationship within the context of an historical timeline (Carruthers, 2000; Hudson & Stanier, 1998; McLaughlin, 2002; Young & Jesser, 1997). Knightley (2001) demonstrates how easily the propaganda machines of wars kept on running for decades due to the sensitivities of citizens and the media correspondents among them about wartime. The comprehensive perspective of a long historical period reveals patterns that may otherwise be missed. Consequently, this research is premised on the assumption that examining a longer historical period can provide greater insights into the complex relationships between the media and the military.

3. Israeli media-military relationship

Existing research regarding the IDF Spokesperson's Unit offers models and theories for understanding the complexities of the mutual relationship between the IDF and the media both in Israel and abroad (Cohen, 2009; Doron, 2006; Lebel, 2008; Shai, 2013; Tal-Saranga, 2012). Limor & Nossek (2006) contend that the ISU is continually fluctuating between openness and opaqueness because its activities are affected by so many internal and external factors. Some studies offer operative recommendations for improving the ISU, while others claim that there is a need for an in-depth change in its overall policy rather than merely in its public relations (Balint, 2000; Bart, 2009). Several studies focus on specific incidents and the IDF's responses to them (Katz, 2012; Limor & Leshem, 2015; Rapaport, 2010). More recent studies focus on contemporary issues of the scope and nature of the new media and the utilization of social networks (Caldwell, Menning, & Murphy, 2009; Heemsbergen & Lindgren, 2014).

A critical view of the ISU can be found in the work of Toledano (Toledano, 2010; Toledano & McKie, 2013), who claims that due to the cultural and social climate in Israel, in which the IDF is highly trusted by a society that deeply values the defense system, it is very difficult to criticize its deficiencies. This is despite the fact that the IDF and its ISU branch were exposed as being evasive and incorrect on several occasions (Toledano & McKie, 2013). Caspi and Limor argued that “the defense system institutionalized control over information gathering by establishing a procedure wherein appointment of military correspondents is subject to approval by the IDF authorities.” According to them, the ‘fear of losing accreditation undoubtedly persuaded many military correspondents to toe the line’ (Caspi & Limor, 1999, p. 264). Caspi and Limor also criticized the “filtering” procedure used by the ISU. “Filtering” is considered a unique method applied in the ISU, by which items are published in the media only after receiving the approval of the IDF spokesperson, “with no changes, abridgment or commentary liable to be perceived as contrary to the official line” (Caspi & Limor, 1999). This filtering tool actually served the ISU for many years as an indirect censorship platform.

4. Theoretical framework

Despite the obvious relevance of public relations theory, it is the basis of only a few studies analyzing the ISU (Limor & Leshem, 2015; Toledano, 2010; Toledano & McKie, 2013). This study proposes discussing the evolution of the ISU in light of Cutlip and Center's “Adjustment and Adaptation Model.” In the early 1950s, Cutlip and Center suggested that a key component in public relations is the ability to mediate between the organization and its environment and introduced the “Adjustment and Adaptation Model” (Cutlip & Center, 1952). The model emphasized the importance of continually monitoring the organization's social environment and adjusting to it accordingly (Cutlip, 1991). This led to a wider conceptual debate among scholars regarding the centrality of adaptation as a key component in public relations (Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Long & Hazelton, 1987; Everett, 2001) and its strong ties to organizational change, strategic management, strategic control, and organizational legitimacy (Dess, Lumpkin, & Eisner, 2007; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Patel, Xavier, & Broom, 2005; Verhoeven, Zeffass, & Tench, 2011). The importance for organizations of staying informed, scanning the environment, and adjusting to unknown conditions, new circumstances, and changing social and cultural values, continues to occupy scholars in contemporary studies (Broom, 2009; Dougall, 2005; Nothhaft & Wehmeier, 2007; Ristino, 2008; Strandholm & Kumar, 2003). Even in the field of national security, which is commonly considered more sensitive to sharing information and communicating with audiences, the need to adapt to new circumstances is broadly discussed (Cunningham, 2010; Gilmore & Osial, 2012; Pöttsch, 2015; Stavridis, 2007; Ward, 2011).

Despite the rich literature that supports the importance of adaptation, certain barriers and complexities were addressed by several scholars. Hannan and Freeman (1989) identified the force of inertia as a barrier to organizational changes, which could be created by internal and external factors, and Scott (2003) emphasized that organizations perceive their environment in a selective and subjective manner. Ristino claimed that adaptation always occurs within a specific set of norms (Ristino, 2008). The important discussion regarding the need to adjust on the one hand, and external limitations and cultural barriers on the other hand, may prove useful in arriving at a better understanding of the ISU's evolution. Within this theoretical context, we seek to determine whether the ISU

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