Gaza 2014

In Gaza, Epithets Are Fired and Euphemisms Give Shelter

By JODI RUDORENJULY 20, 2014 NY Times

JERUSALEM — The Gaza-based interior ministry advises its supporters in a YouTube video that whenever talking about the dead, “always add ‘an innocent citizen.’ ” In Israel, the message is quite different: Those same victims are described as “human shields” sacrificed by the “heartless” Hamas “terrorists” that rule Gaza.

Recently, thousands of Israeli mobile phone users received a text message that bragged: “We forced you to hide in shelters like mice,” while Israelis trade cartoons and satirical videos — one intersperses an Arab political speech with a slobbering goat, another replaces the heads of Palestinian fighters with Angry Birds characters. And Hamas and the Israel Defense Forces are circulating remarkably similar video clips of exploding buildings with thundering soundtracks that evoke Hollywood thrillers.

The ground war between Israel and Hamas intensified again Sunday with many more civilians and soldiers dying. But that is only one battlefield. Another, the clash of narratives, the struggle for domestic and international opinion, is seen by both sides to have long-term stakes as high and perhaps even more lasting than combat on the ground.

Propaganda wars have unfolded alongside the battlefield for generations. But analysts said the latest flare-up between Israel and the Gaza Strip has brought a new level of dehumanizing, hateful language and a muddying of official talking points with incendiary threats, as social media broadcast an explosion of voices, an onslaught of unreliable information, and creative mash-ups of pop-culture icons with war imagery.

The abduction and murder of teenagers that helped set the stage for the latest escalation had also shown a devolution from a political struggle to a kind of personal blood feud that both fuels and is fueled by the mocking, hateful comments flying in both directions, analysts said.

Etgar Keret, an Israeli novelist, said he had been troubled by some of the terms favored by journalists, politicians and even friends in Tel Aviv. There is no Hebrew word for “assassination,” Mr. Keret said, so killings of Hamas operatives are described with a phrase meaning “focused obstruction.” Instead of “civilians,” he said, slain children and women are sometimes called “uninvolved.”

“There’s something about this ‘uninvolved,’ there’s something passive about it,” Mr. Keret said. “You admit that he is not somebody who is trying to destroy you, but you don’t give him any other identification. It was not a child who wanted to learn how to play the piano,” he said, adding, “it was just somebody who didn’t shoot at us.”

There is a long history here of such euphemisms. The journalist Amos Elon called it “word laundry,” and David Grossman explored the phenomenon in “The Yellow Wind,” his 1987 study of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation. “A society in crisis forges for itself a new vocabulary,” he wrote, using “words that no longer describe reality, but attempt, instead, to conceal it.”

Dalia Gavriely-Nuri, an expert in the discourse of war who is affiliated with universities in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, noted that the Hebrew name for the current operation translates as “strong cliff” — a reference to nature, like the names of 35 percent of Israeli military campaigns since the state’s establishment in 1948, according to her research.

“Using natural forces, it removes the responsibility of leaders, of citizens,” she said. “Nobody is responsible when you are sitting under, let’s say, a tsunami or earthquake. This is a psychological process that helps the people that are involved in a conflict or an operation to survive the situation.”

Social media has put the propaganda war on steroids.

“You’re seeing anger and frustration, you’re seeing sorrow and empathy, and you’re also seeing a wide currency of videos, photos, infographics, emergent hashtags, memes,” said William Youmans, a professor of media and public affairs at George Washington University who specializes in the Middle East. “You read over-triumphalist accounts. It can almost sound like they’re rooting for different sports teams, and cheering their side on. That’s very different from the actual suffering that’s going on.”

Palestinian supporters traced to Israeli teenagers countless posts on Twitter demanding death to all Arabs. Israel backers collect comparisons of their leadership to Nazis. The medium gives a megaphone to radical extremists, and also pushes officialdom to casual shorthand that can be cutting.

Both sides are organized and active, though the hashtag #GazaUnderAttack has been used in nearly four million Twitter posts, compared with 170,000 for #IsraelUnderFire, according to Topsy, a social-media search engine. Mr. Youmans attributed that to broader sympathy for Palestinians, but also said Israel has a more coherent campaign that is powered by institutions.

It was during Israel’s last ground invasion of Gaza, in 2009, that a soldier in the military’s public-affairs unit, Aliza Landes, paid for a WordPress account on her own credit card and started posting battle footage on YouTube because she realized, “if you’re not going to put it out there, you’re not going to be part of the conversation.”

Now, there are 40 people in the interactive unit of the Israel Defense Forces, including videographers, animators, graphic artists and computer programmers, pumping out missives in six languages, on many platforms, in a tone much punchier than the typical news release. “Israel uses the Iron Dome to protect its civilians,” it said on Twitter over the weekend. “Hamas uses civilians to protect its rockets.”

Hamas has also tried to harness social media, though its categorization as a terror group by the United States and other Western countries has led Facebook and Twitter to block some official accounts. The Hebrew Twitter feed of its military wing had a polite, amusing exchange the other day with Israelis correcting its grammar.

A “Dos and Don’ts” YouTube video produced by Hamas, which The Times of Israel news site wrote about earlier this month, shed some light on the Palestinian strategy. Don’t post footage of rockets being launched from cities, it warned, lest Israel use it to justify strikes on populated areas. Don’t publish close-ups of masked gunmen, or your page can be shut down for inciting violence. Do start with “in response to the cruel Israeli assault,” it advised. “No harm in publishing the pictures of casualties.”

Palestinian activists have complained about dehumanizing language used by Israeli leaders. The night the bodies of three kidnapped Israeli teenagers were found, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called their killers “beasts.” Ayelet Shaked, a right-wing member of Parliament, posted to Facebook a 2002 article that called the whole Palestinian people “the enemy,” and described so-called martyrs as “snakes” and suggested their mothers should be murdered.

“In the past when people said racist things, we found that many officials denounced that. This time we found silence,” said Hassan Jabareen, director of Adalah, a legal center for Arab rights in Israel. Calls to “kill all Arabs” used to come from extremist groups defined by Israeli law as terrorist, Mr. Jabareen said, but “today you hear it everywhere.”

“Many, many Arabs feel that it’s not safe today to walk freely in Jewish cities or in a mixed city because of this phenomenon,” he added.

On Israeli news programs, discussion of the dead is often in a diplomatic context — how many casualties before the world demands a halt to hostilities — rather than a more human, moral one.

“I don’t want to call it dehumanization, because that’s a very loaded word — it’s a benumbing: People are just, they don’t show it, but they’re in a daze,” said Michael B. Oren, a historian and former Israeli ambassador to Washington who has spent several hours daily on Israeli and international television.

“In classic dehumanization scenarios, whether in Nazi Germany or in Rwanda before the genocide, you refer to the enemy as rats and cockroaches, and that enables you to kill them on a large scale,” Mr. Oren said. “We’re not calling Palestinians cockroaches.” Still, he added, “It’s very difficult to feel compassion

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**Peace Journalism and Gaza**

by Erin Niemela

As Israel’s boots hit the ground in Gaza, Operation War Journalism rages on. Both Arab and Israeli war journalists weaponize rhetoric: False dichotomies (do we bomb or do nothing?) and a pro-violence worldview, among other deadly bullets. War journalism sells violent conflict – “if it bleeds, it leads” – and we’re buying it. The violence in Gaza is partially a result of decades of media-distributed war products made from state-provided materials. War journalists escalate and prolong violent conflict. Their reporting choices, whether conscious or not, are harmful to citizens on all sides of violent conflicts, the Gaza crisis included.

Fortunately, violence isn’t the only product on the market. “To say that violence is the only thing that sells is to insult humanity,” Prof. Johan Galtung said his 2000 essay, “The Task of Peace Journalism.” Peace journalism, Galtung’s  conception of the 70s, is defined as “when editors and reporters make choices – about what to report, and how to report it – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and to value nonviolent responses to conflict.” Peace journalism insulates journalists from war propaganda by avoiding false dichotomies, highlighting nonviolent options and making other positive peace reporting choices. For the immediate cynics: Peace does, in fact, sell. Conflict & Communication Online studies in 2005 and 2006, by Wilhem Kempf and Monika Sphors, respectively, showed audiences accepted peace journalism articles no less, and even more, than traditional war journalism articles on the same issues.  Nevertheless, war journalism continues, and Gaza is the perfect battleground.

The photo: A grieving Palestinian woman, wailing toward the sky. The headline: “Gaza Under Siege: Naming the Dead.” Al-Jazeera’s regularly updated webpage lists the names and ages of the now-285 Palestinian victims in Gaza. In a 2013 study on Arab news framing of the 2008-2009 Gaza conflict, author Mohamad Hamas Elmasry and colleagues found that some Arab news networks regularly framed Palestinians as victims of Israeli aggression, showed images of Palestinian grief and included names and ages for Palestinian victims more than that of Israeli victims. In fairness to Al-Jazeera, two Israeli victims’ names and ages – the only Israeli deaths, so far – sit below the list. But the names aren’t meant to provide balance or personalize those deaths. They’re meant to dichotomize between good and evil and provoke the question: Whose side are you on? With victimization comes demonization – the “evil” side is implied and violence against evil is culturally justified.

For Israeli news, it’s the same story. In an extensive 2004 study on audience effects from news of Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, “Bad News from Israel,” Greg Philo and Mike Berry observed that participants identified more with the side where violence was presented as justifiable. Words like “retaliation” for Israel’s military operations provided this justification. Palestinians were presented as having “started it.”

A July 18th article from The Times of Israel on the Gaza invasion is a case in point. The title: “20 Hamas fighters killed, 13 captured in first hours of ground offensive.” With violence in the headline, the lead justifies: “IDF says soldiers in Gaza destroy 21 rocket launchers, find several tunnel openings; Eitan Barak, 21, from Herzliya, is first IDF fatality; 80 rockets fired at Israel.”  Dangerous weapons, nefarious tunnels and an Israeli death are just the facts on the ground and they happen to provide justification.

Yet, there are other facts, such as in a curious blurb near the bottom: “Gaza health officials said at least 20 Palestinians have been killed since the ground operation began, including three teenage siblings killed by shrapnel from a tank shell attack. It was not immediately clear if the 17 terrorists killed by the IDF were among the casualties reported by Gaza authorities.”  Peace journalism refrains from emphasizing our facts while marginalizing their facts, and names “evil-doers” on all sides.

War journalism gives us two sides to choose from, but it only offers one option for resolving conflict: violence. As media often frame the Israeli government and its citizens, and Hamas and Palestinians, as one and the same, we get to choose the violence of either Hamas or Israel.

But violence is never the only choice for dealing with conflict. Peace journalists report nonviolent options from Palestinians, Israelis and any other stakeholders. Not because we don’t recognize claims to victimhood, but because we recognize that emphasizing violence as the only conflict management option only produces more violence.

Reporting nonviolent options means sourcing peacebuilders, like the Christian Peacemaker Teams that work with locals to build nonviolent, Palestinian-led, grassroots resistance. Or Gush Salom – Jewish-Israelis using direct action to stop the occupation. Insight on Conflict and Peace NGO Forum host a long list of peacebuilding organizations in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Any respectable reporter can find a peacebuilder to quote, and a balanced, impartial report on Gaza depends on including the voices of peace.

Traditional war journalists support perpetual violence – their bread and butter. Yet, reporters could choose to support perpetual peace and still maintain journalistic integrity. Peace journalism practices deflect war propaganda, provide actual balance and fully inform democratic audiences. We need more peace journalists in Gaza, America, Israel and every country suffering through violent conflict. This isn’t advocacy, public relations or advertising – these are the goals of war profiteers. This is simply good journalism by good journalists with a commitment to democracy, accountability and the wellbeing of global society.

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**Israel, Gaza and the media**

**Propaganda war**

Both sides consume fantasy news

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..BY ITS nature, war is polarising. Six out of seven Israelis oppose a ceasefire in Gaza that would include easing the blockade of the enclave, for example. Nor are Palestinians very interested in making necessary concessions.

In Israel, coverage of the current war is unusually partisan. The sole liberal daily, Haaretz, has favoured the military campaign, albeit with questions about its conduct. (Some Haaretz readers cancelled their subscriptions, nonetheless, because the newspaper insisted that Palestinian casualties be covered alongside Israeli ones.) Most Israelis get their news from rolling bulletins issued by correspondents quoting army spokesmen. Since the campaign began, Israeli broadcasts have been solidly upbeat. Specialists in Arab affairs report that the offensive is bringing Hamas to its knees. Former generals provide constant commentary, often describing Hamas in blood-curdling terms.

Few Israeli television anchors have drawn attention to the high death toll among Palestinian civilians. When Reshet Bet, a state radio station, interviewed one Palestinian who spoke fluent Hebrew, the presenter cut him off as he spoke of the toll on Gaza’s children. Israel’s broadcasting authority stopped B’Tselem, a human-rights group, from placing an advertisement calling for the names of Palestinian children killed in the attacks to be broadcast. “The [Israeli] channels only discuss tactics—whether to push on a few kilometres more, or dig in—rather than examine political ways out of conflict,” says Menachem Friedman, a former peace negotiator.

Hamas’s propaganda machine, for its part, has kept up a flow of heroic exhortations and fanciful tales of its triumphant fighters. The group has sent e-mails and text messages to Israelis. “We will continue to explode all of Israel until you accept our legitimate conditions,” read one. In the West Bank most Palestinian cafés have stopped showing programmes beamed by the television station loyal to Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinians’ moderate president. Instead they have switched to the martial footage on Hamas’s two satellite channels as well as one that extols Islamic Jihad, the more extreme of the Gaza groups. It shows pictures of Palestinian commandos supposedly storming enemy lines, as cowardly Israeli soldiers collapse in tears.