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## The use of offensive public relations during a conflict: Hamas's efforts to damage Israel's image during the 2010 flotilla

*Kurzfassung:* Krisenkommunikationsmodelle befassen sich mit Strategien zur Wiederherstellung des Ansehens von Organisationen, nicht jedoch nicht mit jenen Strategien, die zur Beschädigung des Ansehens anderer Akteure oder Konkurrenten verwendet werden. Mittels einer qualitativen Inhaltsanalyse von 178 Artikeln, die vom Palestinian Information Center (PIC, der führenden Website der Hamas) publiziert wurden, untersucht dieser Aufsatz die Bemühungen der Hamas, während des Flottenzwischenfalls vom Mai 2010, eine offensive PR-Kampagne zu fahren und Israels Anstrengungen zur Wiederherstellung seines Ansehens zu beschädigen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Hamas eine aus fünf Elementen bestehende Strategie angewendet hat: Evidenz für das Bestehen eines Krisenereignisses, Zerstörungen, Opfer, historische Entwicklung und Unterminierung der gegnerischen Reaktionen.

*Abstract:* Crisis communication models contain strategies to rehabilitate an organization's image, but do not deal with strategies used to damage the image of another player or competitor. Using qualitative content analysis of 178 items published by Palestinian Information Center (PIC, the Hamas's leading website), the purpose of this manuscript is to examine Hamas's efforts to run offensive PR and to harm Israel's image restoration efforts at the time of the flotilla crisis in May 2010. We discover that Hamas deployed a strategy that consisted of five elements: evidence of existence of the crisis event, damages, victims, performance history and undermining the competitor's responses.

### Introduction

In the field of crisis management, most crisis communications models offer organizations and companies strategies to restore their image after a crisis (Coombs, 1999; Beniot, 1997; 1995; Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Stocker, 1997; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). These models contain strategies and tactics to rehabilitate an organization's image, but do not deal with strategies used to damage the image of another player or competitor. This is surprising given the perception that one player's image crisis is actually a second player's opportunity; if a player's image is damaged, its competitors can often increase their popularity. Moreover, the lack of models dealing with methods that organizations use to damage the image of a competitor is surprising given the increase in non-mediated access to the target audience offered by the Internet. The Internet offers easier ways to attack opponents and to damage their image using means such as websites and social media. Using qualitative content analysis of items published by the Palestinian Information Center (PIC), the purpose of this manuscript is to examine Hamas's efforts to run offensive PR and to harm Israel's image restoration efforts at the time of the flotilla crisis in May 2010.

### 1. Theoretical background

A crisis is bound to happen; this is a known fact. Just as an organization needs to be prepared to handle a physical crisis, it also needs to be prepared to deal with the communication/image crisis that will surely follow (Pearson & Mitroff, 1993; Coombs, 1999; Coombs & Holladay, 2010). When an organization is facing a crisis, its opponents and competitors can use the situation to damage the organization's image. In other words, one organization's crisis is another organization's opportunity. In recent years the role of crisis communication management has expanded, as practitioners and scholars noticed that a company can suffer from the communicative consequences of a crisis long after the physical crisis has ended.

The basic paradigm of crisis communication management divides a crisis into three time frames: pre-crisis, crisis and post-crisis (Coombs, 1999; Avraham & Ketter, 2008). In the pre-crisis stage the organization needs to prepare for the crisis (Coombs, 1999); it has to actively work on narrowing the perceptual gap between the stakeholders' expectations and the perceived company behavior, as well as plan its activities once the crisis erupts. Every organization has numerous stakeholders that hold different views of its behavior, and there are always conceptual gaps between the different stakeholders' expectations and how they interpret the company's behavior. An organization needs to work constantly to keep those gaps as narrow as possible (Hallahan, 1999). Although such gaps are bound to widen during a crisis, the narrower the gap in the pre-crisis stage, the easier it will be to handle the crisis and recover from it afterwards (Avraham & Ketter, 2008).

In the crisis coping stage, an organization needs to try to control the news by feeding the media with relevant information. It is not that the organization can camouflage the crisis in bright colors of success, but if the company uses a comprehensive and coherent communication strategy, the communication crisis can be more manageable (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). After the physical crisis has ended, the post-crisis stage begins. In this stage, an organization ought to direct most of its resources towards investigation and rehabilitation, along with communication efforts to remove the crisis from the news cycle (Coombs, 1999). This stage is also called "recovery marketing" when the organization tries to restore its image or the

image of its product. In addition to any concrete steps taken to solve the crisis, strategic actions of learning and debriefing should be undertaken to implement the lessons gained from the recent events. The emergency response and action plan should be revised and updated, in readiness for a future crisis (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Gonzalez-Herrero & Pratt, 1996). In addition, initiatives need to be taken by the organization at this stage in order to regain the trust of stakeholders, employees and the public.

The Internet has become a great tool for managing public relations; some may say that the Internet is the first direct public relations tool since it enables organizations to reach their stakeholders without the need to go through the media gatekeepers (White & Raman, 1999). Therefore, it is no wonder that the Internet is used during the three stages of crisis (Gonzalez-Herrero & Smith, 2008). However, this unmediated connection between organizations and the public enables any Internet users to spread their views, perceptions and positions regarding the organization, whether it is right or wrong, good or bad. The Internet is the sanctuary of anonymity; not only can any blogger post an item dealing with any organization, it can be done without the need to reveal identity or sources. This is truly a new era for public relations professionals and researchers.

The ability of Internet users to anonymously broadcast information about a certain organization makes it relatively easy to create an image crisis for one's competitors by posting negative information and views. This option of offensive public relations has yet to be researched as a coherent subject. We suggest using this term to describe the actions taken by an organization that is competing with another organization. This is a real threat at all times that becomes greatly intensified in times of crisis.

### **1.1 Image restoration**

The field of image restoration is composed of several existing models that provide suggestions on how firms and organizations can restore their image post-crisis. For example, Stocker (1997) states that the basic response strategy includes three or four steps: expression of regret that the situation has happened; action to resolve the situation; ensuring the situation will not occur again; and if necessary the offer of restitution to the injured parties. A more elaborate model is offered by Beniot (1995, 1997), who lists five communication strategies that can be used in response to a crisis: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of events, corrective action, and mortification. Similarly, Coombs (1999) identifies seven communication strategies: attacking the accuser, denial, excuse, justification, ingratiation, corrective action, and full apology. Avraham & Ketter (2008) proposed a model that was exclusively designed and created for assisting localities to alter negative destination images. The choice in such cases can be among three groups of media strategies with the focus on the source of the message, on the message itself, or on the target audience. Source strategies focus on affecting, influencing or replacing the sources of the negative message or the accuser (mainly the mass media but can also be an NGO, the UN or other international organizations). Message strategies focus on the message itself, handling the problematic image components directly. An example of this would be blaming a certain country for human rights violations or discrimination against minorities. Lastly, audience strategies focus on resemblances between the marketed country and foreign audiences regarding shared values and cultures, common enemies and past cooperation. The campaign sponsored by Saudi Arabia in order to restore its image in the US after the 9/11 crisis by means of emphasizing Saudi Arabia's ties to America over the years (Avraham, 2013) is an example of this strategy. Avraham used this model to analyze both Israel's efforts to restore its image (2009) and also the image of Middle Eastern countries (2013).

### **1.2 Media and terror**

Hamas is a terror organization (USDS, 2011) that uses a wide assortment of media tactics and strategies, as do many other modern terror organizations (Weimann, 2011). Terror has always been the chosen tactic of the oppressed and the weak, as its perceived ability to influence decision makers and public opinion relatively inexpensively has drawn those who seek to create fundamental changes (Kimhi & Even, 2004). In recent years terror organizations have not only used acts of terror to promote their agendas but also public campaigns. This has become even easier and more widespread in recent years over the Internet. When approaching their target audiences over the Internet, terror organizations use marketing tools and techniques similar to any other organization (Mozes & Weimann, 2010). Although traditionally terror organizations' public communication efforts were researched within the framework of propaganda, using commercial marketing frameworks to research the acts of terror organizations over the Internet has been proven to be much more beneficial and productive (Archetti, 2010; Mozes & Weimann, 2010; Weimann, 2008). Like any public organization, terror groups have multiple stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined as all the people and organizations that are affected by or can affect the organization in question (Freeman & Reed, 1983). Most terror groups have the same categories of stakeholders: the international public and decision makers, the local and international media, their enemy's public and decision makers, and the society in which they are based.

Each one of these stakeholders has different opinions about the terror organization and the organization has varied goals in regarding their many stakeholders. For example, in the context of terror events, using the international media would not serve the need of the organization to address its own society. The need to address different stakeholders is one way to explain the establishment of many independent media outlets by terror groups, including newspapers, magazines, TV stations, and radio stations. In the framework of media channel development, many terrorist groups use the Internet to reach stakeholders by building websites in various languages and with different content (Mozes & Weimann, 2010). In 2010 there were more than 7,600 websites serving terrorists and their supporters (Weimann, 2011). There are many ways to interpret the huge number of websites owned and used by terror organizations. The ability to bypass the traditional media outlets (Weimann, 2006) is the focus of the current discussion.

### 1.3 The case study

The Palestinian territories consist of two geographically separated areas: the West Bank, ruled by Fatah, and the Gaza Strip, under the control of Hamas (Matthew, 2006). Since January 2009, the Gaza Strip has been under an Israeli naval blockade in an effort to stop the arrival of military equipment. One of the consequences of this blockade is that every ship on its way to the area is stopped by the Israeli navy to have its crew, passengers and cargo inspected (Turkel et al., 2010). At the end of May 2010, a flotilla comprised of several ships sailed towards the Gaza Strip in order to break the blockade.

On the night of May 30, the flotilla was addressed by Israeli gunships, who requested that they stop in order to undergo routine inspection. While five of the ships replied willingly to the call, the captain of the Mavi Marmara declared his refusal to stop on the grounds that it was on a humanitarian mission. When the flotilla got closer to the Gaza shores, at around 4:30 a.m., Israeli Special Forces began to physically intercept the ships of the flotilla. The troops that attempted to board the Mavi Marmara encountered physical resistance. In the end, after several hours of clashes, the Israeli troops took control of the flotilla. During the incident, nine Turkish passengers were killed along with twenty more who were wounded; ten Israeli soldiers were wounded as well (Turkel et al., 2010). The event received heavy international media coverage, damaged the diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey, and resulted in a world-wide image crisis for Israel, which was accused of employing unnecessary force to stop the boats. An intense debate continued long after the event about the legitimacy of the flotilla, its cargo and its goals.

### 1.4 Methodology

At the basis of this research lay the assumption that Hamas used offensive public relations to damage Israel's image during its struggle with the flotilla crisis. To do so, Hamas used the crisis communication model in an offensive way before, during and after the crisis. The study postulates that during the pre-crisis stage, Hamas made efforts to widen the conceptual gap between the perceived Israeli behavior and its stakeholders' expectations. It is further assumed that during the crisis Hamas deployed a communication strategy that consisted of the five elements that have been shown to be important in any communication crisis, such as evidence of the existence of the crisis event, damages, victims, performance history and undermining the competitor response (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Coombs, 1999). At the post-crisis stage, the working assumption was that Hamas would try to keep the crisis in the news cycle, so Israel would not be able to rehabilitate from the crisis (Coombs, 1999; Coombs and Holladay, 2010).

In order to analyze Hamas's communication strategy relating the events of the flotilla, we used the items that appeared on the Palestine Information Center (PIC) website in English ([palestine-info.co.uk](http://palestine-info.co.uk)). It is widely acknowledged that the PIC site is Hamas's leading news website (Bunt, 2002; Khatib, 2003; Mozes & Weimann, 2010). The PIC website first appeared in 1998 and began regular operations in 1999. It provides both basic information on Hamas and current news, and is primarily oriented towards Hamas's ideology and viewpoint on current events. The site publishes Hamas's news releases; posts official announcements and interviews with high-ranking members of the movement; and carries attacks aimed at Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) and other countries. It also encourages acts of terrorism against Israeli targets and praises the terrorists who commit them. In addition, it conducts surveys and provides information including videos, music, posters and pictures supporting Hamas's point of view. The site is offered in eight languages including Arabic, English, French, Farsi (Iran), Urdu (Pakistan), Russian and Malaysian (Mozes & Weimann, 2010).

After a pre-test of 40 items published about the flotilla, the authors found that the appropriate keyword for searching the news archive should be the phrase "Freedom Flotilla," which was the name that the organizers of the flotilla used in order to describe the event. The time frame of the items to be included in the study was May 1 to June 23, 2010. The search resulted in 178 items: 49 items from May 1 to May 30 (the pre-crisis period), 15 items from May 31 (the crisis period), and 115 items from June 1 to June 23 (the post-crisis period). These items were then examined using quality content analysis.

As seen above, Hamas issued numerous items about the flotilla. In order to analyze these items and extrapolate Hamas's

media strategy, a content analysis was used. Krippendorff (2004), defined content analysis as "... a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use" (2004, p.18). In the first step of the content analysis process, a structured analysis matrix was formed (Elo & Kyngas, 2008) using the model of crisis communication management (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Coombs, 1999). As mentioned above, the model divides the crisis communication into three stages: the pre-crisis, the crisis itself and the post-crisis. The model also emphasizes various aspects in each of the three stages, which were used to form the analysis matrix (see Table 1).

Each item published on the PIC website was divided into two or more paragraphs. All of the paragraphs of the 178 articles that were included in this study were collected. The paragraphs were used as the basic content units to be analyzed using the analysis matrix. To further deepen the understanding of Hamas's offensive public relations methods, each paragraph was given headlines that described the categories shown in it. These were the inductive sub-categories (as shown in Table 1) that demonstrate how each category of the model was addressed by Hamas. As we can see from Table 1, the two right-hand columns were drafted using the crisis communication management model (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Coombs, 1999); the left-hand column was drafted using inductive sub-categories discovered in our analysis of the PIC items.

| Stage                | Deductive Categories                                    | Inductive Subcategories     |
|----------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| <b>Pre-Crisis</b>    | A Shaping the stakeholders' expectations                | 1 The cargo                 |
|                      |   | 2 The participants          |
|                      |   | 3 Legitimacy                |
|                      | B Creating a negative image of the corporate behavior   | 1 Israeli plans             |
|                      |   | 2 Illegitimacy              |
|                      |   | 3 The siege on Gaza         |
| <b>Crisis Coping</b> | A Evidence of existence                                 |                             |
|                      | B Damages   |                             |
|                      | C Victims   |                             |
|                      | D Performance history                                   |                             |
|                      | E Undermining the preferred corporate response strategy | 1 Israeli responsibility    |
|                      |   | 2 Innocence of participants |
| 3 Adjectives         |   |                             |
| <b>Post-Crisis</b>   |   | 1 Direct references         |
|                      |   | 2 Side effects              |
|                      |   | 3 The wide context          |

Table 1: The research analysis matrix

Validity and reliability (Guttman, 1945) of the data were achieved through the use of two judges, and the agreement rate between them with regard to the various variables included in the coding page was 90 percent. We ran an inter-coder reliability test, based on the model presented by Light (1971).

## 2. Findings

The findings section will present Hamas's offensive public relations methods. The findings are divided by the three stages of the crisis, deductive categories and their inductive subcategories (see Table 1).

### 2.1 Pre-crisis

The items posted on the PIC website during the pre-crisis stage revolved around two main topics: shaping the stakeholders' expectations and creating a negative image of the corporate behavior, Israel in our case.

#### 2.1.1 Shaping the stakeholders' expectations

The findings show that the stakeholders' expectations were addressed using three topics: the flotilla cargo, the participants and the legitimacy of the flotilla. We believe that Hamas used these three sub-categories in order to portray the flotilla as a humanitarian act that posed no threat to Israel, which should let it pass.

### **2.1.1.1 The cargo**

While reporting on the boats' cargo, the PIC items emphasized the types and amounts of cargo. While some of the PIC reports regarding the cargo were general and used the terms "humanitarian aid" or "relief convoy", in most cases there were demonstrative details of the cargo:

"The convoy ships will be carrying more than 10,000 tons of humanitarian aid including medical supplies, building materials..." (May 29, 2010, 15:51).

The items about the cargo were not consistent in their content. Various items reported different cargo, including electronic wheelchairs, school supplies, sports equipment, electricity generators and desalination units, for example:

"(The ships) will carry on board tons of building materials, electric generators, medical appliances, medicines and food aid" (May 19, 2010, 16:26).

It is true that these inconsistencies can be explained by low professional reporting standards of evidence checking, but it seems that despite the inconsistencies a consistent image of the cargo emerged from the news items. The reports emphasized that the cargo included basic supplies and necessities that posed no threat to Israel.

### **2.1.1.2 The participants**

Another sub-category that emerged from the items relates to the reports about the flotilla participants. This sub-category is very important because of the debate between Israeli spokespersons and the flotilla organizers over the framing of the events. Hamas joined these "framing efforts" and emphasized the peaceful characteristics of the participants in items such as the following:

"... 750 activists who came from 40 countries to channel purely medical and humanitarian assistance to 1.7 million besieged Palestinians in the Strip" (May 29, 2010, 15:33).

The reports placed an emphasis on two characters of the participants. The first was on the number of different nationalities; and the second was the repeated mention that these multi-national activists brought "purely medical and humanitarian assistance" to the siege area inhabitants. In addition, we also discovered an emphasis on the members of parliament from different European countries that were on board:

"Two German Members of Parliament joined the participants along with two Swedish Members of Parliament bringing the total number of official and parliamentary figures to more than 50 and the overall participants to 750 persons from 60 nationalities" (May 25, 2010, 15:31).

Along with these emphases, general remarks about the participants were also found, for example:

"The activists from 40 countries including Members of Parliament, notables, and officials came to Gaza with nothing in mind except the humanitarian aspect of the trip and to end the siege and oppression against Gaza" (May 30, 2010, 16:50).

The reports concentrated on presenting the passengers as solidarity activists while claiming that their only goal for participating in this flotilla was to ensure the arrival of basic supplies to Gaza. Thus, in the PIC the reports the flotilla's participants were characterized as multi-national, mostly from Western countries and accompanied, if not even supervised, by parliament members of EU countries. In addition, these participants were presented as being dedicated to high humanitarian and peaceful causes.

### **2.1.1.3 Legitimacy of the flotilla**

The third category emphasized in the PIC reports during the pre-crisis period was the legitimacy of the flotilla. While Israel claimed that the flotilla had no legitimacy, the organizers claimed that their goal was to break the siege on Gaza. As expected, the PIC reports promoted these claims:

"The Freedom Flotilla is acting in line with universal principals of human rights and justice in defying a blockade identified as illegal by the UN and other humanitarian organizations" (May 15, 2010, 15:22).

Among those reports one can discover many explanations regarding the international laws of marine travel, the illegality of the blockade and emphasis of different actions the flotilla's organizers took in accordance with laws of the different countries:

"The first ship had left Ireland after concluding all legal and official procedures, noting that the ship was insured at international insurance companies" (May 18, 2010, 16:38).

Looking at the items issued by Hamas before the crisis, it is clear that some of their reports were aimed at shaping the stakeholders' views of the flotilla. This was accomplished by emphasizing the humanitarian properties of the cargo, the peaceful manner of the participants and the legal issues that were fully addressed by the flotilla organizers; this way Israel's stakeholders were bound to expect a safe arrival of the flotilla to Gaza.

### **2.1.2 Creating a negative image of the corporate behavior**

Before a crisis occurs, there is great importance to minimizing the conceptual gap between the stakeholders' expectations and the perceived firm's behavior. This is because the smaller the gap, the more credit the stakeholders give the company when the crisis erupts (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). The perceived company's behavior is important in the management of this conceptual gap because it reflects on the company's actions, once a crisis erupts. Our analysis shows that the PIC reports regarding the Israeli actions focused on three topics: descriptions of Israeli acts against the flotilla, the legal issues of Israel's planned attack, and reports about the Israeli-imposed siege on Gaza and its consequences. These three topics helped Hamas to depict Israel's behavior as brutal and deliberately offensive.

#### **2.1.2.1 Descriptions of Israeli acts**

The items about Israeli acts range from general notions about the preparations to stop the flotilla to reports about the characteristics of the planned Israeli actions to stop the flotilla; for example:

"Palestinian sources said that the IDF (Israel Defiance Force) navy forces were using live ammunition in those [practice] maneuvers that could pose great dangers on the Freedom Flotilla" (May 30, 2010, 08:59).

Israel's possible responses to the flotilla were portrayed in the PIC items as forceful, aiming to cause damage to flotilla participants, with the hope that each Israeli act would be framed as brutal to begin with and most likely illegitimate.

#### **2.1.2.2 The illegitimacy of the attack**

With the reports about the planned actions by Israel there were some reports that dealt with the illegality of those actions. In several reports the planned actions were referred to as being acts of piracy and state terrorism, as in the following example:

"The head of the popular committee against the siege also said that blocking the ships would be in violation of the international law and would be viewed as 'piracy'" (May 18, 2010, 16:38).

Again we can see in the PIC reports Israel being described as an international law breaker and a country that would adopt naval piracy.

#### **2.1.2.3 The siege on Gaza**

The PIC reports about the siege concentrated on the suffering of the Gaza population and the shortage of basic supplies. Without these basic necessities, it is difficult to live a regular life, and this lack creates casualties:

"Jamal Al-Khudari underlined that 500 Palestinians had died during more than one thousand days of siege, which is the biggest proof of the shortage of medical equipment and necessary medication and which in turn refutes the Israeli claim that supplies to Gaza never ceased" (May 20, 2010, 16:27).

This report is trying to turn the general allegations against Israel into something more concrete and to emphasize the number of casualties as the result of Israel's behavior, contradicting the Israeli claim that the medical boycott never happened.

In summary, from the PIC reports, it seems that Israel was planning to stop the aid to Gaza at all cost, regardless of the illegitimacy of its actions and the suffering of the Gazan population under siege. The analysis of PIC's pre-crisis items shows that Hamas had made efforts to widen the conceptual gap between the stakeholders' expectations and the perceived Israeli behavior. It did so by polarizing the reports about the Israeli actions. By creating, on the one hand, an innocent image of the flotilla and, on the other hand, painting the Israeli plans as illegitimate and aggressive, Hamas was widening the conceptual gap of the stakeholders, as was postulated by the hypothesis.

## **2.2 Crisis coping**

The analysis of the items in the second stage of the crisis partially supports the research assumptions. It was assumed, according to the crisis communication model (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Coombs, 1999), that Hamas would try to counter any Israeli attempts to deal with the crisis by focusing on the five elements that are stressed in the model: evidence of existence, damages, victims, performance history and response strategy.

### **2.2.1 Evidence of existence**

The analysis revealed that there was minimal reference to evidence of the existence of the event. We found only two references in the PIC items to evidence of existence, both in the same item:

"Israeli troops' hijacking of the ships and their use of live bullets and tear gas grenades are acts of piracy and aggression against hundreds of non-violent people who wanted to deliver humanitarian aid to the impoverished Gaza people... According to different news reports, 16 people were killed and dozens injured when Israeli troops stormed..." (May 31, 2010, 08:19)

This minimal reference to evidence can be explained when looking back at Coombs' model (1999). The need to deal with evidences is the first issue the model emphasizes since the existence of a physical crisis does not necessarily mean that a communication crisis exists, and vice-versa. In the current event there is no doubt that a crisis happened, so there is no need for Hamas to emphasize the existence of the crisis. We believe that this may be the reason for the minimal reference to the first aspect in the model.

### **2.2.2 References to damages**

In contrast to what was assumed by the model, there were no references in the items to the damages to the ships, supplies or any other materials. This absence can be explained by comparison to the severe injuries and casualties of the flotilla participants. Since the human victims are much more newsworthy, it is rational that the damages to the ships and their cargo, assuming there were any, would not be mentioned.

### **2.2.3 References to victims**

Many PIC items dealt with the victims of the event. When analyzing this data two patterns of references to victims emerged: the numbers of casualties and the origin of the key participants.

#### **2.2.3.1 The number of casualties**

While in reality nine passengers were killed and 20 injured, the PIC reports painted a false picture. In the beginning, the reports claimed that the number of casualties was low relative to the real number; on the other hand, we found hints to "massacre"; for example:

"Turkish media outlets had said earlier that two persons were killed in the start of the IDF attack while many others were wounded some of them in serious conditions, charging Israel with committing a 'massacre'" (May 31, 2010, 06:04).

Later, the PIC reports claimed that the number of casualties, as result from the Israeli act, was much higher:

"Dozens of people were either killed or injured when special Israeli naval units stormed and opened fire on a Turkish ship" (May 31, 2010, 22:47).

The lack of accurate information most probably results from the fact that the PIC did not have reporters on the boats, so the website relied on various sources and media outlets. Other references to the victims in later items present a more precise number although these numbers were still exaggerated. By doing so, Hamas undermined any Israeli effort to say the event is act of defiance, that is under control and that only necessary force was employed.

#### **2.2.3.2 Key participants**

The second style of references to the victims was the reports about key participants injured or killed during the Israeli action. Along this pattern we found reports about an injury of one of the captains, and references to injured media members:

"The Greek captain of the ship 8000 sustained critical injuries after the Israeli troops, who stormed the ship, opened fire at him" (May 31, 2010, 11:51)

It seems that the main story that leads this pattern of dealing with key participants was the story of the killing of Sheikh Ra'ad Salah, an Israeli Arab religious leader. The reports about Sheikh Salah's wellbeing were published during the hours of the crisis:

"Sheikh Ra'ad Salah, the leader of the Islamic movement in the 1948 occupied Palestinian lands, was seriously injured in the Israeli occupation forces' (IOF) assault on the Freedom Flotilla" (May 31, 2010, 07:53).

"Israeli sources said that Sheikh Salah was wounded with IDF bullets during the storming of the Freedom Flotilla, describing his wounds as serious" (May 31, 2010, 15:44).

The model of crisis communication urges the communication managers to deal with the victims of the event, to keep the stakeholders informed of the exact numbers of victims and their condition (Coombs, 1999). When looking at our findings, it seems very clear that Hamas, by exaggerating the number of victims and reporting about victimized key participants, was emphasizing the severe consequences of the Israeli actions.

Although it is clear that Hamas's reports about the victims are in accordance with the model, the inaccuracies in the numbers and the false reporting about the killing of Sheikh Ra'ad Salah can be a product of misinformation caused by the

mayhem that is typical in this kind of events, as mentioned. And still, even if this is the cause, the decision to emphasize the victims in all of the items that were posted during the crisis is, by itself, strong enough evidence of fit to the model.

#### **2.2.4 Performance history**

As was assumed by the model, in the midst of the events, there were references to past Israeli actions, intended to emphasize that Israel's current behavior is in line with its "brutal and offensive" history. For example:

"Israel's aggressive attack on Freedom Flotilla aid convoy reflected its usual devilish face and unprecedented piracy against all international laws and norms" (May 31, 2010, 15:05).

"What happened to the Freedom Flotilla at the hands of 'Zionist gangs' was a miniature replica to what happened in the Gaza Strip at the hands of the Zionist military arsenal that bears a 'brutal grudge against humanity' and that targets the innocent and the unarmed" (May 31, 2010, 15:23).

"In the final analysis, violence, coercion and cruelty are the natural trademarks of Zionism. This is the way they think they can feel virile and manly...by starving and killing children..." (May 31, 2010, 21:36).

As we can see, these references contain no exact examples, but rather general remarks about patterns of Israeli violence against Palestinians over the years.

#### **2.2.5 Undermining the preferred Israeli response strategy**

There is a variety of possible response strategies when facing a crisis and those strategies differ by the degree of perceived responsibility that the organization has over the crisis (Beniot, 1997; Coombs and Holladay, 2010). It is clear that Israel preferred its definition of the events as malevolence, which is defined as the result of an outside actor or opponent that employs extreme tactics to express anger toward the organization, such as terrorism (Coombs, 1999). Following the model, Israel will have to emphasize the flotilla participants' responsibility to the event and its consequences. Hamas, on the other hand, should try to define the crisis as organizational misdeeds. Presumably, Hamas will do so by emphasizing that Israeli leaders have knowingly orchestrated a military operation to harm the flotilla participants (Coombs, 1999). Our findings show that Hamas did just as was assumed.

##### **2.2.5.1 Israeli responsibility**

One way to emphasize Israel's full responsibility for the crisis and its consequences was to report quotations of Arab and Muslim leader saying that Israel is responsible for the events; for example:

"Sheikh Kamal Al-Khatib, the deputy leader of the Islamic movement, held the Israeli occupation authority (IOA) fully responsible for the life of Sheikh Salah" (May 31, 2010, 15:44).

This pattern was found in the numerous reports that quoted Hamas and other Muslim leaders who spoke about the Israeli responsibility for the events and especially for the life of Sheikh Salah, when rumors claimed that he was hurt. Alongside the quoted accusations, there were third-person references to newspeople who participated in the flotilla itself that held Israel fully responsible; for example:

"The media outlets that sent their reporters and crews to cover the journey of Freedom Flotilla held Israel fully responsible for their safety, especially since all communications were lost with them" (May 31, 2010, 11:14).

By putting the responsibility on Israel in the midst of the event, Hamas is laying the groundwork to blame Israel for unnecessary use of force and an attack against peaceful participants of a relief convoy.

##### **2.2.5.2 Innocence of participants**

If the preferred Israeli response strategy is to define the crisis as malevolence, Israel needs to show that the flotilla passengers were actually lawbreakers who came with a clear purpose to hurt the Israeli troops and acted violently. This is why the PIC has published several items emphasizing that the passengers were unarmed, non-violent activists:

"The IDF used live bullets and teargas bombs in the attack on the ships carrying hundreds of solidarity activists and thousands of tons of medical aid and other relief material to the besieged people of Gaza" (May 31, 2010, 07:53).

"The Israeli attack on the Freedom Flotilla that left tens of martyrs and wounded in lines of the foreign solidarity activists on board" (May 31, 2010, 09:14).

The reports emphasize the characteristics of the flotilla passengers, while using adjectives that commemorate the fact that these passengers were human rights and solidarity activists.

### 2.2.5.3 Adjectives

The third way Hamas undermines the preferred Israeli response strategy is by using very harsh adjectives to describe the Israeli acts; for example:

"One of the convoy organizers said the Israeli troops' hijacking of the ships and their use of live bullets and tear gas grenades are acts of piracy and aggression against hundreds of non-violent people who wanted to deliver humanitarian aid to the impoverished Gaza people" (May 31, 2010, 08:19).

"The Yemeni government told the Quds Press that the attack was sheer piracy, and exposed the terrorist, ugly image of Israel" (May 31, 2010, 10:36).

"Hamas also condemned the attack on ships as an act of piracy committed in full view of the whole world" (May 31, 2010, 10:39).

Hamas made repeated use of three concepts "piracy," "hijacking" and "massacre". All of those terms are usually used to describe illegal and amoral acts, just as the model predicted.

In conclusion, it seems that Hamas acted strongly to undermine any Israeli attempt to put forward its logically preferred response strategy. Hamas did so by emphasizing the Israeli responsibility to the crisis and its consequences in three degrees of reference: direct, indirect and implicit.

## 2.3 Post-crisis

One of the main goals of an organization after dealing with and handling the physical crisis is to end the negative media coverage. Naturally an organization would do its best to take the crisis off the news cycle by minimizing the news worthiness of the events (Coombs, 1999). When using the model to predict an offensive crisis communication strategy, it is reasonable to assume that Hamas would make efforts to keep the events of the flotilla in the news cycle. This assumption has been found to be true, because Hamas kept the public interest in the flotilla events by referring to it in one of three growing circles of reference: direct references to the events, the side effects and the wide context of the events.

### 3.3.1 Direct references

The items of the direct reference circle dealt with the aftermath of the flotilla crisis. In these items Hamas emphasized the continuity of the crisis, long after the Israeli troops had gained full control of the flotilla ships and participants. For example:

"Basim Mansour, who visited on Tuesday a number of Freedom Flotilla detainees, said that two women told him that the Israeli soldiers tied two of the passengers and threw them into the sea to die by drowning (June 2, 2010, 09:08).

"Assad also said that Israel's action undermined human life and international law" (June 1, 2010, 11:25).

"The Turkish media reported that the Israeli troops who attacked Mavi Marmara, one of the Freedom Flotilla ships, possessed a 'hit list' containing the names of activists who should be killed and eliminated" (June 1, 2010, 14:45).

As we can see, the direct references came in one of three possible ways: testimonies of participants, items that presented new information about the events, and quotes from various figures condemning Israel and its acts. Items that brought new information about the events dealt mainly with the Israeli attack, while some of those items also reported about "hit lists" of people needed to be killed that were prepared in advance by Israeli troops. The direct references to the events in the post-crisis stage were first quotes of condemnation of Israel and secondly references to legal issues that derive from the Israeli acts. For example:

"The archbishop added that the Israeli attack on the flotilla exposed the Israeli racism and fascism pointing out that the aim of the activists was to break the siege on Gaza and to expose the Zionist entity for what it really is" (June 4, 2010, 13:21).

All of the direct references to the events were used to maintain the allure that the crisis is not over yet and that there is a great deal to be said about the event and Israel's actions. Thus, although the physical crisis had ended and Israel had gained control over the flotilla, the crisis communication can go on. In other words, Hamas was trying to gain the maximum benefits and support from the crisis and to expand the damage to Israel's image

### 2.3.2 Side effects

Most of the items published during the third stage were items regarding the various side effects of the events. In this sub-category the emphasis in the items was not on the crisis event itself but rather on the consequences on Israel and other actors. For example:

"In a related incident, the Israeli government decided to prevent its soldiers from traveling to Turkey either for military or private reasons for fear their lives may be exposed to danger in the wake of the attack on Freedom Flotilla, that led to the murder of nine Turks" (June 7, 2010, 17:36).

"The European street is witnessing a series of protest rallies against the Israeli bloody attack on the Freedom Flotilla that left many of the activists on board its ships either killed or wounded" (June 2, 2010, 09:46).

As seen above, and in other items posted after the crisis was contained, the wide range of side effects reported by Hamas included items about worldwide rallies and demonstrations, diplomatic consequences and international condemnations. As our analysis shows, Hamas made distinct efforts to keep the communication crisis alive after the physical crisis had already been contained. It is reasonable to assume that Hamas was using references from the second circle since those references have a greater news worthiness value due to their evolving nature and thus attract media and other readers of the website.

### 3. Discussion and summary

Our analysis has shown that Hamas, using its leading website, PIC, has been engaged in fulfilling a communication strategy that concentrates on causing damage to Israel's image during the "May 2010 flotilla" crisis. In the pre-crisis stage, Hamas employed a dual effort to widen the conceptual gap between the perceived behavior of Israel and the expectations of its stakeholders. On one hand, the Hamas website framed Israel as criminally violent in its planned operations to stop the ships. On the other hand, it framed the flotilla as a peaceful humanitarian effort carried out by "peace activists," shaping the stakeholders' expectations for the flotilla to reach its destination. Due to these offensive public relations tactics, the conceptual gap between Israel's stakeholders' expectations and the perceived Israeli behavior was very wide, thus forcing the Israeli crisis communication efforts to deal with hostile stakeholders' views.

The items published on the PIC website during the crisis dealt with issues that are emphasized in the crisis communication management models (Avraham & Ketter, 2008; Coombs, 1999). Our findings show that during the crisis the Hamas website focused on the evidence of the existence of the crisis, with references to the damages, victims and the performance history of Israel. All of those references, along with direct accusations of full Israeli responsibility, criminal adjectives to describe the Israeli actions and an emphasis on the non-violent nature of the participants of the flotilla, accumulated into a coherent communication strategy of full accusation of Israel for the crisis and its consequences. In the post-crisis stage, it was found that the Hamas website tried to keep the flotilla crisis in the news cycle by bringing new stories about the crisis and references to Israeli actions by leaders around the world. These post-crisis items focused mainly on the diplomatic side effects that Israel was suffering from as a result of the crisis.

While other studies in the field of crisis communication have focused on the preferred communication strategies chosen by organizations to restore their image after a crisis, they neglected the offensive communication strategies that concentrate on the damage to competitors. While our case study concentrates on a political crisis, we believe there is a need for further research that will analyze offensive public relations in commercial circumstances.

Our conclusions also contribute to the study of terrorists' use of the Internet. Terror organizations use different means to fight their battles (Weimann, 2006). Our research has shown for the first time that a terror organization also engaged in offensive public relations. This is an important factor that must be taken into account by the Western efforts to fight terrorist groups. Other research has shown that terror organizations use their websites as psychological warfare vehicles to spread publicity and propaganda, attack the core values and psychological strength of their enemy, and recruit international public opinion to attack the enemies' activities against the organization (Weimann, 2004). The finding here shows that terror organizations use their websites to coordinate an offensive communication strategy to undermine their enemies' efforts to overcome a communication or image crisis.

The findings are another example of the benefits of using models that were built and tested in the business arena in the study of terror. As Mozes & Weimann (2010) has shown, when using a conceptual framework in the study of terror it is possible to conduct an analysis of the terror organization's strategies. In our research the use of the crisis communication model was helpful to emphasize the different strategic efforts that Hamas made before, during and after the crisis. Due to the use of a well-structured model, it was possible to test the research questions. Another benefit of using the model is the ability to test the communication strategy of different terror organizations in different events. For example, this model can be used for investigating whether al Qaeda employed a crisis communication strategy when the United States army was dealing with the Abu Ghraib communication crisis in 2004.

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