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Live Tweeting Gaza: The IDF Speaks Up ^[1]

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During a discussion being held in a class taught by [Professor Mai'a Cross](#), my peers and I debated the potential utility of a public diplomacy campaign intended to minimize the damage of the United States' use of drones in its counterterrorism activities. The first point made was one that has been frequently taught by [Nick Cull](#): PD will not work if the underlying policy is bad or unpopular. And it need not be said that drones are unpopular.

Rather than admit that there are some policies for which public diplomacy would be useless, I suggested that a PD campaign did not have to engender positive outcomes to be efficacious, but that a transparent explanation could dampen hostile feedback and therefore be useful as a way of managing public reactions—something my classmates quickly pointed out was an essential tenet of counterterrorism. Ultimately, it would be impossible to do, the class concluded: the government would not want to draw attention to the fact that there is such hostility towards its policy, or invite more.

Without realizing it, an unpopular military decided to use Twitter to broadcast, explain, and inform about its use of missiles to assassinate terrorist leaders in a hostile environment. Yes, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) live-tweeted its self-described “widespread campaign on terror sites & operatives.”

The result is striking in its bluntness. It's also expansively detailed, worrisome, haunting, morally grey and maybe brilliant. After announcing the campaign, the IDF quickly tweeted three different types of messages in quick succession: an operational report, a mission statement, and a justification.

?@IDFSpokesperson:

The first target, hit minutes ago, was Ahmed Al-Jabari, head of the# Hamas military wing:
<http://www.idfblog.com/2012/11/14/idf-begins-widespread-attack-on-terror-sites-in-the-gaza-strip/> ...

?@IDFSpokesperson:

There are 2 main goals of this IDF operation: to protect Israeli civilians and to cripple the terrorist infrastructure in the #GazaStrip.

]@IDFSpokesperson:

Israelis living near the #Gaza Strip have been living under fire for the past 12 years.

Each type of message is expanded upon regularly, whether to update the status or provide factual and symbolic justification for the IDF's actions. Clearly, these messages are meant for

two audiences: supporters looking for information or talking points and doubters or neutral observers who could be convinced that Israel was in the right. The IDF is able to neatly communicate to both with the same tweets.

But, the IDF is aware that there is a third recipient of all of its messages: hostiles who use Twitter as open-source intel. It is impossible for me to say now that targeted individuals in Gaza are looking at Twitter, but their supporters both in Palestine and in other nations are certainly receiving these messages:

?@IDFSpokesperson:

All options are on the table. If necessary, the IDF is ready to initiate a ground operation in Gaza.

@IDFSpokesperson:

We recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead.

These are threatening messages that are a crucial lynchpin to Israel's deterrent strategy: any aggression must be responded to with overwhelming and disproportionate force. But what risk does the IDF take in exposing all its messages in a common forum? Is it possible to narrowcast and broadcast simultaneously? Has the Obama 2012 victory already answered that question? (Yes, probably.)

To some degree, one must express admiration for the IDF's embrace of technology that makes the realities of war more transparent and apparent. The televisualization of war during Gulf War I was a harbinger for today. No one can question that the ability of mass, and now social, media to make the public more aware of war and violence is a good thing, if only because it forces us to confront the difficult problems of life that are impossible to solve but essential to grapple with.

There is no verdict that can be determined at this moment as to the success or failure of the IDF's public relations strategy. It is far, far too soon to make such a judgment. Still, the significance of this is already apparent. Foremost, there is some probability of this being a turn-the-corner moment wherein the mostly self-contained chaos in Syria begins to explode throughout the region (See: [Thomas Friedman](#)—it's almost as if he had an insider source). When that prediction is - hopefully - found to be misguided, the fact will remain that this moment is a watershed in how military operations are communicated to the public.

If nothing else, the line "we recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead" is an instant classic.

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