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The Israeli Media's Flotilla Fail

On 06.22.10, By Max Blumenthal

My summary of the Israeli media's shambolic performance following the flotilla massacre was originally published [here](#) in Hebrew at Dvorit Shargal's excellent Israeli media blog, Velvet Underground. The English version follows:

If the raid of the Gaza Freedom Flotilla was a disaster for the Israel Defense Forces, its aftermath demonstrated an equally bewildering performance by the Israeli media. The IDF Spokesman's Office churned out one misleading claim after another, each one more implausible than the next, seeking to implant in the public's mind a version of events that bore little relation to reality. To a degree, this was to be expected; but it was startling to see how some of Israel's most respected reporters lined up to serve as military stenographers, barely challenging the IDF's rapidly changing versions of events. IDF claims about the flotilla passengers' links to Al Qaeda, anti-Semitic statements shouted at the Israeli Navy, and their terrorist intentions were eagerly broadcast by the Israeli media without a second thought. When independent reporters forced the IDF to retract or "clarify" all of these claims, Israeli news outlets refused to correct their errors, or covered them up without acknowledgment.

It so happened that I arrived in Israel for a research trip the day after the flotilla raid. As a result, I was able to do something which I always thought to be a very basic journalistic practice, so basic it's supposed to be applied routinely: Asking an implicated party in a story to produce evidence for its claims. What I found bewildering is that at least judging from Israeli media reports, few, if any, mainstream reporters applied this practice, and when a visiting colleague did their job for them – nobody bothered to correct or withdraw their original report.

On June 2, the IDF disseminated a press release entitled, "Attackers of the IDF soldiers found to be Al Qaeda mercenaries." The accusation was not accompanied by any conclusive evidence — the IDF reported that Mavi Marmara passengers were equipped with night-vision goggles (gasp!). This did not stop Yedioth's Ron Ben-Yishai, who was embedded with the Navy commandos, from amplifying the baseless charge. Citing an "interrogation" of Marmara passengers — "lynchers," he called them — Ben-Yishai wrote the same day, "Some among the [flotilla passengers] are believed to have ties with World Jihad groups, mainly Al Qaeda." The article made no reference to any efforts on part of Ben Yishai to investigate this claim, nor did he seem to think to ask why the IDF was about to release dangerous operatives of Osama Bin Laden — presumably they would attack again, wouldn't they?

On June 3, Israeli journalist Lia Tarachansky of the Real News Network and I placed calls to the IDF Spokesman's Office to demand further evidence of the Marmara's Al Qaeda ties. We received identical responses from spokespeople from the IDF's Israel and North America desks: "We don't have any evidence. The press release was based on information from the National Security Council." Hours later, the IDF retracted its claim, changing the title of its press release to, "Attackers of IDF Soldiers Found Without Identification Papers." Despite the official retraction, Ben-Yishai's article remains uncorrected.

On June 4, the IDF released an audio clip purporting to consist of transmissions between the Mavi Marmara and a Naval warship. "Go back to Aushwitz!" a Marmara passenger shouted, according to the IDF. YNet and Haaretz reported on and reproduced the audio clip without investigating its authenticity. Forget that the voice uttering the anti-Semitic slur sounded like a mentally disturbed teenager; had reporters performed a cursory search of the IDF Spokeman's Office website, they would have found a longer clip released on May 31 that featured a dramatically different exchange with the Marmara with no mention of Auschwitz. Further, the voice of flotilla organizer Huwaida Arraf was featured in the "Aushwitz" clip, yet Arraf was not aboard the Marmara (she was on the Challenger One). Could the IDF have doctored audio to exploit public hysteria surrounding the issue of anti-Semitism?

On my blog, I pointed out the discrepancies in the IDF's footage and raised the question of doctoring. The next day, the IDF conceded that it had in fact doctored the footage, releasing a "clarification" and a new clip claiming to consist of the "full" exchange between the Navy and the flotilla. Unfortunately, the authenticity of the new clip was impossible to verify. Despite the IDF's admission, YNet and Haaretz have not corrected their original reports, though Haaretz has at least altered its headline. Once the doctoring was exposed, the New York Times covered the episode in detail, directing

international attention to the triumph of independent online reporting and the apparent failure of Israel's parochial press corps.

On June 7, Haaretz's Anshel Pfeffer reported on an IDF press release claiming without evidence that five flotilla passengers had links to international terror. The press release was larded with highly implausible claims, including that Ken O'Keefe, who runs an aid organization with Tony Blair's sister-in-law, was planning to train a Hamas commando unit in the Gaza Strip. When I called the IDF Spokesman's Office, I learned that once again, no evidence was available to support their press release. "There is very limited intelligence we can give in this specific case," Sgt. Chen Arad told me. "Obviously I'm unable to give you more information." Did Pfeffer demand more evidence? If he did and was answered in the same manner as I did, why did Haaretz publish an unsubstantiated spin as fact?

Joined by Haaretz military correspondents Avi Isacharoff and Amos Harel, Pfeffer became a channel for another daytime deception by the IDF. On May 31, the three reporters produced an article based exclusively on testimony from Naval commandos — the flotilla passengers' side of the story was ignored — claiming they had faced live fire and lynching attempts from Marmara passengers. Since the story was published, the IDF has produced scant evidence to support either accusation. The article was accompanied by a suspicious photo from the IDF Spokesman's Office depicting a bearded Muslim man brandishing a knife and surrounded by photojournalists. Daylight beamed in from a window behind the man. Haaretz's caption, which was sourced to the IDF, asserted that the photo was taken "after" the commandos had boarded the Marmara. However, the commandos raided the ship at night, while the photo was taken during the day. Once again, the IDF's story was fishy.

I called Sgt. Arad at the IDF Spokesman's Office to investigate. He told me he had no evidence to support the photo's questionable caption. Soon after our phone conversation, Haaretz quietly altered the caption, removing its claim that the photo was taken "after" the commando raid. For nearly a week, the false photo caption had remained intact. Why did Haaretz suddenly change it? The only plausible explanation is that the paper received a tip from the IDF Spokesman's Office. If true, the tip-off suggests a scandalous level of coordination between the Israeli military and the country's media. In the wake of the flotilla raid, Israeli journalists had a unique opportunity to lead the global media's investigation into the bloodbath that occurred on the deck of the Mavi Marmara. After all, no one had better access to the military or the eyewitnesses aboard the flotilla. Instead, too many among the Israeli press corps allowed themselves to be conscripted into the IDF's hapless information war, leaving the important task of investigating the raid to independent reporters who remembered to view claims by any nation's military with extreme skepticism.

So why do well-connected, experienced reporters follow the IDF baton so willingly, and fail to follow up when IDF claims are retracted? Is it simple bias, a desire to present their military in the best possible light, a desire so strong they abandon their duty to their readers to verify their information? Are they afraid of sanctions, of losing contacts and access to information? Do they fear personal reprisals? Their readers, and the world media that still relies on Israeli journalism as a vital source of information, need to know.