



ISRAEL MATTERS!

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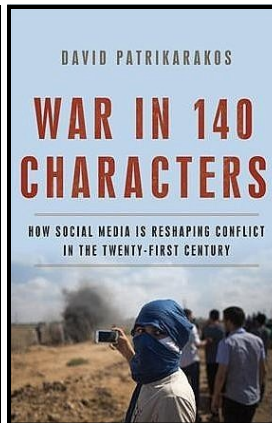
Fighting for Israel on Social Media

US Ambassador to Israel Adds Momentum to Taylor Force Act Limiting PA “Martyr” Payments

Reacting on Twitter to the recent murder of a rabbi by Palestinians, David Friedman, the US ambassador, said the episode spoke to the core issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. “An Israeli father of six was killed in cold blood by Palestinian terrorists,” the ambassador wrote. “ Hamas praises the killers and PA laws will provide them financial rewards. “Look no further as to why there is no peace,” the diplomat added.

Friedman was referring to a program at the heart of a bill fast proceeding through Congress that Ramallah warns will lead to the dissolution of the Palestinian Authority. The Taylor Force Act threatens a dramatic cut in aid to the PA if it continues its decades-old scheme of compensating families of Palestinians convicted in Israel of murder and terrorism, and the families of slain terrorists. Israel and the US argue that the program, referred to by the PA as a “martyr” fund, is immoral and contrary to the pursuit of peace; Palestinians claim it compensates families of the wrongfully convicted and legitimate combatants in the “resistance,” representing a welfare program essential to the PA’s support.

President Trump was quoted as saying he “strongly supports” the Taylor Force Act, all but assuring he will sign it into law once it reaches his desk. Trump underscored his willingness to cut PA funding in a tweet of his own. “We pay the Palestinians HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect,” the president said. [JPost.com]



Late in the afternoon on July 28, 2014, Daniel Rubenstein was scrolling through Twitter at IDF headquarters in sunny Tel Aviv when he saw a tweet from NBC News reporter Ayman Mohyeldin: “Israeli airstrike has hit the outpatient clinic at Shifa Hospital. Local Palestinian media is reporting several children among dead #gaza.” Minutes later Mohyeldin tweeted again, this time accusing Israel of striking Al Shati refugee camp.

Rubenstein, an Israeli immigrant originally from Sugar Land, Texas, was an IDF reservist during the 50-day war known as Operation Protective Edge, leading the Spokesperson Unit’s English social media team. He switched into crisis mode, moving quickly to get the facts before responding. An hour after Mohyeldin’s first tweet, Rubenstein sent information via text message to reporters after receiving confirmation that the airstrikes were actually coming from Hamas, the terror group that rules the Gaza Strip.



Mohyeldin subsequently tweeted, “IDF: Palestinians killed in Gaza at Shati refugee and strike at Shifa hospital were result of Hamas rockets that landed in Gaza.”

Rubenstein, then 30 years old, could breathe again, having prevailed in yet another quick round of fire in the social media war raging alongside the ground conflict. [Illustrative image left: Screen capture of MSNBC reporter Ayman Mohyeldin during a broadcast in which he erroneously claimed that a Palestinian shot by security forces as he carried out a knife attack was unarmed. (YouTube/MBC NESS)]

This anecdote among with many others is told in the new book, “War in 140 Characters: How Social Media is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century” by journalist David Patrikarakos. The book is a fast-paced read exploring the power of the individual in shaping the

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narrative of war online. Patrikarakos spoke with The Times of Israel about his new book and what the increasingly challenging media war will mean for Israel in future conflicts.

“What we’re seeing now is that war is the practice of politics itself,” Patrikarakos says. “[Hamas is] not trying to achieve a military victory. It can’t have one. What it wants to do is try to goad the Israelis into action and display its suffering to the world, get more sympathy, get more condemnation of Israel, and that is a political goal, and that is where countries like Israel are at a disadvantage.” This, he said, is what will make it harder for Israel to fight the next war.

“Israel is quadruple damned. It’s doubly damned in the sense that if it suffers casualties, it loses, and if it inflicts casualties, it loses. It’s also doubly damned in that it’s seen as the bully and the Palestinians as the underdog but actually online the reverse is true. Online, Israel is the underdog; it is massively outnumbered. The amount of pro-Palestinian accounts far outweigh the Israeli ones.” This disadvantage, Patrikarakos said, has significant implications. In the book, Patrikarakos introduces the reader to 16-year-old Gazan girl Farah Baker who live-tweets from her home during the 2014 Gaza conflict. She comes to represent the Palestinian side of the narrative.

What is so different about Baker, as Patrikarakos points out in the interview, is that traditionally as a young female in a patriarchal society she would be the most powerless person in a war, yet she became a highly influential player thanks to social media. Her tweets during the war are personal; they emphasize the suffering of children and her constant fear of death.

Farah’s tweets started gaining exposure from traditional news outlets. Patrikarakos points out that with her fair skin, blue eyes and vulnerability on display, “in a sea of the faceless, Farah was Taylor Swift.” It was Western media that transformed her from a young terrified girl into a phone-wielding soldier, essentially becoming her spearholder, he said. And more than that, reporters let Baker tell her story directly, listing her tweets as the body of the article itself and allowing readers to directly link back to her accounts.

“Now, [Baker] is not Hamas, but she became a foot soldier for the Palestinian cause and it’s a form of mass enlist-

ment where there are almost no boundaries to entry,” Patrikarakos says.

In contrast to Farah is the IDF’s Spokesperson’s Unit. Aliza Landes who, like Rubenstein, is North America-born and educated. At 25, with a wider outlook than the post-high school soldiers around her, Landes is exceptionally placed to play a role in creating the IDF’s social media

infrastructure during Operation Cast Lead that started in the winter of 2008. Bureaucracy runs faster during a war, and Landes used this to her advantage, pushing permission through to start the IDF’s various social media platforms. “It is both odd and instructive,” Patrikarakos writes, “that it took a soldier instead of a diplomat to greatly expand Israel’s public diplomacy and propaganda machine.”

By 2014, the IDF had a finely tuned social media presence; they knew that competing in the emotional debate was a nonstarter, so strategy focused on contextualization, showing Hamas’ use of tunnels as tools for terror and of civilians as human shields. Patrikarakos writes, “In a major way, Operation Protective Edge inverted war’s traditional paradigm: it was an information war played out on the battlefield, in which the former was, at times, more important than the latter. It was gladiatorial combat, war as political theater: a truly postmodern conflict.”

As Patrikarakos discovered in interviews with officers from the IDF’s Spokesperson’s Unit, this struggle pushes Israel into a Sisyphian exercise. The country knows it’s doomed to lose the mass media war from the start, particularly as news media and international organizations are shown to display inherent pro-Palestinian leaning. But it has no choice but to play the game.

Still, Israel very much uses social media to its advantage, but media wins for the IDF are few and far between — like having an NBC journalist correct a false story or getting coverage of how Israelis in Sderot live under the constant threat of Hamas rocket fire, according to the Spokesperson’s Unit.

According to the author, the 2014 war was an example of how in 21st century conflict one side can conclusively win on the battlefield but lose the wider war.

For a small country which requires outside diplomatic and financial support, global opinion holds value. As Patrikarakos’s timely work shows, determining who won and who lost depends on where you stand. But what that means for future conflicts is still yet to be seen.

[timesofisrael.com]

Help Wanted!

Your editor has been the Chair of the TBS Israel Affairs Committee for about a decade. During that time Israel has seen significant changes to its national identity, including those in security, technology, and the sociology of the country.

Few things last forever and the time is right for a change in the committee’s leadership.

If you are passionate about Israel and are willing to take the initiative to continue to bring to the TBS membership an increased awareness of events in, or affecting Israel, then this is the challenge for you. If this sounds like you, please let Rabbi Scolnic know of your interest.