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Confrontation off Gaza: Israeli government's Orwellian spin

By GARY FIELDS

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If, as George Orwell once observed, propaganda “is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable,” there is perhaps no better example of this dubious practice than the recent pronouncements of Israeli officials justifying the seizure of ships carrying humanitarian aid to Gaza, and the killing of civilians on board by Israeli naval commandos. As Orwell understood, and as the government of Israel has learned from its last two military campaigns in Lebanon and Gaza itself, the power to prevail in conflict is just as much about control over meanings as it is about the projection of brute force. Both types of power – military force and propaganda – were on display for the world to witness this past week.

Shortly after Israeli navy commandos descended from helicopters onto ships of the Free Gaza Campaign carrying cement, wheelchairs, paper, medicines and other humanitarian cargo, and shortly after these troops proceeded to kill 10 civilians on board, Israeli government spokesmen embarked upon a highly orchestrated campaign of refashioning truths from lies, and transforming murder into self-defense. This campaign began at the very pinnacle of the Israeli political establishment

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Despite Israel launching the military operation against the ships and their civilian passengers in international waters, it was Israel, according to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, that was defending itself. Such inverted logic drew upon a time-honored Israeli strategy of disinformation – transform the victims into aggressors while assuming the mantle of victimhood. It is a strategy employed by countless Israeli governments in describing their occupation of Palestine in which Israel, the occupier, becomes the victim of Palestinian violence, thereby recasting the Israeli aggression of military occupation into self-defense.

Netanyahu, however, left the more defamatory elements of this propaganda campaign to others in his government, chief among them, Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Aylon. He described the ships of the Free Gaza Movement and the hundreds of volunteers on them, including a Nobel Peace Prize winner and a former American Army colonel, as an “Armada of hate and terror.” Absent evidence of any kind, Aylon remarked how organizers of the aid convoy bound for Gaza “are well known for their ties to global jihad, al-Qaeda and Hamas,” with “a history of arms smuggling and deadly terror.” Seemingly inspired by what Orwell insisted was the mark of the most skilled propagandists, Aylon dispensed with pretenses to petty falsehoods and instead followed the prescription that if you are going to lie, make the lie a big one.

Adding a crucial element to this campaign of inverting the distinction between the military initiators of the attack and civilians, Danny Danon, deputy speaker of the Israeli Parliament, insisted that it was the Israeli commandoes seizing the ships who were the beleaguered victims defending themselves in the attack.

Such inverted logic, in which a military force invades a ship, and then insists that it is the victim of the civilians it has besieged, would have undoubtedly made even Orwell take notice. The author of “1984” dubbed such inversions, “newspeak” in which words

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In recent days, the focus of Israeli officials has shifted in an effort to narrow the frame around these events. Central to this shift is a series of videos showing the pitched battles that erupted on board the Mariv Marmar between Israel commandos and the civilian passengers. In this micro-frame presentation, Israel is trying to redefine the incident through imagery of a supposedly defenseless and besieged military.

According to Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee Chair Tzachi Hanegbi, navy commandos were attacked by a mob “that tried to commit a brutal lynching. The use of the emotionally charged term “lynching” is hardly accidental. It is a subtle but calculated attempt to draw an analogy with the Civil Rights Movement by associating the civilians with racists, and the commandos as defenders of civil rights.

More important, what the video presentation seeks to accomplish is to divert the world’s attention from the real issues raised by the incident. Submerged beneath the tragic deaths and the propaganda war waged by the government of Israel rationalizing this tragedy is the broader question of why there is need for a flotilla of ships with humanitarian aid bound for Gaza in the first place.

The answer to this question focuses on the blockade imposed upon Gaza and the meaning of the so-called “disengagement” from Gaza by Israel in 2005. In truth, Gaza since 2005 remains an occupied territory, enclosed by walls in what is probably the only historical instance of a people both occupied and blockaded. Until this blockade is lifted, and until this occupation ends, other boats with humanitarian aid will undoubtedly set sail to help Gaza’s suffering people. Does Israel really want to repeat this tragedy again?

The world will be watching.

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