

The Rhetoric of Hegemony

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Introduction

In January 2006 Hamas won the legislative elections in the Palestinian territories. The EU Election Observation Mission declared: *Open and well-administered parliamentary elections strengthen Palestinian commitment to democratic institutions*” (EU EOM, 2006).

The Hamas election victory came as a surprise— to say the least - to many actors in the international community (Agha & Malley, 2006; Asser, 2006). Nevertheless, the international community recognized the legitimacy of the elections, as part of the democratic process in which the Palestinians expressed their views. The Hamas landslide election victory represented a new situation that neither Israel nor Hamas had anticipated (Asser, 2006; ICG, 2006a). The Israeli government expected, as most of the international community that Fatah would win the elections or as a worst case scenario; a hung parliament with the two political parties forced into a coalition (Agha & Malley, 2006; Asser, 2006). Hamas was also taken by surprise; they had expected to go into a strong opposition (ICG, 2006a).

In this paper we will examine the rhetoric of Hamas and the Israeli government in the aftermath of the Hamas election landslide in 2006. We explore the facts that was selected and presented by the Hamas government and the Israeli government to substantiate arguments in support of their view of the situation and in support of their preferred actions.

Our research suggests that this dramatic event did not have any effect on either the Israeli government or Hamas with respect to the image of the opponent in the conflict. We will show how their pre-existing beliefs systems were mirrored in their rhetorical explanation of the outcome of the election. In a new and unexpected situation, like the Hamas election victory, it becomes imperative for the political actors to explain the situation in a way that supports and legitimizes their own political goals (Heradstveit & Bjørgo, 1992).

In addition, the rhetorical exercise that both the Israeli government and the Hamas government undertook in the aftermath of the election reflected the belief systems of the two parties. First, their aim was to organize rhetorically the international community`s perception of the situation according to **their** own beliefs to insure that **their** views and plan of action

seemed natural and obvious to the international community (cf. Heradstveit & Bjørgo, 1992; Paine, 1981). Secondly, the Hamas government and the Israeli government aimed at mobilizing important actors, namely, the Bush Administration, in particular, and the Quartet to act in accordance with **their** view of the situation. Our conclusion from this analysis is that the beliefs of the Israeli government and Hamas did not change. Their beliefs systems were mirrored in their rhetoric. Their rhetoric represented their need to convince the international community that their definition of the situation was the right one.

Political communication

The semiotic approach to the study of political communication aims at revealing how meanings are established and communicated in political processes. According to Eco (1971:13), there are rules or codes to every communication process and further, these rules or codes rest on some cultural conventions. A political actor can make use of these “hidden” cultural codes to create a new message directed towards particular audiences. Sometimes this is done by calculated manipulation of the language with the intention to accomplish political and rhetorical achievements/success, but it *can* also be a product of unconscious processes, because one is often unaware of the cultural codes in one’s own culture.

The **meaning** of the text is greater than the sum of the signs that constitute the text. The dynamical interaction between the conventional coded meaning of signs--how the actor combines these signs in his/hers statement and finally, how this statement is given meaning--is dependent on the context of the statement (Heradstveit & Bjørgo, 1992).

According to Austin (1975) it is also important to distinguish between what a statement means, the *locutionary act*, and what it does, the *illocutionary act*. One example of this is the declaration of president Obama that the two-state solution must be based at the 1967-borders: "*We believe the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states*" (Obama, 2011). The intention behind his statement was most likely understood somewhat in the same way by both Palestinians and Israelis. However, this statement produced totally different responses within the Palestinian and Israeli population and among their policymakers.

Political communication is thus about communicating the meaning of a given political event/situation. But how a given political situation is understood depends to a high degree on the decision-maker and can therefore be communicated differently from actor to actor (cf. George, 1979; Snyder, Bruck & Sapin, 2002; Vertzberger, 1990) When it is vital that other actors (or the international community) agree with one’s own definition of the situation, as in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, the conflicting parties will use rhetoric designed to persuade the audience that is, the international community. This does not necessarily mean that the political leaders fabricate facts; it means that they are trying to organize the belief systems of the audience by putting together the facts in a specific context of meaning so that the listeners

interpret the situation from the speakers' point of view. If the political actor is successful in his or her rhetorical persuasion, he or she has by far established legitimacy regarding his definition of the situation, which can be crucial in political conflicts in which the parties' fight for the international community's support (Heradstveit & Bjørgo, 1990; cf. Kelman & Fisher, 2003).

A political situation, like the Hamas election victory, can be separated into three analytical levels (Heradstveit & Bjørgo, 1992:102). On the first level are the **facts of the situation**--the institutions, who won, how many seats, which districts and so on. On the second level are the **perceptions of those facts**--how people perceive and define the situation. The third level is the **rhetorical**--how the actor portrayed the situation in his or her rhetoric as he or she tries to alter or adjust the international community's perception of the situation. This portrayal of facts is most often in accordance with the actor's own perception of the facts, which again are a consequence or product of the actor's beliefs system.

The aim of using rhetorical speech is not only to persuade the audience, but also to mobilize action. In order to accomplish this, statements need to involve both cognitive and affective components (Paine, 1981). Cognitive components are presentation of causal connections of facts, whereas the affective components involve the connection of these causalities to established facts or "truths" which evoke powerful sentiments.

Methodology

In this research we have used hermeneutical methodology to analyze official statements from the Israeli government and the Hamas movement. From the Israeli side the documents were downloaded from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs Web site. Regarding Hamas, which does not have such an informational Web site, the documents are downloaded from the Internet and consist mainly of interviews made by CNN, Al-Jazeera, BBC News, and other news organizations. From Hamas we have restricted the data collection to include only central actors like Khaled Meshaal, Ismail Haniyeh, and Mohammed al-Zahar. From the Israeli side the data collection is restricted to official documents from the government's Website, like Cabinet communiqués and statements from the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister at the time; Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni. The timeline is restricted to 2006.

Discussion

In the aftermath of the Hamas election victory both the Israeli government and Hamas found it imperative to persuade the international community to view this unexpected political situation in accordance with their definition of the situation. Our analysis suggests that there were especially two concepts that were repeated in their rhetoric.

From the Israeli government's side the main concept was "terrorism/terrorist."

From Hamas's side it was the concept of victimization. Both terrorist and victim are two-dimensional signs; the sign **terrorist** implies that there are victims and the sign **victim** implies that there are aggressors.

The Israeli government as well as Hamas categorizes the other as the aggressor and themselves as the victim. This is the phenomenon of *mirror-image formation* (Bronfenbrenner, 1961; White, 1965). To develop parallel images of self and other, except with the value reversed, is well-known in the conflict research literature and is often a product of both motivational and cognitive processes:

*Motivationally each side is concerned with 'looking good' when blame for the conflict events is being apportioned; political leaders, therefore, feel a strong need to persuade themselves, their own people, the rest of the world, and future historians that the blame rests with the enemy. Cognitively, each side views the conflict from its own perspective and – painfully aware of its own needs, fears and historical traumas, grievances, suspicions, and political constraints – is convinced that it is acting defensively and with the best intentions and that this is so self-evident that it must be equally clear to **even the enemy and all others*** (Kelman & Fisher, 2003: 326-327). [Our emphasis]

Even if the Israeli government and Hamas perceived themselves and the other in this mirror-image fashion, they applied two different rhetorical strategies in order to get **their** definition of the situation accepted by the international community--the terrorist and the victim strategy. Both these signs have powerful connotations¹ attached to them.

Terrorist

- **Innocent** victims of terrorism
- All means necessary can be applied to fight the terrorist.
- Without morale

Victim

- Innocence
- An aggressor (The victim can't be the initial aggressor)
- Legitimization of aggressive **reactions** – defense

In the aftermath of the Palestinian election, many international actors were in a state of cognitive dissonance between what they described as a democratic election and the factual result of this democratic election. Both the Bush-government and the EU had since 2001 (BBC News, 2001) and 2003 (BBC News, 2003) classified Hamas as a terrorist organization².

¹ Connotations are those meanings being evoked in the meeting between the sign and the audience's cultural conditions and values.

² The US administration had since 1993 classified Hamas as a terror organization (ICG, 2006b), but the Bush administration put Hamas on an official list of terrorist organizations in 2001 (BBC News, 2001). The EU had

As a general position, one can say that both Hamas and the Israeli government are affected by the phenomenon of cognitive closure of parties in conflict and the two opponents' aim became to resolve the dissonance amongst actors on the international arena according to **their** beliefs³

The following examples illuminate how the Israeli government presented Hamas as a terrorist organization, so that the international community would interpret the situation, *Hamas has won the Palestinian election*, from their point of view.

Thereafter, the examples illuminate how Hamas presented themselves as victims within their story of victimization as a fact in this specific context of meaning. This, so that the international community would interpret the situation, *Hamas has won the Palestinian election*, from their point of view.⁴

The Israeli government:

"The Hamas victory sent shock waves through both the Palestinian community, and the international community as well. For the first time in Middle Eastern history, an overtly terrorist organization with a radical Islamic ideology took over a government by means of a democratic election" (Israel MFA, 2006a).

"The State of Israel upholds the Roadmap and continues to demand that PA Chairman Abu Mazen carry out the commitment to dismantle all terrorist organizations and their infrastructures" (Israel MFA, 2006b).

"It is clear that in light of the Hamas majority in the PLC and the instructions to form a new government that were given to the head of Hamas, the PA is - in practice - becoming a terrorist authority" (Israel MFA, 2006c).

"From our point-of-view, the swearing-in of the PLC means that Hamas has - in effect - taken control of the PA. Israel views the rise of Hamas as a dangerous milestone that turns the PA into a terrorist authority" (Israel MFA, 2006c).

"In light of the heightened security risk (...). "All necessary steps will be continued to prevent terrorist attacks against Israel, from Gaza and Judea and Samaria, and construction of the security fence will be accelerated" (Israel MFA, 2006c).

differentiated between the militant and the political wing of Hamas and declared the former a terrorist entity in 2002 but in 2003 they also included the political wing on their list of terror organizations (BBC News, 2003).

³ Nadim N. Rouhana and Daniel Bar-Tal (1998) have identified four societal beliefs that all exist in both the Israeli and Palestinian society. These are: "Our goals are just", "The opponent has no legitimacy", "We can do no wrong" and "We are the victims".

⁴ We are presenting these citations not to find out who is right and wrong, but to illuminate the two adversaries' beliefs and rhetorical justifications.

“(...) I believe that nobody wants to see the success of Hamas in the Palestinian Authority in an understanding that [the] Hamas leadership is not only a threat to Israel, it’s not only a threat to the moderate Palestinian society, but it is also or can be a threat and it can send a wrong message to the extremists within these moderate Arab states”. (Israel MFA, 2006d).

“(...) the view that the Israeli-Palestinian is the cause of extremism is misleading. I know that this view is popular, especially in Europe, but the truth is that the conflicts in the Middle East are a consequence, not a cause, of radicalism and terrorism.” (Israel MFA, 2006d).

“(...) the loss of a child is awful for an Israeli mother and a Palestinian mother; it’s the same grief, it’s the same sorrow. But in terms of values and in terms of being judged by the international community there is no comparison between a terrorist and an Israeli soldier even though during a war these kind of mistakes can happen, as there is no comparison in any kind of legal system which is based on the values of society between a murderer and between somebody who is killed by mistake.” (Israel MFA, 2006d).

Looking at these statements in light of the second and third level in our analytical model referred earlier, we can see that the Israeli governments perceived the situation of having Hamas in charge of the Palestinian areas as posing a severe threat to the Israeli population. Therefore, it became imperative to communicate this threat to the international community, and to mobilize them into a rejection of Hamas as legitimate representatives of the Palestinian population. As we have seen above the Israeli government presented several equations between Hamas and terrorism:

- *“(...) a new government that were given to the head of Hamas, the PA is - in practice - becoming a terrorist authority”.*
- *“Israel views the rise of Hamas as a dangerous milestone that turns the PA into a terrorist authority”.*
- *“(...) the conflicts in the Middle East are a consequence, not a cause, of radicalism and terrorism.”*

As we have also noted an affective component is needed to mobilize the audience into action. In this case the concept of the terrorist in itself entails strong negative emotions like fear and anger. In addition, this concept has powerful connotations attached to it. Especially strong is the notion of the innocence of victims of terrorist acts and the urgent feeling (and justification) that an imminent terrorist act must be prevented by all means necessary.

The last point on the list above reflects also the Israeli government’s awareness of the rhetoric of Hamas-- *the rhetorical exercise that presented the story of victimization and in that the right of the victim to defend itself* – and thus the specification of terrorism as a **cause**, not an **effect**, of the conflict was an effort to counter the rhetorical justifications from Hamas.

Hamas:

“We would practice democracy peacefully without violence - but when there is occupation, there is no contradiction between democracy and what the West calls violence, which is in this case resistance.” (Meshaal, 2006a).

“Why is pressure always applied on the weak side, the one that is under occupation and suffers from killing, assassination, the building of the wall, confiscation of land and building of settlements?” (Meshaal, 2006a).

“Why does the international community always stand with the strong side, even though he is the aggressor, and stands against the weak, even though he is being attacked and has all the rights?” (Meshaal, 2006a).

“Now the international community faces a contradiction. It considers Hamas a terror organization and this is an unfair description of Hamas because Hamas does what the British and French did when they were up against the Nazi occupation”. (Meshaal, 2006a).

"Why do we have to put up our guns while every country everywhere has in addition to a political system a strong military system in order to protect their homeland, their interests and their people? “So why do you consider us a unique phenomenon that we have to keep the Israeli border, to keep the Israeli aggression against our people, to keep our people inside Israeli jails without resistance?” (Mahmoud al-Zahar, 2006a).

“The question is if Israel is ready to stop attacking Palestinian targets. The people here are running self defense. Is the job of the government to protect the Israeli border while the Israelis all the time are attacking our people? It is a new policy here, a new government, a new agenda.” (Mahmoud al-Zahar, 2006b).

“What we can we do? We calmed the situation down, we are the weaker party, we don't have tanks or fighter planes; we are defending ourselves with very simple weapons. The international community should re-direct its pressure onto the occupier. Israel's aggression is discouraging us from renewing the cease-fire.” (Meshaal, 2006b).

Looking at these statements in light of the second and third level in our analytical model referred to earlier, we can see that Hamas perceived the situation as follows: The increasing international pressure to comply with the demands from the Quartet was unfair and posed a threat to the future of the Palestinian people's interests. Therefore, it became imperative to communicate this to the international community and to mobilize them into a moderation of the demands or to put forward the same demands to the Israeli government. As we have seen above, Hamas representatives defended themselves against the accusations of them being terrorists with the story of victimization and the right to self defense:

- *“(...) when there is occupation, there is no contradiction between democracy and what the West calls violence, which is in this case resistance.”*
- *“The question is if Israel is ready to stop attacking Palestinian targets. The people here are running self defense.”*
- *“(...) we are defending ourselves with very simple weapons. The international community should re-direct its pressure onto the occupier. Israel's aggression is discouraging us from renewing the cease-fire.”*

As noted above an affective component is also needed to mobilize the audience into action. In this case Hamas representatives tried to evoke sympathy and a feeling of unjust treatment. In addition, they put forward an historical analogy between the Palestinian people's sufferings under occupation and the Second World War and the Nazi occupation of Europe. The story of victimization has powerful connotations attached to it. Especially strong is the notion of innocence and that the victim can't be the initial aggressor. Therefore, aggressive reactions are legitimized as defensive acts.

Conclusion

The main problem of the two “images/ rhetorical concepts” discussed above is that one cannot be both the victim and the aggressor. Which story gets support depends on the audience, i.e., the recipients of the message. In this case the Israeli government's definition of the situation, *Hamas has won the Palestinian election*, was viewed as the most legitimate by the major international players. Thus, the Israeli government, not Hamas succeeded in its efforts to organize the beliefs systems of international actors in accordance with their own beliefs.

The view of the Bush administration reflects this accommodation of the Israelis definition of the situation and the solution of the dissonance between the value of democracy and the illegitimate result it produced:

“(...) we have supported elections and democratic processes in (...) the Palestinian territories and we respect the choice of those people. We want their government to govern democratically and in a way that recognizes that you can't have one foot in violence and one foot in politics” (Rice, 2006a).

“What has been said to Hamas is not that their victory was illegitimate, by any means. In fact, we welcomed the elections. But if they are going to govern, they have to accede to other international standards which say that you cannot have one foot in violence and one foot in politics” (Rice, 2006b).

Thus, the beliefs systems of the parties did not change, and further, the belief systems of important international actors, with regard to the solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, did not change either.

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