

7-6-2001

Trends. Meanings and Words: Communication Catalysis and Reactivity in the Mideast

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2001) "Trends. Meanings and Words: Communication Catalysis and Reactivity in the Mideast," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol11/iss1/2>

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Title: Trends. Meanings and Words: Communication Catalysis and Reactivity in the Mideast

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Volume: 11

Issue: 1

Date: 2001-07-06

Keywords: Israel, Palestinian National Authority, Political Violence, Public Discourse

Public discourse on the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority continues to serve less as an analytic market bearing on the past, present, and future but as the cause and consequence of that conflict.

As cause, public discourse serves as a catalytic agent for action. A stated belief that Israeli oppression of Palestinians precipitates Palestinian violence justifies, encourages, and nurtures that violence as long as oppression continues. Israeli oppression defined solely as violence then delegitimizes all Israeli violence, while legitimizing Palestinian violence. Palestinian violence becomes delegitimized only upon the absence of all Israeli violence. However, Israeli oppression also defined as the implementing of any behavioral constraints on Palestinians delegitimizes any Israeli action that affects Palestinians except Israeli non-violence that expands the menu of acceptable Palestinian behaviors as perceived by Palestinians. The legitimacy of Israeli action becomes totally dependent on Palestinian perception. Israeli action becomes legitimized only through its delegitimization as a self-interested actor. Such a status may possibly be ethically and morally upright, but seemingly suicidal for a political entity and unindulged by the governments of any other nation-state.

As consequence, public discourse--especially based on the visual mass media--serves as a residual of action for it is reactive to what occurs. What is depicted through public discourse depends on what has been collected. What has been collected can be and has been controlled through action by various participants in the conflict. Examples of murder, torture, and other human rights violations can be copied, destroyed, transmitted, simulated, feigned, and impeded. The nature of the conflict expounded through public discourse is necessarily reactive and distorted dependent on the differential skills of controlling collection of information effected by participants in the conflict. Many political psychologists assert that the less a political entity approaches the characteristics of a representative democracy, the more control to its own advantage is at least a possibility.

None of the above necessarily has a bearing on the validity of various contentions of participants to the conflict. However, the upshot of communication catalysis and reactivity is to subvert the common public stance of mass media authorities: that "we" report the facts on the ground and do not take sides. Instead, communication ineluctably constructs facts and takes sides. It can do no other. Privileging public discourse as unburdened by catalytic and reactive properties only serves to render opaque any lens employed for conflict resolution in the Mideast and throughout the world. (See Bar-Tal, D., & Labin, D. (2001). The effect of a major event on stereotyping: Terrorist attacks in Israel and Israeli adolescents' perceptions of Palestinians, Jordanians and Arabs. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 265-280; Damazer, M. (June 29, 2001). Letter to the editor. *The New York Times*, p. A24; Green, E.C. (2001). Can qualitative research produce reliable quantitative findings? *Field Methods*, 13, 3-19; Hanauer, E.R. (June 30, 2001). Letter to the editor. *The New York Times*, p. A24; Maoz, I. (2000). Multiple conflicts and competing agendas: A framework for conceptualizing structured encounters between groups in conflict--the case of a coexistence project of Jews and Palestinians in Israel. *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 6, 135-156; McKerrow, R.E. (1999). Space and time in the postmodern polity. *Western Journal of Communication*, 63, 271-290; Pezzullo, P.C. (2001). Performing critical interruptions:

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Stories, rhetorical invention, and the environmental justice movement. *Western Journal of Communication*, 65, 1-25.) (Keywords: Israel, Palestinian National Authority, Political Violence, Public Discourse.)