

The media battleground

AT breakfast in a Beverly Hills hotel, the woman in the next booth is angry and loud. So I can't miss anything she says. "Did you read Elon Gold's column?" she asks her companion. "Elon was walking home with his wife and kids after Friday night dinner and these Arabs jumped out of a car and screamed 'Free Palestine'. They shouted that they wanted his children to die just like he was killing children in Gaza. The LAPD came."

I won't repeat the accompanying expletives. Except to say that the woman, a prominent Hollywood lawyer, had a salty turn of phrase. And she was clearly upset that the Gaza war had brought Jew-hatred to the Los Angeles streets.

As clearly and understandably was TV actor and comedian Elon Gold. His column (25/08) in the *Jewish Journal* about the "hate incident" went viral on social media. Said Gold: "I was stunned that I can no longer feel safe walking on Shabbat with my family in my city. I kept reading about all the anti-Semitism all over Europe, but here in these United States?"

A rhetorical question indeed. I sympathise with Gold and his family, and I understand his dismay that Jew-hatred doesn't stop at national borders. Yet this "hate incident" doesn't tell us much about any increased anti-Semitism in America. But it does tell us something about the new kind of "asymmetrical" warfare Hamas has waged against Israel.

As we've seen, media coverage whether by "old" media – TV, press and radio – or "new" media – Facebook, Twitter and the rest – are not only key weapons; in some ways they are the new battlefield.

Hard-headed military analysts – whether in Israel or the West or Russia – dismiss such views as media-induced irrelevance. What matters, as they see it, is what's always mattered. Boots on the ground. But Israel is fighting for something more than the outcome of yet another mini-war with Hamas. It is fighting the larger battle for international legitimacy which its enemies have imposed on it. In that battle the media are not at all irrelevant.

I offer two pieces of evidence. A front-page report in the *New York Times*, and a statement by some Tinseltown "A-Listers". According to the *New York Times* (31/08): "The extremists who have seized large parts of Syria and Iraq have riveted the world's attention with their military prowess and unrestrained brutality. But Western intelligence services are also worried about their extraordinary command of seemingly less lethal weapons: state-of-the art videos, ground images shot from drones and multi-lingual Twitter messages."

Really? This is front-page news? Where have "the Western intelligence services" and the *New York*



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Times been for the past five years? Haven't they heard about Hamas' media-management? Don't they understand that Hamas wrote the playbook for ISIS? More rhetorical questions, I know.

Which brings me to the second piece of evidence: Hollywood's role in Israel's battle for "hearts and minds". In the war's initial phase, actors Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem – who accused Israel of genocide – Mark Ruffalo, Selena Gomez, singer Rihanna and others sided with the Palestinians. Jon Voight, Joan Rivers and Howard Stern defended Israel.

Consider ... *Exodus* which helped to move American public and political opinion in Israel's favour for a whole generation.

More recently, nearly 200 leading Hollywood actors and executives – including Sylvester Stallone, Aaron Sorkin, Seth Rogen, Amy Pascal, Jerry Weintraub, Mayim Bialik and Arnold Schwarzenegger – signed a statement which expressed sadness at the loss of life by Israelis and Palestinians. But it also condemned the ideas of "hatred and genocide" in the Hamas charter. And it said: "Hamas cannot be allowed to rain rockets on Israeli cities, nor can it be allowed to hold its own people hostage. Hospitals are for healing, not for hiding weapons. Schools are for learning, not for launching missiles. Children are our hope, not our human shields."

Well said. Now I'm not suggesting that these "Views from Tinseltown" – some from "stars" and some from nonentities – really matter. But the movies and TV dramas that Hollywood produces do matter. Consider the 1960 film of Leon Uris's *Exodus* which helped to move American public and political opinion in Israel's favour for a whole generation.

Clearly, it's hard to imagine one movie – on any topic – making that kind of impact today.

But what about a series of pro-Israel movies? There's talk around Los Angeles that after Gaza and the rise of anti-Semitism quite a few Hollywood companies, including Walt Disney, Viacom, and Time-Warner, are planning such productions. If the reports are true, the movies' impact on Israel's new battlefield may be worth watching.

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