

Dafna Lemish

“This war is our war!”

Israeli children and their perceptions of the war in Iraq

Children in Israel established a direct link between the Iraq War and the conflict in their own country. Influenced by the prevalent media discourse in Israel, which presents war in keeping with the national conflict as “fateful” and “without any prospect of ending”, they regarded the war as a justified act by George Bush, although they very much wanted an end to the hostilities.

In the spring of 2003, Israeli children were caught up in a whirlpool of anxieties. For months, the media had been building up expectations of a possible Iraqi missile attack. Appearing on television screens, in radio interviews, newspaper headlines and front-page photos, politicians, military generals, and academic professionals, mostly men of authority and power, fed the tension about a possible doomsday. All agreed that an attacked Iraq – particularly a desperate one – would seek revenge by attacking Israel once again, as it did in the Gulf War. Non-conventional weapons, bio-chemical missile heads, water poisoning, food shortage, even atomic bombs – became the topics of dinner table conversations.

At home children helped their parents to prepare shelters and special protective rooms. At the store they helped carry bottled water, canned food, and first-aid equipment to their parents' baskets. They walked to school with their individual “protection kit” that

included their very own gas mask and anthroproin shot in case of exposure to chemical substances. In class they practised putting the gas mask on and rushing in and out of shelters. Under these circumstances, no child could have missed feeling the hovering danger of a possible war.

Under these circumstances, studying the role of the media in children's perceptions of the war poses quite unique challenges. News consumption by the public is not only high in practice but is also regarded as an important civil duty and good parenting practice (Katz, Haas & Gurevitch, 1997; Lemish, 1998). Unfortunately, there is never a dull moment in Israel, and children learn from birth to accept news media as an integrated part of their environment.

In this particular study, much like the ones in Germany and the USA (see Götz and Seiter in this issue), we wanted to understand the role children ascribe to the media in their understanding of the war in general and, more specifically, in its possible effect on their lives. 39 children aged between 7 and 11 years were interviewed following a structured yet open-ended questionnaire (similar to the German one), including a drawing assignment.

Of the interviewees, who came from various parts of the country, 19 were boys and 20 girls, 24 from middle class and 15 from lower class homes. Most of the children interviewed cooperated enthusiastically and seemed eager to talk about their experiences. The drawing assignment aroused

some resentment and therefore varied in the degree of investment. Four children refused to draw altogether.

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On the whole, Israeli children had a very elaborate understanding of the situation, were quite up-to-date on the daily developments and perceived the war in Iraq to have direct relevance to their own lives. Of the 39 children, only one girl reported making a conscious decision to deny the situation out of fear, and only one girl responded with a vague “don't know”. Their responses included an explanation about the Americans attacking Iraq, the fear of non-conventional weapons, a personification of the war into a Bush-Saddam power conflict, some awareness of anti-war demonstrations around the world, and even a preoccupation by some of the children with Saddam's many “look-alikes”. A few gave quite complex, albeit naïve, responses. For example, Beni (10, boy) answered the question “Why do you think the war broke out?”: “Because of conflicts with the Iraqi regime, Saddam Hussein, who distributes dictatorship in Iraq. When they had elections in the dictatorship Saddam Hussein threatened everybody that he'll kill them if they don't vote for him. That's why the war started, because Bush wants to bring democracy to Iraq, so it will be a democratic country and not a dictatorship.” Roy (11, boy) explains: “It's because Iraq has a non-democratic regime and

part of the population is against it, but they can't express themselves because they are afraid of the ruler. It's also because Bush thinks that Saddam has mass-destruction weapons." Almost all of the children assigned positive benevolent motivations to Bush's military actions: his attack on Iraq was an act of defence of the world from terrible dangers and for restoring democracy and good life to the Iraqi people. None of the children showed any awareness of political-economy issues or possible self-serving motivations.

A most striking theme emerging from their responses was the tendency to domesticate the war into an Israeli issue: the conflict between the USA and Iraq was framed as "our" war, as Irit (9, girl) explained: "The Iraqis want to attack Israel, so the Americans want to bomb Saddam's bunker. And tomorrow we need to come to school at 9:00 because there is a strike and we have to bring our protection-kit with us to school." This theme was expressed through four integrated arguments. For many children, the reason Bush chose to attack Iraq was to protect Israel. "There is this person who is against us named Saddam Hussein and the Americans want to protect us, so they want to do something to him" said Ravit (9, girl), and continues later in the interview: "The Iraqi people hate us, and the Americans are kind of protecting us." The potential dangers to Israel were very real in these children's responses, particularly the fear of a missile attack. Roy (11, boy) explains: "Saddam has non-conventional weapons ... we've got the Patriot, and Saddam has biological and chemical missiles." Adi (11, girl) gives a voice to her fears: "I think: What will happen if I am at school and the war starts, and my dog ... what if I don't make it home on time ... what will happen to my family?"

In addition, children talked a lot about the defensive acts taken in Israel against the war as well as their own

preparations at home and at school: military plans for diverting missiles, Civil Defense organisation of shelters, hospitals, cemeteries, centres for distribution of protection kits, etc. Many of their remarks were a form of anxiety management by the children. Hagar (11, girl) comforted herself by saying: "I was afraid a little bit that in a few seconds a missile will fall. But on the other hand the IDF [Israeli Defence Forces] have the strongest weapons and we are the strongest army and there is nothing to be afraid of because there is someone to protect us."

Domestication of the war in Iraq into an Israeli affair was occasionally confused with the general Middle-East conflict: "The Iraqis and the Arabs are together in their military forces, and they claim that Jerusalem belonged to the Arabs and that's why the war started," explained Sivan (8, girl) very seriously. "It's because Iraq wants that Israel will belong to her ..." argued Tamar (9, girl). Adam (8, boy) echoed the general media discourse on the "Axis of Evil" and the struggle against radical Islam: "It's because the collapse of the Twins. It's like in the First World War, between the Americans and their enemies ... in this case, they killed many in the Twin buildings, but the Americans gave them back – not through the use of terror, but in a fair war – missile against missile [makes a noise of missiles colliding]." Clearly, children have adopted their frame of reference for the war from the general hegemonic media discourse in Israel during that time.

Interestingly enough, the general sense that the war would not really change anything dramatically seemed to prevail in children's responses, reflecting, once again, the general national discourse of national conflicts being the doing of "fate" and having "no end in sight" (Dor, 2003). Children expect that many people will die on all sides, that the tension between Israel and the Arab world will in-

crease, that a third world war may be hovering on the horizon, and that fear and tension will mount. "It will get worse" said Irit (9, girl), "war only brings more violence." And Ariel (11, boy) concluded: "In the end nobody will win and nobody will lose, and in the end this entire war would have been in vain."

Media dependency

Indeed, children's discussion made it very clear that they were heavily dependent on the media for their information and interpretation of the situation, as well as a resource for trying to handle their anxieties. All but 4 children claimed that the media were their source of information. Television news reporting was mentioned by 32 of the children as their main source of information regarding the situation (with special news programmes for children mentioned by 9 children, and general family entertainment programmes by 6).

Children's accuracy and highly detailed anecdotal knowledge of news reports indicate their heavy reliance on the television news. Examples included relating information about prisoners of war, pictures of the bombing of Baghdad, the training of dolphins to detect bombs, the whereabouts of Saddam and his use of look-alikes, visual evidence that part of an American missile contained an Israeli label, direct (and quite accurate) quotes from Saddam and Bush, descriptions of maps, Turkey's refusal to co-operate with the US, and the like.

Occasionally, they got carried away in their descriptions, mixing facts and fiction, as did Roni (7.5, boy): "Our teacher asked us to bring newspapers and things about the war. Avi from class said that Saddam is hiding 40 metres under the ground and he has palaces there and things. We read in the newspapers that he takes a very very hot shower that you can die



Fig. 1: Yarif (9): Bush and the USA are fighting with American missiles against Saddam and Iraq.

from, and he does it to people he wants to kill and he cuts off their hands and legs.”

The authority of news reporting as a factual, truthful, and reliable source was never challenged by these children. Gili (10, girl), for example, trusted it completely: “I am not afraid anymore because I know that Saddam Hussein will not send missiles because they already took over his Baghdad and we don’t see him on TV anymore.” If he is not there on the news – he simply doesn’t constitute a threat any more, according to these children.

Children did not like the news

Although most children reported watching news reports on television to some degree, about half claimed that they did not like them. Two main reasons were given: the first group found the news reporting boring, it did not satisfy their needs and interests, disturbed their regular scheduled programmes, and was generally not attuned to them. In particular, they found the talk on television news repetitive and uninteresting, while the

“action-oriented” coverage was attractive. “I am bored watching what they are saying and all, but I like to watch the real war closely, like the shootings and all ...,” said Beni (10, boy). “All those carrying on about the issue – the interviewers, the news studio and all those explaining about the war – are boring because you already know it all, and they repeat it like a parrot, you need something new, it’s not like something is happening, it’s like stuck,” explained Beni. “Only the pictures were interesting, the reporters just blah blah and didn’t say anything new. The same thing all the time,” added Adi (11, girl).

Children admitted to being left with many unanswered questions of interest: “I didn’t understand how many look-alikes Saddam has,” said Dan (10, boy); “I didn’t understand how the US airplane fell in Iraq. They didn’t explain a lot,” illustrated Gili (10, girl). While many of these questions related to their interest in intriguing details of the war, some also challenged the existence of the war itself: “I didn’t understand when a house was bombed whether it was an important house, a residential house, a store? Why aren’t they stopping the war for a moment and trying to talk

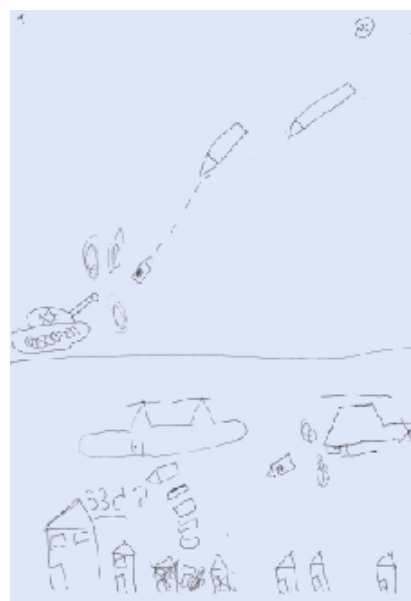


Fig. 2: Adam (8): Many missiles are fired above residential areas as well.

and reach an agreement?” asked Adi (11, girl).

The second type of reasons for the children’s dislike of the news related to the emotional impact of reports. Many children, mostly girls, confessed that the news could bring about fearful reactions, and that they do not like to watch human suffering. “I didn’t like it because they show people suffering and it is not fun to watch,” said Irit (9, girl). “It’s not like they are showing a birthday party – it’s a bad thing and they show killings, and I don’t like to watch it,” said Shirley (9, girl).

How would Israeli children have done the news?

When asked about ideas for how the news could have been done differently, children concentrated on the need to explain things. “I would have explained ...” was a common response. A few wanted specifically to produce news reports more appropriate for children: “I would have invited many children, especially from my own class, to say all kinds of things that they think about the war. I would have been kind of nice, like all those people on television that have a high rating; I would have talked to them, I would have told them not to be afraid, all kinds of things like this. I would have called the programme ‘The war with children’”, explained Adam (8, boy). “I would have made a special programme for children, because adults know what war is and children don’t. I would have explained what is war, how they build missiles and what will happen to us. I would have also made fun of them, and imitated George Bush or Saddam so the children will calm down,” suggested Shirley (9, girl). This last response presents in a nutshell an understanding of the role the media play in Israel at the much too frequent times of crisis: information, interpretation, and tension relief (Peled & Katz, 1974).



Fig. 3: Merav (11): Various weapons and their names in Hebrew; furthermore, USA on the left, Iraq on the right.

What does the war look like?

Concretising the war via the request to draw it resulted in several repetitive themes. War as a personal battle between single soldiers, most often Bush and Saddam, was found in 11 drawings. The soldiers, often marked as Iraqi and American, or as Saddam and Bush, were portrayed pointing weapons (guns, swords, grenades) at each other. The accompanying verbal description centred on the details of combat: “It says ‘war’. There is Bush on the left and the country of the USA. There are missiles where it says ‘USA Rockets’ and underneath there is Saddam and a map of Iraq with Baghdad”, described Yariv (9, boy) his drawing (see Fig. 1).

The second major theme, which also appeared in 11 of the drawings, was a general war scene that included military weapons such as tanks, missiles, and airplanes; sometimes within a setting, such as Adam’s (8, boy) drawing (see Fig. 2); and sometimes children just used verbal explanations, such as in the case of Merav (11, girl). The Hebrew labels include: “USA on the right”, “Iraq on the left”, “The war in Iraq” on the bottom, and labels for each object: “missile”, “sword”, “shield”, “bomb” (see Fig. 3).

Four of the drawings – all of which were by girls – dealt with emotions and personal involvement. Managing

fear was the most obvious expression. “It was my first day at war,” says the label of Sigal’s (9, girl) drawing of her protective kit. She added: “I felt I was going to die. I trembled very much. Suddenly there was a siren, I trembled, I was afraid. I put on the gas mask and I ran to the shelter. The war ended finally.” Irit (9, girl) transferred her feelings to another female figure when she explained her drawing (see Fig. 4): “There are houses and there are missiles [the Hebrew labels say: a regular missile, a dangerous missile, a chemical missile], and there is a girl or a woman who is sitting. On the table there is a radio-tape player and suddenly it sounds a siren and then she yells: ‘Oi, a siren!’ I wanted to write about a biological missile, but I don’t know how to write it.”

Reactions of fear to news reporting are, of course, to be expected – particularly when the threat is perceived as real and relevant (Cohen & Adoni, 1980) as seemed to be the case here. However, studies of children’s reactions to news reporting in Europe and the USA, where the threat was not immediate and geographically removed, during the Gulf War, were very inconclusive (Cantor, Mares & Oliver, 1993; Hoffner & Haefner, 1993; Wober & Young, 1993). It may be suggested that most Israeli children (including all the boys) seemed to use the drawing as an outlet for their anxieties in an active way, by identifying with the fighting rather than with their own situation as potential victims.

Wishful thinking

When asked to draw what they wish to see on television, children concentrated on two versions of putting an end to the war: either victory (17 drawings) or peace (8 drawings). Contrary to expectations, there was no obvious difference between boys and girls. Victory motives included

neutral scenes such as a newswoman announcing the victory and a scene of homecoming greeting to an American jet-plane. But it also included humiliation scenes – such as Saddam dancing wearing a dress at gunpoint, and Iraqi soldiers surrendering or begging for their lives. More extreme examples were victory scenes that included destruction of houses by missiles and tanks, and even depiction of death – either of Saddam Hussein himself (by either bullets or fire) or of Iraqi soldiers. Only one girl presented victory from a positive point of view with the Iraqis cheering with happiness for their newly acquired democracy.

A unique drawing was offered by Yael (10, girl) who presented an elaborate comic-style story in which she plays the central heroine’s role (much like the traditional biblical character of Esther, the Jewish bride-queen who saved her people from the hands of the Persian king whom she married and manipulated). The comic (see Fig. 5) reads as follows (from right to left):

Saddam: “This is so much fun because I am going to bomb Israel.”

Girl: “I pretend: Saddam, you are so beautiful and cute, do you want to marry me?”

Saddam: “She is so cute, I will agree but without kisses.”

Girl: “Saddam’ele [loving suffix], come let’s not make war, we need to talk about our wedding and to spend time together.”

Saddam: “You are right sweetie, can you bring me a glass of wine?”



Fig. 4: Irit (9): On the left top a female figure with a tape recorder playing the sound of a siren. Various missiles are firing on residential buildings.

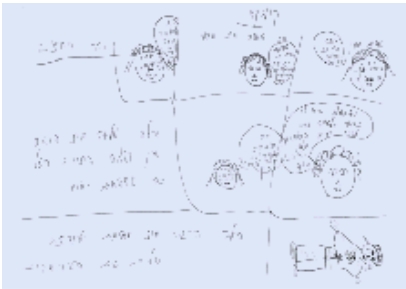


Fig. 5: 10-year-old Yael shows how Saddam is bewitching her. She proposes to talk about their wedding instead of making war. When he agrees, she pours poison into his wine to kill him. Thus, there can be peace with Iraq.

Text: Yael filled the glass with wine and put poison in it so Saddam will die. Yael killed Saddam and made peace with the Iraqis.

She continues to tell the interviewer: "Afterwards I make peace with the Iraqis and everyone loves me. I don't want anyone to cheer for me because it is all thanks to God," and she ends saying: "I hope that you don't take this seriously because I hate Saddam Hussein."

Yael, so it seems, placed herself in an active role in bringing the situation to a fairy-tale-type ending, recruiting for that purpose a biblical (albeit very stereotypically gendered) role model. The theme of peace was expressed by 8 of the drawings, partially by drawings of symbols such as hearts, butterflies and flowers, and mostly by drawings of the personalised handshake and smiles of Saddam and Bush. Since the war is perceived as "our" war by the children, peace has become "our" peace as well. This is clearly visible in Tamar's (9, girl) drawing in which Israel's Prime Minister Sharon is represented in between Saddam (on the right) and Bush (on the left) under a rainbow with the Hebrew word *Shalom* (peace) on top (see Fig. 6).

While the personalisation of peace into a personal handshake may seem a limited concretisation of an abstract concept, it can easily be related to the many presentations of ceremonial events that Israeli children have seen on television. The famous ceremony

on the White House lawn of the signing of the treaty by US President Clinton, Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and Palestinian President Arafat in 1993 is probably part of every Israeli child's visual memory as the symbol of peace.

Conclusion

What conclusions can be made about the role of the media in Israeli children's reactions to the war in Iraq? Clearly, Israeli children were heavily dependent on the media, as was the entire population. The media supplied them with information on related events – war strategies, tactics, political developments and the like. It was also a frame of mind they adopted, so that they perceived the war as posing an immediate threat to their lives, as being directly related to their country's conflict with the Arab world, and as a justified, even heroic act on the part of President Bush. While there was some evidence of awareness of anti-war demonstrations around the world and political resistance by certain European countries – the justification of the war as the most necessary and logical course of action was never challenged by them.



Fig. 6: Tamar (9): Saddam and Bush make peace, symbolised by a rainbow.

At the same time, many Israeli children seemed to have adopted the fatalist belief so common now in this society, that the war will continue, with no end in sight, and that the promise of peace is becoming more and more removed. It seems that the media's hegemonic framing of reality at a time perceived as being one of existential crisis is successful in cultivating a dominant world view even among children, through their own exposure to media coverage of events, as well as through the reinforcing surrounding parental and educational environment. ■

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