In psychological warfare the term “theme” refers to the justifications, argumentations, and emotional elements used in a military-political conflict to elicit hatred, fear, and second thoughts within the target audience. The themes are conveyed through speeches, books, newspapers, magazines, leaflets, electronic and digital networks, and street graffiti. The choice of theme is crucial because its effectiveness depends largely on an intimate familiarity with the target audience’s culture and mentality.

Arab and Israeli intelligence services assemble a cultural profile of their enemies by obtaining material from the media and academic research institutes. In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict the quality of the picture they formed of one another was asymmetrical: the Palestinians’ superior knowledge and understanding of the enemy culture added immensely to the effectiveness of their messages. They set up research centers that focused on Israeli culture and psychology1 as early as 1968 (which testifies to their awareness of the latent potential in this field). Palestinian prisoners organized Hebrew language study groups where they read Israeli newspapers and listened to Hebrew radio stations. East Jerusalem Palestinians with Israeli citizenship attended Israeli universities and acquired profound insight into Israeli culture. Palestinians in low economic fields worked in Israel and picked up a working knowledge of Hebrew.

Israel, too, collected a vast amount of material on the enemy through military intelligence (such as the Hatzav Unit that translates open-source information from the Arab media) and the Shabak, but the material was designed for operational purposes rather than for psywar. The Shabak was responsible for collecting intelligence to preempt terrorist attacks but, it will be recalled, it gradually withdrew from overseeing the political uprising.

R. Schleifer, *Psychological Warfare in the Arab-Israeli Conflict* © Ron Schleifer 2014
Until the Intifada broke out the Shabak had been considered practically omniscient, now it had to admit that its intelligence was “only” intended to stave off terrorist strikes. Military intelligence was responsible for “psychological warfare” but lacked many basic tools for applying it. The upshot was that at the start of the Intifada Israel failed to analyze the target audiences and their messages. Nonetheless, when the parties responsible realized that the uprising was going to be a drawn-out affair they quickly prepared a comprehensive analysis of its causes, directions, and the ways of quelling it.

Israel’s Themes

“Educational” Themes

These themes provided target audiences with Israel’s view of the Middle East reality and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Lack of Historical Context. This theme claims that criticism of Israel stems from the lack of historical information given to the neutral audience and the deliberate ambiguity of the Arabs and Palestinians. If foreign countries are given enough factual background, their criticism of Israeli policy will change. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ first publication on the Intifada was entitled The Riots in the Territories—Remembering the Context. The theme reflects a hasbara approach.

Israel Is a Democratic Country. Living in the only democracy in the Middle East, Israeli citizens enjoy freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and free access to information; therefore, Israel does not need to prevent the media from photographing events or prohibit people from participation in nonviolent demonstrations. Security forces intervene only when the protests turn violent.

A number of spinoff themes were derived from this.

Israel Acts Legally. This was an important theme for Western consumption, and the Palestinians disputed it from the start. The two sides battled over the legitimacy of Israel’s punitive steps in the territories, which included administrative detention, the demolition of homes, and, most infuriating for the Palestinians, deportation. The legal arguments revolved around the interpretation of two historical documents in international law: The Hague Convention of 1907 and the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949. The Palestinians claimed that Israel’s conduct in the territories violated these conventions. Israel counterclaimed—and the Supreme Court upheld the argument—that the Geneva Convention of 1949 had to be understood against the background of World War II and its intention to prevent