

MILITARY PROPAGANDA

Psychological Warfare
and Operations

Edited by
Ron D. McLaurin

PRAEGER

PRAEGER SPECIAL STUDIES • PRAEGER SCIENTIFIC

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Military propaganda.

Bibliography: p.

1. Psychological warfare—Addresses, essays, lectures. I. McLaurin, R. D.

(Ronald De), 1944-

UB275.M54 355.3'434 81-22638

ISBN 0-03-058862-6 AACR2

Articles marked by * appeared in Ronald D. McLaurin et al., eds., The Art and Science of Psychological Operations: Case Studies of Military Application (2 vols., Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office for Headquarters, Department of the Army, April 1976). Some titles have been modified, and additional excerpting may have occurred from articles as they originally appeared in The Art and Science.

Published in 1982 by Praeger Publishers
CBS Educational and Professional Publishing
a Division of CBS Inc.
521 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10175 U.S.A.

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23456789 145 987654321

Printed in the United States of America

ISRAELI SECTARIAN PROPAGANDA DURING THE OCTOBER 1973 WAR

Nikolaos van Dam

INTRODUCTION

In broadcasts of Radio Israel in the Arabic language, supposed or real negative aspects of Arab regimes are regularly brought forward, in an apparent effort to undermine the positions of Israel's military and political opponents.¹ How intensively Israeli broadcasts in Arabic are being listened to in the Arab world is unknown. In periods of crisis, however, there seems to be a special desire to compare their news content with that of the broadcasting services of Arab states, which often has been of a rather poor quality.²

It is my intention to deal here briefly with the Israeli sectarian propaganda campaign during the Arab-Israeli October 1973 War, especially as it was directed against Syria.³ Its aim clearly was to sow dissension in a period of crisis among the ranks of Israeli's enemy by stimulating discord, latent or already manifest, between members of different religious communities.

During the October 1973 War, Radio Israel of course elaborated on various other, rather obvious propaganda themes, such as various kinds of military weakness of the Arab states it had to confront. As far as the Syrian-Israeli front was concerned, these weaknesses were alleged to emanate from differences between Syria and its Arab allies, particularly those that militarily participated on the Golan front and had previously had political disputes with Syria: Iraq and Jordan. This was supposed to have caused

mutual distrust among the military units concerned. The present article leaves aside these more common themes of psychological warfare, which accompany almost any large-scale military confrontation, and concentrates instead on Israeli sectarian propaganda.

Sectarianism came to be a key issue in the struggle for political power in Syria, particularly after the rise of the Ba'th Party to power in March 1963. That year was an important turning point in modern Syrian history, with regard to the representation in power institutions of specific sectarian, regional, socioeconomic, and political groups. Before 1963 people belonging to the Sunni Muslim majority (constituting 69 percent of the population), urbanites, and persons from the more well-to-do classes filled most of the powerful positions outside the armed forces, whereas members of religious minorities such as the heterodox Islamic 'Alawis (11.5 percent), Druzes (3 percent), and Isma'ilis (1.5 percent), and people from the poor countryside generally were grossly under-represented and discriminated against politically and socioeconomically.⁴ After 1963 this situation was drastically reversed with the help of the army and the Ba'th Party. This was evidenced by the fact that members of the heterodox Islamic minorities, 'Alawis in particular, and people from the poor countryside then rose strongly, became relatively overrepresented in the main Syrian power institutions, and went through a process of rapid national emancipation. This strong rise of minorities and rural people was to an important extent due to manipulations in the armed forces by groups with sectarian, regional, and tribal loyalties, and ended up in a monopolization of power by Ba'thist officers' factions that were mainly composed of 'Alawis, of which that of President Hafiz al-Asad turned out to be the strongest.⁵

Not surprisingly, all this made Syria's military leaders vulnerable to the propaganda theme of sectarianism at least as much as to the more common subjects of psychological warfare. Since the takeover by the Ba'th in 1963, Radio Israel had often stressed the powerful position of 'Alawi officers in the Syrian armed forces, as well as the alleged dissension among officers from different religious communities.⁶ As could be expected, Radio Israel intensified the use of this propaganda theme during the October 1973 War.

Thus, in their broadcasts in Arabic the Israelis claimed that the Syrian Air Force was not able to function properly and had been partly paralyzed in its activities, allegedly as a result of sectarian tensions between its Sunni commander, Major General Naji Jamil, and the 'Alawi Syrian president and supreme commander of the armed forces, Lieutenant General Hafiz al-Asad. How true this allegation was and its effect on Syrian military morale are not known. What is known, however, is that the Syrian Air Force fought relatively well during the October War.

It is rarely possible, if possible at all, to ascertain whether combat PSYOP has had an effect on the enemy. Several Syrian reactions to the Israeli sectarian propaganda campaign, however, give clear evidence of how effective such propaganda can be. Some of the Israeli sectarian propaganda items and subsequent Syrian reactions are dealt with below.

THE CASE OF RAFIQ HALAWAH

A news item of Radio Israel that, if judged according to subsequent Arab reactions, did indeed produce tensions and suspicions in the Syrian camp, was the one in which it was, probably falsely, alleged that a Druze lieutenant colonel, Rafiq Halawah, had been executed at the order of the Syrian president because of what was called "neglect of duty." The news item, broadcast on October 20, 1973, ran as follows:

Today, the commander of an infantry brigade in the Syrian Army was executed on the order of the Syrian president, Lieutenant General Hafiz al-Asad. The person concerned is Lieutenant Colonel Rafiq Halawah, commander of the 68th Infantry Brigade. Lieutenant Colonel Halawah was stationed in the northern sector of the Syrian front. This is the sector where the Israeli Defence Army has broken through in its progress on the axis al-Qunaytarah-Damascus. Halawah is a member of the Druze religious community.⁷

The Israeli broadcast alleging the execution of Halawah certainly did not go unnoticed by the Syrians and, if judged by Syrian mass media reactions, it may well have stimulated distrust among members of the various religious communities living in Syria, particularly a distrust directed against the Druzes. One of the first public Syrian reactions came the following day, October 21, 1973, in an editorial of the official Syrian daily al-Ba'th:

The enemy has used the cheapest methods, as well as the most despicable propaganda, and the vilest rumors against the march of our people. Concerning the methods of the enemy, this is nothing new or strange, So, the stirring up of sectarianism, which we have buried in the dunghill of history, thanks to the consciousness of our people and their sticking together in order to achieve their national aims; and the stimulation

of regionalism, which our people have left behind ever since they carried arms in order to drive away the foreign invaders from their country, and achieved their freedom and national independence, and offered thousands of martyrs on the altar of patriotism; all these methods, on which the enemy concentrates with care, and which it applies today in its mass media, mean to us the assurance that the enemy fails on the battlefield, and is incapable of achieving a victory over our combatants. It assures us also of the enemy's ignorance of the nature of our people, and its incapability to understand the reality of the coherence of our internal front behind her armed forces which beat the enemy in the name of our history and honor, and which achieve for us one victory after another.

That very day Radio Israel reacted to the article in al-Ba'th by spreading additional rumors about the supposed sectarian dissensions in Syria:

[The editorial in al-Ba'th] seems to be an answer to the news saying that the Ba'th regime has taken vengeance measures against Druze villages situated on the road between Damascus and al-Qunaytarah, or that death sentences have been carried out against Druze officers and members of other minorities.

Accusations of such a nature touched a very sensitive point indeed. It was, moreover, much easier to send them into the world than to bring to an end the circulation of the rumors that had consequently come into being.

Somewhat later on October 21, 1973, Radio Israel transmitted the contents of an interview that one of its correspondents was said to have had with some Druze Golan Heights villagers who were supposed to have known Halawah personally. The Druzes interviewed related that Halawah had been highly respected by his coreligionists, that he had been a prominent member of the Ba'th Party, and that he was originally a protégé of President Hafiz al-Asad. The death of Halawah was, however, ascribed by those interviewed to his being a Druze:

Halawah has become a victim. If Rafiq Halawah had been a Muslim [sic]⁸ or 'Alawi officer, nobody would have done him any harm. But since he has been executed, the Syrian authorities try to put the responsibility

of the military defeat on the neck of the Druzes, who, according to the authorities, have brought the Israeli Defence Force to the outskirts of Damascus.

This kind of news report tried to stimulate dissension between Druzes and non-Druzes in the Syrian armed forces. Weren't the Druzes in Israel the only Arab group whose members were being treated more or less as Israeli citizens with almost full rights, including compulsory military service? So weren't they potentially suspect because they fought in the Israeli Army as well?

As to the Syrian Druzes from the Golan Heights villages that had been occupied by the Israeli armed forces during the war of June 1967, the Israeli government applied a policy of incorporation and privileging, certainly if compared with the treatment of non-Druze inhabitants of the respective occupied territories.⁹ During the October 1973 War some Druze villages of the Golan came repeatedly under fire of the Syrian Air Force, reportedly suffering some dead and wounded. The Israeli government, in an effort to strengthen its Druze support, subsequently declared that it would compensate the losses suffered by the inhabitants of the Druze villages concerned as if they were Israeli citizens. The Druzes of the Golan were also reported by Radio Israel to have retained their freedom of movement, despite the continuing state of war.¹⁰ An Israeli military spokesman even alleged that a great number of Druzes from the Golan "had expressed their allegiance to the State of Israel as well as their readiness to participate in the war efforts."¹¹ It is understandable that a possible distrust in Syria toward the Syrian Druzes could only be enlarged by reports such as these. Hadn't those same Druzes now reported by Radio Israel to have expressed their allegiance toward the state of Israel been normal Syrian citizens before the war of June 1967?

As far as events could be reconstructed, the Syrian Lieutenant Colonel Rafiq Halawah had not been executed, but had been killed in battle against the Israeli Army. Probably the Israeli Army had intercepted an internal radio message of the Syrian Army, reporting the death of Halawah, and subsequently knew how to exploit his death in an artful way for propaganda purposes.¹²

It may have been difficult for the Syrian Army Command to put an end to the rumors spread by Radio Israel. In an effort to do so, a notice addressed to all Syrian armed units was reportedly issued by the Syrian Army Command, threatening with heavy punishment all those who circulated rumors broadcast by Israel, or simply spoke of them. According to the Syrian Army Command, doing so would only serve the interests of the enemy. A request was made to report immediately to one's superiors any persons who could be

identified as spreading rumors and reports of a "doubtful nature." In the same circular the Syrian Army Command indirectly commented on the Israeli reports concerning the execution of the Druze officer Rafiq Halawah and others:

We mention, by way of an example, that the radio of the enemy has broadcast, on the occasion of its lies and deception, that some of our leading officers have been executed. It has fabricated these big lies in order to arouse doubts, and to create confusion in the minds of the people. The truth is, however, without any doubt, that those, about whom the radio of the enemy has spoken, have sincerely and honourably done their national duty, and deserve the esteem of their people and nation.¹³

The Druzes, thanks to the Israeli propaganda, were accused in Syria of being responsible for defeats inflicted upon the Syrian Army during the October War, and elsewhere as well. As a result, members of the Druze community living in Kuwait sent a declaration to Druze leaders in Syria and Lebanon, asking them to take effective measures to put an end to the rumors spread by Radio Israel about the Syrian Druzes. The Druze community in Kuwait, because of the Israeli rumors, was constantly being subjected to criticism in which doubts were cast on its position concerning the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹⁴

In an effort to neutralize the Israeli rumors concerning the Syrian Druzes, the Druze leader, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, was invited to speak on Syrian radio and television on November 1, 1973, shortly following Syria's acceptance of an armistice with Israel. Sultan al-Atrash was widely respected throughout Syria because of the leading role he had played during the Syrian revolt against the French in 1925. He was, therefore, considered to be a hero for the whole of Syria, and not only in the Druze community. In his speech, Sultan al-Atrash stressed that the people of Syria formed a strong unity "that could not be smashed by the Zionist and Israeli propaganda."¹⁵

On November 4, 1973, al-Ba'th published another interview with him in which he made similar statements:

Israel has tried to spread poisonous propaganda in order to crumble Arab unanimity in an effort to have the bones decay from the inside. But this endeavour is old and obvious. Here in the Jabal al-'Arab,¹⁶ we have surpassed the stage of propaganda, and we have

reached the stage of the real image of the Arab creation in general. Our only decisive answer to the fabricated lies of the enemy is to sacrifice a maximum of martyrs, who will never hesitate to raise the head of their nation high.

Some eight months later, on July 7, 1974, the mortal remains of Lieutenant Colonel Rafiq Halawah were taken from the military hospital in Harasta, and buried in Damascus at the Cemetery of the Martyrs of the October War after a funeral attended by the commanders of various Syrian military units, the Syrian chief of staff, the minister of defense and other ministers, and delegations from Lebanon.¹⁷ Rafiq Halawah had already been honorably mentioned in al-Hadith, where he was "praised by the Minister of Defense in esteem for his efforts, courage and discipline." It was further stated that "he enjoyed the confidence of his superiors, and responded to the call of his fatherland during the liberating October battles, of which he was one of the prominent heroes. He died as a martyr, while defending the soil and freedom of his fatherland."¹⁸ Nevertheless, the rumors concerning Rafiq Halawah and others have left their marks on history.

CONCLUSION

Israeli sectarian propaganda, as well as Israeli support for particular religious and ethnic minorities in the Middle East, should be explained not only within the framework of purely military strategic interests, but also within that of long-term Israeli policy toward religious and ethnic minorities in the Arab world. That policy is apparently aimed at maintaining or encouraging a kind of religious and ethnic pluralism in the Middle East.

Since the rise of nationalism in the Arab world, a transformation has been going on in which the traditional religious, tribal, and regional loyalties are being replaced, completely or partially, by national and socioeconomic loyalties. These can contribute to the integration of the Arab world or of different Arab political entities. Religious loyalties, on the other hand, especially in those states that contain many members of different religious communities, can stimulate or maintain social dissension and retard social progress.

Israel, in order to maintain or strengthen its position of power, has taken advantage of differences within the Arab world. In its mass media and political policy, Israel has concentrated on latent or manifest sectarian, tribal, regional, and national or ethnic differences between or within specific Arab states—and even within

Israel itself—a major aim thereby apparently being to hinder the above-mentioned transformation process.¹⁹

The stimulation of sectarian loyalties was not disadvantageous to Israel itself, since as a Jewish state it would fit more easily into a Middle East divided into political or administrative units based on religious and ethnic bonds than into a Middle East where boundaries between religious communities would count politically for less and less and, moreover, cut through existing national boundaries.

In the case of the Jewish state of Israel, the categories of nation and religious community are closely intertwined and almost inseparable. A similar relationship does not apply to the Arabs, however, who might be subdivided into several distinct religious groups such as the Sunnis, heterodox Islamic minorities, Greek Orthodox Christians, Maronites, and others. The majority of these groups are not restricted to the Arab people, but include other national groups, such as the Turks, Persians, and Kurds. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that Sunnis constitute an overwhelming majority among the Arab people, and that the Arab nationalist movement originally had strong Sunni overtones and used to be Sunni-dominated, the role of religious communities in relation to Arab nationalism is completely different from that in relation to Jewish nationalism, as manifested in the case of the Jewish state of Israel.

Finally, it may be concluded that Israeli sectarian propaganda, as described above, did indeed affect national integration in Syria in a negative way. During the October 1973 War it was the Syrian Druze community that was most negatively affected by the Israeli broadcasts. These broadcasts apparently succeeded in undermining confidence between military men and officers belonging to different religious communities, thereby reducing the fighting capabilities of the Syrian armed forces as a whole.

But whereas the effects of more traditional propaganda themes dealing with, for instance, material, technical, and purely strategic aspects of the military situation tended to be limited to the duration of military confrontation itself and to fade away with the ending of military hostilities, psychological propaganda themes such as sectarianism tended to have a much more lasting effect. Since the 'Alawi-dominated Ba'th regime in Syria did not allow any open investigation or criticism that might convincingly prove to the general public whether the Israeli sectarian propaganda was true or unfounded, the aftereffects of such propaganda were much more persistent, allowing latent or manifest sectarian distrust and division to continue to exist and to flare up during internal crises or renewed military hostilities.

NOTES

1. Along with the normal use of "classical" Arabic, Radio Israel regularly broadcasts programs in Arabic dialects spoken in the states attacked. The intention of this seems to be to draw special attention, particularly of illiterate or semiliterate people, to whom dialects similar to their own are more easily understandable than is "classical" Arabic.

2. See Donald R. Browne, "The Voices of Palestine: A Broadcasting House Divided," Middle East Journal, XXIX, 2 (Spring 1975), p. 149.

3. The religious distinctions between and the political roles of the 'Alawis and Druzes in Syria are discussed at length in R. D. McLaurin, ed., The Political Role of Minority Groups in the Middle East (New York: Praeger, 1979), chs. 2 and 5.

4. For a summary and analysis of the Israeli broadcasts in Arabic during the October 1973 War, as well as a comparison of them with Israeli broadcasts in Hebrew, see Shu'un Filastiniyah (Beirut), no. 27 (November 1973), pp. 119-142.

5. See Nikolaos van Dam, The Struggle for Power in Syria. Sectarianism, Regionalism and Tribalism in Politics (1961-1980), 2nd ed. (London, Croon Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981).

6. The theme of sectarian propaganda against Syria was exploited not only by Israel but also by opponent Arab regimes. See Nikolaos van Dam, "Middle Eastern Political Clichés. . .," Orient, XXI, 1 (January 1980), pp. 42-57.

7. See Chaim Herzog, The War of Atonement (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1975), p. 132; Riad Ashkar, "The Syrian and Egyptian Campaigns," Journal of Palestine Studies, III, 2 (Winter 1974), p. 26.

8. A Druze would not usually classify religions in terms of Muslims on the one hand and Druzes and 'Alawis on the other, since Druzes consider themselves to be Muslims.

9. See Daniel Dishon, ed., Middle East Record, IV (1968), p. 455.

10. Radio Israel, October 12, 15, and 18, 1973.

11. Radio Israel, October 18, 1973.

12. See al-Ba'th, February 13 and July 8, 1974; and Fu'ad al-Atrash, al-Duruz: Mu'amarat, Tarikh, aw Haqa'iq ("The Druzes: Complots, History, and Truths") (Beirut, 1975), pp. 364-369.

13. al-Atrash, al-Duruz, p. 367.

14. Ibid., pp. 354-367.

15. al-Ba'th, November 2, 1973.

16. The Jabal al-'Arab, also called Jabal al-Duruz (Mountain of the Druzes) is another name for the province of al-Suwayda'. Arab nationalists in Syria usually avoid the use of geographical names that give an indication of the sectarian backgrounds of the inhabitants of the area concerned. Thus, stressing that all Arabs are equal, irrespective of their religion, they prefer the name Jabal al- Arab.

17. al-Ba'th, July 8, 1974.

18. al-Ba'th, February 13, 1974.

19. For further analysis of this point, see Nikolaos van Dam, "Israel and Arab National Integration: Pluralism versus Arabism," Asian Affairs, LXVI, 2 (June 1979), pp. 144-150.