

The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of **Global Dialogue and Democracy**·MIFTAH
المبادرة الفلسطينية لتعميق الحوار العالمي والديمقراطية



“Dimona Operation: The Coverage of the Three Newspapers and Palestine Satellite Television”

The Coverage of the Palestinian Media of the Suicide

Bombing at Dimona

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Introduction

On 4 February 2008, a Palestinian blew himself up at a commercial center in Dimona, a town in south Israel, killing himself and an Israeli woman, and wounding several others. The Israeli security shot another Palestinian to death in the same town, who according to Israeli Police, was wearing an explosive belt that he intended to detonate after the security and paramedics gathered to rescue the casualties of the first explosion.

Israeli television channels broadcast footage of the wounded Palestinian before the security shot him to death, as he was trying to detonate the explosive belt, Israelis said.

This event was covered in the Palestinian media, particularly in the three newspapers: Al-Quds, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah and Al-Ayyam, as well as in the Palestinian Television (PBC), in varying magnitude, style and location of the news item among news coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and local developments.

The confused description of this event and the relatively conflicting phrasing between headlines and body, particularly on the identity of the implementer and even the operation itself, was a common characteristic of this media coverage.

The coverage of the three newspapers

Al-Quds:

Al-Quds newspaper had the following headline on its front page on 5 February 2008:

"Israeli Police on alert" (subheading) 4 columns

"Two martyrs and the death of one Israeli in an explosive operation in Dimona" (main headline).

The newspaper described the implementers of the operation as "martyrs," while it described the operation as a "bombing operation." The word "martyr" has a known religious and political connotation that commends and glorifies the act and the implementer, as the reader would assume, even if it did not reflect the position of the newspaper.

Nevertheless, the newspaper did not show enough interest in the event, as the news item occupied the left side of the front page, and not the headline. Another less important topic, namely the Palestinian National Council (PNC) meeting in the coming months was given more attention. Hence, the newspaper was more concerned with the PNC meeting than the "bombing operation" of Dimona, despite its significance.

The newspaper also expressed less interest in the Israeli military operation in Qabatiyah, Jenin, in which the Israeli Army shot and killed two Palestinians, in addition to killing a

third in Gaza. These two events had caused official and popular reactions, as the PNA condemnation of the Dimona operation was linked to that of Qabatiyah, since both targeted civilians, according to Al-Quds headline on the front page of 5 February 2008:

"PNA denounces Qabatiyah and Dimona operations and condemns targeting civilians." (2 columns)

The newspaper also published another news item on the implementing party of Dimona operation entitled:

"Dimona operation implementer is from Gaza." (2 columns)

The newspaper quoted the German news agency (DPA), which declared that "Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades," the military arm of Fateh, are responsible for the attack, and named the implementers: Musa Khalil Ahmad Arafat and Luay Al Aghawani.

It also published on page 2 another item in two columns about Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades assuming responsibility for the attack, jointly with two other factions: "Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades," and the "National Resistance Brigades," according to Agence France Presse (AFP). Hence, the newspaper published two news items on the same topic; the first identified the implementers by name, but did not describe them as martyrs, and the second did not mention names but considered the operation a "heroic, brave operation" according to the news item.

Al-Quds published on page 2 of 5 February issue an AFP report on the implementer of the Dimona blast, entitled:

"The last cup of coffee for the bomber at a restaurant near the Dimona commercial center" (3 columns)

The newspaper described the implementer as "bomber" rather than "martyr," as on the front page when talking about the "martyrdom of the implementers of operation."

Obviously, the newspaper's editor did not edit the heading quoted from AFP, which described the implementer as a bomber, while the editor chose another description for the implementers that is commonly used in writing and editing news of the Palestinian – Israeli conflict; hence he wrote his previously mentioned heading "Two martyrs and the death of one Israeli in an explosive operation in Dimona."

The newspaper relied on a number of international news agencies' news items and reports on Dimona operation, in addition to one news report by its Bethlehem correspondent Najib Farraj, published on page 3 on 5 February and entitled:

"Dimona Operation, hard questions and big surprises" (3 columns)

The report addressed the surprise the operation caused and the many questions it raised on how the implementers arrived to their target city Dimona, the most important town in

Israel that has the nuclear reactor. The report conveyed Israeli officials' reactions towards the operation, but stood short of analyzing them.

The newspaper also published another AFP report on 5 February which included information about the town of Dimona, linking it to the nuclear reactor. The report published on the left side of page 3 was entitled:

"Dimona a desert town that has the secret nuclear reactor" (2 columns)

The report presented important strategic, demographic and historic information on this town that interests the readers who followed up the bombing operation.

The newspaper also published another 4-column AFP report on page 5 entitled:

"Palestinian bombing attacks since the beginning of the Intifada"

This report included detailed information on the number of major operations and the resulting Israeli casualties, which revealed the interest of the newspaper in the event and its repercussions. It included pictures of the location, similar to the photo published on the front page. The newspaper also published on page 8 the picture of a Palestinian activist declaring the joint responsibility of the factions for the attack.

Although Al-Quds showed little interest in the operation on 6 February, i.e. two days later, it however, continued to follow up its repercussions. It published on the left side of the front page a picture of Israelis on guard at Mahane Yehuda market in West Jerusalem following the Dimona operation. To the right of the picture, the newspaper published its headline news on killing 9 Palestinian citizens and wounding 13 others in Israeli bombardment of Gaza Strip. The headline was as follows:

"Declaring a state of emergency and evacuating the Executive Force headquarters" (subheading)

"9 martyrs and 13 injured in Israeli bombardment of the Strip, and 7 killed during afternoon prayer" (main headline over 4 columns)

The report, however, did not point out the relation between the Israeli shelling and the killing of nine citizens, and the Dimona operation, although it was a reaction to the operation and to shelling of Sderot.

Without any reference to Dimona operation, Al-Quds published on the front page of the same day another report on the Palestinian–Israeli field escalation entitled:

"Damaging two firms and several houses and cutting off an electric line" (subheading):

"4 Israelis wounded and another 4 traumatized by 16 Palestinian rockets that fell on Sderot, Kesofim, and Sufa crossing" (main headline) 4 columns.

The newspaper, however, did not show interest in the new development related to Dimona operation, namely, identifying the real implementing party. On page 3 of the same day, it published:

"Both implementers are from Hebron." (subheading)

"Al-Qassam Brigades assume responsibility for Dimona operation" (main headline);
(2 columns)

This news item was attributed to Al-Quds correspondent in Gaza, Ala'a Mashharawi, and included a statement by Hamas leader Sammy Abu Zuhri who said: "This operation asserts Hamas' adherence to resistance to confront Israeli aggression." Despite the importance of this news, the newspaper did not highlight it sufficiently and did not publish it on the front page. On page 8, it published a picture of the mother of Mohammad Harbawi, the implementer of the bombing operation. It also published on page 31 two paid obituaries of the implementers that included their photos and beneath each photo was written "obituary of a martyr." The local newspapers had stopped for a while publishing paid obituaries, particularly relating to operations that target civilians.

The newspaper also published on the left side of page 3, and within the context of its follow up on the Dimona operation, a DPA news report entitled:

"Israeli security sources: 50 alarms on operations inside Israel" (2 columns)

The report said: *"Sources in the Israeli Army and internal security services announced that they received around fifty alarms on operations inside Israel following the suicidal Dimona operation."*

As you may see, the newspaper described Dimona operation this time as "suicidal," quoting the news agency literally, unlike the previous "bombing" description.

This report, as well as the previous one on identifying the implementing party, should have been published on the front page, or at least on page 2 or 3, with the photos of implementers and that of the mother of one of them, given the importance of the new information in the report that quoted Israeli Channel 10 saying that the features of one implementer of the attack did not match those that appeared in the video of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades; the newspaper referred to the implementers in this report as "suicide bombers."

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah

Dimona operation received wide coverage and occupied prominent space in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, particularly on the front page of 5 February. The main headline that covered correspondents and news agencies' reports was as follows:

"The martyrdom of implementers, conflicting declarations of responsibility, pictures of attackers and where they come from" (subheading)

"An Israeli killed and 11 others wounded in an operation in the center of Dimona" (main headline) 4 columns.

A photo of soldiers, police and paramedics appeared in the middle. The newspaper described the implementers as "martyrs," and later as "attackers" in the same subheading. The report referred to the operation as a "bombing operation," as it presented official Israeli reactions in the beginning and referred to the implementer as the "suicide bomber" in presenting details provided by the Israeli Police.

Unlike Al-Quds, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah covered Dimona operation and reactions extensively through its own reporters, as well as news agencies reports and Israeli media. The description of the implementers of the operation, though, which reflected a lack of a specific editorial policy, was common to both newspapers.

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah published to the right of the front page on 5 February another report entitled:

"Israeli television broadcast footage of Israeli guard in Dimona executing a wounded person crying for help." (3 columns)

This report was fully taken from Maan, an independent news agency, without introducing any changes in the heading. It considered the killing of one of the implementers of the Dimona operation an "execution" and referred to him as a wounded person crying for help without revealing his identity.

The following quote is from the report:

"The second Israeli channel broadcast footage of an Israeli dressed in civilian clothes and shooting with his pistol a wounded person crying for help and raising his hands requesting paramedics help." Channel 10 though claimed that "the Palestinian continued to attempt at detonating his explosive belt which necessitated his killing."

The contradiction in the phrasing of this paragraph of the report and its incompatibility with the heading the newspaper quoted from Maan is striking. While the heading spoke of "Israeli Guard in Dimona executing a wounded person crying for help," the report itself spoke about an Israeli dressed in civilian clothes, which means that an Israeli

dressed in civilian clothes, and not a security guard whose duty is to protect his place of work, killed the wounded young man. The report also mentioned that the wounded was crying for help and raising his hands. Was he really crying for help? Or was he trying to activate the detonator when the Israeli security person shot and killed him in cold blood, as was mentioned in the police report?

The report included another contradiction. It stated that an Israeli woman witnessed the process of discovering the Palestinian hiding behind a lottery shop unarmed, while an Israeli guard named Kobi shot him and left him bleeding until an officer in Israeli Police uniform shouted at the crowds saying, "Stay away; he is moving and may have an explosive belt on him." Few minutes later, other guards shot him with their pistols on the pretext that he had moved his left hand making sure that the shots did not hit the explosive belt.

Hence, the report first mentions Kobi, an Israeli guard who shot the Palestinian and left him bleeding, then a police officer arrived and moved the crowds away, then other guards killed him with their pistols.

Who then killed the wounded young man? Was it the civilian Israeli? Was it the guard Kobi or the guards who did not appear in the footage, but rather a man appeared shooting him in the head and killing him?

The Maan report did not clarify the matter. This asserts the need for verifying information, accurate use of sentences and phrases in writing news items, as well as accurate description of the incident and revision of the report entitled "Executing the wounded man."

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, just like Al-Quds, highlighted the PNA reaction to Dimona operation, linked to its reaction to the Israeli military operations in Qabatiyah and Beit Lahiya, in which the Israeli Army killed three activists of "Al-Quds Brigades" and the "Resistance Committees." Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah also covered this operation widely, as it published on the same day a large photo over four columns of the funeral of Ammar Zakarneh and Ahmad Abu Zeid, both of whom were killed in Qabatiyah.

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah also highlighted Fateh position that denied any connection to Dimona operation and said that the implementing party was known for its position that rejects any calm or progress in the peace process. On the same day, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah exclusively published a news report taken from Ramattan on Luay Aghawani, the activist who was thought to be one of the implementers of the operation, before Al-Qassam declared responsibility. The report had the following heading:

"Luay Al-Aghawani left an open grave to die in a closed tomb" (5 columns)
A photo of his mother holding her son's picture and crying appeared.

On the same page, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah also published the AFP report Al-Quds had published, which had the following heading;

"The last cup of coffee of the implementer of the Dimona operation" (3 columns)

Unlike Al-Quds, it did not describe the implementer in the heading as "the bomber," as it appeared in the original AFP report, but described him as the "implementer," reflecting the personal opinion of the editor, and not necessarily that of the newspaper itself.

While Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah highlighted a statement on Dimona operation by Palestinian Minister of Information Riyadh Malki, Al-Quds quoted his statement on employees' salaries only, reporting from Palestinian News Agency (Wafa), despite the importance of Al-Malki's statements that he had given in a press conference. Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah gave it the following heading:

"Al-Malki rules out any impact of Dimona operation on negotiations and reiterates the Government's renunciation of violence regardless of its source"

Although the newspaper published these important statements in its internal pages, they had a large font heading spread over six columns, with a photo of the cabinet meeting.

While Al-Quds used Wafa as its source for covering this meeting, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah correspondent Muntaser Hamdan covered it, a positive practice that resulted in a comprehensive coverage that did not exclude extremely important statements by The Minister of Information.

Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah also exclusively followed up Dimona operation on 6 February, as it published statements of "Al-Qassam Brigades," of Hamas, that declared responsibility for the operation. It published the following item on the front page over three columns:

"Hanegbi called for assassinating Hamas leaders and Israeli Police on maximum alert"
(subheading)

"Al-Qassam Brigades adopt Dimona operation and assert that implementers are from Hebron" (main headline)

Unlike Al-Quds, which published the relevant report on page 3, Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah attributed this report to news agencies, but published photos of the implementers, with captions mentioning their names in the following manner: "Martyr" Mohammad Harbawi and "Martyr" Shadi Zughayyar. The report itself referred to their names only without describing them as "martyrs" as indicated in Al-Qassam communiqué. It, however, quoted the communiqué describing the Dimona operation as a "martyrdom operation."

The newspaper also published two paid obituaries on its front page over four columns, starting with the following Verse from the Qur'an:

"And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's war are dead; nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord"

Beneath the verse, the phrase "martyr obituary" was written. The text of each obituary, issued on behalf of their families, included the phrase "the heroic martyr."

Al-Ayyam

Unlike Al-Quds and Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, the main news on the front page of Al-Ayyam was about clashes on the Egyptian borders between Palestinian youth and Egyptian soldiers. It spread this item over eight columns, four of which included pictures of young men throwing stones at soldiers, under the following heading:

*"... and 46 Egyptian security members wounded" (subheading)
Border-crossing clashes: one citizen killed and tens wounded (main headline)
Cairo announces aborting border infiltration attempts"*

The picture had the following caption:

"Youth throwing stones at Egyptian security forces on the other side of the border at the crossing, during clashes that included shooting yesterday."

It did not mention the party responsible for shooting.

Within the context of this report, the newspaper also published two other relevant news items in boxes, under the following heading:

*"A Palestinian caught possessing explosives" (subheading)
"Egypt seeks the return to Gaza of Palestinians who remain over its territory" (main headline)*

The second news item had the following heading:

"PNA denounces assaults against the Egyptian Security forces in Rafah crossing."

This was the most important news for Al-Ayyam, while the Dimona operation was less important, and the Israeli military operation in Qabatiyah, and assassinating two Al-Quds Brigades activists and a Resistance Committees leader in Gaza was even less important.

Al-Ayyam selected the following heading for the Dimona operation:

"Dimona: An Israeli killed in a blast operation at a commercial center and the two implementers were martyred" (3 columns)

Although the newspaper described the operation as a "bombing operation," throughout the news item reported from their Gaza correspondents as well as from news agencies, it described it as a "suicidal attack," while it named the implementers as "martyrs," a

description the three newspapers unanimously adopted towards this kind of operations targeting civilians.

As was the case with Al-Quds and Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, Al-Ayyam also published the PNA denunciation of Qabatiyah and Dimona operations on its front page and over two columns, reported from Wafa. It should be noted that Al-Quds used the AFP report as a source for this news item, while Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah attributed it to itself and did not refer to Wafa as the source. In Al-Ayyam report on the Israeli reaction to the operation, it described the operation as a "suicidal bombing" operation, attributing the report to DPA, while it published on its front page and over one column, the Maan report published also in Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah, about the Israeli security person killing the second implementer. This item was entitled:

"Israeli television broadcasts footage of eliminating a wounded Palestinian in Dimona"
(1 column)

It is noted that both Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah and Al-Ayyam used the words "executing" and "annihilating," and failed to revise the report, edit and check content to make it consistent with what actually occurred, and verify facts.

Al-Ayyam, however, showed interest in the operation on 6 February, i.e. two days after the operation, as it highlighted on its front page that Al-Qassam Brigades assumed responsibility for the operation under the following heading:

"Al-Qassam assumes responsibility for Dimona operation and asserts that the two implementer come from Hebron" (2columns)

In the heading, Al-Ayyam referred to "implementers," while it described them as "martyrs" in the body of the report. Nevertheless, on the day that followed the operation, Al-Ayyam published on its front page Al-Qassam Brigades communiqué almost fully, and obituaries of implementers Mohammad Harbawi and Shady Zughayyar, as did Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah. To the left side of Al-Ayyam front page, the following news item appeared:

*"Israel: High alert following Dimona operation;
Livni supports the presence of Egyptian forces in Sinai"* (3 columns)

While the heading referred to it as "Dimona operation," the content described it as a "suicidal attack." We noted that the three newspapers used such contradictory and incompatible descriptions, expressions and headings.

Palestine Television (PBC) coverage

The President's news and reception of popular delegations, as well as the Israeli incursion into Qabatiyah and the assassination of two Al-Quds Brigades activists and a third from the "Resistance Committees" in Beit Lahiya in Gaza Strip had priority in PBC coverage on 4 February 2008, the day Dimona operation was carried out.

The main news in the local news bulletin on that day was the President's meeting with delegations from Nablus. Despite its importance, the assassination of three Palestinian activists in Qabatiyah and Beit Lahiya ranked second. The news item started by PNA full denunciation and condemnation of the Israeli operation in Qabatiyah, which led to the martyrdom of two citizens and wounding a third, and also the condemnation of the operation that took place at a commercial center in Dimona, south Israel, which targeted Israeli civilians, according to the local news bulletin. The item highlighted "the PNA firm position against all operations that target civilians, whether Palestinians or Israelis."

The news bulletin focused on a statement by Fateh, stressing the absence of any connection of Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades to this operation, pointing out that "the implementing party is known for its positions and its rejection of any calm of progress in the peace process."

In its comprehensive coverage of both Dimona and Qabatiyah operations, PBC started by broadcasting footage of the victims of the Israeli operation in Qabatiyah at the morgue, with the following text appearing on the screen:

"PNA condemns Qabatiyah and Dimona operations and denounces targeting civilians."

The bulletin then moved to speak about the killing of three persons and the wounding of ten others, some with serious injuries, because of a "bombing operation" that took place in Dimona in south Israel. The lead sentence stated:

"... news reports indicate that one person detonated himself inside a commercial center in the town, causing his own death and killing one Israeli woman, while a third was killed or martyred as the center's security person suspected and shot him."

We notice that PBC used the term "bombing" to describe the operation, avoided describing the implementer as a "martyr," as was the case previously, and described him as "a person who blew himself up" without even referring to his identity.

As for the second person killed in the operation, the news bulletin indicated that, "the third was killed or martyred as the center's security person suspected and shot him," in a reference to the second person who failed to blow himself up but was killed by an Israeli security person at the location.

Such an approach towards writing news and reports on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict may reflect a transformation in the media jargon, such as "martyr" and "martyrdom operation" in reporting this kind of operations, despite some confusion in the use of some descriptions and terms, such as when the news broadcaster said "the third was killed" then added "or martyred."

News of the military operation in Qabatiyah and the assassination of two activists in addition to a third in Beit Lahiya and that of Dimona operation ranked second in the coverage of the local news bulletin. On the other hand, The President's news, his reception of Nablus delegations and his statements on the siege of Gaza Strip ranked first and second, while the denunciation of the two operations ranked third and fourth in main news bulletin. The coverage in the latter was briefer than the local bulletin. The news broadcaster even erred in reading the details of the news item as he said:

"...News reported that a person detonated himself inside a commercial center in the town, causing the death of an Israeli woman and the implementer of the attack, while a security person was martyred or a security person at the center was killed as he was suspected."

There was a need to clarify that it was the "second implementer" who was "killed" by a security person, rather than the latter being "killed." Such clarification was never made and it seemed that the mistake was unintentional, and the news broadcaster continued reading the bulletin.

Three news items out of 33 items comprising both the local and the main news bulletins addressed the operation and relevant reactions, while there was no mention of it as a newsflash, a usual practice at PBC.

The size of coverage reflects the degree of interest of PBC in such news, despite their importance, as it continues to give the President's and PNA news priority over all other news.

Findings:

First: The interest of the three newspapers in the news of Dimona operation and its repercussions varied in terms of size and quality of coverage. While Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah considered the operation its main news, Al-Quds demonstrated relatively less interest, though it published it on the front page, while Al-Ayyam gave priority to the clashes at the Egyptian-Palestinian borders between Palestinian youth and Egyptian soldiers as its main news. It was evident that the latter exaggerated this urgent and exceptional incident at the expense of two other prominent events, namely the Dimona operation and the Israeli military operation in Qabatiyah and Beit Lahiya in which three activists from "Al-Quds Brigades" and "Resistance Committees" were assassinated.

Second: The three newspapers merely provided news coverage of the operation, capturing local and Israeli reactions, particularly that of the PNA. They, however, did not

publish analytical reports and articles that link the operation to the preceding escalating violence between both sides, in terms of escalating assassinations of Palestinian activists, or bombing south Israel with rockets.

Third: There was obvious confusion in the use of terms by the newspapers such as "martyr" or "martyrdom" referring to the implementer of the operation, and the use of other terms such as "bombing operation," and the varying use of terms by the newspapers. While these newspapers used terms like "bombing," "suicidal" or "suicidal operation," as published in sources such as DPA or AFP, the three newspapers published paid obituaries for the implementers of the operation entitled "Martyr obituary," Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah and Al-Ayyam published the obituary on their front pages, while Al-Quds published it on its back page.

Fourth: The newspapers resumed publishing obituaries of implementers of this kind of operations that considered them martyrs and described them as heroes, after a period during which they had refrained from publishing obituaries of implementers of operations that targeted civilians.

Fifth: The coverage of the Palestinian television (PBC) was obviously weak and superficial. News of Dimona operation and the Israeli Army operation in Qabatiyah did not take the lead in news bulletins, but the President's reception of popular delegations had precedence. PBC highlighted PNA reaction before presenting the operations and their repercussions. It should be noted, however, that PBC used more accurate and objective terms to describe the implementers of the Dimona operation and victims of the Israeli military operation in Qabatiyah, while there was no analysis or follow up of both operations and no newsflash on Dimona operation on the day it was carried out.

Recommendations:

First: The press must improve its performance in covering events and must not suffice to convey news but expand the scope of coverage to include research, analysis and follow up. It must improve its local sources of information and not rely fully and exclusively on foreign news agencies. This requires developing and improving the performance of its own reporters.

Second: There is a need to adopt professional conduct and objectivity in news coverage, and a clear policy that is neither muddled nor reluctant in providing accurate facts and news. This requires the PBC management to develop and enhance an objective and professional discourse, adopt a clear editing policy in its field coverage of events, and promote professionalism. The media must convey facts and verify the accuracy of information, particularly in reporting from local or foreign news agencies.