

Chapter 1

“Why Are the Jews Shooting at Us?”

Before Israel’s 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, Netzarim—a small Jewish settlement amid densely populated Arab areas in central Gaza—was a flashpoint between Palestinians and the Israel Defense Forces for many years. As a result, an IDF post was set up near Netzarim Junction, overlooking the main roads and manned by about 30 soldiers.

On the morning of Saturday, September 30, 2000, near the beginning of what would become the second intifada, hundreds of local residents, many of them teenage boys, streamed into Netzarim Junction, hurling rocks and Molotov cocktails at the army post. Journalist Ron Ben-Yishai, who was at the post, stated that it came under fire from several directions.¹ The soldiers at the post returned fire, aiming at Palestinians who were carrying weapons.²

That morning, Jamal al-Dura and his 12-year-old son Muhammad left their home in the Al-Bureij refugee camp to buy a car. “We got in a taxi and drove toward Gaza,” the father later recounted. “When we reached Netzarim Junction, the driver stopped and said there was a riot going on and asked us to get out; he said he couldn’t continue . . . I got out with Muhammad and tried to cross the street, and then we got caught in a hail of gunfire coming from both sides.”³

A video of the incident shows the two pressed against a wall of concrete blocks, cowering behind a barrel. The gunfire continued for 45 minutes.⁴ “They started shooting at us and there was nowhere for us to go and no place to take cover. The only thing we saw was the concrete wall, so we hid there. Muhammad started asking me: ‘Why are the Jews shooting at us?’ I couldn’t answer because I was busy looking for a way to protect him. After 15 minutes of shooting, Muhammad

was wounded in the right leg. He said: 'The dogs got me, the dogs got me.' I told him: 'Don't be afraid. An ambulance will come soon and get us out of here.' But the ambulance didn't come. It came too late, only when everything was over and my son was dead."⁵ Pictures of the incident show what appears to be a burst of gunfire sending puffs of dust from the wall, followed by Muhammad lying dead in his father's lap as the father's head lolls helplessly.

The fighting at Netzarim Junction only subsided as evening approached.



There were many journalists and photographers present at the Netzarim Junction that day, but strangely, there was only a single report on the death of Muhammad al-Dura: The incident was filmed exclusively by France 2 cameraman Talal Abu Rahma.

France 2's Israel bureau chief, Charles Enderlin, was in his Jerusalem office when Abu Rahma phoned and told him about the exchange of gunfire at the junction. He also stated that he was filming a father and son who were under fire. "I receive the footage and can see that it's very powerful," Enderlin recalled. "I have no choice—all of Gaza knows that I have this footage and I must air it. The question is how to do so. Does it meet the network's rules? They won't show dead bodies or images that are too graphic. In consultation with the editor on duty in Paris, we decided that it complied with the rules and could be aired."⁶

Enderlin contacted Maj. Yarden Vatikai, head of the International Media Branch of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit. "I have some very tough footage," he said, "and I want the IDF's response." Enderlin even suggested one: "The IDF is investigating and apologizes for the shooting." Vatikai replied that he hadn't seen the report, so he couldn't respond to it. He also stated that he did not intend to apologize: "I gave him a response that said the matter has been reported in the media and we will check into it. Within an hour, the footage was on [Israeli] Channel 1 and Channel 2."⁷

Later, in the wake of information gathered from the field, the IDF Spokesperson's Unit issued the following statement: "The Palestinians make cynical use of women and children by bringing them to points of conflict in the territories. The incident filmed in the Gaza Strip began with deliberate live fire, the hurling of explosives and firebombs by Palestinians, including police officers, at IDF forces, and with hundreds of rioters charging toward IDF posts. Heavy exchanges of gunfire ensued and

the picture focused exclusively on the injury to the boy and his father who were caught in the crossfire, with no way to identify the source of the gunfire, and thus no way to ascertain who struck the boy and his father. The IDF always regrets the loss of life, particularly of children, but it is clear that given the situation that arose at this location, anyone—Palestinian or Israeli—who came there could have been wounded by gunfire. The responsibility for this falls on the Palestinians and all those responsible for incitement. This incident will be investigated as part of the overall investigation of these events.”⁸

The statement added to the general confusion and left open the question of whether the IDF had killed Muhammad al-Dura. This was in keeping with Israel’s entire response to this question, which proved disorganized and contradictory, with very different statements coming from various sources. Public relations consultant Lenny Ben-David said of the confusion, “We heard one thing from [GOC Southern Command] Yom-Tov Samia, another thing from the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit, and something else from the commander in the field. There was no single version of events.”⁹

For his part, Enderlin moved quickly, distributing the footage to various news agencies. It was immediately broadcast and the impact was enormous. The Arab affairs reporter for Israel’s Channel 1, Shlomi Eldar, prepared the material for broadcast. “The picture was a formative experience for the entire intifada,” he said.¹⁰ The BBC reported on the major impact the story was having, noting that the picture appeared in the main headline of the *New York Times*. The IDF still offered no response to these accusations.

Deputy IDF Spokesperson Col. Elam Kott was sent to investigate the incident. After reviewing maps of the area, Kott concluded that the IDF did not shoot al-Dura. In consultation with Foreign Ministry officials Alon Pinkas, Gideon Meir, and Meir Shlomo, Kott said the IDF should immediately state that it did not shoot the boy. Meir objected: “If you come out now and say, ‘It wasn’t me,’ you have to be ready to provide solid proof so people will say, ‘Okay, it wasn’t you.’”¹¹

On the same day, France 2 aired another report on the incident, this time on Muhammad al-Dura’s funeral. The report mentioned that the IDF had stated it was not possible to conclusively determine who had killed the boy. Meanwhile, media pressure was steadily increasing and, at a meeting of the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit, Maj. Gen. Giora Eiland, chief of the Operations Directorate, proposed informing the press that the IDF planned to review its own conduct. At a press conference, he said: “Based on the information I had at the time, I

explained that it appeared that he had been shot by us, and that we certainly did not intend to hurt him.”¹² After he made this statement, almost all media outlets reported that Israel had accepted responsibility for the incident.¹³ “I made mistakes here, I admit it,” said Eiland a few years later. “I took responsibility because up to that moment it was a more logical explanation. I thought that to start to be perceived as not knowing—no one will believe you, and you come off badly twice. In retrospect, it was a mistake.”¹⁴

That same weekend, major riots erupted in Israeli-Arab communities. Many observers have drawn a connection between the broadcast of the al-Dura video and the outbreak of the riots. Prime Minister Ehud Barak met with leaders of the Arab sector in his office and relayed Eiland’s statement to them: “The boy was killed by IDF fire. . . . It appears that the soldiers, who were caught in a tight spot, shot and killed the boy unintentionally.”¹⁵

At a meeting of the IDF general staff a week after al-Dura’s death, Samia reported the results of a preliminary investigation based on conversations with the post’s commanders and soldiers and aerial photos of the intersection. “Tel Aviv erred with the immediate statement to the media and the apology,” he said. In the meantime, he had ordered the demolition of many structures around the Netzarim Junction, including the wall behind which the al-Duras had taken cover.¹⁶ As a result, the original “scene of the crime” was lost. Many believe Samia acted too hastily, and he has acknowledged the error. In this instance, operational considerations outweighed the needs of public diplomacy, whose importance was not properly understood.

After publishing an investigative report of the incident in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*, journalist Tom Segev suggested an official investigation.¹⁷ Samia agreed and appointed a team of investigators comprised of experts from the military, the police, and Rafael, an Israeli defense technology company.¹⁸ The composition of the team was only disclosed seven years later.¹⁹ Two of its members were Yosef Doriel, a mechanical engineer, and Nahum Shahaf, a physicist. Both believed that the IDF did not shoot the boy and offered their services to Samia.²⁰

Samia presented his findings to IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz. Samia was absolutely convinced that the IDF did not kill al-Dura, but the investigation’s findings only supported this view to a very high degree of likelihood. Discussing whether to present the findings to the public and, if so, how, Mofaz said that the IDF should close the book on the case: “The chief of staff rightly said . . . that some uncertainty remains [and therefore] the matter should be dropped.”²¹

The IDF spokesperson supported the chief of staff’s position.²² The head of the Operations Directorate, Brig. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot, felt differently: “In my opinion, the proper thing to do was to insist on telling the real story, on the basis of the findings, realizing by this point that we were dealing with something that would remain a symbol for many years to come, and so it was important to give the public the real story.”²³ Similarly, Samia persisted in his view that the investigation’s findings should be made public. On November 27, nearly two months after the incident, a press conference was held to present the main findings: “The odds that [al-Dura and his father] were hit by IDF fire are extremely low, practically zero. The likelihood that al-Dura was struck by either stray or deliberate Palestinian fire is high.”²⁴

Did this press conference help Israel’s public diplomacy efforts? The controversy continued. The Foreign Ministry believes that it simply kept the emotionally charged story in the news, causing Israel considerable damage. But some in the IDF and elsewhere came to feel strongly that Israel should continue to investigate the circumstances of the boy’s death and use every means possible to make its doubts public. The debate continues to this day.



When government officials decided to withdraw from the al-Dura case, Nahum Shahaf decided to investigate the incident on his own to disprove the France 2 report. “We have positive proof that the gunfire came from the direction of the Palestinian position, not from the direction of the Israeli position,” he asserted. “We have Palestinians who murdered the boy in cold blood, and this is a terrible deed: Palestinians who kill the boy in front of the cameras and then blame innocent Israeli soldiers.”²⁵

To prove his claim, Shahaf collected visual material related to the events and sent it to the media and to Danny Seaman, director of the Government Press Office. According to *NRG-Maariv*, Shahaf doubted that al-Dura and his father were struck by gunfire at all. Even if so, he contended, the gunfire did not come from IDF soldiers.²⁶ Later, he repeatedly argued that the Palestinians staged the entire incident, and he went so far as to say that al-Dura was still alive. Seaman was the first official to embrace Shahaf’s view and second it in press interviews.²⁷ Years later, al-Dura’s father adamantly denied this, asserting: “In our religion, every person who is killed with a bullet is still alive—living in Paradise. He isn’t here on the ground, but living with God.”²⁸

In the meantime, Esther Shapira, a reporter for Germany's ARD television network, produced a documentary about the circumstances of the boy's death, made with assistance from the pro-Israel group Palestinian Media Watch (PMW). It aired in Germany on March 18, 2002, and concluded that Muhammad al-Dura was almost certainly struck by Palestinian gunfire.

Another private player also decided to join the fray: Philippe Karsenty, a French-Jewish politician, businessman, and head of Media-Ratings, a French NGO that monitors media reports, saw Shapira's film and was impressed by her arguments. He decided to throw himself into the public battle over the al-Dura shooting "for history's sake."²⁹ Karsenty explained: "Israel is despised in France. It's perceived as a strong and wealthy country whose army behaves like the Nazis. My decision to fight infuriated many people, not only in the French establishment, but in the Jewish community too. A lot of Jews and non-Jews have told me that I'm right, but that they can't support me publicly because they can't fight against this establishment."³⁰

The al-Dura case was now an issue for the French courts and the French media. On January 13, 2003, Gérard Huber published *Contre-expertise d'une mise en scène*,³¹ which argued that the al-Dura incident was faked. His partners were Stéphane Juffa, chief editor of the Metula News agency where Huber worked, and journalist Nidra Poller, who translated the book into English.

The online publication *Whistleblower Magazine* supported Huber's claims and called the incident "a staged piece of street theater," adding that France 2 was refusing to reveal crucial evidence in the case. The publication also quoted Huber's assertion that it had yet to be proven whether Muhammad al-Dura was alive or dead and asked why Shapira's film had not been shown on French television.

On October 22, 2004, France 2 permitted three independent journalists to watch 27 minutes of raw footage of the incident. Two of them subsequently published an article in *Le Figaro* that cast doubt on the incident's authenticity. They had originally sent the article to *Le Monde*, which refused to publish it.

The case escalated when France 2 filed a slander lawsuit against some of its critics, including Philippe Karsenty, for claiming that the footage was fake. On February 21, 2005, the *Jerusalem Post* came out on the side of those who doubted whether Muhammad al-Dura had actually been killed. At the same time, Raanan Gissin, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's media advisor, unsuccessfully attempted to obtain the raw footage.

By mid-2005, the controversy was gaining strength in both France and Israel. In France, Karsenty and his supporters were pressuring France 2 to withdraw its claim that al-Dura was killed by IDF fire and admit that its reporting was inadequate. In Israel, Nahum Shahaf waged a public campaign against Charles Enderlin. Karsenty, Shahaf, Gissin, and Seaman all called on Enderlin to hand over the raw footage. This was a reasonable demand in order to determine whether anyone had tampered with material. However, the raw footage disappeared and was never shown in public.

Karsenty lost his first legal battle and was forced to pay court costs plus one euro as symbolic compensation to Enderlin and Abu Rahma. On October 19, 2006, he appealed the verdict and asked Israeli officials to help him obtain Abu Rahma’s raw footage in order to show it in court. This time, Karsenty was successful. Vatikai sent a memo to Deputy Chief of Staff Maj. Gen. Dan Harel explaining the need for the material. In response, Deputy IDF Spokesperson Col. Shlomi Am-Shalom contacted Enderlin and requested the material, acknowledging that it would be used as part of the legal proceedings underway in France.³²

The French court’s ruling, Seaman’s letter, and the deputy IDF spokesperson’s attempt to obtain the raw footage from France 2 stirred renewed interest in the al-Dura affair. Am-Shalom’s appeal to the network was turned down, but the French court ultimately compelled the network to screen the requested material.³³ After viewing the raw footage, Karsenty claimed: “We saw that French 2 doesn’t have any evidence to support what they are saying. There is nothing in the raw footage—just staged scenes. . . . The al-Dura hoax is over tonight.”³⁴

On February 27, 2008, a hearing was held on Karsenty’s appeal. Jean-Claude Shlinger, a French ballistics expert, testified that, in his opinion, there was no way Muhammad al-Dura and his father could have been struck by IDF gunfire and the images were most likely staged. The network’s Israel bureau sent a letter to the editor and publisher of *Haaretz*, which had published the report, demanding the immediate publication of a response stating that Shlinger’s testimony carried no legal weight. The letter said the French court had consented to have the expert opinion submitted, but it had ruled that the expert himself would not be allowed to testify.

On May 21, 2008, the appeals court in Paris acquitted Karsenty of slander; France 2 immediately said it would appeal the decision. On June 4, many French journalists, Enderlin’s colleagues, and ordinary readers signed a petition on the *Nowel Observateur* website that described Enderlin

as the victim of a hate campaign, citing his journalistic accomplishments and good reputation. At the same time, a handful of other journalists denounced the petition and called for an independent investigation. On July 2, representatives of the Jewish community asked then-president Nicolas Sarkozy to establish a commission of inquiry into the matter.

The next stage of the controversy also occurred in a French court. Israeli physician Yehuda David was convicted of slander in a suit brought against him by Jamal al-Dura. The case began with a report by Israel's Channel 10 in which David stated that the wounds Jamal al-Dura claimed to have received during the shooting in 2000 were in fact the injuries David had treated in 1994. Al-Dura insisted that he had been wounded at Netzarim Junction, and the court ruled in his favor. Dr. David subsequently asked the Israeli government to help cover the costs of the trial. In an unusual move, the government agreed.

Taken together, the various legal proceedings surrounding the al-Dura case appear frustratingly inconclusive. They have not and likely cannot provide an answer to the basic question of who killed Muhammad al-Dura. Theoretically, they could reveal whether France 2 had conducted itself in accordance with journalistic ethics and publicly disclosed all the information it possessed, thus reopening the debate once again.

For now, however, the parties have reached a stalemate. Israel cannot conclusively prove itself innocent, just as the Palestinians and France 2 are unable to prove the opposite. What remains is the cumulative effect of the plethora of media coverage, the issue's massive online presence, and the use of the images involved, all of which place responsibility for al-Dura's death squarely on Israel.



Despite the storm of controversy that surrounds the incident, there is no question that Muhammad al-Dura's death was the most influential press story of the second intifada. It was a unique media event that occurred precisely at the moment the intifada broke out. Millions of people are killed in wars and other acts of violence, but the moment of death is rarely captured on film. The fact that there was a child involved only added to the intensity and drama of the story. Children have been placed at the forefront of the Palestinian struggle before: They photograph well and arouse sympathy. "What happened with al-Dura is a totally secondary thing," says Brig. Gen. Yossi Kuperwasser, former head of research for Military Intelligence. "It's the overall situation that must be understood and analyzed. You can't discuss the ostensibly technical issues of the

al-Dura story without grasping the depth of the conceptual impact that occurred here. The heart of the matter is that Jews are killing Palestinian children. All the surrounding *hasbara* is rendered unimportant at that moment.”³⁵

There is widespread agreement among those in the public diplomacy field that the al-Dura shooting changed the role of media in the conflict and set new rules that would profoundly affect subsequent events. Three former Israeli defense ministers related separately to the al-Dura case.

Moshe Yaalon, deputy chief of staff at the time: “Israeli officials accepted responsibility for the event and immediately began to apologize. I think this was a mistake. In this instance, we should have very quickly tried to ascertain the facts and then presented our version of the story.”³⁶

Moshe Arens, former defense minister and foreign minister: “The world today is very open, everything is reported. Our ability to add to the images on television or to newspaper articles and to reports on the Internet is marginal. In the al-Dura case, apparently the picture that was presented was not the reality, but they created a reality.”³⁷

Ehud Barak, prime minister at the time: “The pictures became part of the symbols the other side used in its effort to define who is right. The world is focused on interpreting one particular picture, but it interprets it in a much broader context.”³⁸

The al-Dura incident was, in effect, a test case for the impact of the media, the impressions it creates, and Israel’s response to them. Atrocity stories and images have always existed in war, but due to the growth of the global media, a single camera brought the story to the world’s attention and created a massive reaction.

The story of al-Dura was also one of the first cases of an image that went “viral,” spreading across the media landscape, apparently of its own accord. France 2 shared the video with other news agencies and networks, amplifying the media effect and creating collective media responsibility and commitment to the story on the part of hundreds of channels and stations throughout the world. In the charged atmosphere between the Arab world and Israel, the images sparked an outburst of violence by Israeli Arabs, the adoption of al-Dura as a symbol by al-Qaeda, and the incident’s use as a means of incitement at the infamous Durban conference in 2001.

While initially disseminated by television, this material can be found on websites in perpetuity, preserved in the world’s collective memory. Over a decade and a half after the shooting, an Internet search for the name “Muhammad al-Dura” turns up hundreds of thousands of results. The Internet has no problem vividly recalling what is forgotten by

the traditional media. The story lives forever online, so Israel is forced again and again to respond to it and defend itself in a media landscape it cannot control.

Clearly, the IDF was negligent in its handling of the incident. First, it did not follow a consistent media policy. Conflicting statements were issued throughout the affair and every step taken in the media realm was plagued by internal disagreements, some of which went public. The IDF did not immediately grasp the impact and significance of the event and so dealt with it very slowly, as if it were a routine matter.

Into this vacuum stepped nongovernmental parties, both individuals and organizations. They understood the long-term significance of the event and created a personal network that transcended borders to wage a public campaign. This did not only take place online, but also at events like the Herzliya Conference and in publications like the *New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and *Le Monde*. The campaign eventually moved from the media into political and legal forums, such as the French and Israeli judicial systems. In the battle for hearts and minds, these independent parties and individuals became new players in the field of public diplomacy.



The conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is asymmetrical in every way, including in the media realm. For example, many pictures from the first and second intifadas showed Palestinian children clashing with Israeli soldiers. The image of a Palestinian child facing an Israeli tank calls to mind the biblical story of David and Goliath, but here the roles are switched. This time it is Jewish Israelis, well armed and equipped, confronting helpless and exposed Palestinian youngsters. The images of the al-Dura shooting are perhaps the most notorious of these images. “Al-Dura became an icon, a symbol of the cruelty of Israelis, of Goliath and David, of Israelis as killers of Palestinian children, of the evil within us and of this terrible power that Israel possesses,”³⁹ notes Israeli diplomat Amira Oron.

But this is not the only asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians. Israel tries to uphold democratic values and freedom of expression, while Palestinian organizations—both Fatah and Hamas—generally ignore them. “You’re dealing with a society in which credibility is not a matter of principle but just the opposite. [The norm is] propaganda, distortion of facts and figures, issuing statements that have no connection to reality. They have no problem being perceived as noncredible

since they’re already perceived that way anyhow. They fill the headlines and shape the story.”⁴⁰

The al-Dura incident exemplifies the overlapping nature of different low-intensity battlefields:

- The military front—a violent encounter between the IDF and the Palestinians.
- The diplomatic front—the Durban conference held a year later was heavily influenced by the presence of Jamal al-Dura.
- The legal front—the various court proceedings in France and Israel.
- The economic front—this event and others influenced Christian churches and other institutions to divest from corporations trading with Israel.
- The public diplomacy front—where the battle between Israel and the Palestinians for world public opinion played out.

Israeli institutions proved decidedly inept when faced with the al-Dura incident. At the time, Israel did not have a formal public diplomacy system. Due to the lack of such a system, the al-Dura affair began as a *hasbara* failure and became a clash between different players: the traditional media versus the NGOs and individuals who took up the case. In many ways, the mobilization of hundreds of professional journalists to defend Enderlin was meant to protect him and them from the new forces that had begun gnawing away at the traditional media. The achievements of Karsenty, Shahaf, Prof. Richard Landes and the organizations that dedicated themselves to the al-Dura case demonstrate just how powerful these new forces can be.



What conclusions can we draw from the al-Dura case that can be applied to the overall field of new public diplomacy?

First, this case illustrates the “CNN effect”—the presence of cameras on the front lines. This was a prerequisite for the incident’s wide exposure and the magnitude it acquired relative to similar events. Without Abu Rahma’s footage, it’s unlikely anyone would have paid much attention to the incident. In turn, the “Al Jazeera effect” helped

make the al-Dura incident widely known in the Arab world. This fueled the wave of violence in the territories and in the Israeli-Arab sector that occurred in the wake of the incident. Without question, the media played a decisive role not only in searing the al-Dura incident into the world's consciousness, but also in promoting the violence that followed.

Second, the case proves that long-term planning is extremely important. Israel wavered between providing a quick response and investigating the facts in-depth. In the absence of strategic thinking, Israel zigzagged between accepting and denying responsibility for the incident, so that it was quickly found guilty in the public mind.

Third, the incident resulted in a blurring of political, legal, media, and economic arenas once considered separate. This is characteristic of a globalized world and a globalized media in which traditional boundaries have broken down.

Fourth, the narrative of asymmetry between the weak and the strong peaked in this incident. The victim seemed to be obvious, while the Israelis were depicted as faceless and unfeeling, unseen in the video except as anonymous gunfire directed at defenseless targets. The media captured this asymmetry, which photographs very well, and made much use of it in bashing Israel and blaming it for al-Dura's death.

Fifth, the incident and the enormous attention it received are further confirmation that we are now living in a post-heroic age, characterized by high sensitivity to the lives of noncombatants. This requires liberal democratic countries to wield their military power judiciously and precisely, so that terrorists and their accomplices are the only casualties—and this is sometimes a near-impossible task.

Finally, the episode attests to the success of individuals and organizations in shaping the public diplomacy arena, especially through the Internet. These new players joined forces with colleagues in other countries and together focus on common goals. The power they demonstrated here will affect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in years to come.