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## SETTLEMENTS AT THE HEART OF THE CONFLICT

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## Replaying the pictures

**In the Middle East, as elsewhere, war also means the war of the media. For every bit of military strategy there is equally sophisticated and brutal media strategy. Its main weapon is pictures. But what are more effective, still photos or the moving images of videos? And what misunderstandings can creep in between the intentions of the photographer and the distributor?**

**by EDGAR ROSKIS**

On 30 September, at Netzarim in the Gaza Strip, young Muhammad al-Dirah was hit by a bullet probably fired from an Israeli position (1). Twelve days later, 12 October, two Israeli army reservists were lynched by a gang of Palestinians in and in front of Ramallah's police station. It is very likely that the images of the killing of this 12-year-old child and the tragic death of the two soldiers will be, to this new intifada, what the "Algiers pietà" picture was to the recent violence in Algeria (2).

The cry of the Algerian woman was captured by a photo, whereas the boy's murder was recorded on video by a cameraman from French television's France 2, and that of the Israeli soldiers by an Italian TV crew for the Retequattro channel (part of the Mediaset group). The difference is significant. It signals the end of the reign of those buccanering photographers who roamed the world, particularly from the late 1960s on (when the Gamma agency was created), and were always able to conjure up the most striking symbols, whether of geopolitical conflicts or of technical and scientific discoveries and other forms of human progress.

The "Algiers pietà" appeared on the front page of almost every country's daily papers, and, in one, moved the entire world. It was published just that once - and public opinion was swayed. There are films and videos of all sorts of memorable events, such as the lone figure stopping the tanks outside Tiananmen Square or the small girl burned by napalm fleeing the village of Trang Bang in south Vietnam, naked on the road. However, it is always one single image that remains embedded in what, rightly or

At the sight of the  
panicked cow \*

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single image that remains embedded in what, rightly or wrongly, we call our collective subconscious. The photos of Eddie Adams and Nick Ut from Associated Press (AP) come to mind and, on China, at least three agency photographers (from AP, SIPA-Press and Magnum).

The case of the new intifada in the Middle East is different. The old roaming photographers have been supplanted by the omnipresent TV cameras. The picture of the murder of young Muhammad appeared in the papers only because France 2 gave the agencies four stills taken from the film shot by Talal Abu Rahmed (three for Agence France Presse (AFP) and one for AP). The same thing happened with the Ramallah lynching.

In a conflict as sensitive as the Israeli-Palestinian one, the absence of photos - pictures snapped at the critical moment - has consequences, as the protagonists on both sides know quite well. But the disappearance of the instant snapshot has encouraged that other presence - television. As if to make up for the absence of those fixed images that turn into symbols, the TV networks replay their exclusive sequences over and over again, in the hope that repetition and length will somehow replace the power of the still picture.

In an interview with Helène Marzolf from the respected French magazine *Télérama* (3), Charles Enderlin, Jerusalem correspondent for France 2, observed that "Television can influence public opinion. But it can't influence events themselves." Indeed, the camera crews only record what is happening. And what is happening is a struggle of the oppressed against their oppressors.

At the same time it is clear that, in this war, pictures are playing a vital role. When the cameras are allowed in, whether they want to or not, they highlight the extremes on one side or the other. For this very reason, they are often banned. For example, Mark Seager, 29, a photographer from the British *Sunday Telegraph* witnessed the lynching of the two Israeli reservists by a Palestinian mob in the centre of Ramallah on 12 October. In an interview published on 25 October by the Tel Aviv daily *Maariv*, he said "I was shocked by the scene which was the most upsetting thing I have ever seen. The soldier was dead, but they went on beating him." He indicated that he had photographed the dreadful scene whereupon, "I was pinched in the face and warned by a Palestinian 'No pictures!'"

No pictures. On the 12 October, also in Ramallah, Jacques-Marie Bourget, a reporter for *Paris-Match*, was hit by a bullet that pierced his lung and lodged in his shoulder blade. At the Beaujon hospital doctors described his condition as stationary. The photographer who was with him, Thierry Esch, told AFP: "I have not the slightest doubt that the bullet was fired by an Israeli soldier".

Then there are pictures that we see less, or not at all. Not because they do not exist, but because they have not perhaps been chosen at the right moment by the media

editors - pictures, for instance, of the Israeli army dynamiting the homes of Palestinian "suspects" or tearing down their orchards. Or of the daily humiliation of a lightly-armed people by one that is armed to the teeth: controls on movement, attacks on Red Crescent ambulances, bullets (metal and rubber-coated) fired at children throwing stones, terrifying raids by helicopter gunships.

On 1 October the *New York Times* and *Libération* both published a photo from AP showing an Israeli soldier armed with a club in the background, and in the foreground the bleeding face of a man whom AP described as a "wounded Palestinian demonstrator". The following day *Libération* got a phone call from Aaron Grossman saying "The so-called Palestinian that you showed in your photo is in fact my son, Tuvia Grossman, a Jewish student from Chicago. The reason his face was bleeding is that he and two of his friends were forced out of a taxi by a crowd of Palestinians and severely beaten. Laurent Abadjian, head of *Libération's* photo service, noted for his sense of professional ethics, rang various AP offices. On 6 October, when the checks had been completed, the paper published a full correction.

One side is looking for pictures that shock while the other tries to repress them - though sometimes the situation is reversed. The destruction of Joseph's Tomb in Nablus by Palestinians on 7 October was a far from glorious deed. That day photographers and cameramen were not welcome, as though, behind the fury, there was shame; and indeed Yasser Arafat ordered the tomb to be rebuilt.

There remains the question of the status of all these images, photographic or not. That they bear witness to a reality in the making is no small thing, if it is honestly done. It is their part of their role to influence that reality - desired by those who control them and accepted by those who see them. That these images are endlessly repeated, with the results that we all know, is more debatable, as those who search for peace on both sides desperately look for a political solution.

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1. According to Talal Abu Rahmel, the France 2 cameraman who filmed the scene.
2. The media wrongly gave it this name, since it was a young Muslim woman, whose distress was photographed by Hocine from AFP.
3. No 2,650 of 25 October 2000.

**Translated by Wendy Kristianasen**

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