

The Palestinians' Best Battalion

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STEPHANIE GUTMANN, *The Other War: Israelis, Palestinians and the Struggle for Media Supremacy* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2005), 271 pp., \$25.95.

The Palestinian Arabs—poor, dispossessed, yet bravely struggling to regain their rights. The Israelis—rich, occupiers, and thanks to American aid, able to suppress the Palestinians. Stephanie Gutmann's *The Other War* provides a timely, informative and entertaining review of how much of the foreign press corps reporting from Israel repeatedly presents variations on the above themes, broadcasting and publishing a two-dimensional morality play in which key attributes and actions of the lead characters—who's really intransigent, who wants to be accommodating, who's the aggressor, who the defender—are switched.

A former reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Post* and freelancer for numerous other publications, ranging from *The New York Times* to *Playboy*, Guttman is no stranger to controversy. Her year 2000 book, *The Kinder, Gentler Military*, took on the corrosive culture of political correctness that she charged has progressively eroded the effectiveness of the U.S. military. *The Other War* should prove provocative, too.

Just what was the problem with reporting in the early years of the

2000–2005 Palestinian terror war against Israel known as the “al Aqsa intifada”? Gutmann quotes then *Jerusalem Post* editor-in-chief Bret Stephens: “The norm tends to be one of strict factual accuracy and routine contextual dishonesty.” And she provides plenty of examples of such media malpractice, both glaring and subtle.

One is the infamous Mohammad al-Dura story: the deliberate killing, after 45 minutes of shooting, of a 12-year-old Palestinian Arab boy and the wounding of his father, ostensibly by Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip. The taped image became a world-wide anti-Israel icon. It worked its way into a speech by Osama bin Laden and reappeared as implied justification in the videotaped beheading in Pakistan of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. Yet as Gutmann notes, this image-seen-round-the-world was shot by only one of the many news cameramen on the scene that day, a Palestinian stringer for France TV 2. Bureau chief Charles Enderlin, who was not present, nevertheless added a dramatic voice-over. TV 2 made the tape available to others and “a number of reporters told the story in vivid terms as if they had been there themselves.” “Mainstream” Palestinian spokesman obligingly accused Israel of “premeditated murder.”

The often media-clumsy Israelis initially allowed that they might



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accidentally have shot the boy and his father in a crossfire with Arab gunmen. But a belated Israeli reenactment and a number of journalistic investigations cast doubt on the al-Dura “story.” They suggest that, if a child was shot at all at the Netzzrim crossing that day, he was hit by Palestinian fire, and perhaps not accidentally. But here the major media did not follow. Their original “story” fit preconceptions of victimized Palestinians, victimizing Israelis.

The Ramallah lynching is another case in point. Thirteen days after the al-Dura incident, on October 12, 2000, two Israeli reservists, in uniform but in a civilian car, apparently made a wrong turn and ended up in Ramallah in the midst of a funeral procession for another “beautiful little boy martyr.” Palestinian Authority police detained the men. A mob followed, beat the Israelis to death, mutilated their bodies, and tossed one out a second story window for further mutilation. Hours later, Israeli helicopters fired on the police station and other PA facilities. Yet news reporters like ABC TV’s Gillian Findlay “glossed over the precipitating event (the lynching) to focus on the retaliation,” and did not inform viewers that the Israeli Air Force tried to target empty buildings. Overall, Guttman writes, the lynching “was only subsumed into a new media take on the second intifada emphasizing ‘the cycle of violence’—a phrase suggesting, as David Gelernter put it, ‘that Israelis and Palestinians kill each other as part of some sort of tiresome Punch and Judy show.’”

Then there was the Jenin “massacre.” By now, that episode is well-known; after a series of suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks murdered more than 110 people and wounded hundreds of others in March

2002, Israel launched “Operation Defensive Shield,” reasserting control over West Bank Arab population centers. These included Jenin and its adjacent refugee camp. In nine days of house-to-house fighting, 56 Palestinians, nearly all of them gunmen, and 23 Israeli soldiers were killed. Several blocks of the camp—really a permanent, if poor, neighborhood—were largely destroyed.

But early press accounts, including those in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, France’s influential *Le Nouvel Observateur* and on CNN, relayed Palestinian claims of a massacre of hundreds, if not thousands, of non-combatants, and of hurried secret burials by the Israelis. Four months later, after even the United Nations reported no evidence of a massacre, chagrined foreign correspondents were forced to admit their mistake.

Yet so long as the news media view the larger Arab-Islamic conflict with Israel through the narrow, distorting filter of “weak but righteous Palestinians, strong and law-breaking Israelis,” such mistakes will be made, and made frequently. They will be made because, as Gutmann touches on, open societies like Israel can’t hide their flaws, but societies like that of the PA—simultaneously ruled by intimidation and awash in incitement—don’t tolerate similar exposure. They will also be made because of the often corrupting use by foreign media of Palestinian “fixers”—translators, cameramen, stringers, drivers, and expeditors—who often function overtly or covertly as “minders” in the manner of old Soviet KGB media “escorts.”

And they will be made because Israel, rather than insisting on some sort of “pool” arrangement, tolerates a foreign media infestation of hundreds

of regularly assigned correspondents, with hundreds more “parachuting” in for crises. Rather than providing a worthwhile diversity of hard news, the journalistic pack all too often files superficial, derivative, anti-Israeli, and ideologically blinkered reports. It also dismisses or avoids stories such as the PA’s widespread corruption under Arafat or the anti-Western (and anti-Israeli) nature of Islamic terror groups like Hamas.

Gutmann ends on a hopeful note, concluding that the Israeli government’s fragmented, competing media shops have been getting their act together, and that alternative news sources, such as Internet weblogs—not to mention outside news media monitors—will help keep the press more honest. Meanwhile, as the decline in print circulation and broadcast audiences accelerates, and the last Gutenberg generation of news readers slowly yields to the first post-literary cohort of wireless, Podcasted information consumers, *The Other War* may prove to be both “old media” autopsy and “new media” marker.



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