



## Unfair and Unbalanced

By Joshua Muravchik

*The longstanding media practice of whitewashing tyrannical regimes and their actions continues in most coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Journalists must figure out how to avoid giving a tyranny the upper hand when it takes on a democracy.*

No sooner was Saddam Hussein chased from power than CNN revealed that it had often held its tongue about his savagery for fear of losing access to Iraq and provoking violent retribution. Although the confession was stunning, it was only the most recent chapter in a long story. Tyrannies have often managed to compromise Western journalists—by threats, bribes, and trickery. The *New York Times* covered up the story of Soviet famines in the 1930s. The *Times* of London hailed Hitler's "night of long knives" as an effort to "impose a high standard on Nazi officials." Mao, Fidel, Ho, Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas all succeeded at whitewashing their portrayal in the Western media. To this list, we can add the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

### Anti-Israeli Bias

I recently completed a study of coverage of the Palestinian intifada that found scores of stories displaying imbalance or outright inaccuracy tilted against Israel. Some of this reflected bias—not anti-Semitism, but the perception of the conflict as "an epic struggle of the weak against the strong," in the words of one correspondent for the

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*Economist*. More often, however, the cause lay in the asymmetry of the news environments of a democracy and a tyranny. (I use the word "tyranny" since Yasser Arafat's rule has rested more on the dozen or so "security" services that he has always controlled personally than on the election he won without meaningful opposition.)

Among the American news outlets, only one ground the same axe night after night: ABC TV. On the second day of the intifada, in late September 2000, a mob of Palestinians atop the Temple Mount besieged an Israeli police outpost and rained bottles and stones down on the Jewish worshippers at the Wailing Wall below. Israeli police and soldiers rushed the worshippers to cover, then stormed the mount to relieve the siege and disperse the mob. Other networks aired this full sequence, but viewers of ABC were shown only the Israeli counterattack. The description that accompanied it reinforced the one-sided image. "This is the second day in a row [Israeli forces] have flexed their muscles here, and Palestinians are furious," observed correspondent Gillian Findlay, downplaying the responsive nature of the Israeli action.

Four Palestinians died in that confrontation, and an Israeli also fell victim to violence that day. He was one of two Israeli policemen on a joint patrol in Qalqilya with a Palestinian counterpart who suddenly drew his gun and shot both officers, killing one and wounding the other. Unlike the Palestinians' deaths, this was cold-blooded murder, and it was of more far-reaching significance in that

it signified the end of the Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation that had lain at the heart of the Oslo process. Peter Jennings opened that evening's report by declaring somberly: "Four Palestinians were killed by Israelis on [the Temple Mount] today." Neither he nor anyone else on ABC mentioned the Israeli murdered by a Palestinian.

On various other evenings, viewers of ABC, like those who got their news from other outlets, would have heard Palestinian leaders vociferously deny any connection with the arms-smuggling ship *Karine-A* intercepted by Israel, but unlike other viewers or readers, they would never have known of the ship captain's confession that the weapons had indeed been destined for the Palestinian Authority. Like viewers of other networks, they would have seen the destruction wrought by Israeli forces advancing into Jenin in the spring of 2002, but unlike the others, they would never have seen the booby traps that killed many Israeli soldiers, which prompted the widespread demolitions. Like the viewers of other networks, they would have learned that the Palestinians had declared various "days of rage," but ABC's viewers were the only ones who would have heard that Israeli settlers did likewise, as Peter Jennings reported more than once, an "exclusive" he seems simply to have invented.

CNN was the one other outlet whose reportage was consistently off kilter, marked by intermittent bias compounded with ignorance. During the second week of the intifada, the network reported that "Unrest in the Middle East has spread to other Arab nations. Thousands marched in Baghdad, Iraq, Sunday to condemn Israel." In light of the network's post-Saddam confession, it is hard to believe that CNN did not know that when thousands marched in Baghdad during his reign, it was only because they were told to march: Whatever such marches bespoke, it was not "unrest." When the United States abstained on a typically one-sided UN Security Council resolution blaming Israel for the turmoil, the network's Mike Hanna reported that this constituted "a pointed gesture from the United States toward the Israelis that activities within the last week have become virtually indefensible." But Hanna's explanation was at odds with that of U.S. officials. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke said that the resolution had evoked his "clear distaste," but Secretary of State Albright explained that "vetoing it would have created . . . further problems in the region for us as the honest broker and negotiator."

CNN's peripatetic Christiane Amanpour, who visited the region and delivered a series of mystifying reports,

displayed the most startling ignorance. One day, she described the Israeli Jews who engaged in violence with Israeli Arabs in the town of Nazareth as "settlers," apparently unaware that this term usually refers to Israelis who live in the occupied territories rather than Israel proper (which is why they are called settlers). On another, she described the highly dovish Prime Minister Ehud Barak as if he were from the hawkish end of the Israeli spectrum: "Even the supporters of . . . Prime Minister Barak are saying that he's just gone too far this time, that there simply is too much force being used." Conversely, she mistook Hamas for a group of doves: Happening upon an anti-Arafat protest of theirs, she explained that they were upset about "the killings and the casualties."

### Coming to Terms with Regime Disparity

Despite such instances, the larger reason for the slant against Israel was the contrasting nature of the Israeli and Palestinian regimes—and the failure of the press to cope with the disparity. This took three forms.

First, much investigative information embarrassing to Israel—about illegal settlements, violation of Arab rights, official misconduct, and the like—originates in the Israeli press, which is vibrant and often adversarial. There is, however, no comparable illumination of the warts on the other side. As Palestinian journalist Khaled Abu Toameh put it: "The PA exerts complete control over the media inside the territories."

Second, the Palestinian Authority routinely uses violence and the threat of violence against journalists. Immediately after 9/11, the PA's cabinet secretary called news agencies, warning, as *USA Today* reported, that "the safety of their staff could not be guaranteed unless they withdrew the embarrassing footage of Palestinian police firing joyfully in the air." When grisly scenes of the lynching of two Israeli reservists in the Ramallah police station were aired despite the effort of PA toughs to confiscate all film of the event, a correspondent for Italy's RAI television rushed to establish that his network was not the source. "We always respect the journalistic procedures [of] the Palestinian Authority," swore Riccardo Cristiano in a groveling letter. "Be assured we would never do such a thing." When a Palestinian newspaper published Cristiano's letter, the RAI brass were embarrassed and recalled him, but his colleagues expressed sympathy. One had received a death threat over the Ramallah tape, and Cristiano, they explained, had already been beaten badly in another incident.

Finally, there is an extreme disparity in veracity. Israeli spokesmen, like other Westerners, spin but rarely lie outright, knowing that a steep price would be exacted if they got caught. Trying to be truthful, Israelis sometimes even err to their own disadvantage. On the third day of the violence in the fall of 2000, twelve-year-old Mohammed al-Dura was shot dead in his father's arms while cowering behind a barrel and became the poster child of the intifada. At first, the American outlets, except (surprise) ABC, reported noncommittally that the lad had died in a crossfire. But then Israeli spokesmen acknowledged probable responsibility, and thereafter reports said the death was caused by Israeli fire. Months later, after a painstaking probe, the Israelis concluded that the fatal shots likely came from Palestinian guns (a conclusion also reached by an investigative team from the German television network, ARD).

Similarly, Palestinian claims of a "massacre" in Jenin were reinforced by an off-the-cuff estimate by an Israeli military spokesman that the number of dead was perhaps 200. In the end, the Israelis, as well as a U.N. investigation, found that fifty-two Palestinians had died in Jenin, of whom some fourteen to twenty may have been civilians.

Palestinian spokesmen, in contrast, lie shamelessly. Arafat claimed to have ordered a "very serious investigation" of the Ramallah lynching. Palestinian spokesmen heatedly denied knowledge of the arms ship *Karine-A*. They all claimed a "massacre" had occurred in Jenin: Saeb Erekat estimated the death toll at between 500 and 1,500.

Arafat at various times claimed massacres in a half dozen other West Bank towns. PA spokesmen described the "reconstruction" of an ancient synagogue that had been set on fire in Jericho. (It was turned into a mosque.) All of these claims, and many more, were sheer nonsense.

American news organizations have general rules of balance that tell them to report both sides of a story. But how is this to be achieved? Some journalists contented themselves with formulating mindless equations, as when the *New York Times's* Jane Perlez wrote: "Mr. Sharon's provocative visit to Muslim holy sites atop Jerusalem's Old City, the destruction of the Jewish shrine known as Joseph's tomb . . . and the burning of an ancient synagogue . . . have challenged the very notion of respect for and sovereignty over religious sites." She was referring to Sharon's stroll around the Temple Mount, the third holiest site in Islam, which also happens to be probably the holiest site in Judaism. Was this visit really akin to torching a synagogue and destroying a biblical shrine?

Tortured parallels aside, the goal of balance cannot be achieved by a mechanical report of "he said, she said" when the two sides are so disparate in their fidelity to truth, the openness of their societies, and their willingness to resort to intimidation. A few journalists with long experience in the region consistently presented both sides of the intifada story; NBC's Martin Fletcher was best. But absent especially insightful or knowledgeable individuals, are there no techniques or canons of journalism that will avoid giving a tyranny the upper hand in the press when it takes on a democracy?