

Media Bias in Coverage of Israel-Palestine

When he was asked in 2007 during the filming of *Man From Plains* about media coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict, former President Jimmy Carter replied succinctly, "Abominable! There is no degree of objectivity." (8)

Numerous observers identify, like President Carter, a pervasive, persistent bias in news and analysis on Israel-Palestine, yielding coverage that is more favorable to Israel than to the Palestinians. Credible analysts do not speak in gross, general terms of an orchestrated "Zionist conspiracy" to manipulate and control the media; rather they point to an array of conditions which, taken together, serve to skew coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in Israel's favor.

Three academics from major American universities were engaged by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago to examine coverage of Israel/Palestine in the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post*. Contrary to the expectations of the Federation, the study found a tendency among all three papers to use language "aligned with an Israeli perspective on events." In her book, *Pens and Swords*, Marda Dunsky recounts that the study authors "wondered whether the *Times*...had 'helped mobilize discussions of a pro-Israeli slant more generally in American coverage of the Middle East.'" (11) p. 289

The second battlefield: Israel's public relations war.

Writing in the *Jerusalem Post*, Israeli analyst Efraim Inbar candidly warns that "wars are won, not only in the battlefield, but also with words. A small country such as Israel cannot afford to lose the support of the West." Inbar's parallel assertion that "so far, Israel is losing the war for the heart of Western public opinion" will be met with incredulity by many Americans familiar with the realities of reportage on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many would agree, however, with Inbar's other assertion, that "winning [the war for public opinion] is vital...for easing the outside pressures on Israeli society...."(0)

Israel's attempts to win the war of public opinion—and, consequently, to maintain its freedom to implement violent, repressive policies toward the Palestinians without negative repercussions from the world community—obscure the obvious: the problem is not about Israel's image, but Israel's policies themselves. Nevertheless, Israel continues to expend vast resources on simultaneous militarization and public relations campaigns. Recognizing the negative perception of Israel in the wake of the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza offensive, the Israeli Foreign Ministry has been granted an extra \$2 million to improve Israel's image through cultural and information diplomacy. (14)

Israel's spokespersons, enjoying the support of a well-organized pro-Israel base in the US have, to date, succeeded brilliantly in "easing the outside pressures" on Israel while cementing the relationship between Israel and the US, Israel's primary source of political, economic, and military support. During decades of territorial expansionism, institutionalized oppression, and disproportionate violence toward the Palestinians, Israel has commanded unwavering support from the US government; the few mild criticisms issued by US officials about specific Israeli policies have remained unenforced by any substantive punitive consequences.

The success of Israel's image-management project is due to many factors, one of them that the Israeli officials charged with media relations discharge their duties much more successfully than their Palestinian counterparts. Another factor is that the Israeli government's public relations strategy has a broad-based support network within the US, including motivated individuals acting from deeply held conviction and organizations whose defense of Israeli policies often takes the form of suppressing dissenting viewpoints and vilifying critics of Israeli policy. To identify this pattern is not to claim the existence of a nefarious global conspiracy: the Israeli government acts in its own perceived self-interest, as do other nations.

Examining the "punditocracy" on Israel-Palestine.

"Within the mainstream media punditocracy," writes Eric Alterman, "discussion of the [2008-09] Israeli invasion of Gaza is not only one-sided in Israel's favor but also deeply contemptuous of anyone who deviates from that side....[I]n the United States... right-wing Jewish organizations and neoconservative pundits dominate nearly all Middle East discussion—and where one rarely if ever hears about, say, Israel's illegal settlement and expropriation policies or the daily indignities and immiseration of Palestinian life..." (1) Alterman writes elsewhere, "[f]or reasons of religion, politics, history and genuine conviction the punditocracy debate of the Middle East in America is dominated by people who cannot imagine criticizing Israel. The value of this legion to the Jewish state is, for better or worse, literally incalculable, particularly when push—as it inevitably does in the Middle East—comes to shove." (6)

Do conditions in Israel/Palestine inhibit balanced, impartial coverage?

Pundits make no claim to objectivity, but what about journalists who, unlike independent commentators, are expected to perform to a high standard of journalistic balance and impartiality?

US news organizations are based in Israel and have uninhibited access to official Israeli sources, whereas the comparative difficulty of consulting Palestinian sources or gathering eyewitness information on events within the occupied territories has a distorting effect, denying American audiences an accurate

perspective on the conflict and the attendant humanitarian crisis. Because of the free access to Israeli spokespersons and the comparative difficulty of consulting Palestinian sources, US news outlets may “parrot” as objective fact unverified or disputed claims made by Israeli government spokespersons.

The Government of Israel restricts news organizations’ and journalists’ access to the occupied Palestinian territories and Gaza, an action that attracted unprecedented attention during the December 2008-January 2009 Gaza offensive. (16) Worse yet, dozens of journalists and photographers, most of them Palestinians working for Western news organizations, have been targeted and killed or severely wounded by Israeli military forces in their military offensives within the territories and Lebanon over the years. (17)

Do religion and ethnicity affect objectivity on Israel/Palestine?

J. J. Goldberg observes that “...while Jews make up little more than 5 % of the working press nationwide—hardly more than their share of the population—they make up one fourth or more of the writers, editors, and producers in America’s ‘elite media,’ including network news divisions, the top newsweeklies, and the four leading newspapers (*New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Wall Street Journal*).” (5)

It is impossible to accurately determine to what extent individual Jewish journalists identify sympathetically with Israel, whether consciously or unconsciously. Can NPR’s Daniel Schorr, whose ardently Zionist mother “lit candles for Palestine” (7) comment dispassionately about events in Israel? Is it possible for CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer to set aside his personal alignment with the “Israeli narrative” (18) and his stint in the 1970s as editor of AIPAC’s *Near East Report* (19) (20) when reporting on Israel?

Open discussion of the relationship between ethnicity and attitudes are easily stifled by accusations of anti-Semitism and, in the end, unquantifiable. But the Zionist organizations that condemn such discussion would have it both ways: they dismiss the notion that Jewish writers may be more inclined to report sympathetically on Israel while, simultaneously, condemning Israel’s many Jewish critics as a non-representative lunatic fringe, out of touch with mainstream Jewish consensus.

It is indisputable, in any case, that the representation of Jewish journalists within the US media is vastly disproportionate compared to that of Arabs and Muslims, who are generally assumed to be sympathetic to the Palestinian struggle. It is likely that were this disproportionality reversed, the objectivity of media coverage would be an issue of hot debate.

How do US-based Israel advocacy groups work to affect media coverage?

Israel's public relations and media war is assisted by organizations (15) and individuals within the US who are poised to deploy themselves to "make the case for Israel" and discredit that country's critics. A strange dynamic emerges: Israel advocacy groups dismiss questions about the impact of pro-Israel media watchdog groups on grounds that are mutually exclusive: there is no power-bloc defending Israel's image (and saying so constitutes anti-Semitism), they say, or, conversely, they admit that there is such a power bloc—but that it is the right of individuals and organizations to freely champion the causes of their choice.

Michelle Goldberg writes, "[U]nlike, say, the Cuban lobby or the AARP, there's a taboo against outsiders discussing the influence of AIPAC or the Israel lobby more generally, or criticizing the way it shapes American policy. To do so raises the specter of poisonous old narratives about mysterious cabals and dual loyalties, of hateful tracts like the 'Protocols of the Elders of Zion' and 'The International Jew.' So a strange, dim silence surrounds the Israel lobby, and the hushed atmosphere nurtures conspiracy theories about a power so great and so secret that you can't even talk about it in public." (3)

How does media bias manifest itself?

US news organizations often fail the "balance test" by reporting in sympathetic detail on Israeli casualties while generalizing or dehumanizing Palestinian casualties and transmitting without verification Israel's description of their activities. Then again, those same news outlets fail the "balance test" by implying parity when parity doesn't exist, as in reporting on Palestinian casualties. Recent studies initiated by the media watchdog organization If Americans Knew of NBC, ABC, the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and Portland's *Oregonian* reveal that those news organs reported Israeli children's deaths at rates 7 to 40 times greater than Palestinian children's death. (13) James Zogby observed during the Gaza offensive of December 2008-January 2009 that, "despite the disproportionate suffering of the Palestinians, media coverage attempted to 'balance' the story, giving an extensive treatment, with photos of anguished and fearful Israelis and the impact the war was having on them." (12)

Emotionally-charged language or euphemistic terminology is often used to prejudice perception. For instance, Israel's preferred terms, "security barrier" and "anti-terrorism fence" are employed by many US news outlets, obscuring the barrier's function in Israeli settlement expansion and concomitant Palestinian territorial dispossession.

News stories may appear without providing essential context within international law and human rights conventions: Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) is illegal; Israel's transfer of its citizens to the OPT is a violation of international law; many of the routine policies and practices of Israeli forces in

the OPT, such as collective punishment, are gross violations of the Geneva Conventions. At the same time, media accounts about US engagement in the “peace process” omit that the US is not an “honest broker” to the conflict. “[F]or the past forty years American foreign policy has had a profound influence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, [but] that reality seems largely detached from and even irrelevant to how the story is reported in the field,” observes Marda Dunsky. (11) p. 317

Palestinians resisting Israel’s illegal occupation are typically referred to as “terrorists,” “militants,” or “gunmen,” while Israeli soldiers engaged in illegal activities—even war crimes—are referred to simply as “soldiers.” Israeli violence is described as being a “response” to Palestinian actions, while Palestinian actions are, according to their perpetrators, usually initiated in response to specific acts of Israeli violence and human rights violations. Coverage of settler violence against Palestinians in the West Bank (almost never described as “terrorism”), is rarely covered in the US media. Palestinian militancy, by contrast, is accentuated. Meanwhile, the existence of coordinated Palestinian nonviolent resistance goes virtually unreported. There is little mention in the media, for instance, of protests against Wall construction and land confiscation occurring routinely in the West Bank, at which internationals and Israelis join Palestinian-initiated demonstrations that are routinely met with violence from Israeli military and police.

Framing of the conflict.

Because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has long been presented as a just quest for Jewish nationhood hindered by an unfortunate, intractable “Palestinian problem,” media coverage stresses how “the problem” affects the Israeli people. James Zogby notes that, in the process, Palestinians are dehumanized and Israelis are presented as a people with whose tragic history of oppression we are invited to identify. (12) “Israel has dedicated an enormous amount of resources to perverting our identity and the character of our struggle,” writes Mustafa Barghouti. “It has gained a significant degree of influence over the media, especially in the West, and has used this strength to transform and manipulate reality to its own ends.” (4)

Resources:

Alternative news and views on the Israel-Palestine crisis:

Council for the National Interest (CNI) <http://www.cnionline.org/> 1-800-296-6958
 Electronic Intifada <http://www.electronicintifada.net/>
 Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) <http://www.fair.org/>
 If Americans Knew <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/> 1-202-631-4060
 Institute for Middle East Understanding <http://imeu.net/>
The Link, <http://www.ameu.org/>

Muzzlewatch <http://www.muzzlewatch.com/>
 Palestine Chronicle <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/>
 Palestine Monitor <http://www.palestinemonitor.org/spip/>
 Palestine Media Watch <http://www.pmwatch.org/>
 U.S. Campaign to End the Occupation <http://www.endtheoccupation.org/>
Washington Report on Middle East Affairs <http://www.wrmea.com> 1-800-368-5788

Sources:

0. Efraim Inbar, "Fighting the Propaganda," *Jerusalem Post*, June 11, 2001
http://www.freeman.org/m_online/jul01/inbar.htm
1. Eric Alterman, "Gaza Agonistes: The Liberal Media," *The Nation*, January 15, 2009. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20090202/alterman>. Eric Alterman is a Distinguished Professor of English, Brooklyn College, City University of New York, and Professor of Journalism at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. He is also "The Liberal Media" columnist for *The Nation*, a senior fellow and "Altercation" weblogger for Media Matters for America, (former blogger at MSNBC.com) in Washington, DC, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress in Washington, DC, where he writes and edits the "Think Again" column, a senior fellow (since 1985) at the World Policy Institute at The New School in New York, and a history consultant to HBO Films.
2. Eric Alterman, "Bad For the Jews: The Liberal Media," *The Nation*, December 20, 2007. <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20080107/alterman>
3. Michelle Goldberg, "Is the 'Israel lobby' distorting America's Mideast policies?" Salon.com, April 18, 2006, <http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2006/04/18/lobby/>. Professors John L. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt provide a strong critique of this imbalance in their 2007 book *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*.
4. Mustafa Barghouti, "Steadfast Before Goliath," *The Nation*, February 9, 2009. Mustafa Barghouti is a Palestinian physician and parliamentarian.
5. *Jewish Power: Inside the American Jewish Establishment*, by J.J Goldberg, page 280, Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA, 1996.
6. Eric Alterman, "Intractable Foes, Warring Narratives," [April 2, 2002](http://www.alternet.org/story/12769/). <http://www.alternet.org/story/12769/>
7. Philip Weiss, "AWOL on Gaza, liberal American Jewish tradition will never be the same," January 17, 2009 , <http://www.philipweiss.org/mondoweiss/2009/01/awol-on-gaza-liberal-american-jewish-tradition-will-never-be-the-same.html>
8. *Man from Plains*, Directed by Jonathan Demme, Sony Pictures Classic Documentary Release, 2007)
9. <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article1668.shtml>).

10. <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2009/01/27-8>).
11. Marda Dunsky, *Pens and Swords: How the American Mainstream Media Report the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, Columbia University Press, 2008.
12. James Zogby, "How Israel's Propaganda Machine Works," *January 12, 2009* <http://www.aaiusa.org/washington-watch/3762/how-israels-propaganda-machine-works>
13. <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/media/clues.html>
14. Ethan Bronner, "Is a global rebranding what Israel needs?" *International Herald Tribune*, March 18, 2009, <http://www.iht.com/articles/2009/03/18/mideast/israel.php>
15. There exist in the U.S. numerous organizations whose goal is to monitor and respond to "anti-Israel" media coverage, including CAMERA, StandWithUs, Honest Reporting, FactsAndLogic.org. They are capable of mobilizing high volume of complaints to media outlets over alleged anti-Israel bias. Jewish communal organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League also engage in media monitoring and response.
16. http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=30038
17. http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=6725
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article3764160.ece

<http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5ig1WQh99rSyzcJ9NRmPyoAYXAufw>
18. Debate, Wolf Blitzer and Norman Finkelstein, November, 1989, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2-8aTGnjHnl>
19. Joel Himelfarb, Jimmy Carter's "Jewish Problem," *The American Spectator*, December 13, 2006, <http://spectator.org/archives/2006/12/13/jimmy-carters-jewish-problem>
20. "Mid-East Realities, Ross officially joins Israeli lobby," January 19, 2001, <http://www.middleeast.org/read.cgi?category=Magazine&num=27&standalone=&month=1&year=2001&function=text>