

Israel



Hon
Defending Israel

Watchdogs on the media battlefield

Pro-Israel media monitors say they are on a mission to keep the world's press on its toes

By Tibor Krausz

HonestReporting

Israel From Media Bias



COURTESY HONEST REPORTING



Adam Levick requires for his job is a laptop – and a touch of masochism. He employs both to peruse *The Guardian*, one of Britain’s so-called progressive dailies, and its popular online spinoff, *Comment is Free*, or *CiF*. Levick is managing editor of *CiF Watch*, which monitors bias against Israel in the two publications. He doesn’t have to look too hard.

The *Guardian* is well known for its hostility towards Israel, and, despite perfunctory protestations of balance, wears its anti-Zionism bias proudly on its sleeve. The newspaper has eulogized Palestinian terrorists, and *CiF* has posted flattering comments about unabashed Jew-haters like Israeli-born saxophonist/conspiracy theorist Gilad Atzmon and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh.

“In *The Guardian* and especially on *CiF*, Israel is the subject of rebuke and moral opprobrium quite out of proportion to any other country,” Levick, a Philadelphia native, who now lives in Jerusalem, tells *The Jerusalem Report*. “Their criticisms of Israel contain classic anti-Semitic tropes about the danger of ‘Jewish power,’ the old charge of dual loyalties, and sometimes even the insidious suggestion that Jews are inherently racist.”

Exhibit A on that last score: Israel’s decision in September 2011 to release more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners, many of them convicted murders, in exchange for kidnapped Israel Defense Forces soldier Gilad Shalit “is simply an indication,” opined *The Guardian* columnist Deborah Orr, “of how injured the world has become to the obscene idea that Israeli lives are more important than Palestinian lives.”

Her reasoning: The disproportionate number of Palestinians released in return for a single Israeli soldier “tacitly acknowledges what so many Zionists believe – that the lives of the chosen are of hugely greater consequence than those of their unfortunate neighbors.” A fact the journalist – described by her employer as “one of Britain’s leading social and political commentators” – conveniently overlooked is that Hamas, not Israel, had insisted on the terms of the prisoner swap.

“Orr resorted to the anti-Semitic ‘chosen people’ canard,” Levick says. “It was atrocious.”

Faced by an outcry, the journalist issued an apology. Writing in the passive voice of artful evasion favored by bureaucrats and politicians the world over, she noted, “My words were badly chosen and poorly used.” She then went on to lament the “problematic” circumstances of Israel’s creation in 1948, before implicitly chiding Israelis for not being more open to criticism.

The editors of *CiF* and *The Guardian* did not respond to *The Report*’s repeated requests for comment. In a recent column, however, readers’ editor Chis Elliott acknowledged the use of anti-Semitic terminology in certain *Guardian* articles. “These included,” he wrote, “references to Israel/US ‘global domination’ and the term ‘slavish’ to describe the US relationship with Israel.” Journalists, the editor added, “have to be aware that some examples involve coded references. They need to ask themselves, for example, if the word Zionist is being used as a synonym for Jew.”

Bias against the Jewish state, say pro-Israel media watchdogs, comes in several forms – from purposeful slants to selective omissions, from subtle verbal cues to outright hostility.

Purposeful Slant: In its online country profiles during the run-up to the London Olympics, the BBC failed to list any city as Israel’s capital, yet declared “East Jerusalem” to be the capital of Palestine. “The BBC’s culture of political over-correctness often hampers impartial reporting on Israel,” says Hadar Sela, a British-born Israeli who runs the BBC Watch blog, adding, “The organization’s Editorial Guidelines prescribe that BBC journalists cannot describe Hamas

as a terrorist organization or a bus bombing as a terror attack in the name of avoiding ‘value judgments.’”

Selective omission: Foreign reporters routinely cite Israel’s “occupation” of Gaza, even though Israel unilaterally withdrew from the territory in 2005, uprooting all its settlements in the process. “Often the BBC omits relevant context that would help to accurately present Israel’s case,” says Simon Plosker, the Jerusalem-based managing editor of the influential media watchdog, *Honest Reporting*. “That matters because the British media has a global influence far beyond its size,” adds the British Jew, who moved to Israel in 2005.

Such complaints against the BBC have been voiced for years. In 2004, senior BBC news editor Malcolm Balen was even tasked with investigating the BBC’s reporting from the Middle East over persistent allegations of anti-Israeli bias. His report’s findings are rumored to be damning of the corporation, and the BBC has fought against their release.

Subtle verbal cues: Members of Fatah or Hamas known for their past involvement in terrorism and openly genocidal anti-Semitic views are often labeled “moderate” as long as they pay lip service to “the peace process.” Meanwhile, Israelis who insist on reciprocal concessions from Palestinians in the land-for-peace scheme may end up being labeled “right-wing.”

“The common media labels include ‘Netanyahu is hawkish,’ ‘Abbas is a moderate,’ ‘Settlers are all religious fanatics,’ ‘Palestinians just want to harvest their olives in peace,’” a prolific American Jewish blogger who goes by the pseudonym Elder of Zion tells *The Report*.

Outright hostility: In a discussion ahead of the US presidential elections last year on

MANY BATTLES, IF LEFT UNFOUGHT, WOULD LEAD TO A FAR WORSE SITUATION FOR ISRAEL’S IMAGE IN THE MEDIA. WE CAN’T LET THAT HAPPEN

Ireland's TV3 channel, presenter Vincent Browne opined, "Israel is the cancer in foreign affairs. It polarizes the Islamic community of the world against the rest of the world." That statement, Honest Reporting's Plosker points out, has put the Irish broadcaster on a par with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has labeled the Jewish state a "cancerous tumor." Browne later apologized for his "infelicitous use of the word [cancer]," before citing, like The Guardian's Orr, the "injustice [of Israel's creation] at the center of the conflict."

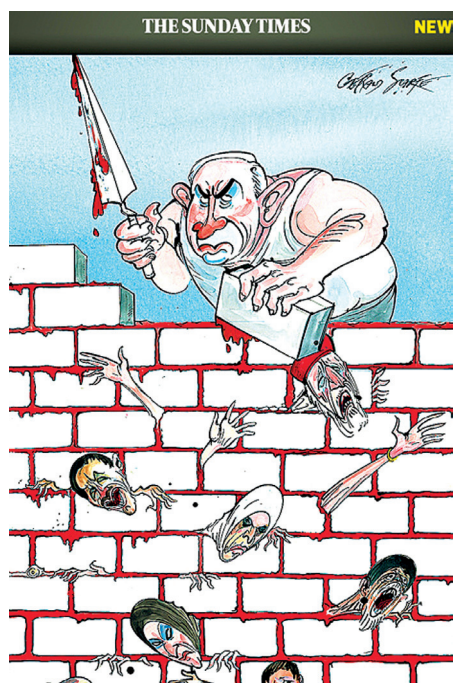
To most Israelis, the second intifada broke out as follows: Then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered historic concessions to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during the Camp David 2 negotiations of July 2000 to end the conflict. After some dithering, Arafat rejected them, returned home and launched a bloody uprising against Israel.

THE INTERNATIONAL media, however, as is their wont, had a different spin on cause and effect: After the failed negotiations, disgruntled Palestinians started rioting, whereupon Israel began responding with brutal force.

The dichotomy between reality and media coverage proved the tipping point for Shraga Simmons, an American-born Israeli journalist. He set up an email alert team whose members would notify one another of instances of biased news coverage and fire off letters to editors, demanding corrections. The grassroots activism soon mushroomed into a professionally run nonprofit organization. Today, Honest Reporting has some 150,000 subscribers worldwide. Headquartered in Jerusalem, the media watchdog operates offices in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada.

The start of the second intifada, with the ensuing lopsided media coverage, was also a turning point for Levick, a political science graduate of Temple University in Philadelphia. "It caused me to drop my Oslo delusions that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was largely about territory," he recalls. "I realized that Israel was in a war of survival."

He began writing letters to editors in defense of Israel, and went on to work for the Anti-Defamation League, where he scoured



The Sunday Times of London subsequently apologized after publishing a blatantly anti-Israel cartoon by Gerald Scarfe on January 27 (International Holocaust Memorial Day) featuring Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; (preceding pages) Simon Plosker, managing director of Honest Reporting, in the Jerusalem office

progressive journals and blogs for anti-Semitic content. In 2009, he moved to Israel, and was appointed editor of CiF Watch a year later, dedicating himself full time ever since to combating bias in The Guardian and its online mouthpiece.

Last December, without warning or explanation, CiF's administrators deleted Levick's account and erased all his posts in the talkback section of the site, in which, he says, he strove to set the record straight about Israel. "They banned me, a Zionist Jew, from their talkback section, even as radical Islamists like Raed Salah [a leader of Israel's Islamic Movement] and Hamas leaders are afforded above-the-line platforms [for full-length essays] despite promoting extreme anti-Semitism," he fumes,

branding the ban "petty and vindictive."

Undeterred, Levick maintains his mission on his blog. His aim, he says, is to demand not only balance but also an accurate reflection of the facts. "The disinformation propagated daily about Israel in [some] foreign media outlets is astonishing," Levick says. "It's our job to make sure that they're held accountable and the truth about the Middle East is told."

Easier said than done: A hatchet job on Page 1 carries far more weight than a subsequent brief correction at the bottom of Page 13 – if any editorial mea culpa is forthcoming at all. And once a malicious claim about Israel is afforded legitimacy by mainstream media coverage, it will often gain a life of its own – even once proven false – by being repeated endlessly on social media by "anti-Zionists."

The fact that cause-and-effect relations are routinely ignored or obscured in media reports, thus masking the reasons for Israel's actions, is cause for concern. The IDF's response to a deadly terror attack or a series of provocations often ends up being presented as just another case of Israeli aggression, seemingly out of the blue, against long-suffering Palestinians. It's invariably described as "disproportional." "We [often] see biased headlines where chronology is inverted and Israeli countermeasures against terror are the focus rather than the Palestinian terror that prompted them in the first place," Plosker notes.

Similarly, whereas journalists exercise a healthy skepticism towards all Israeli sources, they rarely extend the same "courtesy" to Palestinian ones. They often allow accusations by pro-Palestinian activists about Israel's alleged crimes and nefarious intentions to go unchecked, publishing them as fact.

"One studio guest on an Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio show recently suggested that Israel had been responsible for attacking its own embassies [during a recent spate of terror attacks from India to Thailand] in a pretext for a planned attack on Iran," Plosker says. "That disgusting canard was allowed to stand by the interviewer. Equally appall-



Tito Lucaveche, Cake Shop in Majorca, 2005, Oil on canvas, 41x33

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Israel

ing was one Canadian television host's assertion on Quebec TV that Israel simply didn't deserve to exist. Which other country has its own existence called into question in the media?"

OFTEN IT'S not only what foreign media report, but also what they don't. Calumnies of Jewish perfidy and Zionist brutality are commonplace in the Arab and Palestinian media, but almost none of it shows up in foreign media analyses about the "root causes" of the conflict. All "cycles of violence" and any lack of peace are down to Israel's "brutal" and "illegal" occupation of Palestinian territories, and that's that.

In the same vein, whereas Israel is a modern, democratic, multicultural country in which citizens enjoy a vibrant cultural life and boisterous free press, many foreign journalists prefer to ignore all this and frame almost any story, even about mundane matters of daily life, in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In news report after news report, Israelis and Palestinians are portrayed as mere extras in a great morality play of the oppressors and the oppressed.

This reductionist view leads to predictable caricatures. In a recent article on the BBC's website, the organization's Gaza correspondent used the pretext of an upcoming showdown between Spanish footballing giants Real Madrid and Barcelona to present Palestinians as sport-loving underdogs under the thumb of a mighty opponent.

Then there's Time magazine's notorious cover story on September 7, 2010: "Why Israel Doesn't Care About Peace." Featuring a picture of Israelis smoking hookahs on a beach, the report, by correspondent Karl Vick, describes Israelis as callous, happy-go-lucky souls, who prefer to engage in "making money" rather than peace. The Anti-Defamation League condemned the article for its "insidious subtext," and Honest Reporting named Vick "Dishonest Reporter of the Year" in its roundup of most noteworthy journalistic hit-and-run jobs.

A few months later, Time followed up with a piece arguing that "Israel's promotion of its progressive gay-rights record [is] a way to cover up ongoing human-rights abuses in the West Bank and Gaza." The theme was taken

up by The New York Times, which published an op-ed by Sarah Schulman, an American gay rights advocate and anti-Israel activist, who argued that the Jewish state uses "such pinkwashing" to "conceal the continuing violations of Palestinians' human rights."

Pro-Israel bias? What pro-Israel bias? Well, according to pro-Palestinian media watchers, it's flagrant pro-Zionist bias that permeates the media. Last October, Middle East Monitor (MEMO), a news agency that promotes a pro-Palestinian agenda, staged a book launch at the University of London for "The Battle for Public Opinion in Europe," which argues that mainstream European media outlets "routinely espouse Israeli government propaganda [in the service] of the Israel lobby in Europe." The launch's panel featured The Guardian columnist Seamus Milne and Tim Llewellyn, the BBC's former Middle East correspondent.

Llewellyn insisted that "a tremendously well-organized, careful, assiduous and extremely well-financed propaganda campaign" is under way in Britain "through the higher levels of pro-Israel Zionists who are scattered at strategic points throughout the British establishment." He lamented the pressure on the BBC to exercise "self-censorship" about Zionist "atrocities" by "an alien people in the region [Middle East]." The Guardian's Milne seconded Llewellyn. "There are well-funded and well-organized organizations that campaign in support of Israel," he said. "If you're editing in these areas, you will find pressure and campaigning constantly by those groups."

Presumably, they were referring to the likes of Honest Reporting and CiF Watch. The charge of an orchestrated pro-Zionist PR juggernaut to cow Western news organizations into submission through letter writing campaigns and other tactics is nothing new. Vocal critics of Israel dismiss all noise about perceived anti-Israel bias in the media as just another bogus claim of *hasbara* (literally "explanation," but often used as a synonym for "Zionist propaganda").

Pro-Israel media watchers do call on their readers to fire off letters of complaint to "offending" news organizations. Honest Reporting openly engages in such pressure techniques. "Often, the sheer weight of the numbers of people sending complaints or just the exposure of an instance of bias can force



A LOT OF JOURNALISTS HAVE AN IDEOLOGICAL BIAS AND THEIR EDITORS FAIL TO UPHOLD JOURNALISTIC STANDARDS

(Top) Time magazine cover for an article that claimed that happy-go-lucky Israelis do not care about peace with Palestinians, September 2010; (above) The cover of Britain's New Statesman magazine insinuating Zionist control of Britain, January 2002

a change,” Plosker acknowledges. “This can be anything from a simple correction or retraction all the way to, for instance, the firing of CNN’s senior Middle East editor Octavia Nasr [in July 2010] after she tweeted her admiration for Hezbollah founder Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah upon his death.”

But Levick, whose modest Jerusalem apartment doubles as his office, rejects the idea that he’s part of some “well-funded and well-organized campaign” of coercion against The Guardian. “We support vigorous and open debate about Israel and Jewish-related issues, including issues of controversy [so long as they fall within the bounds of honest and fair criticism],” he counters. “Just like The Guardian, we engage in the marketplace of ideas. Our only weapons are our words, facts and logic.”

THE FOREIGN media can criticize Israel and should, agrees Michelle Whiteman, a lawyer who runs Honest Reporting’s operations in Quebec, Canada. It’s the nature of a criticism that holds a clue as to whether journalists do so in good faith. “It’s not anti-Semitic to criticize Israel’s actions,” she stresses. “But a singular preoccupation with those actions and a selective condemnation of them point in that direction. Take checkpoints and security barriers. Many countries have them, yet Israel’s are often exclusively singled out as a symbol of repression, rather than as a measure of security.”

“Israel is held to far higher standards than other countries in the Middle East,” a foreign correspondent with long experience in the region concedes. “There’s a certain expectation by editors to have stories [adhere to] the David and Goliath narrative,” he explains. “But I don’t think it’s because of anti-Israel bias. They just don’t want to look insensitive [to the Palestinians].”

But Barry Rubin doesn’t believe media bias is a matter of sensitivity. “Those of us who have seen behind the scenes know how bad it is,” Prof. Rubin, a prolific author and Middle East expert, tells The Report. “Most editors have no trouble with complete bias. We have a number of issues at play here – sympathy for the underdog, progressives’ hostility to the West, misdirection by the Palestinians.

“When you have that, you have conscious, deliberate bias,” Rubin, an American-born

Israeli, adds. “A lot of journalists have an ideological bias and their editors fail to uphold journalistic standards. And that isn’t just true of Israel; it’s true of a large number of subjects. In fact, the [biased] media treatment of Israel is becoming closer to typical.”

Context, balance and even common sense often take a backseat to agenda journalism, notes Rubin, who argues that “the media has become a tool in a political struggle.” The worst offenders, he says, are wire services like Reuters, the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse, which rely on local stringers and freelance photographers, many of whom seem to make no bones about playing fast and loose with facts and misrepresenting events.

BIAS COMES IN SEVERAL FORMS – FROM PURPOSEFUL SLANTS TO SELECTIVE OMISSIONS, FROM SUBTLE VERBAL CUES TO OUTRIGHT HOSTILITY

Several wire photographers have over the years been shown to pass off carefully staged and choreographed Palestinian propaganda events – so-called Pallywood productions – as spontaneous happenings. And images do matter. For people who are largely unfamiliar with the history and current realities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the issue of right and wrong gets filtered through select media images.

In some cases, thinly veiled advocacy journalism hides behind a make-work pretense of objectivity, as the justness of the Palestinian cause is seen to override common journalistic standards of impartiality, balance and even accuracy. In other cases, simple wishful thinking is at work.

“[Many] journalists’ desire for peace often outweighs the evidence in front of them,” argues blogger Elder of Zion, an IT professional who often dissects news articles and op-eds about Israel on his site. “Hamas’s leaders call for the destruction of Israel in Arabic literally every day,” he says. “Yet a

recent piece in The New York Times argued that they have accepted the two-state solution. The reporter didn’t have any quote that proved it, only quotes that he felt implied it. Journalists’ wishful thinking leads them to believe that both sides in the conflict have the same ethics and goals. That assumption is rarely true.”

Plosker, however, cautions against crying wolf all too readily. “Some people attribute [all] anti-Israel media bias to outright anti-Semitism, but that’s an unsophisticated answer to a multifaceted problem,” he says. “Occasionally, anti-Semitism does rear its ugly head, but the reality is far more complex. The Palestinian narrative has become dominant in Western discourse, particularly in academic and liberal circles. Today’s journalists graduated from campuses where the norm is a postmodern narrative that denies Israel’s rightful historical place in the Middle East.”

That’s how the usual red herrings have taken unshakable hold, especially in op-eds: Israeli “apartheid,” “ethnic cleansing,” and “neo-colonialism.” Ironically, however, it’s Israeli society’s openness, not its “racist” insularity, that can work against it, Plosker stresses. “Israel is a free society and journalists are at liberty to pursue stories without hindrance from the state,” he says. “This is much less so in the Palestinian territories, where journalists are more wary of reporting negative stories about the Palestinians for fear of losing access or, in the worst cases, because of intimidation and threats of violence.”

Media bias doesn’t just skew views about Israel; it can have severe real-life consequences, Sela insists. “The media is a major battlefield,” she says. “Negative reports coming out during the 2006 Lebanon War, for example, affected the parameters that the IDF could operate under” in trying to root out Hezbollah strongholds targeting Israel with rockets and missiles.

And so, for pro-Israeli media watchers, the media war carries on. “Our existence keeps the media on notice and ensures a level of accountability that would not otherwise exist,” Plosker says. “Many battles, if left unfought, would lead to a far worse situation for Israel’s image in the media. We can’t let that happen.” ■