

THE MEDIA

Whose Bias?

by Leon T. Hadar

Two years ago, I was invited to address a group of Jewish-American women on the question, “Is the American media coverage of Middle East biased?” The event took place during the height of the second Palestinian *intifada*, and my hosts were accusing the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as well as some of the leading television news networks, of covering the rising violence in the Holy Land in a way that was biased against the Jewish state.

The local newspaper carried a front-page photo of Israeli soldiers beating up a few Palestinians kids in Nablus? Well, didn’t I hear somewhere that the editor’s mother was, well, Arab, Muslim, or something like that? And that the reporter covering the Middle East was raised in Germany, which kind of brings up the question of what his dad was doing during World War II (and don’t give that crap about the Eastern Front). And did you notice how that television anchorman raises his eyebrows every time he refers to a statement made by Israeli officials? And why do they always showing the bad side of Ariel Sharon’s profile? Don’t they have some clips from before he put on all that weight? Why don’t they broadcast them? Is it because that television broadcaster was once married to a Palestinian?

I am not making this up. Ask the editor of your local newspaper to let you read the letters he receives each week accusing his paper of being “anti-Israeli.” You would have to conclude that the American press is controlled by a pro-Arab cabal. In fact, for years, I have been hearing rumors from members of the “pro-Israeli community” that ABC anchorman Peter Jennings is, or was, married to a Palestinian woman or had a Palestinian lover. (He is actually happily married to journalist Kati Marton, who happens to be a daughter of Hungarian refugees.) Jennings’ crime has been his somewhat balanced coverage of the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which earned his network the reputation among Jewish-

American critics of being the “Arab Broadcasting Company.”

The women I was addressing told me that some of their Jewish friends had decided to cancel their subscriptions to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in order to punish them for their supposedly hostile attitudes toward Israel. Someone referred to a photo of a Palestinian flag that the *Times* had carried a few days earlier (not mentioning the number of times the newspaper had published photos of Israeli flags), while another speaker referred to the “antisemitic” *Post* (which has been run by a Jewish-owned company) and announced that she was switching to the more pro-Israeli *Washington Times* (owned by that great friend of the Jewish people, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon). And, since the *New York Times’* publishers and many of its top reporters and columnists are Jewish, pro-Israeli critics tend to portray them as “self-hating Jews.”

I decided to conduct my own experiment in media analysis and circulated among the audience copies of several articles on Israel and the Middle East. All were very critical of Israeli policies in the West Bank and Gaza and, in particular, of Prime Minister Sharon and his Likud government. One of the writers provided a very depressing exposé of the humiliating fashion in which Palestinian civilians are treated by the Israeli military. Another columnist bashed the Jewish settlers in the West Bank, describing them as religious fanatics and even referring to them as “fascist.” One editorial even called on the Bush administration to pressure the Israeli government to end the building of new settlements. It all sounded very, very anti-Israeli to my hosts’ ears.

I asked my audience to guess where those items were published. In the end, they were divided. Most guessed that the articles appeared in Palestinian newspapers. Others speculated that the authors probably had ties to Nazi publications. A few considered the possibility that the pieces were published in European newspapers. (*Le Monde? Der Spiegel? The Guardian?* That’s the kind of writing you would expect from those French, the Germans, and the loony left in Britain, right?)

The articles, however, were all published in the leading Israeli Hebrew-language daily, *Ha’aretz*, also known as “the

New York Times of Israel. *Ha’aretz* is read by government officials, business executives, and the professional and intellectual elites in Israel. In addition to its exceptional coverage of current events, which has garnered the newspaper many national and international awards, *Ha’aretz* carries editorials and commentaries that help set the public agenda in Israel. It is a “must read” among diplomats and foreign correspondents stationed in Israel, who receive a more accurate and balanced picture of what is happening there than the one presented by most leading American newspapers. *Ha’aretz*—unlike the *Times* or the *Post*—even employs a full-time correspondent who is stationed in the West Bank and Gaza and who provides the Palestinian perspective on the conflict, which explains why the articles by correspondent Amira Hess were considered so “pro-Arab” by my hosts.

Even more controversial, from the Jewish-American perspective, is the wide range of opinions among Israeli writers in the newspaper. For example, an article by secular intellectual Uzi Ornan accused Israel of practicing apartheid policies against her non-Jewish citizens and demanded that Israel take steps to separate religion from the state, an idea that is very popular among young Israelis as well as immigrants from Russia, among whom there are a large number of mixed Jewish-Christian marriages. (According to some estimates, about one third of those immigrants are not considered Jewish based on Orthodox Jewish religious rules that are legally binding in Israel.) Meron Benvenisti, a leading non-Zionist writer, has been calling for changing Israel’s identity as a Jewish state and for the creation of a non-Jewish state in the area between Jordan and the Mediterranean. And just a few weeks ago, *Ha’aretz* carried a long interview with a renowned Israeli intellectual, Benny Morris, endorsing the idea of forcing Palestinians to emigrate from Israel under certain conditions.

Much of the political debate that is taking place in Israel has not been reflected in the coverage in the *Times*, the *Post*, or other important media outlets, where editors and writers have neither the will nor the resources and time to battle the groups decrying their “anti-Israeli” coverage. Indeed, as part of the effort to impose the Israeli p.c. line, a network of

organizations controlled by Likud supporters such as CAMERA (the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America), COMA (the Committee on Media Accountability), and FLAME (Facts and Logic About the Middle East) has been formed in recent years specifically to combat “anti-Israeli bias” in the American press. These and other groups inundate American news organizations with letters to the editor demanding “balanced” coverage and threatening boycotts of “hostile” media organizations and writers. Recently, when New York University professor Tony Judt proposed in the *New York Review of Books* a “one state” solution to the Israel/Palestine conflict that was not very different in its outlines from the one Benvenisti had discussed in *Ha’aretz*, he was branded as an enemy of the Jewish people by neoconservative writers, and the magazine received hundreds of angry letters from readers canceling their subscriptions. (The only sympathetic letter to the editor came from Amos Elon, a columnist for *Ha’aretz*.)

For many American Jewish and non-Jewish supporters of Israel, the problem is not really the existence of an “anti-Israeli” press in the United States. Comparing the daily coverage of the Middle East by leading European newspapers with that of the American press (say, the *Independent* versus the *New York Times*), it becomes quite obvious that American media outlets have been less inclined to focus on Israeli mistreatment of the Palestinians than their European counterparts have been — or, for that matter, than *Ha’aretz* and the rest of the Israeli press have been. Indeed, for many of the critics of the “anti-Israeli” press in the United States, it has all been a classic case of “killing the messenger.” As part of an effort to preserve a fantasy about how they want the Jewish state to be, they reject, discredit, or refuse to deal with depictions of an Israel whose policies contradict their own cherished political values.

Social scientists call the condition that results from perceiving discrepancies between the image and the reality of an admired figure “cognitive dissonance.” When a beloved political leader is accused of immoral personal behavior or political corruption, the immediate tendency of his admirer is not to withdraw his support but to question the reliability of the news medium or of the journalists who reported the story or the credibility of the report’s source. He may even avoid reading or listening to any information

that suggests the idol is less than perfect.

There are, of course, limits to such exercises in avoiding reality, as when, for example, the crimes of the leader become so obvious that they lead to his resignation. These developments can be very traumatic for the true believer, which explains why some supporters of the Communist Party in the West suffered mental breakdowns or committed suicide after the extent of Stalin’s horrors became obvious in the early 1950’s.

Israel has had the potential to produce serious cognitive dissonance in its supporters in this country. Members of the Jewish community in America have been in the forefront of such liberal causes as the struggle for civil and human rights, the separation of Church and state, and free immigration to the United States. They would have been the first to protest any move to impose Christianity as a state religion in America, to pass a “law of return” limiting immigration to white Christians, or to force citizens to carry identity cards indicating their religion or ethnic origin. Those same American Jews, however, support a state that applies these and other discriminatory policies in its treatment of Christian and Muslim Arab citizens. Similarly, many of the American Jews who led the fight against American intervention in Vietnam ignore or defend the long and bloody Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza.

How have most supporters of Israel in the United States avoided dealing with their own political inconsistencies? The answer lies in their image-maintenance methods designed to avoid the cognitive dissonance between their perceptions of Israel and its reality. That and an American media that, for many years, sympathized with the Israeli point of view have helped them to preserve the Israeli fantasy for a while. Until the 1967 Middle East war, memories of the European holocaust and an Israeli political elite steeped in the effective use of public relations produced “Exodus”-like images of the Jewish state in this country. Discrimination against the Arab population, the theocratic nature of the Israeli political system, and adventurist and militaristic Israeli policies received little attention from the American press, though they were the subject of lively public debate in Israel. As a result, American Jews did not have to reconcile their liberal personal agendas with the realization that Israel was not a progressive paradise in the Middle East. Contradictory facts were

not permitted to interfere with an idealized view of the Jewish state.

Developments since the 1967 war, however, and especially the policies pursued by the nationalistic and messianic leadership that came to power in 1977, posed major psychological problems for many supporters of Israel. Television-news images and print-media reports confronted them with the realities of Israeli suppression of Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and the increasing power of the Orthodox Israeli political parties. The 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the two Palestinian uprisings have aggravated the tensions between the liberal instincts of Israel’s Jewish-American supporters and their backing for an Israeli government pursuing nationalist and expansionist policies. Even the most ardent supporters of the Jewish state were shocked by the bloody scenes from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, a direct outcome of Likud policies.

Questioning the credibility of news reports from the Middle East has been one of the major tools of American Jews trying to cope with the continuing cognitive dissonance. I am amazed sometimes that, even in this age of the internet, with *Ha’aretz* and other Israeli newspapers maintaining English-language websites and cable news networks broadcasting around the clock, for many American Jews (and for many Christian evangelicals), Israel still remains a fantasy — and they would like to keep it that way.

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INTELLIGENCE

Who Was Watching the Watchers?

by Margie Burns

One cannot reasonably assume that the attacks of September 11, 2001, were a seamless conspiracy. Even a successful plot is not a well-oiled machine, and, whatever the plotting behind the scenes, as Shakespeareans say about *Romeo and Juliet*, the skyjackings of September 11 were, in some ways, tragedy snatched from the jaws of comedy.