

**Media bias and the Middle East****Leonard Asper**

National Post

**SOUND OFF!**

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THIS STORY?



Almost as disturbing as the daily diet of death and destruction in the Arab-Israeli conflict, is the unwavering perception among the supporters of Israel, joined by many dispassionate observers, that the world media, and particularly European and state-run media organizations, have an institutionalized bias against Israel. I caution that my comments do not apply to all journalists, and in fact there are many media outlets, especially in North America, that have been quite fair toward Israel and have applied intelligent critical analysis of the events in the Middle East. Unfortunately they are in the minority, both in terms of number and reach.

We must therefore go inside the minds of news journalists to fully explore how their political and philosophical leanings lead them to conclude that Israel is the villain and to then report accordingly.

Many news journalists are either doctrinaire socialists or hold political views left of centre. That leads them to be suspicious of free markets and capitalism, to resent the corporate world and politicians who support the capitalist system. They are generally supportive of anyone who they deem to be oppressed, victimized or otherwise aggrieved by a stronger party.

From 1948 and even earlier, Israel and the Jews were deemed by most major media to be the oppressed party and the Arabs the oppressor. Israel in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s was the darling of the socialist-led media partly due to Holocaust guilt, partly because it fought heroic wars as the outmanned and outgunned David against the Goliath known as the Arab world, and because socialists were enamoured with the kibbutzim as a successful socialist institution. Labour governments dominated the Israeli landscape. Israel fit into journalists' binary world as the "oppressed" party.

But after the 1967 war, in which Israel was attacked and not only came out the victor but also seized land, this began to change. The Marxist journalist has a romanticized need for a cause. Once Israel had turned into a strong entity whose survival was no longer in question, who would no longer wait until the enemy was killing its people in the synagogues but rather whose policy, like that of the United States today, evolved to one of meeting the enemy in the field, the cause for journalists became Palestine, not Israel. The hero was Yasser Arafat.

More than almost anyone I know, I am the first to cast doubt upon people who blame their circumstances on racism. While Jews in particular can be prone to accusing people of anti-Semitism as an excuse for their misfortunes, in this case I believe that charge is warranted. Racism is very difficult to prove, particularly when the accused do not openly state the reason for their attacks or their bias. No reporter screams: "I hate Jews."

I did not lightly come to the conclusion that anti-Semitism is part of the reason for the anti-Israel bias of the media, but the evidence suggests it is indeed a major factor.

One must start by equating anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism. Many journalists believe that Zionism is patently wrong, because there is no need for a Jewish state. They accept that there can and should be a state with Jews in it, but not a Jewish state per se even if a secular one. Why? They do not, or choose not to, understand that after several thousand years of repeated, attempted genocides against Jews who lived in states other than their own Jewish state, Jews see Israel as vital to their very existence. Even Martin Luther King recognized this.

Knowingly or not, the media who cover Israel do not recognize it as either a homeland or a fortress for the protection of Jews both within Israel and for Jews living everywhere. Therefore to them Zionism is racism, and some reporters condemn all Jews for the existence of what they deem to be a racist state. And latterly, as terrorism has arrived at the West's doorstep, the reversion to the "blame the Jews" solution for terrorism everywhere is prevalent among the intelligentsia, including journalists. The Jews and therefore Israel are to blame for 9/11; they are to blame for the attacks on the United States and UN installations; they are to blame for the war in Iraq, and even economic decline.

Christian Europe still has a wide streak of anti-Semitism, revived by the decline of Holocaust guilt, evidenced by the radical increase in anti-Jewish graffiti, vandalism and editorial comment.

Oriana Fallaci, the well-known Italian journalist and author, and no lover of Israel, has spoken out: "I find it shameful that state-run television stations contribute to the resurgent anti-Semitism by crying only over Palestinian deaths while playing down Israeli deaths." She goes on: "I am disgusted by the anti-Semitism of many Italians and Europeans."

But hints of anti-Semitism are there in the Canadian media too. When Hezbollah, the well-known terrorist group, was finally banned in Canada, Neil Macdonald of the CBC pompously, but dangerously, suggested Hezbollah was a "national liberation movement victimized by unfair smears cast around by supporters of the Jewish state." No reference to Israel, just "the Jewish state."

There are fair-minded journalists who are neither Marxists nor anti-Semites. But they have little help. Israel is unprepared for propaganda wars. Israeli society is unprepared to fight a war against Arab society for the heart and mind of the journalist.

For undecided, but well-intentioned journalists, it is hard work to support Israel because they must dig up pro-Israel information themselves. Journalists, some of whom are even Jewish, complain openly that they generally receive only an official government statement from Israel, often post-deadline, while from the Arabs they are granted interviews with whomever they want -- Hamas, Hezbollah, al-Aqsa or Islamic Jihad. They get instant access to wild funerals, replete with bug-eyed youths chanting "death to Israel and America," and they are given packaged home videos from Arabs. These home video shots are either fabricated or edited to paint Israelis in the worst possible light. Professional ethics have fallen by the wayside in the interests of good raw video and deadlines.

Another societal difference is that the Palestinians can get a mob together for a video shoot in five minutes. It is part of the strategy.

There are no Israeli mobs. There are no staged funerals. It is too civilized a society for this war and there is no strategy.

So deadline-driven reporters must choose. No story, or the Palestinian tale of woe -- mobs, good quotes, death and grief, as against a flat Israeli denial.

Other reporters are fooled by the openness of Israeli society. The raging debate between Labour and Likud; Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz and The Jerusalem Post; and many other factions, confirms in many journalists' minds that Israel does bear at least some blame for the deaths that occur on both sides of the conflict. Often, to find balance when a reporter's editor is calling for an Israeli quote, foreign correspondents get it from Israeli media critical of the government because that's all there is. So Arafat calls Ariel Sharon a war criminal and Ha'aretz does too, and that passes for balance!

Many journalists think they work very hard. Those who cover the Middle East, or any war zone, do indeed work long hours. They are far away from their families. They also risk their lives. For taking these risks, they are to be commended. But working hard is not to be confused with being diligent.

Many reporters sent to the Middle East are unqualified for complex war coverage. They know nothing about the history but worse, they do not bother to make their own inquiries. A few examples are indicative of the gravity of the problem. There are journalists who cover the Middle East who do not know, for example, that when Jordan and Egypt occupied the West Bank and Gaza these territories were never labeled as occupied territories by the Arab world. Most journalists who criticized the Israeli seizure of an ambulance crossing a West Bank checkpoint did not bother to check that several days earlier an ambulance of the same description had been used in a car bombing in Israel, and that ambulance had crossed at the same checkpoint. Most journalists did not know that the terrorist and weapons-infested Jenin refugee camp is run by the United Nations and has been for more than 50 years. Most do not have any clue that the so-called Arab refugees became refugees because they were urged to leave by Arab leaders when they were attacking Israel in 1948.

The fair-minded journalist's bias is the result of laziness, failure of the Israeli government to spoon-feed as the Arabs do, Arab coddling on one hand and threats against journalists on the other, and confusing Israeli society's self-criticism with guilt.

However, there is some hope, as we have found in observing the results of various programs to educate journalists. With fair-minded journalists, who actually do care more about the truth than their own ideologies, there has been a positive response once the hard facts are known. But for some, their work must be done for them. The dozens of pro-Israel Web sites and books are starting to have some effect, and even the Israeli government is becoming more active and proficient on this front in its choice of spokespeople and the immediacy and quality of its

dissemination of information.

What else can be done?

The awesome challenge facing the Israeli government is to dramatically improve its public relations and communication strategies. It must lift the fog of war.

Media proprietors and managers must ensure that the people they hire do not bring their ideology into their newsrooms, and that journalists do proper research before filing stories and do not rely on dubious second-hand sources. The media must also scrutinize their use of headlines, pictures and words.

And the public? The media must be held accountable, just as they purport to hold others accountable. Respond to bias when you see it. Demand informed, objective and accurate reporting.

This is excerpted from a speech by Leonard Asper, president and chief executive of CanWest Global Communications Corp., at the Gray Academy of Jewish Education's 'Another Great Debate' evening in Winnipeg last night.

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