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A War of Words (In the Hype of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, the Line Between Reality and Propaganda Can Easily Confuse Even the Most Objective Foreign Correspondent)

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ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS

Muhammad al-Dura, a young Arab boy huddled beside his father, was videotaped by a French cameraman while reportedly under Israeli fire. The images captured in this broadcast have been aired around the world and have become a symbol for the Palestinian cause. Yet, strong speculation suggests that if the boy was killed, the fatal shot was a Palestinian bullet, not an Israeli one.

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“I’ve worked in eight other countries as a foreign correspondent, and I’ve always been deemed a good journalist. Then suddenly I come to the Middle East, with no Jewish background and no Palestinian background, and I turn into a bad journalist, making all these ghastly mistakes. Why on earth would this suddenly happen?”

Andrew Steele
Middle East Bureau Chief
British Broadcasting Corporation,
Jerusalem

By Kenneth Lasson

It’s been well over three years since the beginning of what has come to be called the Al Aksa Intifada, during which time close to 4,000 people (almost 2,800 Palestinians and 900 Israelis), have lost their lives to violence. Many more have been maimed. But just as freely as the blood flows, so too does the rhetoric run high. Even as faith in the future diminishes, so too flourishes the passionate expression of opposing objectives.

In the Middle East today, a war of words is spurring much of the conflict.

Those who feel that Israel’s case is clearly the more righteous of the two have trouble understanding why others don’t see it with equal clarity. The Arab world, meanwhile, views the Western press with unreserved suspicion.

Talking directly to foreign correspondents involved in the media war can easily yield the conclusion that, as witnesses to a monumental muddle of murder and high emotions on all sides, journalists are often as confused as anyone else. Like others, they frequently miss the forest for the trees.

Few of them fathom the full historical

of Words

In the hype of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the line between reality and propaganda can easily confuse even the most objective foreign correspondent.

context of Zionism and the State of Israel, much less the Biblical birthright of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, although largely laden with liberal predispositions, journalists cannot be faulted for finding that the palpable poverty and hardship in the streets of Gaza may make for a more compelling story than reciting the fears and aspirations of Israelis sipping coffee in Jerusalem cafes. But in so doing, they often ignore the undisguised incitement that takes place daily in Palestinian mosques, not to mention the virulent indoctrination of Arab schoolchildren given textbooks permeated with expressions of hatred toward Jews.

Moreover, Mideast journalists are on call seven days a week with an endless press of poignant events. They uniformly complain about the difficulties of time management. They have to rely on Hebrew or Arabic translators. Most correspondents acknowledge a degree of intimidation by the Palestinian Authority. They have as much trouble as their audiences in sorting out the logic of suicide attacks and the military responses to them.

Most egregious of all, to many critics of Mideast coverage, is the media's insistence on using judgmental terminology, words that wound, buzzwords that can quickly turn to endless semantic puzzles: Can Hamas fairly be labeled "militant" instead of "terrorist"? Are "extremists" on both sides "equal contributors" to a "cycle of violence"? What does "occupation" mean? "Massacre?"

■■■

Perhaps the single biggest obstacle in Mideast journalism is choosing



ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO/THOMAS COEX

A Palestinian woman argues with an Israeli soldier at the Jenin refugee camp. Palestinians say there was a massacre here; Israelis says there wasn't. Such disputes create a challenge for journalists trying to explain how the victims were killed.

the right words to describe the everyday violence. Particularly nettlesome are "terrorist," "militant" and "extremists on both sides." All of them are said to contribute to the "cycle of violence" — a phrase itself that strongly implies equivalency.

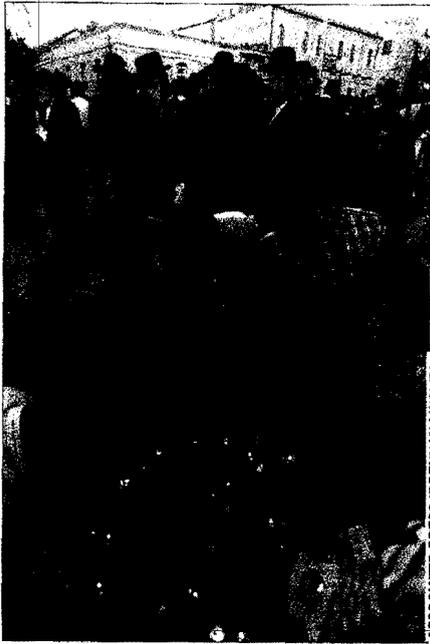
At the *Associated Press* (AP), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Reuters, use of the term "terrorist" in Mideast reporting is firmly forbidden. So too is it taboo at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*.

According to the BBC's official producer's manual, "Credibility is severely undermined if international audiences detect a bias for or against any of those

involved. Neutral language is key; even the word 'terrorist' can appear judgmental in parts of the world where there is no clear consensus about the legitimacy of militant political groups."

But this can lead to absurd results, such as when the AP published a list of countries afflicted by terrorism in 2003 and conspicuously omitted Israel.

National Public Radio (NPR) similarly resists the term "terror" when reporting on homicidal attacks by Palestinians against Israelis — although the network regularly uses the word to describe the activities of Al Qaeda and other radical Islamic groups around the world. NPR vigorously denies



ASSOCIATED PRESS/BRENNAN LINSLEY

Orthodox Jewish children light candles at a memorial service in honor of 20 victims killed in a suicide bombing. Despite dozens of Israeli deaths each year at the hands of Palestinian suicide bombers, journalists still hesitate to label these acts as forms of terrorism.

this apparently biased inconsistency, despite thoroughgoing documentation by various watchdog groups, most notably the Committee on Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA).

NPR's use of the phrase "Israeli-Palestinian violence" suggests not only that Israel's military responses to terrorism are the same as the terrorism itself, but also that the Israelis, if not themselves the protagonists, are equally blameworthy. Imagine if NPR used the phrase "American-Serbian violence in Kosovo" or "American-Iraqi violence." As Lewis Glinert, a professor of linguistics at Dartmouth, recently pointed out, "Language wars are messy." Glinert says that as in all modern conflicts, the entire community is at risk of the propagandists' art and should be trained to protect itself. The stakes, as history has shown, are high.

No one phrase has created as much of a firestorm as the "massacre" at Jenin. In April 2002, shortly after the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) invaded the Palestinian refugee camp, Terje Roed-Larsen, the United Nations' special envoy in the region, described the scene as "horrific beyond belief." His appalled description was quoted widely in the world press and trumpeted by the Palestinians as evidence

of Israeli brutality. Palestinian Authority leaders, such as Saeb Erekat, charged that Israel had massacred 500 Palestinians. That number made its way from the CNN screens to the U.N. Security Council, which demanded immediate access.

The harshest criticism occurred in the British press. The *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Telegraph*, and the *Times* all quoted the same lone Arab saying that he saw Israeli soldiers heap 30 bodies beneath a half-wrecked house. "When the pile was complete, they bulldozed the building, bringing its ruins down on the corpses," said the Arab. "Then they flattened the area with a tank." The *Telegraph* reported that hundreds of victims "were buried by bulldozer in [a] mass grave." The *Evening Standard* printed, "We are talking here of massacre and a cover-up of genocide." The *Guardian* called Israel's actions in Jenin "every bit as repellent" as Osama Bin Laden's attack on New York on Sept. 11.

The truth, though, was that there had been no massacre. When the facts emerged, 13 Israeli soldiers had lost their lives in street-to-street combat, and 52 Palestinians had been killed, 43 of them were armed fighters. According to a *Washington Times* report, these figures were later confirmed by both the U.N. and, in May 2002, by the Palestinian Authority itself. Moreover, there is general agreement that the Israeli casualties would have been much fewer and the civilian death toll higher, had the IDF chosen to subject Jenin to aerial bombardment.

Yet, according to a search of various newspaper databases, virtually no correction was made by the media of its journalistic excesses concerning Jenin. Indeed, there has been scant acknowledgment of the truth anywhere. Thus, to many, the vision of a slaughter at the hands of the Israelis remains indelible.

Another ineffable image is of Muhammad al-Dura, the 12-year-old Palestinian reportedly killed in his father's arms. The video of his death was televised around the world and has become the icon of the Palestinian cause. Postage stamps have been issued in the boy's honor and streets have been named after him.

The fact that a thorough investigation

by the IDF appeared to prove empirically that Muhammad al-Dura could not have been shot by the Israelis — a study that has not been challenged or refuted — was lost in the rubble of Mideast reporting. In June, James Fallows, an award-winning investigative journalist for the *Atlantic Monthly*, did a cover story analyzing the incident in great detail and concluded that al-Dura most likely fell victim to an errant Palestinian shot, unless, as some Israelis speculate, he did not die at all.

One of the more contentious current flaps in Mideast media circles is Israel's acute grievance with the BBC, whose double standard is far from subtle.

In April of 2002, for example, BBC host Tom Paulin stated in an interview to the Egyptian weekly *Al-Ahram* that "Brooklyn-born" settlers in the occupied territories "should be shot dead. ... I think they are Nazis, racists. I feel nothing but hatred for them. ... I never believed that Israel had the right to exist at all." Despite complaints from the Jewish community, Paulin was allowed to continue as a regular contributor to BBC broadcasts.

Yet in January 2004, as several media watchdog groups were quick to point out, BBC commentator Robert Kilroy-Silk was sacked for making negative comments against Arabs in a newspaper article, an action that appeared to be a direct response to a complaint from the Muslim Council of Britain.

Over the past several years, Tom Rose, an American who is now publisher of the *Jerusalem Post*, has emerged as one of the most articulate spokesmen on behalf of Israel. He is

young, earnest, driven, plain-spoken, and possesses a sweeping knowledge of Israeli and American history and politics.

Rose claims that the Israelis have a completely legitimate case, but that they don't think in terms of the big picture. "If you ask any Arab what they want for Palestine, they'll give you an answer: They want an independent Palestinian state, East Jerusalem as its capital," Rose says. "It's very defined, very concrete ... universal. You ask an Israeli what he wants, and he'll tell you: peace. But peace is very abstract. It's hard enough in an election year getting your mind around something concrete, much less abstract.

Imagine if NPR
used the phrase
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"I argue this all the time. Our cause is lily-white, totally legitimate. Their cause is totally illegitimate. Our tactics at pursuing our lily-white strategy are sometimes horrendous; their tactics at pursuing their illegitimate strategy are sometimes far better than ours."

To Gideon Meir of the Israel Foreign Ministry, most reporters are liberals who want to see the world in simple terms. But the world is not black and white. "There is a state here which has suffered for 55 years from Arab terror," Meir says. "The history is all on our side. The word compromise does not exist in the Arab lexicon. For the Palestinians, it is always all or nothing."

"We are paying a price for the fact that we are a democratic state. We have a free and vibrant press, with those criticizing the government and those who don't. Everything is open for the foreign press here. We don't intimidate them the way the Palestinians do."

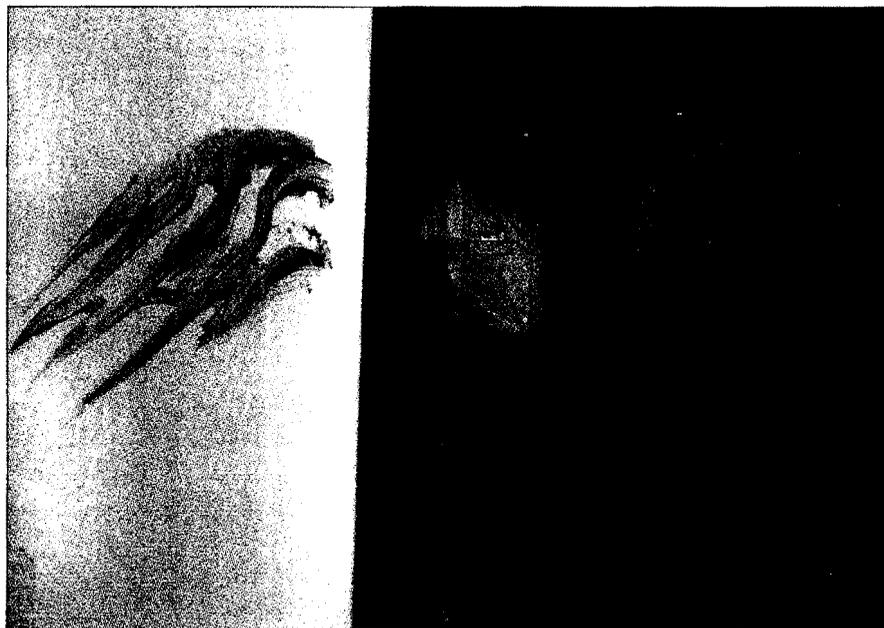
The issue of settlements may be particularly thorny, but few papers anywhere, even editorially, have ever addressed one simple question: If Arabs can live peacefully in Haifa, as many do, why shouldn't Jews be able to live peacefully in Hebron? Why, for that matter, should the political peacemakers permit any territory claimed by the Palestinians to be effectively *judeo-frei* (free of Jews)?

■ ■ ■

John Ward Anderson and his wife, Molly Moore, are the *Washington Post's* current correspondents in Jerusalem. They live in and work out of a comfortable house in the German Colony of Jerusalem, away from the center of town, not far removed from the chic cafes on Emek Refaim — and only a few blocks from a recent bus bombing.

"We work all of the time," says Anderson, a tall, sandy-haired man who graduated from Harvard and cut his teeth covering the Washington, D.C. crime beat. He is friendly, gracious and tired. Because of the 24-hour news cycle and the half-day time difference between here and the United States, he sometimes has to get up in the middle of the night to write and file a story. Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays have lost meaning.

Last year, Moore, the *Washington Post's* premier war correspondent, wrote a long article detailing the increase in targeted assassinations by Israel and the concomitant rise in civilian casualties. Although Michael Getler, the *Post's* ombudsman, thought the story was "legitimate and important, focusing on a tactic that has



ASSOCIATED PRESS/MUHAMMED MUHEISEN

Israeli police stand near a pillar smeared with blood near the site of an Arab suicide bombing, in the town of Rosh Haayin, east of Tel Aviv, Israel. Although Israelis perceive suicide bombers as terrorists, Palestinians view them as soldiers. Andrew Steele, the BBC's Mideast Bureau Chief, believes the biggest challenge in covering the Middle East is providing balance, a lofty goal he believes impossible to obtain in Middle East Journalism. "If you attempt to give a dispassionate view of any element of this, you are going to be challenged by one side or the other," Steele says.

become more controversial in Israel as it has become more frequent," he also found it "hard to understand" why the article ignored the salient contextual facts that more than 800 Israelis have been killed by terrorists since September 2000 and that almost 5,000 have been injured.

"I've been to the scene of almost every single bombing since I got here, I mean dozens, and I don't spare anything in describing the scene quite vividly — the blood, the body parts, the leg under the engine a hundred yards away," Anderson says. "And then I go into the hospital and talk to the people who have lost their loved ones. To me that evokes much stronger reactions and images of what's going on in the readers' minds than simply saying a terrorist bombing."

Anderson insists that a journalist loses his credibility if he takes a position on the conflict. "Molly and I are absolutely resolute that we are not going to choose sides," he says. "There are a lot of readers and letter-writers whose main problem is that we haven't picked a side, and they want us on their side."

But Anderson takes pains to point out that there can be little mistaking his sympathies for victims when he reports, in great and gruesome detail, the suicide bombings in Israel.

He is puzzled that anyone should question his journalistic ethics. "I just report what happens," Anderson says. "Both Molly and I have been at the *Post* for more than 20 years, and I never had complaints about my objectivity or fairness. But suddenly I come to Israel and everybody sees that I'm a biased reporter. I didn't suddenly land in Israel and throw out the window my years of experience writing fair and balanced and impartial stories."

For the most part, when put under the microscope of personal interviews, even journalists who do the biased bidding of their employers come off as decent, fair-minded, hard-working professionals. If they miss the forest for the trees, it's more because of the inherent limitations of their craft: constant deadlines, sometimes severe space restrictions and the pressure to produce dramatic stories.

Add to that mix a generally liberal political bias and an ignorance of broad historical perspectives and the result is often a worldview slanted against Israel. But when journalists look at their work and see professional pride, not personal prejudice. ■

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore. His latest book is Trembling in the Ivory Tower: Excesses in the Pursuit of Truth and Tenure.