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Kenneth Lasson

University of Baltimore School of Law, klasson@ubalt.edu

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Handling the Truth

Baltimore Jewish Times - Kenneth Lasson

Last May, Tali Hatuel was driving the family station wagon from her home in Gush Katif, a Jewish settlement in Gaza, to Ashkelon, an Israeli town 20 miles to the north.

Eight months pregnant and with her four young daughters in tow, she was planning to have an ultrasound exam on what would be her first boy, and then join her husband, David, at a rally against the Israeli government's controversial "disengagement" plan.

In a flash, Palestinian gunmen ambushed the wagon, forcing it off the road. When rescue workers arrived a short time later, all they found was carnage.

Meirav, the 2-year-old, was still strapped into her safety seat. She had been shot in the head at point-blank range, as were her sisters: Roni, 7, Hadar, 9, and Hila, 11. Their mother was dead from multiple gunshot wounds. Just to make certain that there would be no survivors, the terrorists shot a bullet through Tali Hatuel's abdomen.

Two groups, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committee, were quick to claim responsibility in a phone call to the Associated Press. The Voice of Palestine praised the deed as a "heroic" operation against "five settlers."

Only a few major American papers reported the atrocity, and the funerals afterward. Fewer still noted that a number of mourners were attacked by Palestinian gunmen as they entered Ashkelon's new cemetery. They were among the thousands who surrounded David Hatuel, 24 hours earlier a loving husband and father, as he wept, "You were my flowers. I am all alone, and there is no one left."

Shock. Horror. Revulsion.

How else to regard the wanton butchery of an unarmed mother and her children blasted off a public road, or a public bus full of civilians blown up by a bomb, or a hostage beheaded? Such intuitive responses to terrorism are dictated by common sense and human sensibility.

Yet in much of the world in which we live — at least according to many of those who record and comment on the course of contemporary human events — the victims of terror are often considered its cause, and depicted in the same negative light as those who revel in hatred and violence.

"Seek truth and report it," is the first tenet in professional journalism's Code of Ethics. "Journalists should be honest, fair and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information."

Thus are we appalled to witness once again the way that Jews have become the focal point of blame when they are not lumped together with their perceived sponsors, the "Great Satan America." Indeed, much of the Muslim world believes that the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon were a Jewish-American plot, that the democratically elected prime minister of Israel is a butcher as bad as deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, even that the war in Iraq was instigated solely on behalf of Israel. Sadly, such canards are only the most recent in a long history of incitement emanating from Middle East mosques, and distortions promulgated by much of the Arab and European media.

A catalog of current editorial excesses, and the religious tyranny that fuels it, confirms the almost complete abandonment of journalistic objectivity. The standard instead is that noted long ago by Mark Twain: "Get your facts first, and then you can distort 'em as you please."

In Europe and the Middle East, the grotesque slayings of the Hatuel family received scant attention. The Times of London buried the mind-numbing murders in a single brief mention eight paragraphs into an article on the political question surrounding Israel's proposed disengagement plan.

The current president of the European Union, Irish Foreign Minister Brian Cowen, likened the purposeful executions of mother and children to the accidental deaths of young Palestinians caught in Israeli-Palestinian crossfire.

Even in the United States, where journalistic ethics are taken seriously, the massacre of the Hatuels was minimized. National Public Radio reporter Julie McCarthy implicitly blamed the victims:

"There was ample evidence ... to show that their continued presence in Gaza is provoking bloodshed. Israeli troops shot dead two Palestinian gunmen after the men ambushed a mother and her four small daughters outside the Gaza settlement of Gush Katif. They were on their way," said Ms. McCarthy, "to protest Israel's planned pullout from Gaza."

Perhaps there was no way that she could have fit into her dispatch the irony that Tali Hatuel, 34, was an Israeli social worker who was often called on to comfort and assist victims of terrorism. Nor did she report that back in Gaza City, there was dancing in the streets as news of the murders spread; masked Palestinians handed out candies, raised flags of the Islamic Jihad, and sang victory songs.

Baltimore Jewish Times Washington correspondent James D. Besser, a veteran journalist who has covered Middle East affairs for nearly two decades, said he feels that Ms. McCarthy's biases are over the top.

"A few months ago, I almost stopped my car and screamed when I heard one of her reports," he said.

Mr. Besser also feels that CNN reporting is tilted against Israel, that some American papers like the Minneapolis Star-Tribune are very pro-Palestinian, and that the Arab press is based on anti-Semitism and wholly biased.

"Although all reporters have biases, they should be committed to writing honest stories," making a point to talk to people on all sides of an issue, he said. "The same is true of the news organizations for which they work. But many don't."

NPR was not alone in its dismissive coverage of the Hatuel tragedy. ABC News carried a brief story, labeling the attackers as "extremists" and equating the murders of a woman and her children with Israel's targeting of terrorists. The New York Times, the Chicago Tribune and the Los Angeles Times devoted only a few paragraphs to the incident amid their primary reports of political turmoil in Israel. Even then, in keeping with longstanding editorial policy, the Times and Tribune refused to label the gunmen as "terrorists." The same with the Boston Globe and Washington Post.

All of this, concluded the Committee for Accuracy in Mideast Reporting, was in stark contrast to the way in which most of the media treat the deaths of Palestinian children for which CAMERA provided numerous specific examples.

Why does this happen?

"There is no such thing as objectivity in the new journalism," said Eric Rozenman, CAMERA's Washington director. "It's post-modern moral equivalency, in which there is no such thing as objectivity. Each side has its own merits. All history is considered biased."

Also, Mr. Rozenman says, many European newspapers, as well as some in the United States, have bought into the notion long nurtured by the Arab world "that Palestinians are downtrodden and oppressed, through no fault of their own, victims of Israeli racism. In truth, it is they [the Arabs] who are racist."

When Americans are killed in the Gaza Strip — as happened last October when Palestinian terrorists bombed a diplomatic convoy — there is likewise little political condemnation or journalistic follow-up. The Associated Press reported that incident as "an unprecedented deadly attack on a U.S. target" in the territories. There have been more than 50 U.S. citizens murdered by Palestinians in Israel over the past 10 years alone.

Among them were Dr. David Applebaum, an internationally known emergency medicine physician, and his daughter, Nava, who were sitting in a cafe in Jerusalem discussing her wedding the next day; four American students having lunch at Hebrew University; a New Jersey tourist eating pizza in a Sbarro's Restaurant in Jerusalem; and Koby Mandel, a 12-year-old from Silver Spring who was bludgeoned to death by Palestinians when he wandered out of his village with a friend on a hiking trip.

Peter Jennings of ABC News made a passing reference to the Mandel murder, after which he was quick to point out that while six Israelis under the age of 18 had been killed since the previous September, 143 young Palestinians had died. The Mandel story was not covered by any of the mainstream Arab media, and barely noted in Europe.

Al Jazeera, the pan-Arab network that claims "to cover all viewpoints with objectivity, integrity and balance," did not report on any of the American deaths. As for the murders of Tali Hatuel and her daughters, Al Jazeera made brief mention as follows:

"Palestinian resistance fighters have killed five Jewish settlers in the Gaza Strip before being shot dead by Israeli occupation troops. The dead included a mother and four children ... on an access road to a Jewish settlement."

It is not only terrorism in Israel that gets short shrift from the Arab and European media.

On Jan. 23, 2002, the Wall Street Journal's South-Asian bureau chief, Danny Pearl, was on his way to an interview with an Islamic fundamentalist leader in Pakistan when he was kidnapped by Islamic rebels.

Four days later, photos of Pearl, including one with a gun aimed at his head, were e-mailed to his editors. Calling themselves the National Movement for the Restoration of Pakistani Sovereignty, his captors demanded the release, within 24 hours, of Pakistanis detained at Guantanamo Bay as suspected terrorists. They sent a videotape in which Pearl, whose parents immigrated to the United States more than 40 years ago and whose grandmother still lives in Israel, was heard to recite these words: "I'm a Jewish American. I come from a family of Zionists. My father's Jewish. My mother's Jewish. I'm Jewish."

He was then summarily decapitated and dismembered. He was 38.

Last May, a similar fate befell Nicholas Berg, a 26-year-old, self-employed telecommunications expert from suburban Philadelphia. Berg was working in Iraq when he was taken captive by a band of terrorists. A grainy five-minute videotape provided horrifying details of his death.

As was the case with the murder of Italian hostage Fabrizio Quattrocchi in April, the grisly killing and mutilation of four American civilian relief workers in Fallujah, the terrorist bombings in Madrid and Bali, and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks themselves, Berg's murder was carried out in the name of Islam and the Arab people by extremists incited by a perverted interpretation of their religion.

"Allah is great!" they intoned reverently, as they seized body parts from six Israeli soldiers killed by a land mine in Gaza, paraded them through the streets, and explained that they would use the remains as bargaining chips.

One might never know of any such events by reading or watching Arab media. Indeed, the silence among the world's 1.5 billion Muslims, not to mention their governments, sheiks and mullahs, was deafening.

Al Jazeera's only mention of Berg was in a passing reference to the effect that his father supported the Stop the War Coalition and blamed his son's death on the United States. A year earlier, it had nothing to report about the slaying of Danny Pearl. Although it reported the more recent kidnapping and beheadings of Westerners, there was no editorial condemnation of them. Similar silence was heard in Al-Ahram, a leading Egyptian news weekly in Egypt, and Dar Al Hayat, the largest paper in Saudi Arabia.

While Muslim governments and their media were quick to condemn the U.S. military's mistreatment of prisoners in Baghdad's Abu Ghraib prison, they remained mute about the atrocities committed against Americans in Iraq. So did the European press and politicians, whose clarion call was for the prompt removal of "foreign troops."

Another indelible image of the current intifada is that of Muhammad al Dura, the 12-year-old Palestinian killed in his father's arms in September 2000. The video of his death was televised around the world, and became an icon of the Palestinian cause. Postage stamps have been issued in the boy's honor; streets have been named after him.

That it has been empirically proven that Muhammad al Dura could not have been shot by the Israel Defense Forces appears lost in the rubble of Middle East reporting. In June of 2003, James Fallows, a first-rate 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 shot from the Palestinians, if he died at all. (The doubt was underscored most pointedly by Danny Seaman of Israel's Government Press Office, who claims that the coffin at al Dura's funeral was empty.)

Immediately after the incident, Gideon Meir of the Israeli Foreign Ministry was called by the local commander of the IDF, who said that the army did not kill the boy. "The video was running around the world. The damage to Israel was unbelievable," Mr. Meir said.

Fiamma Nirenstein, a veteran Italian journalist and Jerusalem correspondent for the daily La Stampa, wrote that certain intellectuals and journalists form the true cradle of contemporary anti-Semitism.

"We have to know how to say that the free press is a failure when it lies, and that it does lie," she said.

She cited a European radio commentator who said that after the diffusion of the images of Muhammed al Dura, Europe could finally forget the famous picture of the boy in the Warsaw ghetto with his hands raised. This, she said, "is obliteration of the Holocaust through the overlapping of Israel and Nazism, namely racism, genocide, ruthless elimination of civilians, women and children,

an utterly unwarranted eruption of cruelty and the most brutal instincts. It means pretending to believe blindly, without investigation, the Palestinian version of a highly disputed episode and of many, many others. It means taking for granted the 'atrocities' that the Palestinian spokespersons always talk about, and ignoring every proof or fact that doesn't serve its position."

Mr. Fallows' careful expose about the cause of the Arab boy's death was largely ignored by the world press, while the much more calculated murders of Israeli children continue to be perceived as equivalent casualties.

Over the course of the current intifada, no one phrase has created as much of a firestorm as the "massacre at Jenin." In April 2002, shortly after the IDF invaded a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank city, Terje Roed-Larsen, the United Nations' special envoy in the region, described the scene as "horrific beyond belief."

Mr. Larsen's shocked vision was quoted widely in the world press, and trumpeted by the Palestinians as evidence of Israeli brutality. Palestinian spokesman 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 to the scene.

The worst journalistic excesses occurred in the British press. The Independent, the Telegraph, and the Times all quoted the same lone Arab, who said 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. Then they flattened the area with a tank," he said.

The Telegraph reported that hundreds of victims "were buried by bulldozer in [a] mass grave." The Evening Standard stated, "We are talking here of massacre, and a cover-up, of genocide."

The Times reporter wrote that "rarely, in more than a decade of war reporting from Bosnia, Chechnya, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, have I seen such deliberate destruction, such disrespect for human life." The Guardian called Israel's actions in Jenin "every bit as repellent" as Osama bin Laden's attack on New York on Sept. 11.

"Massacre evidence growing" read a headline on the BBC Web site on April 18, 2002.

People around the world assumed this to be true, not only because it had been carried by BBC News, widely considered to be the standard bearer for reportage from the world's combat zones, but also because a U.N. aid worker and a host of other media organizations across Europe said it was so.

In truth, though, there was no massacre.

When the facts emerged months later, both the United Nations and Human Rights Watch confirmed what Israel had been saying all along: the final fatality figures were 26 Palestinian fighters, 26 civilians and 23 Israeli soldiers. (The military casualties would have been much less and civilian death toll much higher had the IDF chosen to subject Jenin to aerial bombardment.)

Yet acknowledgment of the truth in the media, not to mention published corrections, has been paltry or nonexistent. To many, the vision of a slaughter at Jenin remains indelible.

John Ward Anderson, the Washington Post's Jerusalem correspondent, recalls that his newspaper did not buy into the massacre story. ("We don't consider it our responsibility to run around correcting mistakes that others have made.") But on April 11, 2002, his immediate predecessor in Israel, Lee Hockstader, wrote a long account of the fighting in Jenin that was clearly sympathetic to Palestinian claims. The Post never subsequently acknowledged Mr. Hockstader's mistaken reporting.

Conservative columnist William F. Buckley was one of the few to doubt the Big Lie of the Jenin "massacre," almost as it was happening. In an essay at the time in the National Review, he noted the stereotype of "the Arab as a born liar" that had been observed by various 19th-century British explorers, one of whom wrote that "out of the very stones they will fabricate such a tower of falsehood that you can only stand and gape in wonder and admiration at their fruitful invention."

The line between government and media is virtually nonexistent in the Palestinian press. Violence against both Americans and Israelis is routinely celebrated by the Palestinian Authority. A music video broadcast repeatedly on the official PA television channel rhapsodizes about the deaths of U.S. soldiers. Palestinian textbooks talk about how to eradicate the evil of Israel. The central square in Jenin was renamed to commemorate the Iraqi suicide bomber who killed four U.S. Marines at a checkpoint in Iraq.

For years, sermons preached in Palestinian mosques and broadcast on radio and TV stations have praised attacks on the United States.

"Oh, Allah, destroy America, for she is ruled by Zionist Jews," intoned Sheik Ikrima Sabri, the mufti of Jerusalem. "Have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them."

A thorough database search found no European news outlet that reported the fact that there was dancing in the streets of Gaza following the deaths of Americans or Jews.

According to the Middle East Media Research Institute, homicide bombers are still glorified in the PA media, mosques and schoolbooks. They are also celebrated in summer camps that are named for "martyrs" and their dispatchers. Palestinian textbooks containing messages extolling Jihad and Shahada (martyrdom) have not been changed.

Even some American Muslim clerics urge their followers to pursue the path of Jihad by destroying Jews and Americans alike, whom they call "pigs and monkeys."

That Western journalists are intimidated by the Palestinians is patent. A number of non-partisan sources: the U.S. State Department, Amnesty International, Freedom House and even Palestinian rights groups have observed that the PA routinely harasses, arrests, beats and tortures journalists who print or report items critical of the PA or chairman Yasser Arafat. Such pressures feed into the pervasive phenomenon of reporters' self-censorship.

Last May, at least three men attempted to kidnap James Bennet, the New York Times bureau chief who was reporting from a hospital in the Gaza Strip. They tried to shove him into a Mercedes sedan that pulled up, its rear door open. A struggle and cries for help brought police officers at the hospital running, and Mr. Bennet escaped.

No Arab regime bears a democratic sense of responsibility to protect freedom of the press. PA intimidation is standard practice. The fear of physical harm is powerful. After having filmed the barbaric lynching of two Israeli reservists in Ramallah, what else could have motivated an Italian broadcaster to apologize to the PA?

In the past five months, at least 12 journalists have been attacked in the Palestinian territories in what appears to be an organized campaign to intimidate the media. Amid the shrill cries of outrage when Israeli soldiers detain journalists, there is no protest when worse happens at the hands of the Palestinians, such as when a photographer working for Agence France-Presse recently had his arms broken by a masked man in Ramallah.

Meanwhile, all Palestinian media — newspapers, radio and television — remain under the absolute control of Mr. Arafat, who relies on incitement to bolster his public status. Many Middle East newspapers echo an almost identical anti-U.S. theme, modeled on images and quotes aired by Al Jazeera, which continues to refer to homicide bombings against Israeli civilians as "martyrdom

operations."

The harshest criticism of Al Jazeera, though, comes from dissident Arab journalists. According to outspoken Saudi columnist Jamal Khashoggi, "Al Jazeera has a big problem with objectivity. They are being led by the masses, they don't lead the masses. They know the taste of the Arab street, and the Arab street is anti-American."

Munir al-Mawari, an American reporter born in Yemen who worked for Al Jazeera in 2000, agrees. "It's well known that most of the journalists are either radical Islamists or Arab nationalists," he said.

Mamoun Fandy, an Egyptian-American writer, argues that Americans are always portrayed on Arab television as barbarians, while Arabs are always depicted as heroic. It took 25 years, he said, for the Arab media to gain some credibility after Egyptian reporters announced during the 1967 War that Arab guns were bringing down Israeli planes like flies. "Their coverage of [the current intifada] could well cause them to lose it again," he said.

Khaled Abu Toameh, an Israeli Arab, is the West Bank and Gaza correspondent for the Jerusalem Post and U.S. News and World Report. He previously served as a senior writer for the Jerusalem Report and a correspondent for Al-Fajr, a Palestinian newspaper.

"In the Arab world, if you are an independent journalist or you criticize the regime, then you are branded a traitor and that kind of suppression of dissent is how dictatorial Arab regimes survive," he said. "When Palestinian journalists are intimidated, it affects foreign journalists, who depend on Palestinians to be their guides and translators in the territories. Many translators often mis-translate or even reprimand Palestinian interviewees critical of the Palestinian Authority, and foreign journalists' ability to accurately gather facts is thus hampered."

According to Mr. Toameh, some in the foreign media knowingly hire journalists who are political activists, and rely heavily on them for their reporting, but keep quiet about their backgrounds. "It is hard to say if this is due to intimidation or to the need to maintain a good relationship with the PA, but it seriously affects the ability of journalists in the region to report the facts on the ground to the world," he said. "The bulk of the blame, however, rests with the PA, whose tyrannical approach and control of the media creates an atmosphere of intimidation and fear."

Sometimes what is left out in the news is as telling as what is included.

In a recent interview with NBC's Tom Brokaw, King Abdullah of Jordan blamed Israel for most of the problems in the Middle East. Mr. Brokaw asked some tough questions:

"But isn't a lot of the burden also on the Palestinians, particularly on Yasser Arafat, and then just this week again Hamas has said, 'We'll send more suicide bombers across the border?'"

And, "Why isn't there more condemnation of the use of young Arabs, Palestinians particularly, as suicide bombers by you, by President [Hosni] Mubarak of Egypt, by the Saudis, by the other Arab leaders?"

Unfortunately, these questions and the king's answers to them were excised from the interview that aired on television. Although NBC did report that Prince Nayef, the Saudi interior minister, said, "Al-Qaida is backed by Israel and Zionism," the network provided no explanation as to why it edited King Abdullah's remarks, even though Mr. Brokaw ostensibly has editorial control over NBC News.

Similarly, how many Western papers carried the recent story of a U.N. ambulance being commandeered by Palestinian terrorists? (Very few.) How many of the Washington Post's readers would know that its coverage of President Bush's recent speech to the Newspaper Association of America omitted his pointed praise of the Israeli initiative to withdraw from Gaza, his condemnation of Palestinian leadership, and his concern about Iran's potential nuclear weapons threat against

Israel? (None.)

"One of the conceits of journalism," said Eric Rozenman of CAMERA, "is the Big Lie. When it is bought into by journalists covering the Middle East, it forces Israel to operate on an uneven playing field."

Andrea Levin, CAMERA's executive director, is more blunt. "If journalists don't understand that Arabs want to destroy Israel, then they get everything wrong," she said.

The PA employs the Big Lie regularly and effectively. For example, reports that Israel uses poison gas on Arab children have been aired repeatedly without any apparent attempt to question their veracity. The PA and its predecessor, the PLO, often doctor or misrepresent photographic images such as one of a bloodied Jewish student beaten by Palestinians, but presented to the world as a Palestinian student beaten by Israelis. (In a now famous videotape, a corpse being borne aloft in a funeral procession suddenly jumps off and runs into the crowd.)

On the other hand, few papers report the fact that Palestinians regularly use ambulances to transport terrorists and arms.

The ultimate Big Lie is that "occupation" and oppression of the Palestinians is the root cause of their conflict with Israel. But there was anti-Zionist violence long before any occupation began in 1967 as in the bloody Arab pogroms of the 1920s and '30s, long before there was any Jewish state at all, much less "settlements."

By now, though, a large and growing portion of the Arab population has been indoctrinated by the PA and Hamas to aspire to an exclusive homeland, a sovereign Palestinian state from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. That is the mantra preached in the mosques and taught in the classrooms: Jews are infidels, evil usurpers of land and right and swallowed all too eagerly by Europeans.

The dynamic of the Big Lie dilutes language and turns history on its head. Only people with an appreciation of historical fact recognize that the root cause of the conflict is not occupation but anti-Semitism.

As Cynthia Ozick wrote recently in a long and thoughtful essay in the New York Observer, "Because history has been assaulted and undermined by worldwide falsehoods in the mouths of pundits and journalists, in Europe and all over the Muslim world, the distinction between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism has finally and utterly collapsed."

The Palestinians' European sympathizers feel that Israel is a pariah among nations, an unnecessary thorn in the geopolitical thicket of the region, if not of the world. Scholars call for an academic boycott of the Jewish state. Others advocate an economic boycott of this "apartheid regime." No British or French or German journalist asks the question, if Arabs can live peacefully in Haifa, as they do, why should not Jews be allowed to live peacefully in Hebron?

It may be understandable why Arab journalists, largely controlled or intimidated by their tyrannical governments, would promulgate falsehoods, but why wouldn't their European counterparts be more like the comparatively circumspect and balanced American media?

Mr. Rozenman credits "the great American tradition of news consumers talking back. They don't have that in Europe."

For this reason, CAMERA has set up programs in Europe to assist Jewish groups there in challenging biased news reporting.

In view of the worldwide media bias that persists and appears to be growing, however, how successful can such efforts be? Journalists, said Mr. Rozenman, especially Americans, are sensitive

to criticism, although they don't always agree with it. This is especially true when they are held accountable to their own Code of Ethics, which is what CAMERA and Honest Reporting, another Middle East watchdog organization, seek to do.

Both CAMERA and Honest Reporting take credit for the change in tone and substance of dispatches by Reuters, one of the world's largest news-gathering wire services. Similarly, for several years the Associated Press steadfastly refused to acknowledge the clear connection between the terrorist organization Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and the PA until it reported last week that the PA prime minister himself, Ahmed Qureia, said, "We have clearly declared that the Aqsa Martyrs Brigades are part of Fatah. We are committed to them and Fatah bears full responsibility for the group."

"The language of the conflict sets peoples' unconscious parameters and perceptions," said Mr. Rozenman. "Reuters is a big stone in a big pond that ripples out to many news disseminators around the world. Thought is all semantic, and the psychology of war depends on the mobilization and accuracy of language."

Correspondent Jim Besser says that European hostility toward Israel is more complicated.

"Some of it is simple anti-Semitism; some a desire to pull for the underdog [perceived to be the Palestinians], some that it is more exciting to report from a besieged Arab town," he said.

All such bias, Mr. Besser said, runs counter to objective journalism.

Kenneth Lasson, a law professor at the University of Baltimore, is a frequent contributor to the Baltimore Jewish Times.

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