

What constitutes full and fair media coverage of Israeli/Palestinian issues?

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The following article argues that despite its peculiar political, cultural and religious dimensions, the Israeli-Palestine conflict should be reported as any other: fairly, without bias and offering balanced coverage of all sides of the case. The problem is, it isn't.

I follow news of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict closely. Like many Americans, and certainly like many in this room, I consume the usual "name-brand" U.S. mainstream media sources of information. But I don't consider my daily briefing complete until I have read the English-language Israeli press online. It is here one finds the very small details that generate the dramatic events we are witnessing now - the suicide bombings and military incursions and diplomatic initiatives. But many of these details are rarely reported by mainstream American media.

In July 2001 the Israeli newspapers Ha'aretz and the Jerusalem Post published English-language online reports of an incident that was also reported by the Associated Press. Despite the exposure, then, that American foreign correspondents and editors had to the story, it was not picked up widely by U.S. media. The incident is symbolic, emblematic, a corroborative piece in a larger pattern that has gone all but unreported by most U.S. mainstream media in any significant detail.

The 300-word AP report, dated July 30 and written by reporter Laurie Copans, can be found in the Lexus-Nexus database. It reads:

"The Israeli army said Monday that a group of soldiers beat a Palestinian traveling in a taxi, forced the passengers to beat each other, and slashed the tires of a vehicle.

"Responding to a complaint by an Israeli human rights group, the army acknowledged the soldiers "acted with brutality toward passengers" and said it was investigating the July 23 incident outside the West Bank city of Hebron.

"According to witness accounts compiled by the human rights group B'Tselem, three jeeps with soldiers detained 12 Palestinian passengers in two taxis. After letting an elderly man, a woman and a child go, the soldiers told the taxis to drive through an olive orchard to a hidden spot where two soldiers beat one man until he was barely conscious, the B'Tselem report said.

" "Move, let me show you how to beat," one soldier said to another when he wanted a turn at hitting the Palestinian, according to the report.

"Pointing guns at the Palestinians, the soldiers forced the eight remaining men in the two taxis to beat one another.

" "With tears falling from his eyes, the young [Palestinian] man started to beat us with his fist on our faces and heads," passenger Khaled Rawashdeh, 36, said in the report. Rawashdeh said soldiers pointed a gun to the man and told him to beat harder.

?Four of the Palestinians needed hospital treatment afterward, the report added. An army statement acknowledged that a soldier made passengers hit one another, and another soldier slashed the tires of a taxi.

?The army statement referred to only one taxi, not two. Neither the army statement nor the B?Tselem report gave any motive for the soldiers? actions.

?The army chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Shaul Mofaz, condemned the soldiers? actions, saying such cases cause the army great damage, the Ha?aretz newspaper reported Monday.?

What?s missing

If we are to analyse U.S. mainstream media reporting of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict, then we should examine what?s not there as well as what is. Let?s consider three missing elements in this coverage.

The first of these elements is details of Palestinian daily life under occupation as it has existed in one form or another, in periods of low crisis and high crisis, for the last 35 years. I would argue that these details have been given very scant attention in the reporting of the conflict because until now they have not been deemed an important enough obstacle to the pursuit of U.S. interests in the Middle East. This has left the American public without a complete picture of why what is happening now is happening. We are seeing the effect to the near exclusion of the cause.

The pictures we see of the exploded buses and the shattered Passover seder tables and the ambulances collecting the Israeli dead and wounded on the streets of Jerusalem, Hadera and Haifa are gut-wrenching and horrific. They are an important part of the story. But they do not constitute the full picture.

Where were the cameras when the Palestinian taxi passengers were made to beat each other by Israeli soldiers? What does a picture of land confiscation look like? What does a picture of the additional 90,000 Israeli settlers who moved to the West Bank, nearly doubling the settlement population during the seven years of the Oslo peace process, look like? How about the 7,000 Palestinian houses reported by Israeli and international human-rights groups to have been destroyed since 1967 ? not including those houses destroyed in the Israeli military campaign of the last three weeks?

In the early part of 2002 we saw a spate of mainstream media reports under the collective headline ?The making of a suicide bomber.? These reports have appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune and Newsweek, and on ?Nightline? and ?The NewsHour?, among others.

But if the media are just finding out what goes into the making of a suicide bomber because suicide bombing has become a recurring phenomenon, then it stands to reason that something ? many things ? have been left out of the reporting of this conflict all along the way.

The other day I was discussing this issue with a friend of mine who is an editor on the Chicago Tribune foreign desk. He said: ?We don?t report on the building until it catches on fire; we don?t

write about the lake until someone drowns in it.? True enough. But over time, the media should be reporting on the small details of the conflict that lead up to the large ones ? before the fire becomes a conflagration and before the victims are being dragged dead from the water.

International aspects

The second element often missing in reportage of the conflict is explicit acknowledgement that a body of international law and consensus exists that is relevant to competing Israeli and Palestinian demands and claims ? but the U.S. foreign policy tilt toward Israel has consistently marginalized these important international aspects. Let me illustrate with a swatch of analysis on coverage of Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

The Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza ? where some 200,000 Israeli colonists live among 3.2 million Palestinians ? are a key issue in the resolution of the conflict. Yet there has been a virtual absence of critical reporting in the mainstream media on the question of how, directly or indirectly, U.S. aid contributes to Israel?s ability to absorb the cost of building, enlarging and defending the settlements.

In November 2000, the Israeli organization Peace Now reported that the government of then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had earmarked \$300 million for the settlements in 2001, a figure that represented a mere 10% of Israel?s overall foreign-aid package from the United States for fiscal year 2001. Similarly, reporting on the Clinton administration?s long-term efforts to advance the peace process rarely if ever analysed the inherent contradiction between that intensive U.S. mediation and these facts about the settlements:

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that they are illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention, to which the United States is a signatory;

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that they contravene UN Resolution 242, a pillar of the U.S.-brokered Oslo accords;

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and that successive Israeli governments have continually enlarged the settlements since the accords were signed, nearly doubling their population from approximately 110,000 in 1993 to 200,000 by the time of the Camp David negotiations in July 2000.

From June to December 2000, six major newspapers published seven stories on West Bank settlements. The Baltimore Sun, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, New York Times and Washington Post all ran long stories datelined from different West Bank settlements during that period; the Los Angeles Times ran two such stories. In general, the pieces got considerable play: they averaged 1,300 words in length, two ran on the front page and five were illustrated with multiple photos.

All of the stories revolved around the settlers' various points of view, religious and secular. The reporting focused on how the violence had disrupted the settlers' quality of life and their anxieties over what negotiations could bring. Of the six papers, only the Los Angeles Times, in one of its two stories, mentioned — in a passing reference — that the settlements are illegal under international law. Only two of the seven stories (the same Times piece and the Post story) quoted Palestinians, also in passing, on their view of how the settlements affect their lives and the peace process.

Most of the stories mentioned the housing subsidies that the Israeli government extends to settlers. But none of the stories reported how much Israel has invested in order to build and defend the 140 settlements and their supporting infrastructure in the West Bank and Gaza since 1967. None of the stories explored how this investment is likely to affect the determination of final borders in a negotiated settlement. Most of the stories gave a figure for the settler population, but none of the stories put that figure into the context of the Palestinian-settler population ratio, which is 15:1.

Unequal partners in the conflict

The third missing element in mainstream media coverage of the conflict is anything approaching consistent acknowledgment or recognition that the two parties to the conflict are not equal — and that this is so largely by virtue of the fact of the historic U.S. political, military and diplomatic relationship with the State of Israel. Further, reporting of the conflict minimizes or omits altogether the fact that this relationship has continued unchanged even as the U.S. has claimed for itself the role of "honest broker" in the last decade of the peace process.

Diplomatic and political coverage of the conflict rarely challenges the tone or content of official Washington parlance, which routinely characterizes the Israelis and the Palestinians as if they were equals in the war they are making on each other. From the standpoint of each side's right to live in peace, security and dignity, yes, they are equal. But from the standpoint of the political, diplomatic, economic and military weapons each side brings to this war, they are not.

It is one thing for the Israeli government to claim that Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Authority are "not doing enough to prevent terror" and for the American president and secretary of state to repeat this mantra incessantly. Such statements are newsworthy and should be reported as such. But where are the American analysts from beyond the Beltway — not to mention Palestinian and Arab representatives — to remind us, when this mantra is invoked, that Israel under the Sharon government has consistently and systematically destroyed the physical infrastructure of the Palestinian Authority? Israel and the U.S. expect Arafat and the Palestinian leadership to act as statesmen and security agents, but many of the physical tools to do so have been denied or taken away.

Lesson No. 1, Day 1, Reporting 101: For every argument, especially in a conflict situation, there is an equal and opposite argument. Get both sides.

Implications, qualifications, prescriptions

What are the implications of these three holes in U.S. mainstream reporting of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which are, to recap:

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The lack of the details of Palestinian daily life under occupation

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The lack of acknowledgement that international law and consensus relevant to the conflict have been marginalized by U.S. foreign policy

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The lack of recognition that the parties to the conflict are in many important ways not equal

The absence of these details from our context-deficient daily diet of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict-cum-war pose several dangers. First, it leads many in this country to the mistaken postulate that what we are now witnessing can be distilled into an Israeli war against Palestinian terrorism, much the same argument that has been made for the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan ? even though the two phenomena are but superficially similar. This line of argument leads to the inevitable conclusion that military force should be the prime instrument in finding solutions to these conflicts.

The second danger is that the absence of these details exposes those who would reveal them ? be they individuals, news organizations or even whole societies (in Europe and the Arab world) to charges of anti-Semitism and other epithets.

But the third danger is perhaps the greatest. It is that the absence of the three elements in U.S. mainstream media reporting of the conflict analysed here has retarded to near paralysis the ability of American citizens, as individuals or in groups, to demand and receive accountability from their government for a failed U.S. Middle East policy. It is a policy that is being conducted by our government in all of our names but without the consent of many. This puts at risk not only chances for a sustainable Middle East peace, but it also jeopardizes the safety of Americans at home as well as our national interests and credibility abroad.

Now for some qualifications. As someone who has worked as an editor and a reporter in the mainstream media, and as one who now helps prepare students for journalism careers, I would like to offer three qualifiers to the foregoing critique. The first is that while media criticism is legitimate and important, we should nevertheless neither blame the messenger nor view the media as being responsible for solving the conflict.

The second qualifier is that it is impossible to expect each individual news report to deliver full historical context and exact symmetrical balance. The constraints of space and time won't allow for a recreation of the wheel or full-blown reiteration of partisan positions every time. But we should expect context and balance in the body of reporting over time.

The third point is it is important to recognize that there is good reporting being done on this conflict and related topics. Some recent noteworthy examples:

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?'The Palestinian Conversation,?' by Deborah Sontag, The New York Times Magazine, Feb. 3, 2002. A skilful weaving of the spectrum of Palestinian opinion on the Palestinian predicament at that particular juncture.

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?'The Suicide Bomber Took Malki's Life, But Not Our Convictions,?' by Lee Hockstader, The Washington Post, Aug. 19, 2001. A deeply resonant interview with an Israeli father whose daughter was killed in the suicide bombing of the Sbarro pizzeria in Jerusalem on Aug. 9, 2001.

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?'All Suicide Bombers Are Not Alike,?' by Joseph Lelyveld, The New York Times Magazine, Oct. 28, 2001. An exceptionally nuanced report on how the phenomenon of suicide bombing was variously and not uniformly seen by Arabs in Gaza, Cairo and Hamburg in the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11.

Finally, what are the prescriptive guidelines for full and fair media coverage of Israeli-Palestinian issues? I believe that they are the basics of reporting any story well: Consider both sides of the story as equally valid and give them balanced representation and voice not only in direct quotations but also in characterization and analysis. Don't rely on official sources alone ? and challenge them when appropriate. Don't perpetuate false comparisons and equivalencies by reporting them unchallenged again and again. And always be aware of relevant context ? be it historical or recent ? and include it even briefly via a parenthetical phrase or a few paragraphs.

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