

American Foreign Policy & The Muslim World

Edited by

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Chapter Four

Public Opinion and the Media

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Public Opinion and the Media

Introduction

A critical factor to take into account in understanding the dynamics of the Israeli-Palestinian-American triangle is how little Americans know about the conflict with which they are so intimately connected. In fact, most Americans have little idea that they are connected to this conflict at all, since their news media almost never report the amount of US tax money that flows to Israel, or the substantial protection provided Israel by the US government in derailing international efforts to address Israeli human rights violations. As a result, American policies regarding Israel-Palestine largely reflect the determined influence of special interest lobbying rather than the will of the general American public or the informed analysis of American foreign policy experts.

At the same time, however, there is evidence that as Americans become accurately informed on Israel-Palestine, they begin to demand change in US policies, much as earlier generations called for withdrawal from Vietnam and divestment from South Africa. The speed with which such demands increase will largely depend on how quickly the American public becomes informed on Israel-Palestine.

For many decades the US press has reported on Israeli and Palestinian events from an Israeli-centric perspective. While there are many Americans who would acknowledge this reality, very few have any idea of the extent of this bias, and of the degree to which it pervades all sectors of the American media: print and broadcast, conservative and liberal, popular and intellectual. Most of all, very few Americans are aware of the massive amount of significant information that they are simply not receiving on Israel-Palestine.

Statistical Studies

American media overage of deaths among both populations, Israeli and Palestinian, are an indicator of how the American media cover this issue. Studies over the past five years have revealed - in every case - that the media cover Israeli deaths at far higher rates than they cover Palestinian deaths. Studies show that not only are Israeli deaths reported far more often than Palestinian deaths, but that follow-up references to Israeli deaths are included in news articles at even greater rates than follow-up references to Palestinian deaths - thereby increasing the differential in how the two populations are covered. In addition, there is a significant differential in which deaths are reported. While Israeli civilian deaths

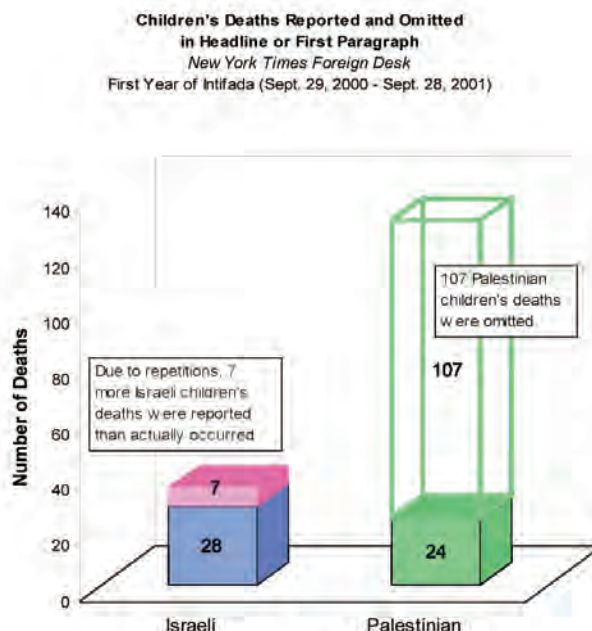


are emphasized, the reverse is the case for Palestinians, where the killing of “militants” is given considerably more attention.

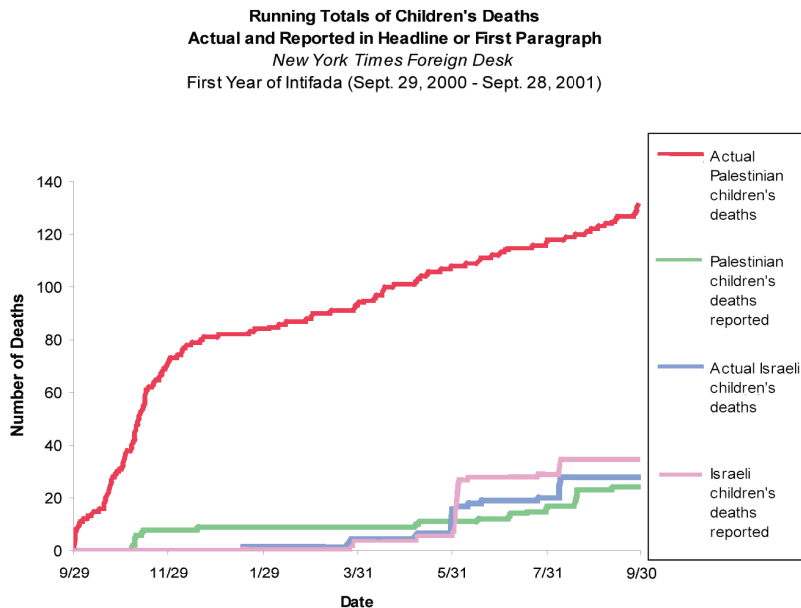
In the first year of the current *Intifadah*, 165 Israelis and 549 Palestinians were killed; among these were 28 Israeli children and 131 Palestinian children.¹ In other words, Palestinians of all ages were killed at a rate over three times greater than Israelis, and Palestinian children were killed at a rate approximately 5 times greater than Israeli children.

During this year, *The New York Times* printed timely news stories reporting prominently² on 197 Israeli deaths and 233 Palestinians deaths. In other words, while the *Times* had more reports on Palestinian deaths than on Israeli deaths, and therefore was alleged to be “pro-Palestinian” by Israel partisans, the reality was that the *Times* was actually reporting on 119%³ of Israeli deaths and on 42% of Palestinian deaths. In other words, an Israeli death was 3 times more likely to be reported to Americans than a Palestinian’s death.⁴

The New York Times reporting on children’s deaths was even more skewed. During a period when 5 times more Palestinian children were being killed than Israeli children, the *Times* carried 35 prominent reports on Israeli children’s deaths and 24 prominent reports on Palestinian children’s deaths. In other words, the *Times* reported on 125% of Israeli children’s deaths and on 18% of Palestinian children’s deaths - creating for the American public an exaggerated impression of Israeli children’s deaths and a greatly minimized view of Palestinian children’s deaths:



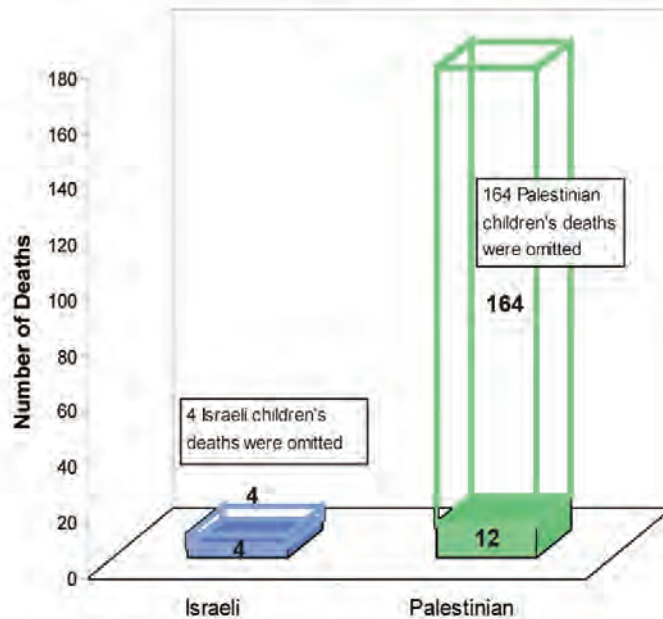
Viewing the *Times* daily reports chronologically is particularly revealing, as it shows that Palestinian deaths were reported along a curve that paralleled Israeli deaths, rather than the rate at which they were actually being killed. This type of curve was found frequently.



Analyses of *The New York Times* coverage in 2004 showed these patterns continuing and, in some cases, even worsening. During this period the American public was consistently told that the violence had decreased. This was true from the Israeli point of view - all deaths were down by 37%, and children's deaths were down by 71%. For the Palestinian population, however, the reverse was the case. Palestinian deaths had increased by 49%; children's deaths by 34%. In 2004 Palestinian children were killed at a rate 22 times greater than Israeli children.

Once again, *Times* headlines and lead paragraphs were found to cover Israeli deaths at far greater rates than Palestinian rates. Deaths of Israelis of all ages were covered at rates 3.6 times greater than Palestinian deaths. The deaths of Israeli children were covered at a rate 7.3 times greater.

**Children's Deaths Reported and Omitted
in Headline or First Paragraph**
New York Times Foreign Desk
2004



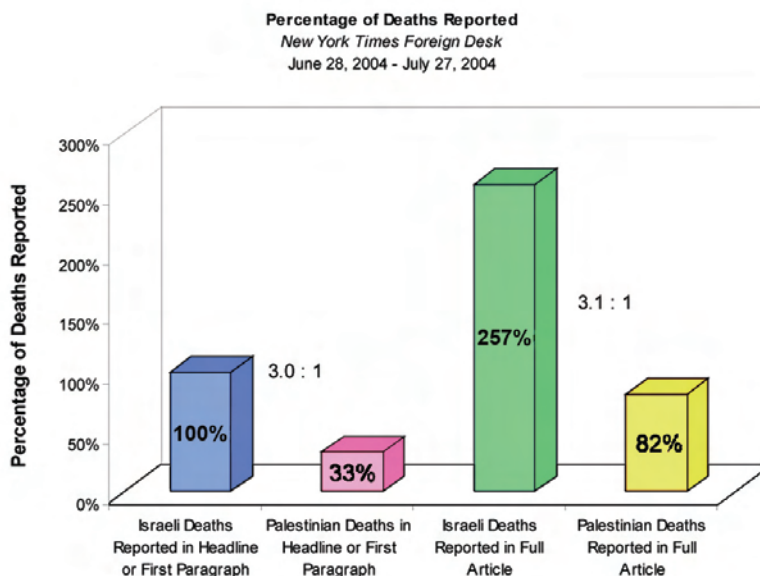
A one-month sub-study examined the *Times* coverage of deaths in its full news stories.⁵ Surprisingly, this showed that the emphasis on Israeli deaths over Palestinian deaths found in the above studies of headlines and lead paragraphs, persisted and, in fact, even grew (largely through repetitions of previously reported Israeli deaths) when the entire article was examined.

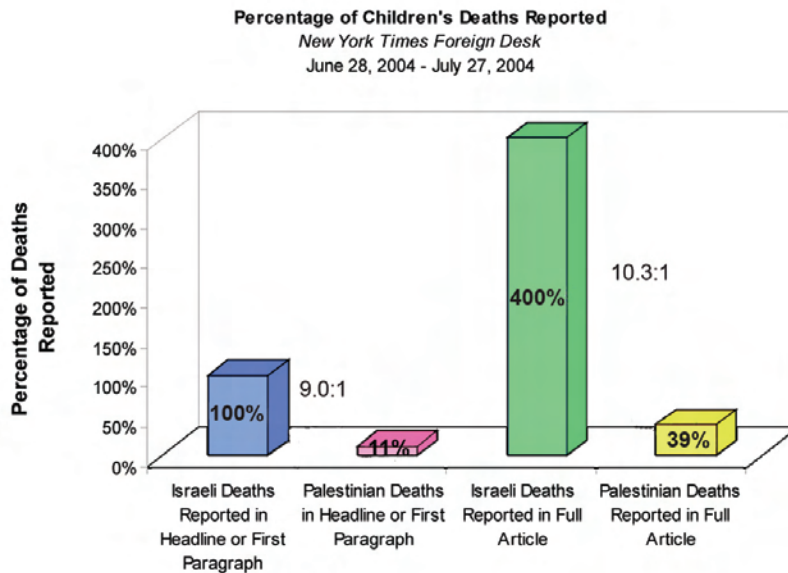
This study analyzed a month that was roughly representative of the year in general. From 28 June to 27 July 2004 seven Israelis were killed, including one child, and 60 Palestinians, roughly 8.6 times the number of Israelis killed by Palestinians. 18 Palestinian children were killed. In the headline and first paragraph of articles printed in this study period, there were mentions of seven Israeli deaths, including one child's - 100% of the deaths that occurred during this period; 33% of Palestinian deaths were reported, and 11% of Palestinian children's deaths. In other words, Israeli deaths were covered in headlines or first paragraphs at a rate three times greater than Palestinian deaths. Israeli children's deaths were covered in headlines or first paragraphs at a rate nine times greater than Palestinian children's deaths.

The study then looked further into the articles, noting the first paragraph in which a death was mentioned. Thus, if a person's death was reported in the fourth, fifth, and sixth paragraphs, it was counted as appearing in the fourth paragraph. Although repetitions within articles were not counted, repetitions in different articles, e.g., if a death was mentioned in one article in a headline and then in a later article in the fifth paragraph, both were tabulated.

It was found that in the first five paragraphs and headlines, 157% of Israeli deaths and 200% of Israeli children's death were reported. There were no additional mentions of Palestinian deaths, so coverage of Palestinian deaths remained at 33%. One article mentioned in the second paragraph that one of the previously mentioned deaths was of a child, increasing the percent of Palestinian children's deaths covered to 17%. Hence, the ratio of Israeli to Palestinian deaths covered grew from 3 to 4.7, and for children's deaths it grew from 9 to 12.

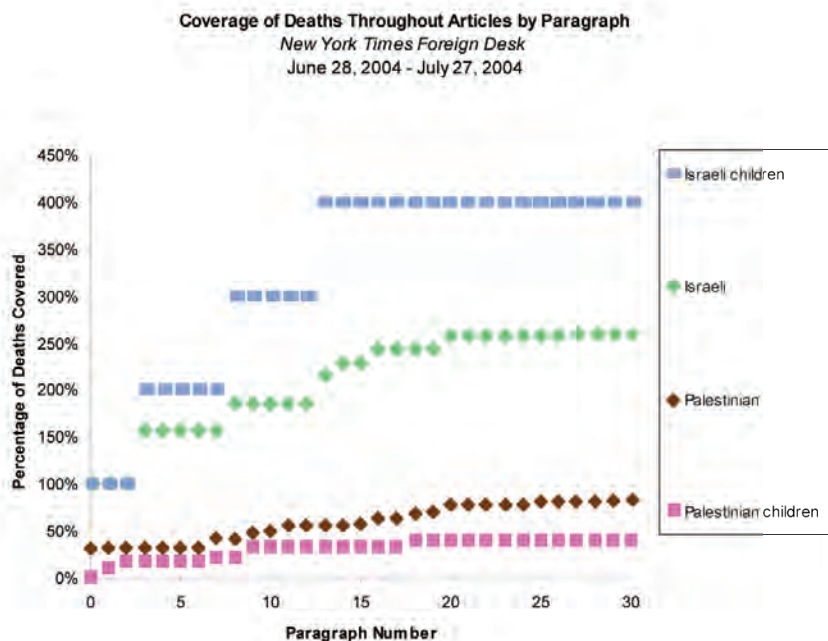
Expanding the examination to the full articles revealed that Israeli deaths had been covered slightly more disproportionately than they were in the headlines and first paragraphs. Here, Israeli deaths were covered at a rate 3.1 times greater than Palestinian deaths (257% of Israeli compared to 82% of Palestinian) compared to a ratio of 3.0 in headlines/first paragraphs. Again, the distortion was even greater in coverage of children's fatalities. Israeli children's deaths were covered at a rate 10.3 times that of Palestinian children (400% of Israeli and 39% of Palestinian) up slightly from 9 times greater in headlines and lead paragraphs.





Interestingly, a closer examination of these articles showed that every death mentioned solely in the last two paragraphs of an article was Palestinian. There were five Palestinian deaths mentioned for the first time in the second to last paragraph, including that of a 16-year-old girl shot through the chest by the Israeli army. Also, there were five Palestinian deaths mentioned for the first time in the last paragraph.

For example, on 6 July a news story was published with a lead paragraph reporting that “An Israeli Army officer and four Palestinians were killed in exchanges of fire early Tuesday around the Ain Beit Ilma refugee camp in the West Bank town of Nablus, Israeli and Palestinian security sources said.” The author devoted the rest of the article to details of the “exchange” and only mentioned that one of the Palestinian dead was a 15-year-old boy in the final paragraph.



Without these final-paragraph mentions, the percentage of Palestinian deaths covered drops to 65% (four times lower than Israeli deaths) and that of Palestinian children's deaths drops to 28% (14.4 times lower than the corresponding Israeli number).

Since readership diminishes the further down an article one goes, such patterns reduce readers' awareness of Palestinian deaths. In addition, *The New York Times* wire service provides its news stories to newspapers throughout the nation. When space limitations require that a story be cut, journalistic practice is to cut from the bottom. As a result, it can be expected that newspapers around the country omitted Palestinian deaths at an even greater rate than *The New York Times*.

The study also examined the *Times* coverage of cumulative totals (reports summarizing deaths over a period of time greater than one week), information that would have at least somewhat ameliorated the above misimpressions. Though such cumulative statistics are not equivalent to individual, timely reports on deaths, they can provide useful contextual information, particularly if they are appended to high-quality daily reporting. Never once, however, did the *Times*' headline and first paragraphs in these two years report numbers for both

populations side by side. Once in 2004 the *Times* reported a partial cumulative figure of Palestinian deaths. Such a cumulative, however, without corresponding statistics for both populations, does little to enlighten readers on the comparative deaths among all people in the region.

The month-long sub-study of full articles found that the *Times* did mention full cumulative counts of fatalities for both populations side by side twice: once in paragraph 14 and once in paragraph 20.

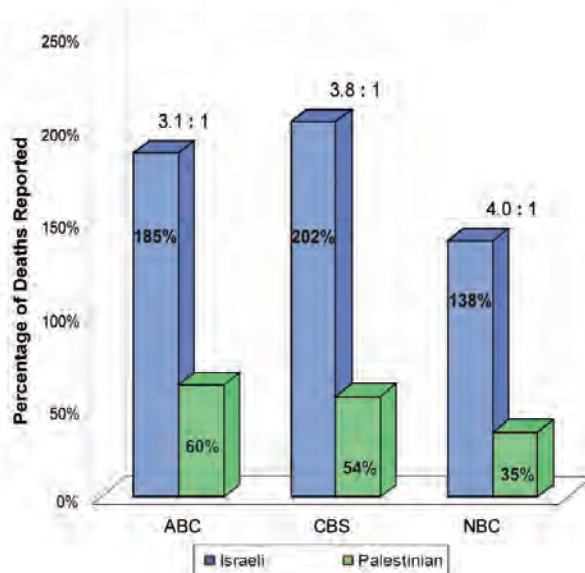
The New York Times, which calls itself the “newspaper of record,” is, in fact, the reference point for many intellectuals around the country. Americans throughout the United States who wish to be well informed tend to read the *Times* to accomplish this goal. Even those who are critical of the newspaper quite often read it and derive their impressions of events from its coverage. In addition, members of the journalism profession (reporters and editors of smaller news media throughout the US, journalism professors, high school journalism and civics teachers, etc) all frequently read the *Times*. It plays a significant role in informing their views on issues and events and is their benchmark for other media. Therefore, its distortion and omission on Israel-Palestine are of special significance.

Broadcast Media

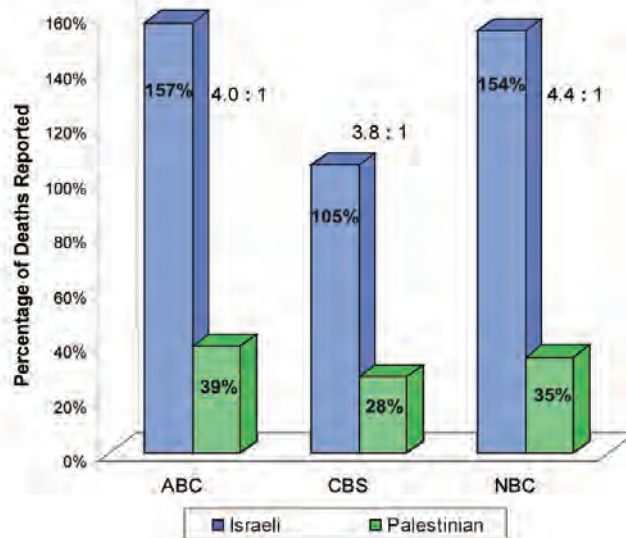
The television primetime news shows directly impact even more people. Almost 30 million Americans view these programs daily. For the majority of Americans, network news is their primary source of information on Israel-Palestine. For many it is virtually their sole source of information on this topic. (By comparison, for example, primetime cable news viewers number approximately 2-3 million).⁶

Once again, we find immense distortion. In fact, the divergence in how deaths were reported, depending on ethnicity, was even greater than *The New York Times*, as the following charts show. In this study the entire news report was examined and timely reports of deaths tabulated for both populations.⁷ For all ages, the television networks reported Israeli deaths in the range of 3.1 to 4.4 times greater.

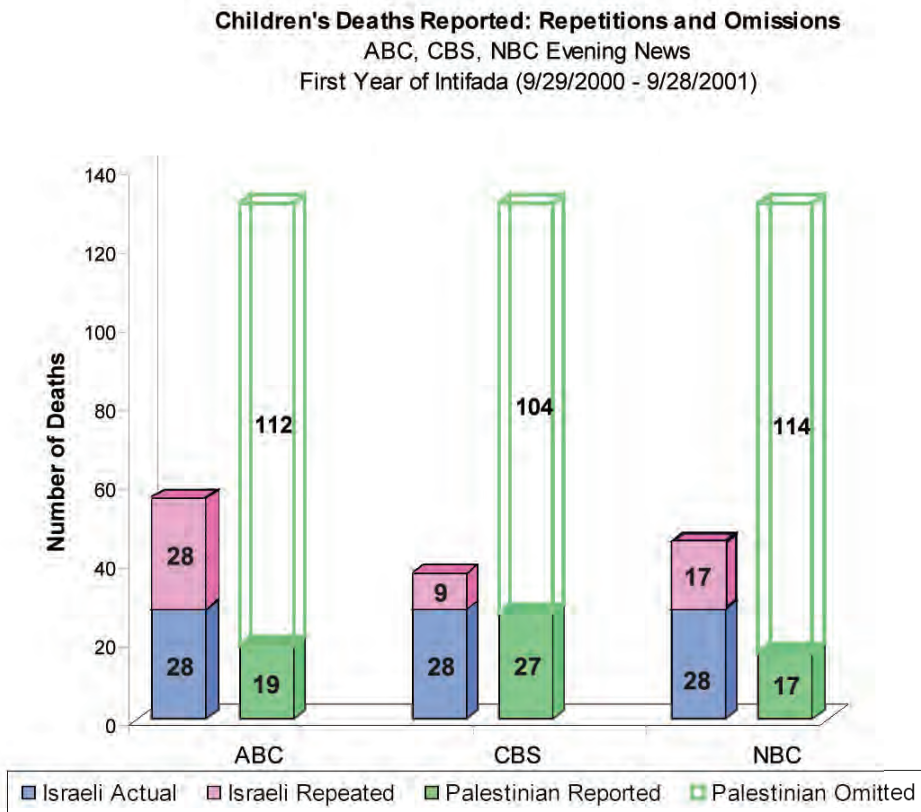
Percentage of Deaths Reported
 ABC, CBS, and NBC Evening News
 First Year of Intifada (9/29/2000 - 9/28/2001)



Percentage of Deaths Reported
 ABC, CBS, and NBC Evening News
 2004



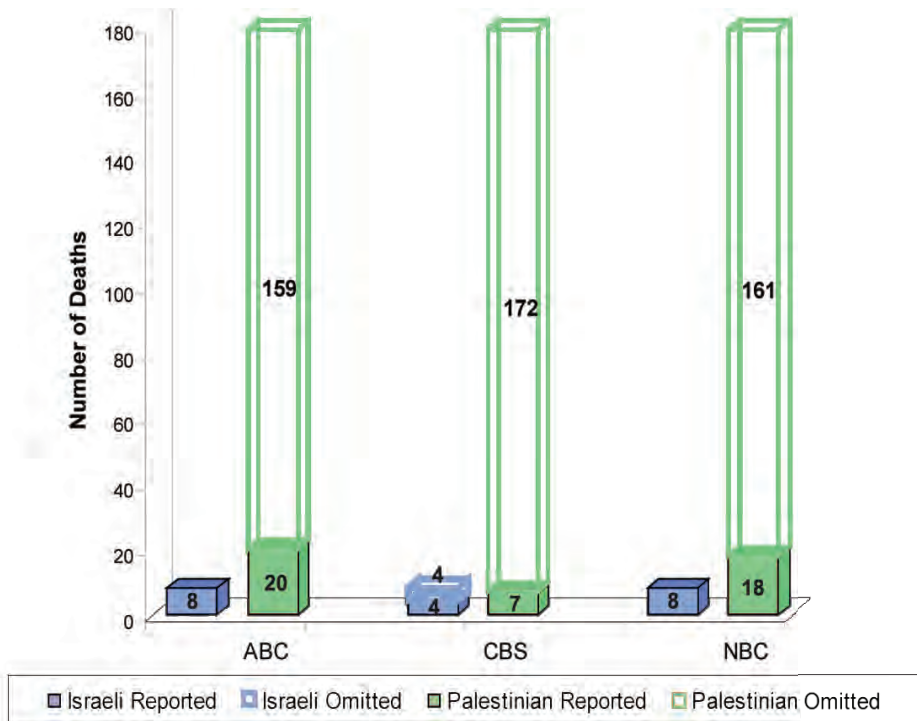
For children, the differential was even greater, with the networks covering Israeli children's deaths at rates 6.4 to 13.8 times greater than Palestinian children's deaths.



Children's Deaths: Reported and Omitted

ABC, CBS, NBC Evening News

2004



The networks' reporting on cumulative deaths for both populations was spotty, and exhibited odd patterns, in which cumulative reports of Israeli fatalities tended to provide information on extensive periods of time, most often back to the beginning of the uprising, while cumulative reports of Palestinian deaths covered far shorter periods of time - often only weeks. Thus, similar numbers of deaths were reported in these cumulative, despite the fact that throughout the conflict Palestinians have been killed in substantially larger numbers than Israelis.

Cable News Network (CNN), is viewed by hundreds of thousands of Americans everyday. A three-month study of CNN's evening news coverage of deaths among both populations also found Israeli deaths being covered at consistently higher rates than Palestinian deaths.⁸ This study counted only initial reports of deaths and did not include follow-up reports in its analysis. It was



found that CNN had reported on 74% of Israeli deaths and 18% of Palestinian deaths. This disparity, once again, grew for coverage of children's deaths, in which CNN reported on 83% of Israeli versus 22% of Palestinian children's deaths.

Of particular note, the study found that Palestinian civilian deaths were particularly underreported: while Palestinian civilians accounted for 40% of the overall deaths during the time period monitored, only 7% of CNN's coverage of deaths caused by the conflict was spent on Palestinian civilians.

National Public Radio (NPR), like *The New York Times*, is a favourite news source for American intellectuals and others who wish more in-depth reporting. It is periodically alleged to be pro-Palestinian, and at one point was targeted by some of Israel's dedicated pressure groups, who complained that it was biased toward Palestinians. Once again, however, objective analysis showed it to be the opposite.

A six-month study of NPR coverage of deaths revealed that it had covered Israeli deaths at a rate 2.4 times greater Palestinian deaths, and Israeli minor's deaths at a rate 4.5 times greater than Palestinian minor's deaths.⁹ (This study also did not include follow-up reports on deaths).

In addition, the study found that while the killing of Israeli young people was covered at a higher rate than adults, the opposite was true for Palestinians. As the author concluded: "Apparently being a minor makes your death more newsworthy to NPR if you are Israeli, but less newsworthy if you are Palestinian."

Interestingly, the study found that NPR had covered similar numbers of deaths among both populations, thus giving an "illusion of balance" in the conflict - and in their coverage - despite the fact that NPR was actually covering an extremely high percentage of Israeli deaths and an extremely low percentage of Palestinian deaths.

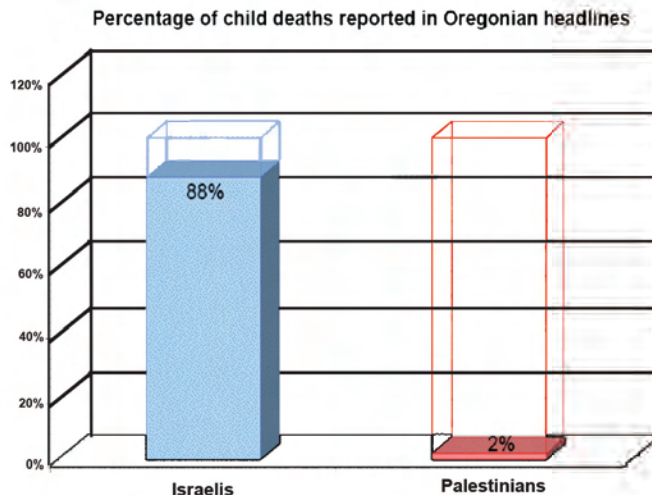
In addition, the study found a significant difference in the coverage of combatants' deaths versus civilian deaths for the two populations. While an Israeli combatant's death was less likely to be covered than a civilian death, once again we find that the reverse was the case for Palestinian deaths:

An Israeli civilian victim was more likely to have his or her death reported on NPR (84 percent were covered) than a member of the Israeli security forces (69 percent). But Palestinians were far more likely to have their deaths reported if they were security personnel (72 percent) than if they were civilians (22 percent). Of the 112 Palestinian civilians killed in the Occupied Territories during the period studied, just 26 were reported on NPR. Of the 28 Israeli civilians killed in the Territories - mostly settlers - 21 were reported on NPR.

As a result of such skewed reporting, of course, the American public is led to believe that for Israelis it is largely civilians who are being killed, while for Palestinians it is largely “militants,” “terrorists,” and “gunmen” who are dying. The reality is that large numbers of civilians are being killed on both sides, and that far more Palestinian civilians have been killed than Israeli civilians throughout the course of the *Intifadah* (and the conflict in total). In other words, we find the American public being led to believe the opposite of what is actually occurring.

Regional and Local Newspapers

Studies of regional and local newspapers indicate that the above pattern of distortion is replicated and even increased. A six-month study of the San Jose Mercury News showed that its front-page headlines had reported on Israeli deaths at a rate almost 20 times greater than Palestinian deaths.¹⁰ An analysis of the San Francisco Chronicle during the first six-months of the *Intifadah* revealed that Chronicle headline coverage had covered Israeli children’s deaths at a rate 30 times greater than Palestinian children’s deaths.¹¹ A study of Portland’s *Oregonian* newspaper headline coverage of the conflict revealed that the paper had reported on Israeli children’s deaths at a rate 44 times greater than Palestinian children’s deaths.¹²



This graph shows that in the headlines *The Oregonian* called attention to 88% of Israeli children’s deaths and 2% of Palestinian children’s deaths.

Associated Press (AP)

A major source for both print and broadcast media is the AP, the largest and oldest news organization in the country. For most news media around the United States, AP is the primary sources of news on Israel-Palestine. Most American editors, particularly if they are not Jewish, have never been to the Middle East. Most have never studied the region and have little first-hand knowledge of it. Their coverage is largely derivative - what little they cover largely follows the parameters of the major outlets. Their stories are drawn from those provided by AP and other wire services.

A six-month study conducted in 2003 found that AP headlines had reported Israeli deaths at twice the rate they reported Palestinian deaths.¹³ (Again, this study did not include follow-up reports). There are indications that the overall disparity might be considerably greater.¹⁴

Upon being presented with a study of her newspaper's extremely disproportionate coverage of deaths, an editor at *The Oregonian* newspaper suggested that this result was unimportant, because the paper had instead concentrated on covering the larger context.

What this editor probably wasn't aware of, however, is that in this regard US reporting is even worse. Again, an examination of the stories AP supplied her paper and hundreds of others across the country reveals that large swaths of the Israeli-Palestinian issue go virtually uncovered by AP. Let me give just a few examples.

Being imprisoned by Israel is an important part of the Palestinian experience. Since the beginning of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, over 650,000 Palestinians have been detained by Israel - approximately 40% of the total male Palestinian population in the Palestinian Territories.¹⁵ In March 2006, over 9,000 Palestinians were in Israeli prisons; in the first two months of 2006 alone over 200 Palestinian youths were arrested.¹⁶ It is rare to come across a Palestinian extended family which has not had at least one of its members arrested. Conditions in these prisons are highly abusive. Outright torture was exposed by the London *Times* in the 1970s,¹⁷ and has been confirmed in numerous human rights reports since.¹⁸ A detailed, potentially explosive article in Foreign Service Journal in 2002 documented the torture of American citizens.¹⁹ Yet, the AP has rarely informed Americans of this reality.

For example, the US State Department's 2004 annual report on human rights worldwide in 2004 contained an appendix of nearly 10,000 words on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which included harsh criticism of Israeli military forces. AP sent out a news report on this entitled "U.S. criticizes Arabs, Israel for wide

range of human rights abuses” that informed readers that “Israeli forces often used excessive force when confronting Palestinian demonstrations or pursuing suspects, impeded medical assistance to Palestinian civilians at roadblocks, and carried out policies of demolitions, strict curfews, and closures that directly punished innocent civilians.” It also noted Israel’s use of torture.

The problem is that this report was only sent on AP’s Worldstream wire. This news feed, according to AP, is distributed in “Europe; Britain; Scandinavia; Middle East; Africa; India; Asia; England.” In other words, American news editors and readers never saw it.

This is typical. The State Department’s 2005 human rights report castigated Israel for, among other things:

Trafficking in and abuse of women and foreign workers, discrimination against persons with disabilities, and government corruption... serious abuses by some members of the security forces against Palestinian detainees; poor conditions in some detention and interrogation facilities; institutional, legal, and societal discrimination against the country’s Arab citizens; and societal violence and discrimination against women...

The report also stated that while Israeli detainees aged 17 and under are separated from adults, “this separation does not exist among Palestinian prisoners...”

Again, AP reported none of this to Americans. Instead, it sent out news reports without a single word about Israel, and emphasized the State Department’s criticism of Arab nations, e.g., “State Department calls human rights records of Arab allies poor, problematic.” The one AP story that did contain mention the State Department’s criticism of Israel - two sentences - was sent out only on the Worldstream wire.²⁰ Thus, American citizens were not informed of significant facts about Israel that even their own State Department, under increasing pro-Israel political control, had reported.

Similarly, there have been weekly demonstrations by Palestinians and international human rights activists in the Palestinian village of Bil’in over the past several years. Yet, a review of AP headlines for the year 2005, upwards of 2,500 stories, reveal only three stories on these protests, despite the fact that many American citizens also took part in these demonstrations, and many of these actions were quite dramatic. As a result of AP’s lack of coverage, most Americans have no idea that there have been ongoing, largely nonviolent demonstrations by Palestinians and others. It is not rare for Americans to say, “If only Palestinians would use nonviolent tactics,” little knowing that they frequently do.



As a result of such profound omission, Americans - including American news editors - have little knowledge of the Palestinian experience. While Americans are thoroughly informed on all aspects of Israeli suffering in this conflict, Americans' knowledge of Palestinian suffering (many degrees greater than that felt by Israelis) is minimal. Yet, neutral American editors - such as the one noted above - scanning dozens of AP headlines from the area daily, believe themselves to be well-informed on the conflict and "balanced" in their coverage, blithely unaware of what their wire services are omitting.

A Systemic Problem

Why and how is this distortion and omission occurring at AP?

To answer this question, it is important to examine AP's two-tiered structure for international reporting. Such an examination reveals some significant flaws.

1. Reporters and Editors in the field: Almost all of AP's American reporters are living in Israel. In many cases they are Jewish, they or their partners have Israeli citizenship, and they are living the Israeli experience. It is not surprising that such a pattern would result in Israeli-centric reporting.

While AP employs Palestinian journalists living in the West Bank and Gaza, these reporters for the most part do not file their own stories, but instead phone their information in to the "control bureau" for the area, which is in Israel (in west Jerusalem), where the story is actually written. The Palestinian journalist's name is then often put on the finished report, and the dateline given as the place where the incident took place, rather than the place where the story was written, which is the correct practice. As a result, Americans and American editors read a story that appears to be from a Palestinian perspective, written in the Palestinian territories, which is actually written by a person (usually Jewish or Israeli) living in Israel. Some of these journalists are openly biased.²¹

2. International Desk in New York: The final decision-making on news reports is directed by editors at the International Desk in New York. These editors decide the final form the story will take, and which wire it will be sent out on. While this sifting would normally occur on the basis of newsworthiness, it appears that, at least at times, stories reporting on negative aspects of Israel are specifically steered away from the feed that goes to American news media.

For example, in the midst of the unfolding scandal about torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, two international human rights organizations released findings that 374 Palestinian teenagers imprisoned by Israel were being treated with somewhat similar cruelty. There was a short AP

story on the report, which was published in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz*.

Once again, we find that the story was only sent out on the Worldstream wire. Perplexingly, it was not sent to American newspapers, despite the fact that it is the US that is reputed to have a uniquely “special relationship” with Israel.

Similarly, on 20 January 2006, approximately 5,000 unarmed Palestinians, including a dozen candidates running for the legislative council and Israeli, American, and international nonviolent activists, marched against the wall being built on Palestinian land in the West Bank town of Bil’in, separating Bil’in farmers from their fields. According to reports, the Israeli military used teargas, fired rubber-coated bullets, and stun grenades on the protesters. A woman candidate from the Independent Palestine Party was evacuated from the scene by ambulance after being hit in the head with a baton. Dozens were injured.

Again, the report on this was only sent out on AP’s Worldstream wire. US news editors never saw it.

In fact, even though AP sent US news organizations four lengthy news stories on Israel/Palestine that day, for a total of 6,614 words, not one of the words was on this incident.

On Monday evening, 23 January 2006, Israeli soldiers shot and killed a 13-year-old Palestinian boy and injured a second. Four days later, Israeli soldiers shot and killed a ten-year old Palestinian girl. There were Worldstream dispatches on both. Yet, despite thousands of words of reporting on Israel/Palestine sent to US news media each of these days after these children had been killed, not one of them told about these deaths.

An AP journalist feels that the international desk in New York is responsible for the distortion in its reporting, not only in its choice of which stories to send to the US press, but in setting the tone for the foreign bureau. After a while, the journalist said, people begin to learn what kind of reporting the higher-ups want, and don’t want.²²

The Alternative and Progressive Media

While the American media have frequently missed important stories of injustice or failed to expose governmental or corporate malfeasance, a tradition of muckraking in American journalism dating back to Ida Tarbell and before has long existed. The journalistic profession continues to espouse a belief in the special importance of a free press in the American system of democracy. As the Statement of Principles of the American Society of Newspaper Editors affirms: “The American press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate but also to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces



of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all levels of government.” Thousands of journalism students each year enter the profession with this intent.

Where the mainstream media fall asleep at this watch, there is an array of lively and often excellent alternative media working to fill this need. Many of these diverse arrays of publications and broadcast media pay particular attention to abuses by the powerful - as A. J. Liebling famously stated it, “to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.”

Such progressive media, allied with political activists, played a central role in working against South African apartheid, in supporting the civil rights movement, and in reporting on events in Central America. Yet, for decades many of these publications and institutions largely overlooked the oppression of Palestinians. For example, Project Censored, an organization devoted to honouring and highlighting journalistic exposes, ignored courageous reporting on Palestine for 20 years.²³ The Center for Investigative Reporting, an institution that has produced numerous reports on abuses of power and injustice, has almost never discussed Israel, and refused to take part in a meeting with the San Francisco Chronicle to discuss the distorted reporting on Israel/Palestine.²⁴ Pacifica Radio and its flagship station KPFA have long been known for alternative, crusading journalism. Yet, there has been censorship of programs on Israel-Palestine dating back to at least 1969. Though such omission is diminishing in the progressive press, such lapses abound. Even in today’s antiwar movement, which opposes the occupation of Iraq, there are a significant number of leaders and organizers who feel it would be too “divisive” or “controversial” to similarly oppose the Israeli occupation of Palestine.²⁵

Professional Journals

Professional media journals, also, such as the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) and the *American Journalism Review* (AJR), are another important counterbalance in American journalism. These publications run in-depth commentaries on the media, and at times step in to expose media misbehaviour. For example, in a January 2006, “Web Special” the CJR devoted considerable space to exposing what appears to be the *New Yorker*’s plagiarism of an English author’s biography of the creator of Mary Poppins. Yet, when it comes to Israel-Palestine the journal treads with great caution, appearing to apply a different standard than to other subject matter. Fascinating as the above piece on Mary Poppins is, for example, it’s hard to think that its significance compares to a book by Norman Finkelstein, *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*, which exposes Harvard’s senior law professor Allen

Dershowitz's uncredited appropriations from an earlier work - and a fallacious one at that - in his recent *The Case for Israel*. Yet, *CJR* has yet to review or even mention Finkelstein's important analysis.

Similarly, in May 2005 *CJR* ran an article on *The New York Times*' omissions on the Nazi holocaust against Jews that had taken place over fifty years before, while refusing to run an article on - or even discuss - studies detailing *The New York Times*' current omissions on the ongoing killing of Palestinian children.

As a result, the American institutions that normally provide the fallback in case of failure - that expose the corruption that the mainstream media have missed, or that point up media transgressions - have themselves failed to provide these important duties regarding Israel-Palestine.

As a result, journalism professors and others around the country who go to these media for full information are remaining uninformed about Israel-Palestine.

The exceptions to the above omission are a small number of publications specializing in this area, such as *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, *The Link*, and the *Middle East Report*, which have published thorough, highly informative reports on Israel-Palestine for many years. Unfortunately, their resources are small, and their circulations currently remain far smaller than mainstream journals.

False Neutrality from Talk Radio to Scholarly/Literary Authors

On a more general note, the general American public is often unaware of the partisanship of many of its literary, media, and scholarly celebrities. Few Americans know, for example, that CNN anchorman Wolf Blitzer was formerly the editor of the Israel lobby's publication, the *Near East Report*; that right-wing talk show host Michael Savage is a Jewish partisan of Israel; that Nobel Laureate Saul Bellow and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Barbara Tuchman endorsed a pro-Israel hoax - even after its fraudulence had been exposed;²⁶ that the work of Harvard Middle East pundit Bernard Lewis is generally held in low regard by many scholars in his field, and that his son is employed in the "research department" for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the powerful and ardently pro-Israel lobbying organization.

Individuals such as these have played a considerable role in shaping American views of Israel and Palestinians among people at all levels of society. In examining Samuel Huntington's books, *The Clash of Civilizations* and *Who We Are*, for example, it is disconcerting to see so many citations of works



by pro-Israel authors, and almost none of the many highly knowledgeable Palestinian and Arab scholars or of those without ethnic connection to either population. However, such omission is not surprising, given that many of the best English-language books on the Israeli-Palestinian issue are out of print, published by small houses with minimal promotion budgets, or largely ignored by reviewers at *The New York Times* and other influential media. If Huntington and other opinion makers were receiving full, unbiased information from their news media; and if their reading included such authors as Donald Neff, Stephen Green, Kathleen Christison, George Ball, Nur Masalha, Naseer Aruri, Norman Finkelstein, and others, it is quite likely that their conclusions would diverge considerably from their present views.

Causation

What is causing such pervasive misinformation and omission?

The factors appear to be complex and interconnected, and a complete answer will require additional study. Preliminary indications, however, focus on two general areas of causation:

1. Owner/editor/reporter bias: Journalists, like other people, possess prejudices and preferences, loyalties and allegiances. Early conditioning, family pressure, and received narratives are difficult to put aside. Such biases may colour, intentionally or unconsciously, one's writing or editing on a subject. In any instance of distortion, one of the first places to examine is the possibility of human bias, and it is quite likely that this human reality is a significant factor in the distortion on Israel-Palestine coverage in the US. In the "chain of command" of those determining coverage on this topic (from the first level, journalists based in the region; through the second level, editors in the US; through the top level, media owners and executives; as well as among media celebrities, pundits, etc.) one finds an unusually high proportion of people with ethnic and emotional ties to Israel.

Again, it is important to point out that there are many journalists from various backgrounds who are able to transcend personal conditioning, and who report with considerable objectivity on diverse issues. Among this group are numerous Israeli and Jewish journalists covering Israel-Palestine with considerable accuracy, some with great power. Nevertheless, the potential for bias on any subject is always a possibility and often a reality. While many segments of the American public now believe that diversity in the newsroom provides fuller, more accurate coverage in general, only Jewish publications openly discuss this principle in relation to coverage of Israel-Palestine.

In an article entitled “Jewish journalists grapple with ‘doing the write thing,’” the *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*²⁷ quoted one student journalist: “I’m a Jew before being a journalist, before someone pays me to write,” he said. “If I find a negative thing about Israel, I will not print it and I will sink into why did it happen and what can I do to change it.” the journalism student said that even if he eventually wrote about negative incidents that happen in Israel, he would try to find the way “to shift the blame.”

The publication quoted another student, who had worked on the Arizona State University newspaper: “On campus there is already so much anti-Israeli sentiment that we have to be careful about any additional criticism against Israel... This is our responsibility as Jews, which obviously contradicts our responsibilities as journalists.”

Still another interviewee felt that her background would inescapably impact her reporting: “...Our Jewish values influence every aspect of our lives. Nobody can be totally objective because we all come with our own perspective, our own biases, and that is going to come through in the writing.”

Given human nature, it would be odd to discount personal bias as a significant factor in the distorted coverage of Israel-Palestine. A sensible approach, given the passions this issue so often elicits, would be for the American media to employ equal numbers of Jewish/Israeli and Muslim/Palestinian editors and reporters at each level to work on this issue, as well as to include reporters and editors without ties to either group. Oddly, this rarely seems to be done.

In fact, two editors at *The New York Times* - Daniel Okrent, the Public Editor, and Ethan Bronner, the deputy foreign editor in charge of coverage of Israel-Palestine - stated that they did not think it was possible to find equal numbers of capable Muslim/Arab journalists to equal the number of Jewish journalists determining *Times* coverage of Israel-Palestine. (There is no indication that they are correct; an Arab-Americans reporter for *The Washington Post*, for example, received a Pulitzer Prize for his Iraq reporting last year). In addition, both editors, themselves Jewish, ignored the suggestion that journalists from populations without ethnic ties to either side (such populations make up approximately 92% of the American public) also be well represented in the journalist team determining the *Times*’ coverage of Israel-Palestine.

2. Pro-Israel Pressure: Almost any time a media outlet reports accurately on Israel-Palestine there are complaints from pro-Israel pressure groups that the outlet is “pro-Palestinian,” “anti-Semitic,” or both. There are letter-writing campaigns, consumer boycotts, advertising threats. Sometimes there are death



threats.²⁸ Boycotts have been organized against NPR and the *Los Angeles Times* (*LA Times*), alleging that their coverage was “anti-Israel.” An off-the-record comment made by the editorial page editor of a large metropolitan daily is noteworthy: “We write our editorials for our Jewish readers.” While pro-Palestinian groups are also beginning to organize media campaigns, these are still far smaller. An editor quoted in an article in the *AJR* estimated them at one-tenth the activity level of pro-Israel efforts.

Israel makes great efforts at influencing the American media. The Israeli government employs such high-powered public relations firms as Howard J. Rubenstein Associates and Morris, Carrick & Guma to promote its version of events, and there are numerous think tanks such as the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), the Middle East Forum, and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy actively disseminating information beneficial to Israel. Again, Palestinian officials and partisans are making similar efforts, but their activities are currently far smaller, their financing a fraction of that being mobilized on behalf of Israel, and they entered the game late.

Hollywood

Finally, while the focus of this paper is the American news media, it is important not to overlook the profound role played by the popular media in creating Americans’ impressions. As researcher Jack Shaheen has documented through meticulous research, negative images of Arabs are deeply ingrained in the American cinema. Shaheen’s book, which discusses 900 American movies, is effective in opening eyes on this Hollywood bias; one reader wrote upon finishing it: “It is impossible to view movies the same way again.” There is one problem. Many people have never heard of it - for a very simple reason. Shaheen reports: “...the popular trade entertainment/film and TV magazines - Variety-Premiere, Hollywood Reported, Film Comment, People, Entertainment Weekly - failed to review it or acknowledge the book’s existence. *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were silent... No major TV critic who reviews movies addressed it. Not one.”²⁹

Conclusion

It is difficult to overstate the significance of media distortion and omission on Israel-Palestine. Since very few Americans have been to the Palestinian Territories, almost everything they think they know has come to them by way of the American media. People's conclusions, impressions, and context are all shaped by what is covered in their news outlets - and what is not. As a result, even the questions Americans ask reflect the media bias: "What can be done about the suicide bombings?" "When will Hamas recognize Israel's right to exist?" "Why do Palestinians target pizza parlours and school buses?" rather than: "What can be done about Israeli attacks on civilian neighborhoods?" "When will Israel recognize Palestine's right to exist?" "Why do Israeli forces target churches, mosques, and school children?"

Interestingly, however, even with such pro-Israel news coverage, most Americans have retained a surprisingly neutral view on this issue. Two-thirds to three-quarters consistently respond in surveys that "the US should not take sides" in this conflict and blame "both sides" for the violence.³⁰ In other words, despite the fact that so much crucial information about the Palestinian situation has not reached them, many Americans seem to understand that there is more to the picture than they are receiving, and attempt to be fair. Unfortunately, most have little idea of the quantity and nature of the information they are not receiving.

A former US ambassador to the Middle East and current publisher of *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, Andrew Kilgore, points out that the Israeli strategy has long been to procure American support for Israel by attempting to create enmity between Americans and the people of the Middle East: "Americans have to be made to look bad to Muslims, and Muslims have to be made to look bad to Americans." This strategy was most evidenced by the Lavon Affair and, some suspect, the attack on the USS *Liberty*.

The type of news coverage detailed above, of course, benefits such a destructive strategy. Fortunately, there are growing numbers of Americans who have become aware of the bias in their media, and there are increasing and diverse grassroots efforts to address this problem. As the above surveys would suggest, the majority of Americans are easily reached when accurate information on Israel-Palestine - and about the media distortion - is provided to them. To date, however, groups providing such information have far smaller financial support than pro-Israel groups working to continue and increase the media slant toward Israel. Until this imbalance changes, it is likely that US media coverage will remain profoundly lopsided and the American public largely misinformed on Israel-Palestine, resulting in the continuation and perhaps escalation of dangerously misguided US foreign policies - a situation that the region, the United States, and the world can ill afford.



Endnotes

- ¹ For purposes of media comparison, I am using data from B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights organization, because it gathers statistics on both populations. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society, better able to gather information on Palestinian deaths, shows approximately 650 deaths during this period.
- ² Reported in headline or lead paragraph. Reports summarizing deaths over a period of time greater than one week were tabulated under a separate category, "Cumulatives," discussed below.
- ³ Since follow-up reports on deaths were included in the study, it was theoretically possible for the media to report on over 100% of deaths. This was found to occur frequently for Israeli deaths; never for Palestinian deaths.
- ⁴ From the two-year study by If Americans Knew: "Off the Charts, Accuracy in Reporting of Israel/Palestine, *The New York Times*" Study Periods: 29 September 2000 - 28 September 2001 and 1 January 2004 - 31 December 2004. The report can be read in full at: <http://ifamericansknew.org/download/nyt.pdf>
- ⁵ Off the Charts: 16-20.
- ⁶ <http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org>
- ⁷ If Americans Knew: "Off the Charts, Accuracy in Reporting of Israel/Palestine: ABC World News Tonight, CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Study Periods: 29 September 2000 - 28 September 2001 and 1 January 2004 - 31 December 2004." The full report can be downloaded at: <http://ifamericansknew.org/download/networks.pdf>. The HTML version is at: <http://ifamericansknew.org/media/net-report.html>
- ⁸ Palestine Media Watch (19 February 2003): "Coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict, CNN - NEWSNIGHT WITH AARON BROWN," 1 November 2002 - 31 January 2003: <http://www.pmwwatch.org/pmw/reports/newsnight/021903.html>
- ⁹ Seth Ackerman, "The Illusion of Balance: NPR's coverage of Mideast deaths doesn't match reality," Extra! (November/December 2001): <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=1086>
- ¹⁰ "Accuracy in Israel/Palestine Reporting: San Jose Mercury News, October 2002 - March 2003," If Americans Knew: <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/media/merc2/report.html>
- ¹¹ "Accuracy in Israel/Palestine Reporting, *San Francisco Chronicle*, 29 September 2000 - 31 March 2001," If Americans Knew: <http://www.ifamericansknew.org/media/chron/report.html>
- ¹² "Accuracy in Israel/Palestine Reporting, *The Oregonian*, A News Coverage Report May - Oct. 2004," Americans United for Palestinian Human Rights: http://www.auphr.org/docs/Oregonian_Report_04072005.pdf
- ¹³ "The Newsworthiness of death," Grade the News, Prof. John McManus (18 December 2003): <http://www.gradethenews.org/pages/middleeast.htm>
- ¹⁴ A study by If Americans Knew was released in 2006.
- ¹⁵ "POLITICAL DETENTION: The Infinite Violation of Human Rights," Addameer: <http://www.addameer.org/detention/background.html>
- ¹⁶ Defence for Children International Palestine Section, "Over 200 Palestinian children arrested in two months," (2 March 2006): <http://www.dci-pal.org/english/display.cfm?DocId=464&CategoryId=1>
- ¹⁷ "Israel and Torture: An Insight Inquiry," *The Sunday Times* Newspaper (19 June 1977).
- ¹⁸ See for example: B'Tselem: <http://www.btselem.org/english/publications/Index.asp?TF=20>; Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, "Back to a Routine of Torture," (September 2001 - April 2003); and Amnesty International Report (2002): <http://web.amnesty.org/web/ar2002.nsf/mde/israel+and+the+occupied+territories+!Open>
- ¹⁹ Jerry Bird, "Arab-Americans In Israel: What 'Special Relationship'?", *Foreign Service Journal* (June 2002): <http://www.partnersforpeace.org/inmedia/db200206010/>. Not a single US newspaper or wire service reported picked up this thoroughly documented report.

- ²⁰ Anne Gearan, "New U.S. human rights survey says rights in Iraq compromised by violence," Associated Press Worldstream (9 March 2006). Anne Gearan is an AP Diplomatic Writer.
- ²¹ Off the record interview.
- ²² Off the record interview.
- ²³ This began to change in 2005, as Project Censored has begun to take a lead in this area.
- ²⁴ Center for Investigate Reporting. See previous reference.
- ²⁵ Project Censored, see: Alison Weir, "The Coverage--and Non-Coverage--of Israel-Palestine," *The Link*, Vol. 38, Issue 3 (July/August 2005); and Colin D. Edwards, "Censored," *The Link*, Vol. 26, Issue 3 (July/August 1993): <http://www.ameu.org/summary1.asp?iid=136>
- ²⁶ See: Norman Finkelstein's essay on "From Time Immemorial" in Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens (eds.), *Blaming the Victims, Spurious Scholarship and the Palestinian Question* (London: Verso, 2005).
- ²⁷ *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California* (23 November 2001).
- ²⁸ "If Americans Knew Receives Death Threat," (2 October 2003): http://www.ifamericansknew.org/about_us/death_threat.html
- ²⁹ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Interlink Publishing Group, 2001).
- ³⁰ http://www.americans-world.org/digest/regional_issues/IsraelPalestinians/USrole.cfm



This book takes an academic, well-documented and comprehensive approach in its analysis. With contributions from scholars based in Lebanon, Malaysia, the UAE, the UK, and the US, the primary objective of this book is to explain the domestic setting of American foreign policy-making and analyse its impact on issues that are considered vital to the Muslim world. The first part of this book explains the complex foreign-policy making system in the United States and assesses the role of Christian evangelicalism, neo-conservatism, the media, the pro-Israel lobby and the role of Muslim groups. The second part is devoted to a detailed analysis of the major characteristics of American foreign policy. The third part of the book provides an in-depth analysis of Americas' policy toward Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Palestine. Barack H. Obama's foreign policy is also discussed. It is a must read book for those interested in understanding American foreign policy toward the Muslim world, and specialists, and students of Political Science, and International Relations.

American Foreign Policy & The Muslim World

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