



How Islam Plays the Press

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The world often views Islam as a seventh century anachronism. But the truth is, the Islamic world is playing and winning a sophisticated game of media manipulation in which powerful and wealthy police states and anti-democratic political movements are more often portrayed and perceived — at least in the context of the Arab-Jewish conflict — as victims rather than threatening oppressors. This chapter contrasts what Islamic leaders say about their intentions for the State of Israel in English while Western television cameras are rolling and what they say to their own constituents in Arabic.

HOW ISLAM PLAYS THE PRESS

Fiamma Nirenstein, who writes for the Italian daily *La Stampa* and the weekly *Panorama*, explains:

The information coming out of Israel these days is heavily influenced by the political imagination of reporters and columnists and cameramen who have flocked to the scene from the four corners of the earth to cover this

latest installment of violence in the ongoing Middle East conflict.

They tend — they are expected — to place those clashes within an agreed-upon framework: the framework, roughly, of David (the Palestinians) versus Goliath (the Israelis). It is only when they fail to follow this paradigm that they, their editors, and their readers or viewers become confused.

Confused, that is, by the facts. “The culture of the press is almost entirely Left,” Nirenstein, a veteran Middle East reporter, explains. “These are people who feel the weakness of democratic values; who enjoy the frisson of sidling up to a threatening civilization that coddles them even while holding in disdain the system they represent.”

Nirenstein makes a profound point: “Even the most articulate and bold defenders of Israel seldom proclaim for newsmen that Israel has an absolute right to protect itself from violence directed at its citizens and soldiers.” Yet, as she states so eloquently, “by contrast, Palestinian spokesmen like Hanan Ashrawi or Ziad abu Ziad or Saeb Erekat never miss an opportunity to begin their story from the top: ‘This is our land, and ours alone, and the Jews who are occupying it are employing armed force against an unarmed people.’ ”

What’s at the root of this media caricature? Nirenstein has two more cogent observations:

It is not just that we are talking about a profession, the world press, that is almost entirely uniform in its attitudes.

The truth is that Israel, as the Jewish state, is also the object of a contemporary form of anti-Semitism that is no less real for being masked or even unconscious. (Arab Holocaust-denial, more violent and vulgar than anything in the West, is rarely if ever touched on in the mainstream media.)

And there is something else as well: looking into the heart of the Arab regimes, preeminently including that of the Palestinians themselves, is simply too disturbing. For what one is liable to find there are disproportionate measures of religious and/or political fanaticism, bullying,

corruption, lies, manipulation, and a carefully nurtured cult of victimhood that rationalizes every cruelty.¹

Could the press possibly be this blind, this biased, this manipulated?

From 1903 through 1908, two young bicycle mechanics from Ohio repeatedly claimed to have built a flying machine. They demonstrated it over and over again to hundreds of people, obtained affidavits from prominent citizens who witnessed their efforts, and even produced photographs of their invention at work.

Nevertheless, Orville and Wilbur Wright were dismissed as frauds and hoaxers in the *Scientific American*, the *New York Herald*, and by the U.S. Army and many American scientists.

But as Richard Milton points out in his entertaining book, *Alternative Science*, the real shocker is that even local newspapers in the Wrights’ hometown of Dayton ignored the story in their backyard for five years.

Despite the fact that witnesses repeatedly visited and wrote to the *Dayton Daily News* and *Dayton Journal* over those years asking about the young men in their flying machine, no reporters were dispatched. No photographers were assigned.

Asked in 1940 about his refusal to publish anything about the sensational accomplishments of the Wrights during those years, *Dayton Daily News* city editor Dan Kumler said, “We just didn’t believe it. Of course, you remember that the Wrights at that time were terribly secretive.”

When the interviewer pointed out that the Wrights were flying over an open field just outside of town for five years, Kumler grew more candid: “I guess the truth is we were just plain dumb.”

What excuses will the international press have when the truth about their current heroes in the Middle East is no longer possible to conceal?

It’s getting there.

If you think you get an accurate idea of what Arab leaders believe when you listen to Hanan Ashrawi interviewed on ABC’s “Nightline” or on CNN, think again.

Yasser Arafat and, indeed, other Arab leaders, have played a skillful media manipulation game in the West, persuading most

Americans and most westerners that the Middle East crisis can be settled by rearranging a few borders — by Israel exchanging more “land for peace.”

What you don't see on ABC or CNN — or even in the pages of the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* — are the harsh, racist, fighting words of Arab “journalists,” politicians, activists, leaders, and even clerics recorded in the Arab-language media.

For instance, read the words of a leading cleric in Gaza in a sermon delivered Oct. 13, 2000.

Dr. Ahmad Abu Halabiya, former acting rector of the Islamic University said:

None of the Jews refrain from committing any possible evil. If the Labor party commits the evil and the crime, the Likud party stands by it; and if the Likud party commits the evil and the crime, the Labor party stands by it. . . . The Jews are Jews, whether Labor or Likud. . . . They do not have any moderates or any advocates of peace. They are all liars. They all want to distort truth, but we are in possession of the truth.

O brother believers, the criminals, the terrorists — are the Jews, who have butchered our children, orphaned them, widowed our women and desecrated our holy places and sacred sites. They are the terrorists. They are the ones who must be butchered and killed, as Allah the Almighty said: “Fight them: Allah will torture them at your hands, and will humiliate them and will help you to overcome them, and will relieve the minds of the believers.” . . .

O brothers in belief, this is the case of the Jews and their habitual conduct, and what happened yesterday, and has been going on for two weeks, and before that for many years, and which will be repeated in future years unless we stand up like men and unless we have the known Muslim position, (the position) of those who wage *jihad* in the path of Allah, those who defend their rights and who sacrifice all that is dear to them. . . .

The hatred-drenched rhetoric is not directed only toward Israel. Here's more from Halabiya:

This is the truth, O brothers in belief. From here, Allah the almighty has called upon us not to ally with the Jews or the Christians, not to like them, not to become their partners, not to support them, and not to sign agreements with them. And he who does that, is one of them, as Allah said: “O you who believe, do not take the Jews and the Christians as allies, for they are allies of one another. Who from among you takes them as allies will indeed be one of them. . . .” The Jews are the allies of the Christians, and the Christians are the allies of the Jews, despite the enmity that exists between them. The enmity between the Jews and the Christians is deep, but all of them are in agreement against the monotheists — against those who say, “There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger,” that is — they are against you, O Muslims.

Have no mercy on the Jews, no matter where they are, in any country. Fight them, wherever you are. Wherever you meet them, kill them. Wherever you are, kill those Jews and those Americans who are like them — and those who stand by them — they are all in one trench, against the Arabs and the Muslims — because they established Israel here, in the beating heart of the Arab world, in Palestine. They created it to be the outpost of their civilization — and the vanguard of their army, and to be the sword of the West and the crusaders, hanging over the necks of the monotheists, the Muslims in these lands. They wanted the Jews to be their spearhead. . . .²

Is there any compromising with people like this? Why is it that we in the West do not read such statements or hear them broadcast? It probably doesn't surprise us to know that such rhetoric is being spoken, published, and broadcast daily in the Arab world. But, how, in spite of such impolitic speech, does the Arab world continue successfully to portray itself as the victim in the conflict with Israel?

The Western world often views Islam as a seventh century anachronism. But the truth is the Islamic world is playing and winning a sophisticated game of media manipulation in which powerful and wealthy police states and freedom-squelching political movements

are more often portrayed and perceived — at least in the context of the Arab-Jewish conflict — as victims rather than threatening oppressors. But what Islamic leaders say about their intentions for the State of Israel in English while Western television cameras are rolling and what they say to their own constituents in Arabic can be two diametrical opposites.

One of the most successful techniques currently being employed in the Arab world is an effort, through the international press, to revise basic Middle East history — even archeology — in ways so profane they suggest there is little hope of quenching the hatred in the hearts of Israel's foes.

In an interview with an Italian newspaper in March 2000, Sheik Ikrama Sabri, the Palestine Authority's top Muslim figure in Jerusalem, decreed that the Western Wall, the last remnant of the Jewish temple, has no religious significance to the Jews. "Let it be clear: the Wailing Wall is not a holy place of the Jews, it is an integral part of the mosque (grounds). We call it *al-Buraq*, the name of the horse with which Muhammad ascended to heaven from Jerusalem," he said.³

In fact, the Temple Mount area and the Western Wall are, according to Jewish scholars, the only truly holy sites of Judaism.

Yasser Arafat himself has made similar statements, claiming the city of Jerusalem has no real significance to Jews. In June 1998, he said on an Arabic television program, "Let me tell you something. The issue of Jerusalem is not just a Palestinian issue. It is a Palestinian, Arab, Islamic, and Christian issue."

Asked by the interviewer if one could also say it is a Jewish issue, he replied, "No. Allow me to be precise — they consider Hebron to be holier than Jerusalem."

Arafat is among those Arab leaders making the incredible suggestion that there was never a Jewish temple at the site. "Until now, all the excavations that have been carried out have failed to prove the location of the temple," he claims. "It is 30 years since they captured the city and they have not succeeded in giving even one proof as the location of the temple."⁴ This was no casual remark by Arafat. In an earlier speech broadcast on Arabic radio, he said, "Let us begin from the holy Buraq wall. It is called the holy Buraq wall, not the Wailing Wall. We do not say this. After the holy Buraq revolution

in 1929 . . . the Shaw International Committee said this is a holy wall for Muslims. This wall ends at the Via Dolorosa. These are our Christian and Muslim holy places."⁵

With such inflammatory rhetoric on the record, how do the Islamic forces maintain an edge in the battle for public relations in the Western media?

According to Judy Lash Balint, a veteran Middle East reporter who decided to report on the ideological axes her colleagues were grinding:

For most of the American Colony Hotel-based Western correspondents, there are certain "given" assumptions that provide the backdrop for all their coverage. Topping the list is the notion that Palestinians are engaged in a noble struggle for independence and Israeli oppressors are using their might and muscle to stand in their way.

How do they arrive at these conclusions? "Journalists arrive at this view based both on experiences in their own native lands as standard-bearers for minority rights and other liberal causes, but also as a result of their reliance on local assistance here in Israel," she explains.

Since very few of the foreign correspondents in Israel are fluent in Hebrew or Arabic, they rely on a network of local sources as well as the service of "fixers" — locals who can "fix" situations for them. Currently, some 400 Palestine Authority residents are in possession of Israel Government Press Office credentials.

Much of the current conflict is raging in Area A (under full Palestinian Authority control), so it is not surprising that the fixers are generally young U.S. educated Palestinians who know how to operate in PA territory and who introduce the journalists to their circle of acquaintances.

By contrast, explains Lash, correspondents generally get the Israeli point of view from official sources — currently bottlenecked with a one-man operation.

The bias in some of the major news bureaus in the Middle East is palpable, according to Lash. At the ABC-TV studio, for instance, the only map hanging in the office is dated March 2000 and displays the title, "Palestine."⁶

This anti-Israel press prism is hardly new, nor unique to the latest Arab uprising. Author Ze'ev Chafets made similar observations of the western press corps during coverage of the Lebanese war in the 1980s. He wrote:

In conformity with the PLO-dependent security system, Western reporters ghettoized themselves and became, in effect, accomplices to their own isolation and supervision.

They clustered around the Palestinian-run Commodore (Hotel) where they knew their movements, contacts, and outgoing communications would be monitored. Some of those with separate offices in the city found that they needed local Palestinian employees in order to establish contacts and guide them through the complexities of life in Beirut. These assistants were, in many cases, subject to the discipline of the PLO.

Even reporters aware of the fact that their local employees might be a conduit to PLO intelligence were loathe to give them up; in many cases, such people were an invaluable buffer.⁷

What the Palestinian leadership cannot accomplish through its charm offensive and by providing friendly manpower to western reporters, they achieve through intimidation and coercion.

The Independent Committee to Protect Journalists, which monitors abuses against the press and promotes press freedom around the world, reports:

In the nearly seven years since the Palestinian National Authority assumed control over parts of the West Bank and Gaza, Chairman Yasser Arafat and his multi-layered security apparatus have muzzled local press critics via arbitrary arrests, threats, physical abuse, and the closure of media outlets. Over the years, the Arafat regime has managed to frighten most Palestinian journalists into self-censorship.⁸

Is it reasonable to assume that foreign correspondents covering the same turf are not exercising similar self-censorship?

And because the Arab world is comprised only of totalitarian police states, unfriendly to Western news media, it ensures that international press attention remains focused on Israel. Those are the only images shown by television cameras — terrorist attacks, rioting, angry protests against “occupation.”

All these factors combine to create a winning public relations agenda for the Arab world and its crusade against Israel.

Perhaps the final weapon in the arsenal of Arafat is what is often referred to as “the big lie.”

In February 2001, a bus was the weapon of choice for Arab terrorists who crashed into a crowd of civilians, killing 8 and injuring 20. Technically, an Islamic terrorist organization known as *Hamas* claimed responsibility for the bus assault. Technically, Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Authority have plausible deniability.

But just read for yourself what Arafat actually said about the attack to see how he not only excuses it, he continues to condone this type of terrorism. “The combined attack on the Palestinian people by (Prime Minister Ehud) Barak and (Prime Minister-elect Ariel) Sharon has a direct effect on the mood of the people. The Israeli escalation is what brought about the attack,” he said in Jordan.⁹

Arafat has mastered a propaganda technique known as “turnspeak.” Turnspeak is achieved when you attack someone but claim, with some success, to be the victim of the attack. Over and over again, we see this happen in the Middle East on a daily basis.

In effect, a purveyor of turnspeak disseminates information that is the exact opposite of the truth — making it difficult for the real victims to respond in a way that is clearly understandable to the world.

Where was turnspeak first employed as a propaganda tool? In March 1939, some enterprising journalists recognized that Adolf Hitler was using “the big lie” in justifying Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Whose fault was it that Germany was forced to invade? It was the fault of the Czechs, of course. They were trying, Hitler claimed, to provoke a regional war by attempting to claim their land as their own.

“Thus the plight of the German minority in Czechoslovakia was merely a pretext . . . for cooking up a stew in a land he coveted,

undermining it, confusing and misleading its friends and concealing his real purpose . . . to destroy the Czech state and grab its territories,” wrote William L. Shirer about Hitler’s gambit.¹⁰

How did much of Europe respond? They bought the big lie — hook, line, and sinker. They didn’t want to risk an all-out war. So they rationalized that Hitler had some legitimate claims on Czechoslovakia.

Tell a big enough lie often enough and some people — often many people — will believe it. That is the lesson of turnspike. And Arafat has learned it well.

It’s not uncommon for the Arabs today — Arafat included — to refer to the Israelis as “Nazis” or fascists. Why do they do that? To provide cover for their own similarities and ties to the Nazis.

As author Joan Peters points out in her Middle East history, *From Time Immemorial*, Hitler’s crimes against the Jews have frequently been justified in Arab writings and speeches. In 1940, Haj Muhammed Amin al-Husseini, the grand *mufti* of Jerusalem, requested the Axis powers to acknowledge the Arab right “to settle the question of Jewish elements in Palestine and other Arab countries in accordance with the national and racial interests of the Arabs and along the lines similar to those used to solve the Jewish question in Germany and Italy.”¹¹

Yasser Arafat’s given name, as an Egyptian, was Abd al-Rahman abd al-Bauf Arafat al-Qud al-Husseini. That’s right. He called the former *mufti* his “uncle.”

Arafat will continue to say day is night and war is peace. We should expect it from him. That is the way the big lie works.

But how many more body bags do we need to see from terrorist incidents before the whole world recognizes Arafat for what he is — a bold liar whose ultimate goal remains, as always, the annihilation of the Jewish state?

Oh yes, Arafat will continue to maintain plausible deniability with regard to *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* and other terrorist operations. He will portray himself as a reasonable man, a man of peace. He will wax persuasively about his own victimhood. He’ll tell you that the Israelis are the true obstacles to peace.

Understand what all that means when you hear it. That’s just the way turnspike works. He’s practiced at the art of deception. He

moves quickly in an effort to remain at least one step ahead of the truth. What he says is usually the exact opposite of reality — and he knows it.

Meanwhile, as Arafat and others execute a nearly flawless public relations offensive in the West — covering up their own warts while exposing both real and imagined horrors perpetrated by their Israeli foes — a cult of anti-Semitism unseen since the Holocaust sweeps through the Arab world.

And those perpetrating it are inventing allies — including America’s founding fathers.

If you are to believe the vicious propaganda increasingly seeping into periodicals and speeches in the Arab world, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington hated Jews and warned against dealing with them.

For instance, Egypt’s General Hassan Sweilem authored a two-part series in the weekly *October* titled “The Jewish Personality and the Israeli Action.” Here’s an excerpt:

Historians, race-studies professors, and sociologists agree that humanity, throughout its long history, has never known a race such as the Jewish race in which so many bad qualities — base and loathsome — have been gathered.

The Jews had a quality which distinguished them from others: whenever they gathered in a particular place and felt comfortable there, they turned the place into a den of evil, corruption, incitement to internal strife, and the spreading of wars,” the official wrote. “The Jews took advantage of the lack of attention by the people and rulers to the plots and traps designed by the Jews.

Sweilem then retraces his version of “history” right up through the Holocaust, which he proclaims “a lie.” “This is a huge lie which they managed to market around the world,” Sweilem writes.

What is particularly noteworthy about the Sweilem slander is his use of false “quotations” about the Jews from America’s founding fathers. Sweilem claims:

The first American presidents warned against the danger of Jewish hegemony over American life. First and

foremost was President George Washington who warned in 1788: “It is troubling that the . . . nation has not purified its land from these pests. The Jews are the enemies of America’s well-being and the corrupters of its prosperity.” Further, Washington writes about the Jews: “They operate against us in a way much more effective than the enemy’s armies. They endanger our liberty and our interests one hundred times more than the enemy. It is most troubling that the states have not begun long ago to follow them, because they are a plague (threatening) society.”

Of course, anyone who has read the precious writings of George Washington can instantly recognize from the style alone, not just the substance, that this statement is a forgery through and through. But Sweilem continues to libel another of America’s early statesmen. He wrote:

American President Benjamin Franklin said in his speech to the 1789 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia: “A great danger threatens the United States — the Jewish danger. When the Jews settle down, we will discover that they are weakening the determination of the people, shaking up the ethics of trade and establishing a government. When they meet resistance, they will suffocate the nation economically.”

Which history text did Sweilem use to find this quotation from Franklin, who, of course, never served as an American president? It turns out the forgery first appeared in 1935 in German in the Nazis’ *Handbook on the Jewish Question*.¹²

There’s a rising strain of anti-Semitism in the Arab world’s popular press, its schools, and its official and unofficial rhetoric. As an Arab-American Christian, it repulses me — it offends me. Moreover, it makes me wonder how peace — true and lasting peace — can be achieved between Jews and adversaries with such enmity in their very hearts and souls.

America should recall what Washington actually wrote about the Jews, a people whose history he studied in the scriptures for clues about building a new civilization in the New World. In an August

1790 letter to Moses Seixas, the warden of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, the president wrote:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent rights. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

Washington then concluded with a quotation from Micah 4:4: “May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, there shall be none to make him afraid.”

Sadly, that, of course, is a Washington quote you’re not likely to see reproduced anywhere in the Arab world today.

Endnotes

- 1 Fiamma Nirenstein, *Commentary* (January 2001), translated from Italian in *La Stampa*.
- 2 Special Dispatch No. 138-PA, Middle East Media and Research Institute, October 14, 2000, translated from Arabic by MEMRI.
- 3 *La Repubblica*, March 24, 2000 (MEMRI).
- 4 Al-Jezira television, June 28, 1998 (MEMRI).
- 5 Voice of Palestine, October 10, 1996 (MEMRI).
- 6 Judy Balint Lash, WorldNetDaily.com, March 6, 2001.
- 7 Ze’ev Chafets, *Double Vision* (New York: William Morrow, 1985).
- 8 Joel Campagna, *Bloodied and Beleaguered*, Committee to Protect Journalists, October 20, 2000.
- 9 WorldNetDaily.com, February 16, 2001.
- 10 William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960).
- 11 Joan Peters, *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict over Palestine* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1984).
- 12 Special Dispatch No. 166, December 16, 2000, MEMRI.