



## AL-AQSA INTIFADA AND THE U.S. MEDIA

SETH ACKERMAN

*This report examines what appears to be a systematic absence of context in U.S. reporting on Al-Aqsa intifada. The result is a narrow view of the conflict that ignores the crucial issues of Israel's ongoing occupation and the United States's pro-Israel bias. After looking at daily reportage and editorial commentary, the author examines pressures on the media by Israel and its supporters, whose efforts in the latest crisis have targeted CNN.*

IN WAR—ESPECIALLY THE KIND of war that broke out between Israel and the Palestinians in late September 2000—each side has its reasons. Not all reasons are equally valid, but in journalism both sides must be told, context and balance must be provided, and ultimately the audience should decide.

### THE NOW-TABOO “O” WORD

When Israel is asked to explain how almost 300 Palestinians and only about thirty Israelis have been killed in the al-Aqsa intifada, the response is generally that it has little choice but to defend itself against Palestinians who attack with rocks, Molotov cocktails, even automatic weapons. And when Palestinians are asked why they persist in confronting Israel's soldiers, the reason is almost always the same: “The Israelis are occupying our land.” But while Palestinian rock-throwers, fuel bombs, and militiamen are in full view on American TV screens night after night, the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land—continuous since 1967, condemned repeatedly by the United Nations, and rejected as contrary to international law by most of the world—is almost ethereal in its absence. It hovers over each report, and yet it never fully appears.

The following quote from a *Time* magazine article (“Into the War Zone,” 4 December 2000) is illustrative:

The Palestinians began the latest protests with old-style demonstrations. Then they started shooting at Israeli towns. Now they are attacking settlements. It's not at all clear what the next step will be, but every step seems to get bloodier.

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Leaving aside the fact that no Israeli towns have been shot at, what is simply not reported about the settlements is that they are built on occupied territory. Other news outlets have even taken the step of referring to occupied Palestinian land as part of Israel. "As the fighting rages in Israel, there's word of a possible cease-fire deal," CBS's Dan Rather said, showing pictures of that day's violence in the West Bank and Gaza. Tom Brokaw ("NBC Nightly News," 2 October 2000) introduced a report about "the ever-widening eruptions of violence in Israel." He then went to NBC correspondent Martin Fletcher, who explained that Palestinians were "storming an Israeli army outpost in Gaza" and "setting siege to another army post in the West Bank."

The word "occupation" has become almost taboo for American reporters. Even the designation "occupied territories," once routine, has all but disappeared. In the early 1990s "occupied territories" showed up in hundreds of Associated Press (AP) articles each year—699 in 1992 and 731 in 1993. Nearly a third of all articles mentioning Palestinians used the term. By the end of the decade, the number of appearances had dwindled to a few dozen. During the first eleven months of 2000, barely 1 percent of such articles mentioned the dreaded phrase.

On the three major networks' evening news broadcasts—"ABC World News Tonight," "NBC Nightly News," and "CBS Evening News"—the West Bank or Gaza were mentioned in ninety-nine news stories since the fighting began in late September. Of those ninety-nine stories, only four used the word "occupied," "occupation," or any other variation. Thus, incredibly, more than 90 percent of network TV reporting on the occupied territories has failed to report that the territories are occupied. (On CNN, the number is closer to 80 percent, perhaps reflecting the network's awareness of its international audience.)

This, too, marks a deterioration in the quality of reporting from the Middle East. During 1990–92, when the intifada was still going on, 156 of the 199 stories mentioning the West Bank or Gaza on ABC and CBS (more than three-quarters) used words like "occupied"—usually as part of the now-vanished phrase "occupied territories" but often, more daringly, to explain that Palestinians were "living under Israeli occupation." Tellingly, while Israel's occupation has been mentioned in almost two-thirds of the news stories in the London *Independent* this year, it has been omitted from more than two-thirds of stories in the *New York Times*.

Thus, instead of an honest accounting of each side's grievances, journalists reporting the clashes in the West Bank and Gaza offer what is, in effect, a daily catalogue of seemingly unprovoked Palestinian aggression. The reports follow a familiar pattern. Take, for example, a typical story filed by ABC correspondent Jim Wooten on the 9 October broadcast of "World News Tonight." Reporting from the West Bank town of Nablus, he described a skirmish between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers:

Thousands of Palestinians began a protest march in the center of Nablus today, then headed for the outskirts, apparently looking for a confrontation with Israeli troops. And they got it.

What began, as usual, with rocks and bottles soon became a genuine gun battle. One more example of how the young Palestinians' anger is turning more violent and more deadly.

Israelis on a nearby ridge opened fire on the marchers. Palestinians soon returned the fire from an olive grove beside the road. Those shooting back were part of Chairman Arafat's Fatah organization, but it isn't clear if he can control the level of violence anymore, given the level of rage in these streets. For example, here in Nablus on Saturday, after Israeli troops withdrew from the tomb of Joseph, a site some Jews consider sacred, Palestinian police were unable or unwilling to protect it from an angry mob. It was sacked and burned and an Israeli policeman killed. And that Palestinian fury against the Israelis continued today at the olive grove. . . .

Among those injured in today's battle, these two young men with leg wounds and this twelve-year-old boy shot in the buttocks. Did his mother know he was in the march? Did she approve? "Yes," she said. "Every Arab should stand up and protest, continue the resistance, keep the revolution alive.

In such reports, Israel's grievances are on vivid display. Viewers can see Palestinians "looking for a confrontation" with Israel, wielding "rocks and bottles," provoking a "gun battle"—yet "one more example" of how their "anger is turning more violent and more deadly."

But what are the Palestinians' grievances? Why did they choose to confront Israel's soldiers? Like most of his colleagues, Wooten maintains a studious silence, not mentioning the Israeli army posts surrounding Nablus or the checkpoints controlling the entrances to the town—even before the current round of violence began. Nor does he mention the bypass roads for settlers only or the ongoing expropriations of Palestinian land for the expansion of the four nearby settlements, which are populated by armed militants many of whom support extremist religious leaders like the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, who advocated the expulsion of Arabs from the West Bank. And finally, he makes no reference to the fact that the entire apparatus of occupation is illegal under the Geneva Conventions or that the UN Security Council resolutions have repeatedly demanded Israel's withdrawal.

Occasionally, when the situation has quieted down for a few days, a news outlet will run an isolated feature story recounting some of the background

to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Journalists will explain that the territories were “captured” by Israel in 1967 and that the settlements were subsequently built. (That the capture and settlement of the territories were illegal under international law is typically left out.) Such stories are useful, certainly. But then the next West Bank clashes or diplomatic moves occur, and the coverage switches back to the old routine of stories like Jim Wooten’s.

Of course, it would be impossible—and unnecessary—for journalists to rehearse the whole litany of Israeli abuses in every new report on the clashes in the West Bank and Gaza. But the crucial context of occupation could easily be preserved with the use of simple modifiers: “occupied” territories instead of “disputed” territories; “illegal” settlements instead of just “settlements” (or, worse, “Jewish neighborhoods”).

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It is interesting to compare the absence of the term “occupation” in reporting the al-Aqsa intifada to the word’s ubiquity in covering the Kuwaiti underground—by all subsequent accounts a rather modest affair—during Iraq’s seven-month occupation of Kuwait. In 1990, Peter Jennings on ABC (“World News Tonight,” 6 September) did not hesitate to refer to the emirate as “Iraqi-occupied Kuwait” and asked a Kuwaiti interviewee to “tell us about the resistance to the Iraqi occupation.” On CBS, Dan Rather spoke admirably of refugees from Kuwait “bringing stories of an occupied but still unconquered nation” (“CBS Evening News,” 11 September), while his correspondent in the Persian Gulf reported on heroic “attacks and ambushes on Iraqi soldiers by a fledgling Kuwaiti resistance.” “It is clear that among Kuwaitis in exile there is a will to resist,” the correspondent declared. “It is searching for a way” (“CBS This Morning,” 23 August).

But today in the Israeli-occupied territories, CBS correspondents talk of “Israeli soldiers under daily attack” (“CBS Evening News,” 4 October 2000); “Israel . . . again feeling isolated and under siege” (“CBS Evening News,” 8 October 2000); and, in one case where Israeli occupation troops abandoned a fortified position in the occupied West Bank, “Israelis [who] have surrendered territory to Palestinian violence” (“CBS Evening News,” 7 October 2000).

“Palestinian violence” has become almost a mantra of the Middle East press corps. The war seems to feature “violence” from one side and mere “retaliation” from the other: “The renewed Arab violence provoked a new wave of retaliation from Israel” was a typical formulation (*Newsweek*, 23 October 2000). The double standard reached absurdity in headlines like “New Violence After Rocket Strikes on Palestinians” (*New York Times*, 1 November 2000).

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Thus, instead of a war to end a military occupation—as Palestinians themselves see the al-Aqsa intifada—some journalists saw it as simply an outburst of hatred. “Hatred now has live ammunition,” Dan Rather announced (“CBS

Evening News," 14 October 2000), as Palestinian militia were shown using firearms against Israeli troops; presumably the Israeli forces who have long used live ammunition against Palestinian demonstrators were never motivated by hate. "Fires of Hate" was the headline *Time* (23 October 2000) gave its package of stories on the conflict; pictured on the facing page was a group of Palestinians hurling Molotov cocktails near a small bonfire.

Two images were chosen to capture the bloodiness of the conflict for *Time's* 23 October cover story, "Terror in the Middle East": the bombed-out hull of the USS *Cole* warship and the infamous photograph of a Palestinian man jubilantly showing his bloody hands to a mob outside a West Bank jail after having hurled an Israeli soldier out the window. Together, the pictures told of nineteen victims of "terror": seventeen American sailors and two Israelis. Left out of the picture were more than 120 Palestinians who had been killed by the Israeli army by that date.

More than anything else, it was the iconic image of twelve-year-old Muhammad al-Dura, shot by Israeli soldiers in Gaza on 30 September as he cowered for protection behind his father, that galvanized world indignation against Israel's use of force. But in the United States, the media were evasive about the circumstances of his death. The shooting revived one of the Middle East press corps' more notorious clichés: the shop-worn euphemism "caught in the crossfire" often used to describe high-profile civilian killings by Israeli soldiers. As Robert Fisk, veteran Middle East correspondent of the London *Independent*, recalled (2 October 2000):

When I read the word "crossfire," I reach for my pen. In the Middle East, it almost always means that the Israelis have killed an innocent person. When the Israelis fired shells into the United Nations compound at Qana in southern Lebanon in 1996, *Time* magazine printed a photograph of a dead baby with a caption saying it had been killed in "crossfire." This was untrue. The baby had been killed in the Israeli bombardment along with 105 other civilians. . . .

So when 12-year-old Mohammed al-Durah was killed in Gaza on Saturday and I read on the Associated Press wire that the child was "caught in the crossfire," I knew at once who had killed him. Sure enough, reporters investigating the killing said the boy was shot by Israeli troops.

Indeed, the phrase appeared in the U.S. media with remarkable uniformity: "NBC Nightly News" and "CBS Evening News" (both 30 September 2000), along with the *Baltimore Sun*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* (all 1 October 2000), all used some variation of "caught in the crossfire" to describe the boy's shooting, even though Israel's responsibility was fairly clear. Israel later acknowledged that its soldiers had shot the boy,

with one of its spokesmen admitting that the initial denial had damaged his government's credibility (*Guardian* [London], 17 October 2000).

But at the end of November, the commander of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Gaza, who would be personally responsible for the boy's death if IDF forces were to blame, released the results of his own "investigation" into the shooting. Unsurprisingly, he cleared himself of all charges. The investigators conducting the inquiry failed to interview the cameraman who filmed the shooting (a Palestinian working for French TV), and they did not examine the bullet-scarred cinder block where the incident took place; the IDF had it bulldozed, along with the other buildings at the site, within days of Dura's death. Two of the army investigators told the media that they believed the whole incident was a set-up orchestrated by the Palestinians with the connivance of the cameraman. The Israeli army's chief of staff disavowed the report, calling it a "personal" investigation, while *Ha'Aretz*, Israel's leading newspaper, editorialized that "it is hard to describe in mild terms the stupidity of this bizarre investigation."

But the *New York Times* played it straight, with the deadpan headline "Israeli Army Says Palestinians May Have Shot Gaza Boy" (28 November 2000). Damning information—such as the blistering *Ha'Aretz* editorial—was packed into the very last paragraphs, while the top of the story mentioned only that the investigation came in for criticism "from Palestinians." In contrast to the *Times's* respectful hearing, the London *Guardian's* Tel Aviv correspondent dispatched the IDF inquiry the same day with an unsparing report under the headline "Israel Washes Its Hands of Boy's Death."

With the context of occupation missing, the media had little difficulty depicting staggering Palestinian casualties as inevitable, though unfortunate, byproducts of "Palestinian violence" in the (occupied) West Bank and Gaza. Of course, that characterization was difficult to square with the broad international agreement—outside the United States—that Israel was committing grave violations of human rights, an assessment that is closely connected to the consensus on Israel's status as an occupying power. But the media simply skimmed over that subject.

Indeed, where the Middle East is concerned, one of the U.S. media's greatest taboos is simply reporting what the rest of the world thinks. A recent case in point is the 7 October UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel's "excessive use of force against Palestinians" in the context of its status as the "occupying power," which was largely ignored by the press. Important newspapers with substantial international coverage relegated the UN vote to a few passing sentences within other stories—e.g., the *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Washington Post* (all 8 October 2000), and *USA Today* (9 October 2000). Only three of the top thirty-six U.S. papers in the Nexis database—the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *Long Island Newsday*—devoted articles to the vote (all 8 October 2000), and none of their headlines mentioned Israel by name; for example, *Newsday's* misleadingly vague "UN Measure Condemns Violence." Similarly, most newspapers, in-

cluding the *New York Times*, totally ignored Amnesty International's extraordinary statement on 1 November concerning Israel's "pattern of gross human rights violations that may amount to war crimes." (It was, however, briefly noted in the *Boston Globe's* foreign news roundup on 2 November and mentioned in passing in a *Washington Post* article the same day.)

### ASSIGNING BLAME

Predictably, U.S. newspaper editorials on the current crisis have lined up overwhelmingly behind Israel. A 24 October study by the Jewish Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which typically accuses the media of anti-Israel bias, found that editorials displayed "overwhelming support and sympathy for Israel's position." The group examined editorials in forty-three major U.S. papers and found that thirty-six expressed either "out-and-out support" for Israel or what the league called "'even-handed' commentary." Only seven papers expressed what the group described as "support for the Palestinian cause" or "focused blame on Israeli officials."

In reality, attitudes toward the crisis were even more monolithic. Newspapers were somewhat divided on the question of whether it was the malign cunning of Yasir Arafat or Israeli rightist Ariel Sharon's "unhelpful visit" to the Temple Mount that was most to blame for derailing Prime Minister Ehud Barak's steadfast march toward peace. Most papers settled on the first interpretation. (Commentaries that singled out Sharon were deemed "pro-Palestinian" by the ADL.)

But central elements of the crisis were almost totally exempt from editorial criticism in the United States: Barak himself, who has been building settlements at a faster pace than his Likud predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu; the Clinton administration, which has tolerated and subsidized Israel's occupation while claiming the mantle of "honest broker"; and the entire U.S.-driven Oslo negotiating process, which has served to protect Israel from its international obligations by eroding the Palestinians' established rights under international law.

Following the script of the Clinton administration, the apparent failure of Oslo signified by the collapse of the Camp David summit in July was almost invariably ascribed to Arafat, who had refused Barak's "unprecedentedly generous offers" to "share sovereignty" over East Jerusalem. This version of events was useful not only because it conveniently framed Arafat as the deal-breaker, but because it shielded the Oslo framework itself from criticism.

The collapse of the Camp David talks became an issue again with the outbreak of the fighting in late September, as newspapers sought to explain what had gone wrong. Thus, on 11 October, the *Washington Post* editorialized that the peace process had

rested on two premises: first, that Israel would be prepared to relinquish control over Palestinian land and lives; and,

second, that the Palestinian leadership would be willing to attain its independence through negotiations alone. The deep compromises Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak offered at the Camp David summit proved the first assumption correct. The second premise, however, has been shattered.

Barak's generosity (and Arafat's ingratitude) was encapsulated in a *Washington Post* front-page headline on 9 October that read, "Barak's Open Hand Now a Clenched Fist." The article beneath it insisted that "even in the view of the most dovish Israelis, Barak made Arafat a good deal at the U.S.-brokered Camp David talks in July, and Arafat has repaid a serious effort at negotiations with attacks on Israeli positions."

The *Los Angeles Times*, too, linked the violence to Arafat's rejection of the peace offered at Camp David. Thus, in a front-page news analysis on 3 October, Tracy Wilkinson wrote, "By declining to stop his men who have seized the streets of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, . . . [Arafat] has solidified his reputation for favoring the use of violence as a negotiating tool."

The *New York Times* editorial page also hewed faithfully to the Barak-Clinton line, writing (30 September 2000) that "none of Israel's proposed compromises have drawn a positive response from Mr. Arafat" and that if he "maintains this unhelpful rigidity, there will be no agreement." Again, most of the burden is placed on Arafat, who "must decide if he is ready to make a deal with an Israeli government willing to offer the most generous compromise terms possible under current political circumstances."

*Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen (10 October 2000) gave an account of the Camp David talks that was almost a mirror image of reality, stating that Barak "offered to make the eastern and heavily Arab part of the city the capital of a Palestinian state, with Islamic holy sites to be managed by Muslim religious authorities. Yasir Arafat turned his back on the proposal and went home. It was not enough. He wanted all of Jerusalem." Not only is Cohen under the mistaken impression that Arafat was offered all of East Jerusalem, which was far from being the case, he also seems to think that Arafat demanded West Jerusalem as well.

In a similar vein, *Time's* hawkish columnist Charles Krauthammer posited a "Barak Paradox" on 23 October: "The most pro-peace leader in the country's history and what does he get? War." The columnist explained, "This July, Barak went the final mile, offering concessions so sweeping that even the U.S. negotiators at Camp David were astonished. . . . What happened? Yassir Arafat refused." Krauthammer concluded, "With Israel's myriad concessions, unilateral withdrawals, pleas for peace and general demoralization, the [Arab] euphoria has returned. Israel's enemies sense weakness."

None of these accounts reminded readers that East Jerusalem is among the occupied territories from which Israel was required to withdraw under UN Resolution 242, the resolution officially governing the Oslo process and

therefore the Camp David talks. Hence, any parts of East Jerusalem that would remain under Israeli sovereignty in a final settlement would represent Palestinian concessions, not the other way around. Nor was it easy to discern that the sovereignty offered involved only very limited parts of the city and that the offer hinged on Arafat's acceptance of the annexation of vast settlement blocs—illegal under the Geneva Conventions and international law—in and around the city. Finally, the media invariably gave the U.S. version that the talks broke down over the status of Jerusalem. Few bothered to consult Palestinian negotiators, who would have stated that the talks foundered less on Jerusalem than on the refugee issue and on Israel's insistence on a clause ending all Palestinian claims against Israel.

Equally unquestioned in the media is the American negotiators' claim that they were merely acting as impartial mediators. Less than three months after Clinton publicly blamed Arafat for Camp David's failure, the *Washington Post* published an article with the headline "Pressures Rise on Clinton's Neutrality" (10 October 2000). The article focused, of course, on pressures for a more forthrightly pro-Israel policy.

Meanwhile, the kind of searching questions about Oslo that are virtually untouchable in the American media were widely asked in the British press, where an authentic editorial debate played out in the opinion pages. Conservative papers, like the *Times* of London and the *Daily Telegraph*, affirmed their staunch support for Israel, while the centrist *Independent* voiced what the ADL would call "even-handed" criticism, urging both sides to halt the fighting.

But the left-leaning London *Observer* (15 October 2000) blamed the violence on "the Oslo accords [which] built in an overwhelming Israeli territorial advantage in the West Bank and inevitably turned Arafat into a compromised leader." Calling Israel's settlement policy a "system of apartheid," aimed at creating "self-administered Bantustans" for the Palestinians, the paper declared that "there is not and never can be any long-term legitimacy for the Israeli state in the Middle East as long as this process continues." And the influential weekly *New Statesman* (23 October 2000) pointed out that "the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem have become, in western media parlance, 'disputed lands,' not 'occupied territories.' Yet occupied territories—illegally occupied, according to UN Resolutions 242 and 338—is exactly what they are." In contrast to the U.S. consensus, the *New Statesman* contended that "Ehud Barak is portrayed as a rational and practical dove even though, like the Ulster Unionists, he says 'no' to most things."

### HIGHLIGHTING THE MEDIA'S "PRO-PALESTINIAN BIAS"

While media editorialists may line up behind Israel, the video footage and daily coverage of the uprising do raise unpleasant questions about the magnitude of Israel's response. As a result, Israel has entered the fray in an effort at spin control. In November, the Israeli dailies *Ha'Aretz* (13 November) and

*Ma'ariv* (8 November) reported that Israel's Foreign Ministry was establishing a special public relations headquarters in New York to reinforce Israel's PR strategy. The office would reportedly be headed by a former director general of the Israel Broadcasting Authority, who would coordinate among the Foreign Ministry's PR department, a steering committee formed of senior officials of Jewish organizations in the United States, and six public relations firms—including "some of the most well known in America"—that had been hired at a cost of \$1 million.

CNN has been a major target of Israeli pressures. A transcript of a mid-October telephone conference call briefing by Israeli government spokesman Nachman Shai to a group of thirty to sixty American Jewish leaders and other leading Israel supporters was obtained by Phyllis Bennis, an analyst with the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Shai explained Israel's media strategy and mentioned in particular CNN, adding that his office was pressuring the network to shift its coverage in a more pro-Israel direction. In early December, Prime Minister Barak himself weighed in against the network. According to the *Jerusalem Post* website (13 December 2000), Barak, along with members of the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry, met with three CNN representatives in early December to express concern about CNN's "slanted and one-sided reportage of violence in the territories." CNN representatives, in turn, reportedly expressed concern about reports of American Jews selling off stock in CNN's parent company to protest the coverage. This was later denied by CNN.

Singled out for particular criticism by Israel and its supporters has been CNN's Palestinian correspondent Rula Amin. Israeli spokesman Shai had told his listeners in October, "We are putting real pressure on the heads of CNN

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to have [Amin and other reporters] replaced with more objective pro-Israel reporters that are willing to tell our side of the story." Amin has been the subject of almost obsessive loathing by many of Israel's supporters in the media. For example, Amos Perlmutter, the hawkish *Washington Times* foreign affairs columnist, who called her a "purveyor of Palestinian propaganda." His only example was the claim that "with no evidence, she reported the false Palestinian argument that the two Israelis who were lynched in Ramallah were Mossad agents." In fact, Amin had merely reported that the mob that attacked the Israeli reservists had "assumed that these were undercover units" (12 October 2000). The feeling against Amin is probably motivated more by her Palestinian background than the content of her reporting, which, though somewhat more sympathetic to the Palestinians than most American fare, is not much different than what typically appears on, say, the BBC.

While the American press is perceived abroad as being unambiguously sympathetic to Israel, the most visible form of media criticism in the United

States takes the opposite view—that the U.S. press is constantly propagandizing for the Palestinian cause. This belief is repeated so often, and by so many prominent organizations and individuals, that it has been largely absorbed into conventional wisdom.

When CNN's weekend program on the news media ("Reliable Sources," 14 October) took up the question of Middle East coverage, the host, *Washington Post* media reporter Howard Kurtz, who is generally seen as a liberal—grilled a panel of journalists on whether the press was being unfair to Israel. One prominent journalist, Doyle McManus of the *Los Angeles Times*, was asked on the show if he thought the *Washington Post*'s 13 October front page had "made it seem too much like Israel was committing an act of aggression" when it launched retaliatory strikes on Palestinians following the lynching of two Israeli soldiers. The *Post* had printed a huge two-column color photograph of the lynching on its cover, showing a Palestinian man displaying his blood-stained hands to the crowd. But Kurtz pointed out that the banner headline over the story was "Israel Strikes Palestinian Sites" and that the lynching itself was announced only in the sub-headline over the main story below. McManus agreed that "yes, it was probably a bad call," though he did not think it was motivated by anti-Israel ideology.

"The whole question of who is depicted as the aggressor," Kurtz mused to *Newsweek*'s managing editor on the same program, "is part of the public relations war. . . . It seems to me you have a number of Palestinian kids as young as 12 who were killed in this violence. But the Palestinians also put children out there on the front lines, and therefore reap a lot of sympathy when these horrible casualties take place." *Newsweek*'s editor replied apologetically that American journalists "probably make a mistake in not thinking" enough about whether the public "perceive us as balanced."

*U.S. News and World Report* owner and editor Mortimer Zuckerman shared Kurtz's view in an editorial dated 23 October. He rebuked the media for having "reinforced the impression that the powerful Israelis were using excessive force." Zuckerman assured us that "this impression was false," but no further evidence was provided. Unfortunately for Zuckerman, he happened to choose exactly the phrase—"excessive force"—that was used almost verbatim by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Physicians for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Commission, and the UN Security Council to characterize Israel's actions. He made no mention of how all of these eminent institutions managed to get the story wrong.

Anti-Palestinian media criticism abounds in the American press, but to a notable degree it consists of elliptical reasoning and baffling non sequiturs, not to mention clumsiness with facts. The Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), for instance, which takes out expensive full-page advertisements in papers like the *New York Times*, issued an 18 November press release headlined "Blatant Anti-Semitism on CNN." That is a serious charge. The smoking gun in this case was that "a Palestinian-American now living in Ramallah was paraphrased by CNN reporter Fionnu-

ala Sweeney as saying ‘she would have voted for George W. Bush because the Democratic vice presidential candidate, Joe Lieberman, is Jewish.’”

CAMERA dedicated an entire press release to this incident. The release did not allege that CNN’s reporter agreed with the anti-Semitic comment, only that the comment was reported—in CAMERA’s words—“as if this were a perfectly normal sentiment.” It could in some sense be argued that CNN’s report showed some subtle bias against the Palestinians, since a Palestinian woman with nakedly prejudiced opinions about the Jews was chosen to represent the Palestinian viewpoint. But subtlety is not a hallmark of such arguments, and “blatant anti-Semitism” is what CNN was accused of.

Even when criticism contains a kernel of truth, it typically overlooks the larger picture. CAMERA condemned the *New York Times* for “covering up” the Palestinian media’s incitement of violence against Israel. A *Times* article had quoted from a fiery sermon by a Palestinian cleric broadcast on Palestinian Authority television, without citing the sermon’s most incendiary passage, which urged the audience to “kill those Jews.” Journalistically speaking, the criticism is fair enough, but CAMERA neglected to point out an equally crucial omission in the *Times* article: The cleric who gave the sermon was arrested by the Palestinian Authority within hours of his speech.

Of all the baleful slanders directed against Israel by the allegedly pro-Palestinian U.S. media, it was the case of Tuvia Grossman that stood out in these critics eyes as the most outrageous. On 29 September, the first day of the al-Aqsa violence, the AP sent out a photograph of an injured man in Jerusalem crouching near an Israeli soldier holding a nightstick. AP’s caption identified the wounded man as a Palestinian, but he turned out to be an American Jew named Tuvia Grossman, who was studying at a Jewish seminary in Jerusalem. An AP editor in the Jerusalem office had received garbled information from the photographer who took the picture and hurriedly assumed the wounded man was a Palestinian hurt in the day’s demonstrations. In fact, Grossman had been beaten by a crowd of angry Palestinians as he tried to make his way to the Western Wall to pray. The AP photo was picked up by seven or eight U.S. newspapers, including the *New York Times*, along with the erroneous caption. When relatives of Grossman saw the photograph and recognized him, they called the AP to ask for a correction. The AP corrected the mistake and almost all of the newspapers promptly printed corrections as well.

To the untrained eye, the Grossman affair might seem like the sort of routine journalistic error that occurs every day in the news business. Corrections to erroneous stories appear all the time. No one alleged any deliberate falsification in the Grossman case: the vast majority of the injuries in Jerusalem the day the Grossman photograph was taken were sustained by Palestinians, so to assume that the wounded man was Palestinian does not seem to have required an enormous leap of logic.

But the pro-Israel media critics cried bias. Newspapers across the country carried angry commentaries and letters by supporters of Israel brandishing

the mislabeled photograph as palpable proof of long-held suspicions. The *Wall Street Journal* (“Carnage for the Cameras,” 6 October) and *New York Post* (“Impact Obvious—And Wrong,” 5 October) each ran entire op-eds about the photo. In the Rhode Island *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, the mislabeled photo was exhibit A in a commentary headlined “Anti-Israel Bias Warps American Minds” (13 October). According to a commentary by a reader in the *Albany Times Union* (25 October), the photo proved that pro-Palestinian “misreporting by the media has been rampant.” The *Daily Oklahoman* printed a column by one of its regular contributors accusing the media of “indirectly stimulating riots” by Palestinians (13 October). When Ted Koppel arrived at the East Jerusalem YMCA to produce a television special, he was “assailed by indignant American expatriates who complained to him about the mislabeled AP photograph” (*Jerusalem Post*, 13 October). “We’ve gotten a flood of e-mails and a number of phone calls about the photograph,” the editor of a Jewish newspaper in Boston told the *Boston Globe* (7 October).

The *New York Times* went to extraordinary lengths to remedy the error. After printing a correction setting out the facts, the *Times* published a second correction a few days later explaining that the officer in the photo was telling Palestinians to move away from Grossman—“not beating Mr. Grossman”—even though the original caption had not claimed the officer was beating Grossman. (The caption had simply said “An Israeli policeman and a wounded Palestinian.”) The correction apologized for having “omitted an explanation of the scene” of the photograph. But apparently, even these two corrections were not sufficient. The *Times* also ran a 670-word news article about the incident (7 October), tracing the caption error from its genesis in the AP’s Jerusalem newsroom to the *New York Times* and the other newspapers. The *Times* reprinted the photo, this time with an accurate caption.

To anyone familiar with the *New York Times*’s notorious reluctance to admit a mistake—especially about the Middle East—the Grossman case is striking. In 1999 and 2000, the *Times* incorrectly reported on seven separate occasions that Saddam Hussein’s government had expelled UN weapons inspectors from Iraq in December 1998—they had actually been withdrawn by the UN to protect them from U.S.-British air strikes—before finally printing a correction in February 2000. During the Gulf War, the *Times*’s editors ignored numerous letters and phone calls urging them to correct an article that reported that, unlike Iraq, “Israel is not in demonstrable violation of UN Security Council decrees.” (The *Times*’s sister paper in Europe, the *International Herald Tribune*, did print a letter to the editor pointing out that error.)

### STRIVING FOR BALANCE?

American journalists probably feel more pressure about their coverage of Israel than any other subject. That is true even of my organization, FAIR. Despite having a readership that is overwhelmingly sympathetic to our pro-

gressive critique of the media, our Middle East coverage invariably elicits angry letters and complaints, sometimes resulting in canceled subscriptions. According to Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of the liberal Jewish magazine *Tikkun*, his publication has felt “tremendous pressure” to alter its editorial position that Israel’s occupation is the “fundamental source of the problem.” Hundreds of subscribers have canceled their subscriptions, and donors have announced publicly that they will stop giving money to the magazine (*Democracy Now!*, 15 November 2000). This being the case, it is probably inevitable that the editors of many respectable American news outlets may conclude that the familiar principles of editorial balance do not apply to the subject of Israel.

*Newsweek’s* 16 October issue featured a sympathetic interview with Ariel Sharon conducted by Lally Weymouth, an American journalist who writes a pro-Israel opinion column in the *Washington Post* and who is part of the family that owns *Newsweek*. The next week’s issue “balanced” the Sharon piece with another interview by Weymouth, this time with the center-left Israeli prime minister, Ehud Barak. The enquiry featured such questions as, “You offered Arafat a generous deal. Why is he turning to violence?” *Newsweek* then featured an interview with former Israeli prime minister Netanyahu, followed by another Weymouth interview, with former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres. All together, *Newsweek’s* effort at editorial balance amounted to offering readers the thoughts of two Israeli leaders from the Left and two from the Right.

But what about the Palestinian side? The magazine did commission an essay by Azmi Bishara, an articulate Palestinian member of the Israeli parliament. Titled “The Wages of an Unjust Peace,” Bishara explained why, in his view, the peace process was forcing an unjust settlement on the Palestinian people. But *Newsweek* apparently did not have room for the Palestinian view. Bishara’s essay ran only in the magazine’s European edition—it did not appear in the United States.

In terms of interviews, *Time* magazine did make an effort at “even-handedness.” On 23 October it ran an interview with Ehud Barak under the heroic headline, “We Are a Tough and Small People.” For balance, Barak’s statement was paired with an interview with a Palestinian guerrilla fighter from the radical opposition group Hamas. The headline over that discussion: “I Shot an Israeli.”