

COVERING THE INTIFADA

How the Media Reported
the Palestinian Uprising

By Joshua Muravchik

THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE FOR NEAR EAST POLICY

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Preface

For the thousand days since September 2000, Israelis and Palestinians have been at war. Unlike a conventional conflict, this war began with Molotov cocktails and police batons, moved to deadly suicide bombings and tank-backed retaliatory raids, and then was characterized by the firing of homemade mortars and “targeted killings” by helicopter gunships. So far, about 3,000 have died, with thousands more wounded. Although popularly known as the “Palestinian uprising”—or intifada—these events should more accurately be regarded as war.

Popular perception, however, is often what matters most in the world of international politics, and this is certainly true of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Perhaps no international dispute has been the subject of as much press coverage—television, radio, print, and web-based—as the battle over rights, land, security, and survival in the Holy Land. Reportage from Ramallah, Gaza, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv often sets the diplomatic agenda; grisly images of human carnage at pizzerias, cafes, outdoor markets, and refugee camps often frame the debates in the White House, the United Nations Security Council, and capitals around the world. In the Middle East, journalists are often more than just conveyors of news—they have the power to shape the news and, in so doing, determine the path of future events.

Despite the significant role that journalists play as actors in this conflict, they are rarely the subject of rigorous, methodical, academic investigation. Two years ago, The Washington Institute decided to address this lacuna by undertaking a major research project to assess the quality and accuracy of reportage on the Palestinian “uprising” by elite U.S. media.

Thanks to a generous grant from Janine and Peter Lowy, valued Institute trustees, we were able to commission noted scholar and historian Joshua Muravchik to undertake this effort. Given Dr. Muravchik's previous work on media coverage—he is author of the definitive work on reportage of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, a book on news coverage of the Nicaraguan revolution, and numerous articles on how the media has covered issues ranging from U.S. defense spending to Cold War clashes with the Soviet Union—we were delighted that he agreed to take on this project. After two years of research, including reviewing dozens of hours of videotape and thousands of column inches of newspaper reportage, we are proud to present this study.

After dissecting ten newsworthy episodes during the course of the uprising, Dr. Muravchik presents an innovative way to evaluate the professionalism of U.S. reporters, producers, editors, and television anchors. His findings include the good, the bad, and the ugly: outstanding reportage by some, misinformed and error-plagued reportage by others, and patterns of outrageous reportage by a select few. Bias, he argues, is certainly present but not rampant. Superficiality; misinformation; lack of historical context; and reliance on narrow, skewed, or unrepresentative sources are greater and more pervasive problems. Although much of the reportage he evaluates is flawed, the problems, he notes optimistically, can be fixed—but only if journalists are willing to address them honestly, directly, and with an open mind. Perhaps most usefully, Dr. Muravchik offers a set of suggestions for improving the quality, depth, and accuracy of the reportage—suggestions that should reach the desks of top executives at major news outlets throughout the United States.

We believe a study on media reportage of the Arab-Israeli conflict is long overdue. This is a first installment of what we expect to be a regular feature on our research agenda.

Michael Stein
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introduction





The appalling violence between Israelis and Palestinians that began in September 2000 has been one of the most painful episodes in the history of the modern Middle East. People on both sides, and many outsiders, had hoped that the famous handshakes on the White House lawn in 1993 that sealed the Oslo agreements marked the beginning of the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Now those hopes seemed to have turned to ashes.

For Israel, the pain of dashed hopes was compounded by the sense that much of the world blamed it for the breakdown and looked upon the Palestinians as the victims. Some Israelis accused the international news media of bias against Israel. On the other side, however, some Arabs insisted it was they who were the victims of unfair coverage. Noting that they were criticized from both directions, news organizations tended to read this as proof of their objectivity, a plausible inference that was not necessarily well founded.

To assess the coverage, I have undertaken this study on behalf of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. It has been designed in collaboration with the Institute's director, Robert Satloff. It examines seven national news outlets: the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and five television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox). The television coverage examined is limited to the main nightly news broadcasts, which are a fixed ritual on the three older networks. Neither CNN nor Fox has an evening news program exactly equivalent to those of the older networks, but I have done my best to select the closest analogue.

Because it was beyond my ability to study two years of news reports, Dr. Satloff and I selected ten critical moments in the unfolding of this conflict, or the "al-Aqsa intifada," as it is sometimes called. For each of these, I have studied the news reports over a five-day period, generally beginning two days before some highlight

event occurred and continuing until two days afterward. We make no claim that these were the ten most important moments, since such a determination would have no particular relevance to the purposes of this study. Our goal was merely to take a manageable slice of these two years for examination. We might have taken fifty days at random, except that we wanted to make sure to choose days on which the Middle East tragedy was indeed in the news. (The *Times* and the *Post* carried at least one story from the area almost daily, but the television news often carried nothing about it except on those days when the conflict had heated up.)

To avoid inadvertent prejudice resulting from our selection of events, we tried to select a mix of occasions, including some on which the main story was about diplomacy and others on which it was about violence; some on which most of the victims were Israeli and others on which most were Palestinian. Our chosen episodes are "front loaded," that is, weighted toward the earlier part of the conflict. This is in part because there was so much drama at the outset, in part because the early reportage set a tone for much that followed, and in part because this study has taken some time to produce (being originally designed earlier in the intifada).

For the fifty selected days, I read carefully all news stories relevant to the Arab-Israeli conflict that appeared in the two newspapers. To examine the television coverage, I viewed each broadcast (thanks to the facilities of the Television News Archive of Vanderbilt University) and, in addition, read transcripts of the broadcasts.

Beyond the care I tried to take in examining the material, this study has no formal methodology. I find quantitative media analysis almost invariably unpersuasive. The number of times that a given term or thought appears in news reports is easy to count, but what does it prove? My "meth-

odology” is common sense. I am aiming to assess accuracy, fairness, and balance. These are values that lie at the heart of the American practice of journalism. My goal is to judge whether the news organizations met these standards, and, if they failed, then to assess how often and how severely. If only one or two of a journalist’s many stories fall short, not much should be made of it; no one is perfect (not even media critics). Yet, if a journalist or news organization repeatedly fails in the realms of accuracy or fairness, this amounts to a serious lapse of professionalism.

Where I have spotted a story that I believe merits criticism, I cite it and explain what I think is wrong. In most cases, I refrain from commenting on editorials, columns, or explicit opinion pieces, even though I have read many opinions with which I disagree. My concern in this study is not to counter such opinions but to judge whether the newspapers and networks I have examined have met the highest standards of their profession. In a few cases, however, I have noted erroneous assertions of fact within editorials, and in one case what seemed to me an absurd supposition.

Much more often, I criticize editorializing within news stories, that is, reportage that seems strongly colored by the journalist’s opinions. In addition, as I shall explain more in the body and the conclusion of the study, I believe I uncovered some systemic problems endemic to the asymmetry of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that have derogated from the quality of the coverage of these tragic events.

One obvious flaw in my method is the familiar “dog that did not bark” problem. Just as news organizations are often criticized for not reporting good news, so my analysis focuses on instances of dereliction on the part of journalists rather than on the many informative stories in which I found nothing to fault. Like others who

study political events, I rely heavily on the accounts of reporters from whose knowledge and skill I benefit. That they often have to work in hazardous conditions makes me all the more indebted to them.

Lastly, I must address the question of my own standing to judge. I do not claim to come to this subject as a dispassionate neutral. I am a Jew and a supporter of Israel. By the last term I mean that I strongly uphold Israel's right to exist (which I believe is a central question of the Arab-Israeli conflict), not that I necessarily agree with every action of each Israeli government. I do not consider that disagreement with, or criticism of, Israeli policy is tantamount to being "anti-Israel." Israelis themselves are often raucous in their own political disputes. Yet, obsessive or one-sided criticism of Israeli policies may reflect a deeper animosity to the state.

I do not believe that my strong support for Israel's existence prevents me from producing a rigorous analysis. As individuals and citizens, news reporters have opinions and political allegiances, yet this does not make it impossible for them to meet standards of accuracy and fairness. Likewise, I have made every effort not to be overmastered by my predilections, but rather to carry out this study with a discipline of reason, objectivity, fairness, and, of course, fidelity to fact. Readers will judge my success or failure at meeting those standards.

episode 1:

Sharon Visits
the Temple Mount





The "al-Aqsa intifada" began on September 28, 2000, following the visit by Ariel Sharon, then the leader of Israel's parliamentary opposition, to the Temple Mount. Sharon's stated purpose was to underscore his opposition to relinquishing Israel's sovereignty over Judaism's holiest site, an issue that had been on the table at the Camp David summit two months before. This position is anathema to the Palestinians, who also want sovereignty over the same place, which they call al-Haram al-Sharif—the location of Jerusalem's most sacred Muslim shrine and one of Islam's earliest objects of devotion, the al-Aqsa mosque. Sharon, moreover, is a particularly offensive figure to them because of his share of responsibility for the 1982 slaughter of hundreds of Palestinians by Lebanese Christian militiamen in the Beirut refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla.

The riot that followed hard on the heels of Sharon's visit to the mount ended without loss of life, although dozens of rioters and Israeli policemen were injured. The next day, rioting recommenced, spreading throughout the territories and resulting in several deaths. In the original Palestinian version of events, Sharon's visit was a provocation that inevitably sparked a spontaneous expression of rage from the grass roots. To the Israelis, the rioting was either orchestrated or encouraged by Palestinian officials in order to strengthen their bargaining position.

It is hard to doubt that the Palestinians found Sharon's visit provocative, but the renewed rioting on a second day, and then a third and fourth, suggested that additional factors were at work. This was confirmed some months later by Marwan Barghouti, probably the most important leader of the intifada, in an interview with the *New Yorker*. "The explosion would have happened anyway," Barghouti stated. "It was necessary in order to

protect Palestinian rights. But Sharon provided a good excuse. He is a hated man.”¹

News organizations varied in the amount of emphasis given to Sharon’s visit. The *New York Times*, which almost invariably characterized Sharon as “right-wing” or “rightist” (although the paper rarely, if ever, referred to the Labor Party prime minister, Ehud Barak, as “left-wing” or “left-ist”), focused more intently than any other outlet on Sharon’s role in stimulating the violence.

The first day’s riots were described by *Times* correspondent Deborah Sontag as “clashes . . . provoked by Mr. Sharon’s visit” (September 29, 2000), which was fair enough. The next day, however, a *Times* editorial underscored the point, chastising Sharon for having behaved “provocatively” and explaining to readers that “authority over [the Temple Mount] is the most sensitive remaining issue in the peace talks . . . the key to a final settlement.” This was simply wrong: sovereignty over the Temple Mount was one of a handful of crucial issues that remained unresolved, including borders and the so-called “right of return” of Arabs who had fled Israel in 1948, arguably the most sensitive issue of all. That evening, NBC’s Tom Aspell, perhaps having read the *Times’* take, made the same mistake, commenting that “the whole Middle East peace process is deadlocked over which side will control” the mount.

On October 1, the *Times* was still focused on Sharon’s pilgrimage, as correspondent William Orme wrote of “the third day of fierce fighting set off by the defiant visit.” And two days after that, Orme wrote much the same again: “A defiant visit by Israel’s right-wing opposition leader to the most sacred Islamic site in Jerusalem ignited Palestinian protests.” In this recapitulation, Orme reminded his readers of the importance of the mount to Muslims but failed to mention its (still more primary) importance to Jews, although he might just as easily have used a phrase such as “a site sacred to both faiths.” By stating the one

fact without the other, Orme risked leaving the impression that Sharon's aim was to set foot gratuitously on a Muslim shrine when in fact it was to assert Israel's claim to a Jewish shrine. Even if his action was ill timed or ill considered, there is a considerable difference between the two intentions.

This points to an additional issue, namely, that the site is holy to Christians as well, but no mention of this fact was found in the coverage examined for this study. It was as if the intensity of the Jewish-Muslim tug-of-war canceled out Christian interests entirely.

On October 3, another *Times* editorial summed up the events this way: "The precipitating incident was a provocative and irresponsible visit by the Likud leader, Ariel Sharon. . . . But the fighting has now taken on a life of its own." In other words, the culprits were (1) Sharon and (2) the impersonal force of momentum. This interpretation was striking for what it omitted. The day after Sharon's visit—the day that the violence turned deadly—was a Friday, and an estimated 22,000 worshippers packed al-Aqsa for weekly services. They were treated to a vitriolic and incendiary sermon by the imam, Shaykh Hayan al-Idrisi, known for his outspoken anti-Semitism and opposition to the Camp David negotiations, who warned that "the Jews" were intending to replace the mosque with a synagogue or temple. He added hortatively, "The Muslims are ready to sacrifice their lives and blood to protect the Islamic nature of Jerusalem and El Aksa!"²

In her account of that day's violence, the *Times'* Sontag made brief mention of the sermon in the twenty-sixth paragraph of a twenty-seven-paragraph story, citing Israeli police officials who pointed to it as an incitement. Her account agreed that the sermon "did . . . raise anxieties by talking about Jewish extremists," but this was a misleading description since the sermon was squarely aimed at "the Jews" per se, not at "ex-

tremists." A few days later, *Washington Post* correspondent Lee Hockstader gave something of the sermon's flavor, quoting the shaykh as having encouraged worshipers to "eradicate the Jews from Palestine" (October 4).

None of the television news broadcasts examined in this study carried any mention of the sermon. Nor did any explore the larger question to which it pointed about the role of the Palestinian leadership in instigating the violence. The *Post's* Hockstader reported that, beginning on the third day of violence, Palestinian television "carried archival footage [of] the Palestinian uprising of the late 1980s and early 90s, and played militant songs urging Palestinians to rise up and take to the streets" (October 4). This was not reported in the *Times* or on any of the television networks, according to the findings of this study. Neither did any of the networks report the fact that the Palestinian Authority (PA) closed schools during the first several days of the intifada, apparently to encourage students to take part in the riots. (PA minister of information Yasir Abed Rabbo denied that this was the motive, arguing that the schools were closed to protect the children from Israeli snipers.³ But this explanation is unpersuasive since the school closures were part of an official Palestinian "general strike" and since those youngsters who were hit by Israeli gunfire were almost always involved in rock throwing or standing nearby and rarely if ever were just walking to school.)

In one rare case in which the question of Palestinian incitement was raised on U.S. television, it was with a sarcastic twist that emphasized Israeli culpability. On the fourth day of rioting, ABC correspondent Gillian Findlay reported that "Sharon . . . whose visit to the site of their sacred mosque sparked these riots . . . refused to accept responsibility" (October 1). Then she added, referring to the Barak government, "The men who could have stopped Sharon's

visit and didn't today blamed Palestinian leaders." In other words, Israeli complaints about Palestinian incitement were not reported straight—as Palestinian complaints about Israeli behavior often were on ABC—but rather in a way that made the Israeli complaint itself a damnable hypocrisy.

The second day of violence, which happened to be the Jewish New Year, began when worshipers emerged from al-Aqsa, where they had heard Shaykh al-Idrisi's sermon. Hurling thousands of rocks and bottles, they besieged an Israeli police post nearby and began raining projectiles on Jews praying below at the Wailing Wall, which is located at the base of the mount. Israeli police escorted Jewish worshipers away from the wall and then charged up onto the mount in order to rescue their comrades in the besieged outpost. Firing rubber-coated bullets and sometimes, it seems, live ammunition, they caused the death of four Palestinians. An Israeli soldier died in nearby Qalqilya that day when his Palestinian counterpart in a joint patrol turned on him suddenly and gunned him down along with another Israeli who survived his wounds.

The *Times'* account of that day's grim events clearly reported the stoning of Jewish worshipers at the Wailing Wall (Orme, October 1), but the *Post's* story failed to mention it. Of the three television networks reporting the events on that evening's news, CBS gave the clearest account, with reporter David Hawkins explaining that "the Israelis opened fire after Palestinian protesters showered rocks and bottles down on Jewish worshipers and tourists" (September 29). NBC's version was much less informative. "Israeli riot police stormed the shrine, opening fire with rubber bullets and live ammunition on Palestinians who were throwing stones," reported Tom Brokaw, without mentioning the Wailing Wall or the police outpost (September 29). Then he added that "the riots began after Israel's conservative Ariel Sharon went to the Temple Mount to show that Jews were in

control." There was no way for viewers to know that Sharon's visit had occurred the day before, nor about the connection between the riots and that day's services at al-Aqsa.

The most remarkable reportage was on ABC, where Gillian Findlay described the violence on the mount without mentioning the assault on the worshipers at the Wailing Wall or the siege of the police outpost. Indeed, her choice of words seemed to downplay any Palestinian provocation: "Israeli police and soldiers rarely come here. This is the second day in a row they have flexed their muscles here, and Palestinians are furious," she stated (September 29). This one-sided version followed an opening by anchor Peter Jennings in which he declared that "four Palestinians were killed by Israelis on [the Temple Mount] today." No mention was made of the Israeli who was killed by a Palestinian in Qalqilya.

Findlay went on for several sentences blaming Sharon for the outbreak, citing both Palestinian and Israeli critics of his visit the previous day and concluding thus: "Sharon said he came to insist that Israel must control this place. Palestinians again today vowed that would never happen." This conclusion, perhaps a pale echo of the shaykh's incendiary warnings, suggested that Sharon was out to change the status quo. In truth, Sharon's gesture was aimed at reaffirming the status quo that had existed since 1967, under which Israel claimed sovereignty over the mount but left its administration in the hands of the Muslim clergy. This had been put in question by Prime Minister Barak's willingness at Camp David to relinquish Israel's sovereignty.

Findlay also reported, without any show of doubt or opportunity for denial from the other side, that "doctors who treated the wounded accused the soldiers of aiming to kill." Since Jennings had stated that, in addition to the four dead, 200 Palestinians had been injured, this claim by Palestinian medical personnel was all

but absurd on its face. If less than 2 percent of the injured died, what was the likelihood that the Israelis were "aiming to kill"? And how could the doctors tell this from the wounds? What could they deduce from the wounds of the 98 percent who survived? None of the other networks saw fit to air the "aiming to kill" accusation.

The third day's clashes were still more violent, with a larger number of deaths, highlighted by that of twelve-year-old Mohammed al-Dura, whose last terrible hour was caught on film by a Palestinian cameraman for a French television network. Mohammed and his father cowered behind a concrete barrel at the Netzarim junction in Gaza, where Palestinian rioters had besieged an Israeli military outpost. The rioters hurled rocks and Molotov cocktails, and some of them fired guns. From their fortified position, Israeli soldiers responded with gunfire. The boy was hit, and his father appealed in vain for a halt to the firing. A half hour or so later, the son was hit again and died beside his father, who himself suffered nine separate bullet wounds but survived. Young al-Dura at once became "a potent new symbol of what angry Palestinians contend is their continued victimization" (*New York Times*, Orme, October 2). ABC's Findlay reported that "the video of twelve-year-old Mohammed plays on Palestinian television non-stop." Then she added, with apparent indignation, "It has appeared on Israel's most popular TV station exactly twice," implying that this amounted to downplaying the story.

Initially, most U.S. news organizations were cautious about saying who had fired the fatal shots, noting only that the boy had died "in a crossfire" (CBS, October 1). The one on-scene correspondent from the news organizations covered in this study who immediately blamed Mohammed's death on "Israeli fire" was ABC's Findlay (October 1). In addition, NBC anchor John Siegenthaler twisted the meaning of the report by his own correspondent, Tom Aspell. Siegenthaler prefaced Aspell's

report with this summary: "Israeli troops opened fire, killing twelve people, including a twelve-year-old boy caught in the crossfire" (September 30). But Aspell reported only that the boy had died in a crossfire, not that the fatal shots had come from the Israelis. Four days after the tragic event, most of the other news organizations abandoned their agnosticism and stated or implied that the shots that had killed the boy had indeed come from the Israelis (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*, Fox, October 4). The reason for this shift was not hard to find. As the Associated Press's Laura King reported in a story carried in the *Post*, "The [Israeli] Army acknowledged later that its soldiers apparently fired the fatal shots and expressed sorrow" (October 4).

After the early acceptance of responsibility by the Israeli spokesman, the Israeli army ordered a formal investigation, and several months later it concluded that its soldiers probably had not fired the fatal shots. This conclusion was subsequently reinforced by an investigative program broadcast in March 2002 by the German television network ARD.⁴ While most of the rocks and Molotov cocktails were thrown from the direction of the intersection where the rioters had massed, a pair of apartment buildings used as barracks by Palestinian policemen stood behind the Israeli outpost, and some of the shooting on the Palestinian side came from those buildings. Shots directed from there at the Israeli outpost would have been on a line that led to the intersection where Mohammed and his father were crouching. These and other details about the shooting (e.g., the facts that Israeli weapons have better sights, that Israeli fire tends to be more disciplined than that of the Palestinians, who are less trained, and that Mohammed and his father were not amid any group of shooters or stone throwers) led the German crew to conclude that the Palestinian barracks were a more likely source of the fire that killed Mohammed than the Israeli position.

Because the Palestinian hospital where Mohammed and his father were taken claimed to have recovered not a single one of the roughly dozen bullets that hit the two, it will never be known which side's fire killed Mohammed. But the incident, which is likely to live forever in Palestinian lore, also symbolizes a profound asymmetry in the public relations activities of the two sides. The Israelis had acknowledged culpability, on the basis of superficial information, for a shooting that they later concluded (plausibly) had not been done by them. In contrast, the Palestinians never acknowledged a shred of doubt in fixing the blame on the other side and making the shooting out to have been deliberate, when in truth, even if the fire did come from Israeli guns, it almost certainly was accidental, the boy having been a bystander to violent demonstrations. Yet, PA chairman Yasir Arafat's top advisor, Nabil Abu Rudeineh, told the *Times*, "This is a killing in cold blood, an attack on an innocent child without any excuse. This cannot be forgiven" (Orme, October 1).

In a similar vein, referring to the rioters who died from Israeli gunfire during those few days, Arafat lieutenant Nabil Sha'ath accused the Israelis of "premeditated murder" (CBS, September 30; NBC, *Washington Post* [Hockstader], October 1). Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, sounding a theme that was to be repeated often over the next two years, stated, "It's a massacre being committed against the Palestinian people . . . a complete massacre" (NBC, October 1; *Washington Post* [Hockstader], October 3). Ironically, if there was a single deadly shooting "in cold blood" or "premeditated murder" during these first days of the intifada, it was the killing of the Israeli policeman by his Palestinian partner in Qalqilya on September 29.

In short, while Israeli spokesmen seemed to strive to provide truthful answers even while straining to put their nation's best foot forward, Palestinian spokesmen conducted themselves as if

they felt no similar constraint. Yet, in the apparent interest of evenhandedness, the news organizations reported the two sides' claims equally and gave every appearance of treating them with equal credulity. A rare departure from this occurred when Sharon, defending his visit to the mount, pointed out that any Arab was free to visit the Israeli Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, a site of great sensitivity to Jews. In reporting Sharon's point, the *Times*' Sontag followed it with a rebuttal of her own, reminding readers that "Yad Vashem is not a religious site" (October 2). Nowhere in the stories reviewed for this study did she rebut the arguments of any Palestinian spokesman she quoted.

Despite Erekat's continued insistence that all the shooting was on one side, by October 1, virtually all major U.S. news organizations were reporting that the confrontations involved gunfire from the Palestinians as well. Still, there were numerous reports echoing the Palestinian accusation that the Israelis were using disproportionate force. And Israeli denials were sometimes brushed aside in odd non sequiturs. For example, CNN's Mike Hanna reported: "Israel says its forces are using lethal force only when Israeli lives are at risk. But Amnesty International and other independent organizations record that the overwhelming majority of . . . wounded are Palestinian" (October 2). The word "but" suggested that the second sentence nullifies the first, but it does not. Similarly, the *Times*' Orme discounted the Israeli version of the scene at Netzarim junction without directly contradicting it: "Israeli Army spokesmen said the troops came under live fire from the Palestinian police. But television footage of the incident, including the shooting of the 12-year-old boy, and the absence of any serious Israeli casualties, served to reinforce the Palestinians' belief that the Israelis were responding with disproportionate force" (October 1). Additional film footage that circulated as the al-Dura story reverberated indeed showed many

Molotov cocktails hitting the Israeli post and much Palestinian fire.

Three days later, the *Times* carried a feature story by Orme on "the case being made here by Palestinians and some Israelis here, as well as by diplomats abroad, that Israeli forces have employed deadly force too readily" (October 4). Orme claimed that "there are many documented instances of close-range shooting at eye level," although he did not explain how they were "documented." The *Post's* Hockstader also wrote about the second day's violence that "Palestinian officials [stated] at least seven people . . . had been hit in the eye by Israeli bullets" (September 30). Were Israeli marksmen trained to aim for the eyes? And was their fire so accurate? These claims cried out for verification before being reported.

episode 2:

Barak's Ultimatum





During the second week of the al-Aqsa intifada, few foresaw that it might continue for a long time. The peace process had endured for seven years, and a week of mayhem, however upsetting, seemed an anomaly. The week was highlighted by three things: a public ultimatum issued by Prime Minister Ehud Barak warning the Palestinians that failure to end the intifada would lead to a harsher Israeli response; the destruction of a Jewish holy place, Joseph's Tomb in Nablus; and bloodshed inside Israel's 1967 borders, where thirteen Arabs died in clashes between Jewish and Arab Israelis. Much of the reportage aimed at discovering the underlying dynamics and causes of all this unexpected violence.

Israel's version was that the violence was initiated by the Palestinians and that it was fomented, if not directed, by Yasir Arafat. This was the reasoning behind Barak's ultimatum. In contrast, the Palestinians claimed that Israel had attacked them largely unprovoked, was continuing to attack them, and was employing excessive force. This indictment was somewhat inconsistent in that the concept of "excessive force" seems to imply that some lesser amount of force might have been appropriate, implicitly conceding that Israel was responding to provocation. If Israel was engaged in naked aggression, as the Palestinian spokesmen usually suggested, then the use of force was illegitimate per se, regardless of its level.

Despite Barak's warning, Palestinian spokesmen described Israeli action in terms suggesting that it was already so severe that it could scarcely be intensified. According to the *Washington Post* (Keith Richburg, October 5, 2000), Arafat claimed that a "serious massacre" was "being perpetrated against the Palestinian people." On CNN, Palestinian spokeswoman Hanan Ashrawi stated that Israel's army was waging a "unilateral war against the civilian popu-

lation" (October 7), while Saeb Erekat again stated that "Palestinians are being massacred" (October 9). Ashrawi also appeared on NBC, proclaiming angrily that "a whole nation is being killed every day and being asked to lie back and to die quietly, not even to defend themselves" (October 8).

What did the various news outlets say about the causes of the continuing violence? In the *New York Times*, William Orme and Jane Perlez reported that Arafat "said he was willing to resume peace talks, but 'first we must stop the massacres against our people'" (October 6). They added that "the radical Islamic movement Hamas . . . bitterly chastised Mr. Arafat for negotiating while the violence continued," which made Arafat seem something of a beleaguered peace-seeker. Yet, their explanation of Hamas's position was strange since Hamas was neither against violence nor in favor of negotiations. It proclaimed its goal to be the destruction of Israel and its belief, accordingly, in "armed struggle" as the means to attain that goal. Orme and Perlez offered no explication for their odd report. In the same story, they wrote that "the Israelis have refused an international commission, arguing it could prove . . . unsympathetic to Israeli security interests." This, too, was an odd formulation, for Israel's professed fear was not that a commission might find fault with Israel but that it might be so prejudiced at the outset as to guarantee a one-sided conclusion. The word "biased" rather than "unsympathetic" would have conveyed Israel's position more accurately.

Two days later, the *Times*' Sunday "Week in Review" section carried a 1,200-word piece by John Kifner devoted to debunking "the underlying assumption—shared by Israeli officials who accused Mr. Arafat of 'orchestrating' the violence— . . . that he had the power to swiftly turn [it] off" (October 8). Kifner quoted an anonymous "Western expert" who stated that "Arafat's authority has eroded over the years," adding that "there is a

tremendous frustration among Palestinians . . . an awful lot of rage” as a result of “the perception . . . that the Israelis want to drag the process out, to build new settlements [and] expand existing ones.” Kifner also quoted Israeli dissident Meron Benvenisti, who scorned the view that Arafat was in charge as “a typical approach of Israeli . . . so-called Arab experts.” And Kifner concluded with quotes from a young member of the Tanzim, the Palestinian group that was initiating much of the violence, saying “the Israelis think that Arafat controls us like puppets . . . but we are a force on our own.” Kifner did not see fit to quote anyone with a view contrary to his own thesis.

Washington Post news columns also conveyed doubts about Israel’s view that Arafat was responsible for the violence. “Many suspect that with emotions running so high, Arafat may not be able to halt the violence even if he wants to,” reported Lee Hockstader (October 7). Hockstader went on to explain:

The Palestinians’ sense of grievance is bound up in long-standing and unmet demands—for an independent state with East Jerusalem as its capital; for the return of refugees who fled or were forced from their homes in Israel’s 1948 War of Independence; for the release of prisoners held for years in Israeli jails; and for the return of West Bank and Gaza territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war.

The question of what, exactly, the Palestinians were fighting for was a crucial one. And the interpretation Hockstader introduced here—that the Palestinians were after a return of the territories Israel captured in 1967—was to be repeated often in *Post* coverage over the next two years, although it was tendentious. Most Americans and Europeans, even most Israelis, believed that these territories, or the larger part of them, should be given over to the Palestinians. If this was indeed the Palestinians’ goal, then

there was much reason to sympathize with them. If, however, their goal was to destroy Israel, then the Palestinians' struggle would deserve less sympathy.

Alas, there was much evidence that the Palestinians had not abandoned the aim of ruling all of mandatory Palestine, including the parts that constituted Israel within its pre-1967 borders. In public opinion polls, a plurality of Palestinians stated that this was their goal, and the official Palestinian Authority (PA) maps and textbooks invariably portrayed "Palestine" as encompassing Israel proper as well as the occupied territories. This, too, was the implication of the demand for the return of the 1948 refugees mentioned by Hockstader without any explication. The return of these refugees and their progeny, or all the millions who claimed such status, would suffice to ensure that Israel would no longer be a majority Jewish state. In short, Hockstader and several of his colleagues who used similar language were putting their own benign spin on the intifada. Eventually, the *Post's* ombudsman acknowledged that objections to this formulation constituted a "fair criticism of its reportage."⁵ But the paper's correspondents ignored his assessment; they went on using such language with undiminished regularity.

Hockstader was also on shaky ground in his reference to "prisoners held for years in Israeli jails." Such prisoners had indeed been a sensitive issue in the Oslo negotiations, but in the end Israel had released them all, even those guilty of murder. The Palestinians in Israeli jails at the time of Hockstader's article were those who had been incarcerated for new acts of violence perpetrated after Oslo.

While Hockstader's summary of Palestinian goals put them in a favorable light, his description of Israeli actions was far from sympathetic. "Instead of a deft tap," he reported, Prime Minister Barak "has authorized firepower that is being criticized

as indiscriminate and excessive. . . . Television footage of Israeli soldiers using tear gas, rubber-coated bullets, antitank weapons and helicopter gunships against armed and unarmed rioters has generated a storm of criticism that Barak has gone too far" (October 9). Later in the article, Hockstader added, "Mustafa Barghouti, a Palestinian physician who heads a medical association in the West Bank, accused Israel of employing a heavily disproportionate use of force. 'I don't think they need those kind of weapons to protect their own troops,' he said. 'They're so well equipped, so well protected.'" Hockstader's citing of Barghouti was misleading. Medical personnel are universally respected, and while they may, as individuals, have a loyalty to their own side, they are nonetheless, as professionals, often presumed to have a degree of objectivity. *Post* readers had no way of knowing that Barghouti, while he may be a physician, serves primarily as a Palestinian political leader (he was, for example, a member of the Palestinian delegation to the 1991 Madrid peace conference) and was presented as such in numerous citations by other journalists.

Reinforcing the image of a heartless Israel in another story, Hockstader wrote on October 5:

Some Israelis have Arab acquaintances but few have Arab friends, and the mounting death toll among Palestinians has registered with most Israelis more as a statistic than as individual human tragedies. 'Our deaths are stories, but theirs are just numbers,' said the headline on an unusually frank article in the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* this week.

The essence of Hockstader's assertion—that Israelis are callous to Palestinian suffering—is impressionistic and cannot be proved or disproved, but his reference to the *Ha'aretz* article was misleading. *Ha'aretz* is the flagship of the liberal side of the Israeli spectrum, and for it to carry articles that are self-critical from an Israeli perspective is anything but "unusual."

This illustrates one of the several asymmetries in the Arab-Israeli news environment. Israel has numerous publications and journalists that are sharply critical of their own government's policies, and even those that are pro-government share with the presses of other democracies an ethos of seeking and reporting the truth even if it is embarrassing to their own side. Many of the stories in the Western press that put Israel on the defensive originate in the Israeli press. Nothing comparable exists on the Arab side.

On the television news, only the occasional broadcast suggested an explanation for the violence. On October 9, ABC correspondent Gillian Findlay reported that

Palestinian leaders say they have been trying to rein in the gunmen but they also warn that as long as Israeli troops keep killing Palestinians there will be little anyone can do. 'Israel started this war,' said security chief Muhammad Dahlan today, 'everything Israel is doing is making Palestinian anger stronger.'

Neither Findlay nor anchor Peter Jennings said a word to cast doubt on the claim that Israel was the initiator of the violence, nor did they balance Dahlan with any Israeli spokesman who might have contradicted him. On the contrary, as if to give credence to the image of Israelis as unprovoked aggressors, Findlay went on to say that "there are reports of Israeli helicopters opening fire on civilian homes in Hebron." She did not explain further, although it is hard to imagine that this report of a report was accurate unless the helicopters were returning fire. There was no similar report from the other outlets examined in this study.

ABC also lent more credence than any other outlet to the charge that Israel was employing excessive force. Findlay reported: "The Israelis say they are practicing restraint, but at this hospital, doctors say they are still seeing plenty of evidence of live ammunition, plenty of evi-

dence the soldiers are still shooting to kill—chest wounds, head wounds” (October 6). This made it sound as if Israel’s claims were false, but why should the accounts of the Palestinian doctors be taken at face value, as Findlay seemed to take them? And what were those individuals doing at the time they were shot? If they were shooting at the Israelis, then were the Israelis to be faulted for firing back?

By this time, many news reports had verified Israel’s complaints that Palestinian gunmen were firing from amid the mobs of youthful stone throwers. Yet, in another report, Findlay seemed to cast doubt on this: “In Gaza, Israeli soldiers opened fire on schoolboys throwing stones” (October 10). Did she mean to assert that no gunmen were among the “schoolboys”? If so, how could she have known this? On still another occasion she reported, “In Gaza, Israeli troops blew up two Palestinian apartment buildings, buildings they say Palestinian gunmen had been using for cover” (October 8). She did not say—as, for example, Keith Richburg reported in the *Washington Post*—that the two “apartment buildings” in fact served as barracks for the Palestinian security forces. Nor was it merely Israel’s contention that gunmen operated from those buildings: footage of shooting from them had been shown on the air. Indeed, it was from those buildings that the fatal shots that killed young Mohammed al-Dura had probably been fired, according to the assessment of the German television broadcast mentioned in “episode 1” of this study.⁶

On October 9, NBC correspondent Andrea Mitchell’s explanation of the violence offered a novel twist:

To many, peace seemed so close at Camp David in July. How did it all fall apart? First, Palestinian resentment on the street, people see no economic rewards . . . and they resent the U.S. for blaming Arafat when the summit collapses while praising Israel’s Prime Minister Barak.

In other words, the fault lay not with Arafat for refusing to negotiate at Camp David but with

President Bill Clinton for criticizing Arafat's refusal.

CNN was the other network to lend support to the accusation that Israel was using excessive force. When the United States abstained on a United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution critical of Israel, Mike Hanna explained that it was "a pointed gesture from the United States towards the Israelis that activities within the last week have become virtually indefensible" (October 7). But Hanna's version was at odds with the explanation given by U.S. officials. UN ambassador Richard Holbrooke stated that the resolution had evoked his "clear distaste," but that "vetoing it would have created . . . further problems in the region for us as the honest broker and negotiator."⁷

On October 7, CNN ran a string of interviews, all from one side. First, correspondent Mike Hanna spent four minutes on camera with Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat, who said that the underlying motive behind Barak's ultimatum was that he wanted an "exit strategy from the peace process." Hanna did not press Erekat on why that might be, an obvious question in view of the fact that Barak had staked his leadership on the peace process. This was followed by an equally long interview of Palestinian spokeswoman Ashrawi, who claimed that the "Israeli army" was waging a "unilateral war against the civilian population." This, too, passed unchallenged by the interviewer, Wolf Blitzer. Following Ashrawi, CNN brought on John Daly of the Middle East Institute, a Saudi-funded Washington think tank. Daly criticized Barak and Sharon but not Arafat or any other Palestinian, and he called for turning the whole problem over to the UN. As against these three Arab or pro-Arab spokesmen, no one on that evening's news presented Israel's side of the argument.

The next evening, CNN treated viewers to the silliest media moment in this mostly unfunny episode. The lead-in to that evening's report stated,

“Unrest in the Middle East has spread to other Arab nations. Thousands marched in Baghdad, Iraq, Sunday to condemn Israel.” Could the network have been unaware that, under the iron-fisted rule of Saddam Husayn, spontaneous political demonstrations did not occur in Baghdad? When thousands marched against Israel (or for any other reason), it was because they were ordered to march. The last thing in the world this march bespoke was “unrest.”

That week was also witness to one of the more important exercises of media self-policing. On October 7 the *Times* ran a story clarifying an erroneous photo caption it had published during the first days of violence. The photo showed a dazed victim, blood streaming down his face, whom the caption identified as a Palestinian sitting near an armed Israeli soldier. In fact, the injured man was a Jewish American student, Tuvia Grossman of Chicago, who, together with two friends, had been pulled from a taxi in Arab Jerusalem by a mob that attempted to beat them to death by battering their heads with stones. They had escaped, albeit injured, to the protection of the Israeli soldier pictured in the photo. The caption falsely describing Grossman as a Palestinian had been attached to the photo distributed by the Associated Press and was carried by many newspapers in addition to the *Times*. Whatever fault the *Times* bore in having run the caption and then a brief, insufficiently enlightening correction a few days later was counterbalanced by the full account of the story the *Times* gave on October 7. One can only wonder how many of the other papers that used the misleading caption corrected it as carefully as the *Times* did.

One wonders, too, how the Associated Press's error came about in the first place. Certainly it was not deliberate, but could it be that the overriding theme of Palestinian victimhood was coloring the lens through which reporters were viewing events? Were it not for the need to cor-

rect the earlier caption, the story of the assault on Grossman and his friends would never have run (it ran a week after the event). Was not a murderous mob attack on innocent Jewish American bystanders newsworthy? Aside from the effort by the *Times* to set the record straight on the caption, scarcely a story on acts of violence by Arab rioters against Jewish civilians appeared in the outlets reviewed for this study. Were there none?

The one exception was on October 6, when both CBS and NBC offered brief but vivid footage of Arab rioters on the Temple Mount once again showering stones and bottles on Jewish worshipers at the Wailing Wall below. In contrast, CNN showed Israeli security personnel charging onto the mount in response to these attacks. "Israeli police stormed a bitterly contested holy site, tearing down Palestinian flags," reported Judy Woodruff. But she offered neither a mention nor a view of the assault on the Jewish worshipers that precipitated the charge. No mention of these stonings was found to appear in the other media outlets reviewed for this study.

Coverage of another kind of anti-Jewish attack was also uneven, the destruction of Joseph's Tomb, a prayer site for orthodox Jews that the Oslo Accords stated should remain under the protection of Israeli forces. (As with many ancient sites, there is uncertainty about whether this was the actual site of Joseph's burial.) A shrine had been erected, and holy books were kept there for use in prayer. As it was located in Nablus, a densely populated Palestinian area, it became a flashpoint. Israel withdrew its forces from the site after the PA agreed to protect it, but it was trashed and burned soon after the Israeli departure. The *Washington Post*, in a dispatch from Richburg, carried a lengthier and more descriptive account of the "dismantling" of the tomb "brick by brick" (October 8) than did the *New York Times*, which mentioned it only

briefly, although adding a photo. Of particular interest was Richburg's description of some of the participants:

'I feel proud,' said Nasser Badawi, 35, a militiaman from Yasser Arafat's Fatah organization, who wore a gray T-shirt and had a shiny mini-AK-47 assault rifle slung across his back. He said he began pelting Israeli soldiers with rocks when he was 15 years old and only last week was able to fire on them with his automatic weapon. 'I feel like we did something today,' he said. 'This is victory.'

This account of the role of Arafat's own organization in the mayhem might have cast some light on the question of Arafat's role (that is, whether he was encouraging the violence or helpless to rein it in), yet no other news organization except NBC reported it, and even the *Post*, in other stories, did not seem to give much weight to the implications.

A few days later, the *Times*' Orme reported that "[t]he Palestinians invited observers to their hasty restoration work at Joseph's tomb" (October 11). Orme did not say whether he had accepted the invitation, and his story carried no description suggesting that he had been there, so it remained unclear whether any restoration had occurred. As it turned out, "restoration" was in fact performed: the building was transformed into a mosque.⁸

NBC correspondent Ron Allen provided a vivid account of the events at the tomb, including the fact that Palestinian police stood by passively during the destruction despite the PA's pledges. A day later, he also reported a retaliatory action that occurred at a mosque in the Israeli city of Tiberias. "A band of young men burned and looted this Moslem place of worship," he stated (October 7). The mosque was an old one, no longer in use, so it is unclear what "looted" may have meant. Fox and ABC also reported both events, with ABC's Gillian Findlay telling viewers that "angry Is-

raelis attacked and burned two of the city's mosques" (October 8). No correspondent other than Findlay reported multiple mosque burnings in Tiberias—and for good reason. There is only one mosque in Tiberias: the old, unused one. The town's population is almost entirely Jewish. No mention of either the Tiberias or the Joseph's Tomb attacks was found on CBS. CNN mentioned the attack on the tomb but only belatedly, in the context of Jerrold Kessel's report that "under Mr. Arafat's orders, repairs began on the Jewish shrine" (October 10).

Following the mosque report, Findlay showed an angry crowd of Israeli demonstrators. She translated their chants as "Death to the Arabs" and "We want blood." She then put on a single, threatening sentence from an interview with Barak: "Under the right of self-defense we will know what to do and how to act, how to respond, how to initiate those types [of action] that are needed." Then she switched to Saeb Erekat, who lamented "a very ugly scene" and appealed for the international community to "stop this madness and to stop hell from breaking loose." Comparing the view she offered of the two leaders, her audience would have been likely to conclude that it was the Palestinian side that was appalled by violence.

The arson attack in Tiberias was not the only violence within Israel. Arab Israelis in the northern part of the country rioted and blocked roads in support of their brethren in the territories. This led to deadly confrontations with police, and it also led to counter-riots by angry Jews who at one point swooped down from the Jewish town of Upper Nazareth into the Arab town of Nazareth, raining destruction. On October 10, *New York Times* correspondent Chris Hedges reported:

When the police arrived, they found groups of Israeli Arabs backed into alleys and throwing rocks at the Jewish demonstrators who were attacking the Arab area. The police pulled the Jewish protesters across the road and fired on the Arab crowd, shooting [two] dead.

That same day in the *Washington Post*, Richburg wrote:

Hundreds of Jewish civilians from a nearby town arrived . . . firing automatic weapons and brandishing clubs. Residents say they shouted 'death to the Arabs!' Two Arab citizens of Israel were killed. . . . Fifty others were injured. . . . Even for many here who are accustomed to the violence and invective, the attack by Jews against the Arabs of Nazareth was considered astonishing and difficult to explain.

And on October 9, CNN's Jerrold Kessel relayed

ominous reports . . . of more violence and rioting inside Israel . . . and by Jewish settlers on the West Bank against Palestinians there. But Jewish Israelis have taken to attacking Arab Israelis in various parts of the country. . . . [L]ast night in the town of Nazareth . . . two Israeli Arab citizens shot dead. . . . Minds and hearts have really been hardening . . . both in the streets of Ramallah and Gaza and now very much in the streets of Israel, as Jewish Israelis are taking on their fellow citizens, Arabs, and attacking them literally.

On ABC, anchor Peter Jennings stated, "Last night, two more Palestinians were killed by the Israelis in northern Israel, which led to demonstrations today in Palestinian towns, which led to confrontations with the Israeli army again" (October 9). And CBS's Richard Roth stated, "The nightmare has been a series of attacks on Israel's unnoticed minority" (October 11). The latter cliché seemed particularly inapt in an atmosphere thick with discourse about the "demographic factor" in the political struggle. Of all these accounts, only that of Hedges in the *Times* suggested that the Jewish riots were in response to provocation on the part of the Arab Israelis. Viewers of CNN or ABC would not have known that the two men who died were shot by police, not by the Jewish rioters.

Meanwhile, violence continued in the West Bank and Gaza, and there were several incidents in

which doubtful claims were made by Palestinians, and not just the leadership. In the *Post*, Richburg wrote, "Palestinians reported that a 9-year-old boy, identified as Mohammed Abu Assi, also was killed at Netzarim junction, shot in the chest during clashes" (October 5). But Richburg went on to say that "the Israeli military denied its troops fired the bullet that killed the boy, saying it had investigated the incident with the help of Palestinian officials." Netzarim junction was the spot where Mohammed al-Dura had died five days before. Had a second shooting of a still younger child by the Israelis in fact occurred, it seems all but certain that it would have received far more publicity.

In another dubious incident, Fox's David Lee Miller reported that "near . . . Ramallah a Palestinian man was found beaten to death" (October 9). The next day's *Washington Post* carried a fuller report by Richburg: "Two Palestinians were found dead this morning on the West Bank, apparently killed by Jewish settlers—or so the Palestinians believe. One . . . appeared to have been tortured and his mutilated body had been set on fire." While Richburg's phrase "so the Palestinians believe" established a modicum of reportorial distance, the reasons for such distance became clear only in the *New York Times* account that same day. There, correspondent Deborah Sontag reported that Palestinian

protesters and mourners became enraged by the announcement of an alleged brutal killing of a Palestinian by settlers. The 40-year-old man's skull was crushed, his bones broken and his body burned, the crowd was told. Palestinian television repeatedly showed pictures of the charred and mutilated body . . . and offered the opinion of some Palestinian officials that the killing justified an open season on settlers.

Two paragraphs later, Sontag added this enlightening note: "Israeli military officials, however, disputed the account of how the man had died.

They contend that the man, Isam Hamad, 36, died in a car crash north of Ramallah and that the Palestinians chose to exploit the terrible condition of his body.”

The oddest treatment of this incident was seen on CNN. On October 9, Ben Wedeman reported the Palestinian allegation that the victim had been killed by Israeli settlers and also reported that the Israeli authorities had investigated the death and discovered that the man had died in an automobile accident. Nonetheless, a night later Mike Hanna reported the story again, in a manner lending credence to the Palestinian claims. From the Ramallah hospital he stated:

Displayed here [are] pictures of the body. . . . According to the doctors, the man had been burnt with some kind of electrical implement as well as cigarettes. The X rays of his head indicate he was then beaten with heavy objects. The doctors here say he appeared to have been murdered. Now the Israelis claim that he was killed in a car accident.

Then Hanna turned to a doctor who stated, pointing to the pictures, “Look, you see. This is a car accident?” The net effect was to cast doubt on the Israeli version, not the Palestinian version, although it was the latter that was almost certainly fictitious.

episode 3:

The Ramallah
Lynching





On October 12, 2000, as the intifada began its third week, two Israeli reservists on their way to duty in the West Bank took a wrong turn and ended up amid a hostile crowd in Ramallah. Shortly thereafter at the Ramallah police station, they were murdered by the mob. Later that day, Israel retaliated by firing rockets into the by-then-empty police station and a few other sites. The reports of these traumatic events varied greatly in their tone and emphasis.

The most vivid account was provided by Deborah Sontag in the *New York Times* on October 13. "Israeli helicopter gunships rocketed Ramallah and Gaza City today after a Palestinian mob here stabbed and stomped to death two Israeli reserve soldiers and then paraded a mutilated body through town," began the story. It added:

Before the rockets started falling, Palestinian youths danced on the bloody spot where one Israeli was tossed through floral curtains into the mob below. In a call and response, they chanted: 'Here is where we gouged his eyes! Here is where we ripped off his legs! Here is where we smashed in his face!' One teenage boy joyously thrust in the air the oil dipstick from the charred carcass of the soldiers' car, which had been burnt by the mob and lay curled beneath a billboard that said, 'Rule of Law Project.'

In contrast, the *Washington Post* account by Keith Richburg was much milder. It began by explaining the context. "Like so many days here, this one began with a funeral" (October 13). The Palestinians were "grieving and angry." Only in the fifth paragraph did it get around to the murder, and then with none of the grisly detail to be found in the *Times*. The sixth paragraph consisted of a single sentence, isolated for emphasis. "The Israeli government's reaction was swift and harsh." Then the article quoted the ubiquitous Mustafa Barghouti—identifying him only as "a Palestinian

doctor in Ramallah," although he is in fact a spokesman and political leader—claiming that twenty-five people were injured, nineteen of them civilians, and adding "this is a massacre." The *Post* did not mention, as the *Times* had, that Israel gave the Palestinian Authority advance warning of its retaliatory strike so that the buildings could be emptied.

In the aftermath of the murders, Palestinians sought to extenuate them by claiming that the two soldiers were suspected of being Israeli undercover agents. Such agents do in fact infiltrate Palestinian areas, but these two were pulled from a car bearing Israeli license plates and were clothed in their military uniforms, which made the claim absurd. Nonetheless, the *Post's* Nora Boustany lent credence to it by reporting falsely that "at least some of" the reservists "were in civilian clothing" (October 13).

On October 14, both the *Times* (twice, in articles by Hedges/Perlez and Sontag) and the *Post* (Richburg) reported that Arafat had ordered a "very serious investigation" of the killings. In fact, no investigation appears to have taken place except by Israel, which some days later arrested a number of men believed to have been the perpetrators.

On ABC, Peter Jennings—who, on nights when Arabs had died, introduced the story with short declarative sentences about Arabs "killed by Israelis" as if to drive home the point that the circumstances were secondary—took a very different tack in this case. His preliminary sound bite was painstakingly evenhanded: "Israelis and Palestinians, another day of dead and wounded, each side accuses the other of going to war" (October 12). Then his lead-in was longer than usual, carefully painting the context:

It has been another terrible day of fighting between Israelis and Palestinians. There was a particularly ugly incident in the Palestinian city of Ramallah. Forty-thousand people

live there. This week they're all angry at the Israelis. There was about to be another funeral. Thousands of young men had congregated. At least two Israeli army reservists were clearly in the wrong place. They were stopped and taken into a police station. That was not enough for their protection.

Correspondent Gillian Findlay then reported the murders and the retaliation, devoting an equal number of lines to each, after which Jennings added this exquisitely balanced homily: "There are Israelis and Palestinians who do not want this peace plan to succeed. Yasir Arafat is vulnerable to those forces and so is Prime Minister Barak."

There was, however, a lot that was questionable about the equivalence that Jennings drew here. Barak was elected to his post in a parliamentary system, indeed, one known for the short life spans of its governments, whereas Arafat had ruled the Palestinian movement for more than thirty years (and had been elected president of the Palestinian Authority without meaningful opposition). It was true that Arafat was susceptible to internal political pressures, as is any authoritarian leader, but this is not equivalent to the situation of a parliamentary leader. Moreover, Barak had staked all his political chips on a peace settlement. He had tabled an offer embodying concessions that went well beyond anything that a majority in Israel's parliament had said it would support. His political strategy was apparent: if the Palestinians would agree to a settlement, he believed that the Israeli public would be so happy with the breakthrough that all demurrals about the terms of peace would be swept away. Arafat, on the other hand, had turned down the American compromises proposed at Camp David without even deigning to suggest an alternative, and, as the intifada proceeded, he was refusing to call for an end to the violence. So, while Jennings's words were literally true, the im-

pression they conveyed that the continuing violence was equally the will of the two sides was false.

Jennings then closed the segment with a report that carried his exercise in equivalence to the level of outright concoction. "And as everybody in the region has said today, nobody knows what will happen tomorrow. Various Palestinian factions as well as Jewish settlers in the territories are calling for another day of rage," he stated. The Palestinian groups did in fact often proclaim "days of rage," but the settlers, although guilty of occasional acts of violence, did nothing of the sort.

This strange insertion of the settlers into Jennings's report harkened back to his broadcast of the previous evening, when he had told viewers, "There are now more than a hundred Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories, and the settlers, the Jewish settlers, are now very involved in the violence" (October 11). This led into Findlay's report:

Ever since Rabbi Hillel Lieberman's bullet-ridden body was found three days ago, Jewish settlers have been talking revenge. Today, thousands of them turned out for the funeral and a procession that took them right past a Palestinian town. The settlers say the Palestinians threw the first stones, but soon the settlers were on a rampage. Attacking Palestinian homes, then turning on a truck driven by Palestinians. Israeli soldiers accompanying the convoy did little to stop the mob. It wasn't long before shots rang out from Palestinians hiding in the hills, the army says, and the soldiers began firing back. . . . Today, the army sent tanks to defend the settlers. The real worry is the settlers may go on the attack.

When word of the desecration of Joseph's Tomb had spread, Hillel Lieberman, an orthodox Jew in his thirties, had set off by foot to investigate it. He was apparently intercepted and murdered by Palestinians. Although reported elsewhere, this was not mentioned on ABC's evening news until

Findlay's remark. Only the "rampage" of Jewish settlers, in which no one died or even seemed to have been seriously injured, impelled ABC to note Lieberman's murder.

On October 13, Jennings continued this tack. He prefaced that evening's broadcast with the question: "What does a day of rage mean between Israelis and Palestinians?" He did not repeat his previous claim that Jewish settlers had, like Palestinians, proclaimed a "day of rage." Indeed the broadcast contained nothing about the settlers, presumably because there had been no action that day on their part. Still, Jennings labored to preserve his tendentious equation by observing that "rage [is] felt by both Israelis and Palestinians." But the example of Jewish "rage" that he presented was nothing of the kind. He reported: "And today in Jerusalem, Israeli security forces barred Palestinians under the age of forty-five from praying at the al-Aqsa mosque. So, young Palestinians prayed outside, and some young men were chased and beaten by Israeli police, which may help make clear why arranging a summit is so difficult."

The reason young men had been barred from the Friday prayers was that these occasions had repeatedly turned into riots, with rocks and bottles being tossed down on the Jewish worshipers at the Wailing Wall beneath. Nor was the action of the Israeli police an expression of "rage" (although the officers may have been angry), but rather a method of chasing away young men who had defied the ban. The claim that this event explained the difficulty of renewing negotiations was disingenuous since it was Arafat who at this point was standing in the way.

CNN's Christiane Amanpour reported from the region that week, placing great stress on what she made clear she believed was the excessive use of force by Israel. In an interview with one Israeli cabinet minister, she pressed: "Even the supporters of Prime Minister Barak are saying that he's just gone too far this time, that there simply is

too much force being used against stone throwers” (October 10). What was striking about this was the phrase “even the supporters.” If the prime minister had come from Israel’s hardline camp, then the assertion would have been coherent, but Barak was very much a dove. It was not clear whom Amanpour was referencing, if anyone or anything at all other than her own feelings. But if she meant that some of the most dovish Israelis criticized Barak’s use of force (few in reality did), then her phrase still made little sense since there would have been nothing remarkable about their stance.

Later in the same broadcast, she mentioned some acts of violence that had occurred inside Israel proper, perpetrated by Jews against Arab Israelis: “A new sort of ugly dimension has come into this: Jewish settlers turning on Israeli citizens who happen to be Arabs.” This was a further muddle. The settlers were not in Israel proper but in the territories, and the Arabs there were not Israeli citizens. The violence inside Israel’s 1967 borders did not have anything to do with settlers. While Amanpour betrayed strong opinions about the conflict, she seemed strangely deficient in the most elementary background knowledge.

episode 4:

The Sharm
al-Shaykh Summit





On October 16 and 17, 2000, the leaders of Israel, Jordan, Egypt, the United States, and the Palestinian Authority held a summit in Sharm al-Shaykh, Egypt, initiated by President Bill Clinton in the hope of arresting the Middle East violence and salvaging the peace process. Israel agreed to the Palestinians' key demand, the creation of an international fact-finding mission, insisting, however, that it be under American aegis. This became the Mitchell Commission (so called after its chair, former senator George Mitchell). Israel also agreed to a simultaneous stand-down from violent confrontations rather than, as it had proposed, a pullback of its forces only in response to a Palestinian cessation of violence. But Yasir Arafat issued no call for an end to violence, and the *Washington Post* reported within an hour after the summit's end that Marwan Barghouti, "the fiery field marshal of the Palestinian revolt, had declared, 'we will continue'" (Lee Hockstader, October 18).

The Palestinians' determination to continue what they called their "uprising" came across more vividly in Hockstader's report than in any account by the other outlets reviewed for this study. Yet, he once again referred to it as a "revolt against Israel's continued occupation of most of the West Bank and some of the Gaza Strip," although, as mentioned previously, as good a case could be made for calling it a revolt against Israel's existence.

The most ignorant or incoherent report on the summit was by CNN's Christiane Amanpour on October 16. Describing Palestinian protests against the meeting, she explained:

They felt [Arafat] was strong-armed into coming here, that he would come here and come back with absolutely nothing. And they also felt that it was too close to the killings and the casualties. They thought there should be a decent interval before any kind of summit.

It was unclear how Amanpour derived her interpretation of Palestinian motivations, but her explanation defied logic. The demonstrators were demanding a continuation of the violence. How could they want that and also a "decent interval"? Obviously there could not be any interval until they stopped their violence. Moreover, the notion of a "decent interval" implied that violence was repugnant to them. That was why they were demanding more of it?

Once again, the most pro-Palestinian tilt was seen on ABC. On the first day of the summit, anticipating that Arafat might refuse to call for a halt to the intifada, Jennings leapt preemptively to his defense: "An Israeli government . . . cannot simply order its most extreme citizens to stop mistreating Palestinians. And while the Israelis say that Yasir Arafat can simply tell all the Palestinians what to do, the evidence suggests he cannot" (October 16). But the issue was not whether all Palestinians would obey an order from Arafat to end the violence; it was his conspicuous refusal to issue such an order. And the invocation of "extreme" Israelis "mistreating Palestinians" was gratuitous; it referenced no story. In fact, the Israeli government does endeavor to prevent its citizens from abusing Palestinians, although of course it does not always succeed.

Gillian Findlay's ensuing report echoed Jennings's theme:

The Israelis insist Yasir Arafat could stop all of this. He could use his police to keep the stone throwers off the streets. He could shut down Palestinian radio and TV, which Israel says incites the crowds. And he could order his armed militia, the Tanzim, to never open fire, not even in self-defense. Yasir Arafat could give all of those orders, Palestinian leaders say, but it wouldn't make much difference.

This was yet another shot at the same straw man Jennings had already pummeled. How much difference an order from Arafat might make could be discovered

only if Arafat would give the order, but he would not. And the formula about ordering his gunmen not to fire “even in self-defense” was tendentious. Although they were taking far more casualties, it was the Palestinians who were initiating the violence, as their terminology acknowledged: they were engaged in an “uprising.”

Then, after a bit of an interview with Hanan Ashrawi, Findlay continued: “Seven years of talking with Israel [have] produced nothing. Exactly what extremist groups told Mr. Arafat would happen.” The suggestion seemed to be that not only was it understandable if Arafat did not compromise at Sharm al-Shaykh, it would be wrong for him to do so, perhaps even to have gone there at all. Findlay, it seemed, was endorsing Hamas’s stand.

The next night, Findlay went on without any noticeable shift: “The fundamental problem is that the Palestinians on the street don’t see that they have any obligation to stop. The violence has all been from the Israeli side, they insist. They have a right to protest, and they will continue” (October 17). With the summit consummated, Jennings seemed to take the side of the Palestinian “protesters,” complaining that the agreement announced by Clinton was too pro-Israel: “Palestinians will try to prevent violent demonstrations. Israel *may* pull back its forces from some Palestinian territories if Israel believes the latest Palestinian uprising has ended,” his voice emphasizing the word “may.” This assertion did not merely violate journalistic integrity; it was false. Israel had committed, as was widely reported in other outlets, to pulling back its forces from the Palestinian population centers if the violence there ceased for forty-eight hours.

On CNN, correspondent Rula Amin reported from Gaza on demonstrations against the summit: “Once again, the familiar pattern. The Palestinians throw stones. The Israelis respond with tear gas, rubber-coated bullets, and live ammunition” (October 16). But this was false, or at least incomplete.

As had been widely reported, the familiar pattern (probably followed by these demonstrations in Gaza, as well) included not only stones from the Palestinians but also Molotov cocktails and gunfire. Amin's report contained another important item from which neither she nor other journalists drew the obvious inference. "Almost every Palestinian faction was present," she stated, "from the communists to Islamic fundamentalists . . . to Yasir Arafat's supporters. All were united by the principle [that] their president must not compromise on basic Palestinian demands." But if Arafat's faction turned out for the demonstration, it could only be because he wanted them to, suggesting that the much-reported Palestinian pressure on Arafat was a tactic in which he himself colluded.

Also that evening, CNN's Andrea Koppel came up with a mystifying explanation for the weeks of mayhem: "When Camp David ended without an agreement, Palestinian despair eventually led to violence" (October 16). This may have been true, but as the normally evenhanded President Clinton made clear, it was the Palestinians who had refused to negotiate at Camp David. At the very least, if Koppel's view was accurate, it cried out for some explication about the relationship between the Palestinians and their representatives.

Jennings was not the only one to take an anti-Israel tilt during the week of the summit. In the *New York Times* "Week in Review" section, David Shipler, tracing the breakdown of the peace process, wrote, "Trust was undermined when the right-wing Israeli government [of] Netanyahu built more Jewish settlements and dragged its feet on carrying out commitments to relinquish territory" (October 15). Trust, however, is a two-way street, and Shipler was silent on the violations of the peace process by the Palestinians, such as the failure to amend the Palestinian Charter to accept Israel's right to exist, as promised, or Arafat's speeches to Arab

audiences suggesting that the accords were only a tactic for eventually gaining control of the territory of Israel as well.

In the *Washington Post*, Keith Richburg wrote, "Barak is already talking to his right-wing political opponents about forming a 'national emergency government.' . . . Israeli hard-liners . . . warned they will not look favorably on any outcome that seems likely to revive peace efforts" (October 16). In truth, the view of hardliners to whom Barak was talking about a unity government was not opposed to "peace efforts" but to what they saw as the overly generous terms that Barak's dovish government had offered. In a separate story that same day, Richburg wrote about Israeli military fire in Hebron that, as he reported, the Israeli military stated was aimed at Palestinian snipers. Yet, Richburg interviewed the owner of a bullet-riddled house that had been the Israeli target and reported credulously that he "said no one had ever shot at the Israelis from his house."

When Israel announced the arrest of a group of Ramallah residents whom it had identified as participants in the police station lynching, CBS's David Hawkins expressed alarm: "The arrests . . . almost certainly required the infiltration of Israeli commandos into Palestinian territory. That fact alone could rekindle Palestinian fury" (October 18).

More numerous than the examples of outright anti-Israel tilt in that week's coverage were reports that drew a false equivalence between the two sides. *New York Times* correspondent Jane Perlez wrote that "Mr. Sharon's provocative visit to Muslim holy sites . . . the destruction of . . . Joseph's tomb . . . and the burning of an ancient synagogue . . . have challenged the very notion of respect for and sovereignty over religious sites" (October 15). Surely Sharon's tour of the Temple Mount (which happens also to be the holiest site in Judaism and where he made no attempt to enter al-Aqsa mosque) bore no parallel to the

the destruction of the two Jewish holy sites. Also in the *Times*, John Kifner, reporting on the kidnapping in Europe of Israeli businessman Elchanan Tannenbaum by Hizballah, added gratuitously at the end that "Israeli operations inside Lebanon are hardly unknown" (October 16). After giving a few examples, he commented even more gratuitously: "The Israelis were not always infallible. A Moroccan waiter was killed in Lillehammer, Norway." This was true, but the story was decades old and had no relation to the snatching of Tannenbaum, nor was it analogous. It seemed to have been appended to the story for no other reason than to remind the reader that Israelis have done bad things, too.

The *Post's* Hockstader reported that "each leader has made overtures to his most intransigent and hawkish opponents. On the Palestinian side, Arafat has reached out to Hamas. . . . And on the Israeli side, Barak has invited Sharon to join his government" (October 15). The parallelism was misplaced, even ugly. Hamas had been explicit in its aim of destroying Israel, a goal that it had pursued by relentlessly trying to murder as many Israelis as possible. Sharon, on the other hand, although a hardliner, had said he was prepared to make compromises to achieve peace, even if the concessions he was prepared to offer were too modest to interest the Palestinians. (He had, for example, supported the forceful uprooting of Jewish settlements in Sinai in order to fulfill the 1978 peace agreement with Egypt.)

Anticipating the summit, Keith Richburg wrote, "Both Barak and . . . Arafat will . . . be riding forces they may not fully control—populations with hardened attitudes and less interest in making peace than in laying blame and extracting revenge" (October 16). This may have been true for the Palestinians, who were forever proclaiming days of rage and seemed committed to prosecuting their "uprising" until victory. But Israelis were in a state of despair as years of hope for

peace went down the drain. The formula of the peace process, "land for peace," acknowledged that peace was the Israeli desideratum. For the Palestinians, it was land. And now they seemed to believe that they had found a different path to that goal. Richburg's parallelism was unfair. The falseness of it was inadvertently highlighted in the illustration he offered:

For Palestinians, the pertinent image going into the summit has been that of a 12-year-old boy, Mohammed Aldura, who was shot to death by Israeli soldiers while crying helplessly, cradled beneath his father's arm. For Israelis, the image has been the mutilated body of one of their soldiers being dumped from the window of a Palestinian police station in Ramallah and a young Palestinian gleefully holding out his hands to the screaming crowd below to display the soldier's blood.

As seen earlier, it is likely that al-Dura was not shot by Israelis at all, but even if he was, it was an accidental shooting in a crossfire initiated by the Palestinians. So distressed were the Israelis by the boy's death and so eager to make clear their regrets, they even accepted blame prematurely. In contrast, the Ramallah victims were set upon with clearly murderous intent by a lynch mob that joyfully celebrated the deed afterward.

On CNN, the day after the summit, correspondent Ben Wedeman reported that

opposition to the Sharm al-Shaykh agreement remains strong on both sides. A coalition of Palestinian opposition groups, including Hamas, declared their determination to carry on the uprising. And Israeli opposition leader Ariel Sharon, accusing Israeli prime minister Ehud Barak of being soft on the Palestinians, has let it be known he will not join Prime Minister Barak in an emergency government.

The fault in the analogy here is that Sharon's refusal to join a coalition government in no way

impeded Israel's compliance with the agreements that it had made at the summit, whereas the Palestinian groups could indeed make Palestinian compliance difficult. But since Arafat did not even try to comply, that was perhaps a moot point.

In a like vein, the network's Jerrold Kessel reported on the south Jerusalem Israeli neighborhood of Gilo, into which Palestinian gunmen had been firing repeatedly from the town of Beit Jalla, drawing Israeli return fire. The result, stated Kessel, was "two communities united in fear, hatred, and an appetite to punish the other" (October 18). This was simply false. The Israelis wanted to be left in peace, not to serve up punishment. But what could they do except respond to Palestinian fire?

episode 5:

The Election
of Sharon





The al-Aqsa intifada spelled political doom for Prime Minister Ehud

Barak. Already governing without a reliable majority in the Knesset, he had gambled that a peace breakthrough with the Arabs would rally the public behind him. But with the peace process buried beneath the rubble of the new Palestinian uprising, Barak was compelled to face elections in early 2001. His principal opponent was Ariel Sharon, who had won the standard of the Likud Party to widespread surprise, as he had long been presumed dead politically. The stain on Sharon was a grievous one. As the mastermind of Israel's 1982 war against the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon, Sharon had arranged with his Lebanese Christian allies for their militias to enter the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla to clean out PLO fighters believed to have secretly remained behind in violation of an agreement for their exile. Instead, the militia massacred many hundreds of civilians, and an official Israeli inquiry later held Sharon "indirectly responsible" for this crime.

Nonetheless, with Barak's peace strategy having failed dramatically, and with the Israeli public wishing for a government to take a strong hand against Arab violence, the phoenix-like Sharon defeated Barak by a wide margin. U.S. news coverage of this election might have been expected to produce many instances of unfair treatment of Sharon or of Israel for selecting him. Various surveys have shown that journalists, especially in the elite media, are disproportionately Democratic in their personal party allegiance, and they might be expected to favor the Labor Party over the Likud Party in Israel, even more so given the strong themes of an alien nationalism at the core of Likud ideology, not to mention the additional baggage carried by its standard-bearer.

Somewhat surprisingly, however, little of this appeared in the news outlets reviewed for this

study. In covering Sharon's landslide victory, there was less tendentious reportage treating Israel in a jaundiced light than during most other moments of the intifada. It was as if the journalists, who had seemed so mesmerized by Palestinian "rage," were sobered by Israeli anger at the Arabs, which had expressed itself at the ballot box.

There were, of course, exceptions. *New York Times* reporter Dexter Filkins referred to Sharon's "reputation as one of the region's harshest men" (February 7, 2001). Did Filkins not know that Israel is located in the Middle East? The Ba'athist elites of Iraq and Syria were bathed in blood. The theocrats who ruled Iran were responsible for the death and torture of untold numbers of their citizens as well as for a global reign of terrorism. The Islamists of Algeria massacred hundreds of thousands of their compatriots, many of them women and children. Those of Egypt were not much milder. The Sudanese regime prosecuted a devastating civil war against the south of the country. There were also Osama bin Laden, Abu Nidal, and countless other terrorist leaders whose lives were consecrated to nihilistic bloodletting. Slavery, "honor" killings of nonvirgins, and various other barbaric practices thrived throughout the region. What were Filkins and his editors thinking?

In a February 4 *Times* article, Deborah Sontag also offered a predisposed summary of Sharon's conception of peace:

An end to the conflict . . . in [Sharon's] view . . . would entail an evolution of the Palestinians and of the Arabs to the point where they wholeheartedly accepted Israel's existence and Israel's terms for existence.

The word "wholeheartedly" and the phrase "Israel's terms for existence" were expressions of sarcasm on the part of a hostile reporter rather than an honest effort to capture Sharon's position. A

fair rendering of his position could have instead used the word "sincerely" and the phrase "entered into meaningful compromises to resolve the issues outstanding between the two sides."

When the election result was announced, *Times* correspondent Neil MacFarquhar reported that around the Arab world, "the most common response was a collective shrug about the defeat of Ehud Barak . . . , stemming from the sense that all Israeli leaders have treated Arabs with equal violence no matter what their party" (February 8). In reality, the Arabs have behaved more violently toward Israel than vice versa, most Israeli violence has been retaliatory, and Israel has relentlessly sued for peace. It may be true that the Arabs feel that it is they who have been the victims of violence, but this is a highly distorted, self-exculpating image. MacFarquhar, however, echoed this image in terms that appeared to lend it credence.

Most of the television networks carried stories that included much criticism of Sharon but nonetheless presented a clear and fair image of why Israeli voters chose him. For example, on the eve of the voting, NBC's Martin Fletcher, recalling Sharon's role in the Sabra and Shatilla massacres, noted ironically, "A government commission recommended he never be defense minister again. Instead, he could be elected prime minister" (February 4). At the same time, Fletcher conveyed the meaning of the election with a sound bite from a single voter who stated: "The center wants one thing: not to get killed."

Likewise, in the wake of the vote, Fox's Jennifer Griffin was hard on Sharon. "He promises to bring peace to Israel, but his critics say that all he knows is war," she stated, adding that his conception of peace "will put him on a collision course with the Palestinians, and it's hard to see how he will avoid more violence in the region" (February 6). But she also explained: "Israeli voters have said, in effect, that they are tired

of feeling helpless in the face of Palestinian violence and that they hope Sharon will . . . return a sense of security and strength to the Jewish state.”

CBS's David Hawkins, characteristically, was more jaundiced. On February 6, he spoke of Sharon's "hardline opposition to compromise with the Palestinians," which was a tendentious characterization. He might as easily, and more truthfully, have phrased it: "Sharon's unaccommodating terms for compromise with the Palestinians." And he explained the vote this way: "After five months of fighting and nearly 400 dead, most Israelis have given up on a negotiated peace. Today, they chose the general they believe is most capable of protecting Israel's security." This was partially accurate, although the assertion that Israelis had "given up on a negotiated peace" was wide of the mark. The true point was that Israelis had concluded that Arafat was not a sincere negotiating partner.

As usual, the most prejudiced report was to be found on ABC. Jennings led off the election-night coverage. "On *World News Tonight*, a new leader in Israel," he began. "The Arabs and many Israelis think he will lead the country into war. . . . There is no more divisive figure in Israel, and . . . the Palestinians hate Ariel Sharon" (February 6). Then, Gillian Findlay reported in with a series of commentaries on Sharon from his Israeli political opponents, which she did not bother to balance by presenting any of his supporters. Unlike the other networks, ABC gave its viewership no comprehensible explanation of why Israeli voters had chosen Sharon except perhaps that they were bloodthirsty.

NBC, Fox, and CNN all reported that the Palestinians had responded to Sharon's victory by proclaiming yet another "day of rage." According to the findings of this study, neither CBS nor ABC chose to report this.

episode 6:

The Gaza Incursion





In April 2001, for the first time, Palestinians fired mortars from the Gaza Strip into Israel proper. Israel had suffered rocket attacks across its border with Lebanon at many moments in its history, and these had led to major military actions. The prospect of a similar pattern developing along its southern border with an incipient Palestinian state was viewed with gravity. In response, Israel launched a military incursion into the strip, which it had ceded to the governance of the Palestinian Authority (PA) under the terms of the Oslo Accords. Although comments by Israeli military officers suggested that their plan was to remain in Gaza for an extended time, the Israeli force withdrew after one day, apparently bowing to the pressure of the United States after Secretary of State Colin Powell denounced the Israeli action as “excessive and disproportionate.”

The Gaza incursion was reported in the *New York Times* by Jane Perlez, who quoted Powell’s rebuke and went on to substantiate it implicitly: “The [Israeli] assault followed a fierce Israeli bombardment of Palestinian targets in Gaza, all in response to a Palestinian mortar attack” (April 18). There was something in Powell’s words “excessive and disproportionate” that invited comment. Until that moment, the military doctrine for which Powell had been noted was the use of overwhelming force. “Cut it off and kill it,” was how he had explained his strategy for handling the Iraqi army in the 1991 Gulf War. His criticism of Israel was thus a contradiction of what he had previously advocated. But the *Times* refrained from noting the contradiction. If President George W. Bush had, say, demanded that Japan increase its income tax rates, it is hard to imagine that *Times* reporters would have resisted the temptation to point out how this contradicted his own economic program.

Just two days before the Gaza incursion, Israel had responded to ongoing attacks from the

Lebanese group Hizballah by striking a Syrian radar station in Lebanon, since Israel held Syria—the dominant force inside Lebanon—responsible for encouraging Hizballah's activity. The Israeli strike was reported in the *Times* by Deborah Sontag, whose April 17 account of it was laced with opinion. "A deadly Israeli airstrike on a Syrian radar installation deep inside Lebanon unsettled the Arab world today just as Israel was receiving the first Arab official to visit since Prime Minister Ariel Sharon took office last month," she began. (The official was Foreign Minister Abdallah al-Khatib of Jordan.) Some paragraphs later, she added:

Before the Israeli airstrike, something of a backlash had been building against Hezbollah inside Lebanon. . . . But the Israeli raid will most likely increase support for Hezbollah. The organization is seen across the Arab and Islamic worlds as the sole group actively doing something to counter Israeli violence.

This passage sounded a lot like the editorial that the *Times* ran the same day chastising Israel for the strike; it certainly was not reportage. And the last sentence was an Orwellian inversion; Hizballah's cachet was based on perpetrating violence, not countering it.

On April 16, *Washington Post* correspondent Daniel Williams reported the strike against Syria as "Sharon's second escalation within a week," although each was in fact a retaliation for an Arab attack. He also asserted that "peace talks between Israel and Syria brokered by the United States collapsed last year, after Israel declined to withdraw from the entire Golan Heights." This was an extremely biased version of the failure of the Israeli-Syrian negotiations and flatly false. Israel had indeed offered to withdraw from the entire Golan Heights; this was never in question. Yet, the negotiations foundered over where, on the narrow strip between the heights and the Sea of Galilee, the border would be drawn. Syria demanded to hold on to a small piece of land that it

had seized on the banks of the lake in 1948. This territory was not part of the recognized international boundary. Syria had agreed to withdraw from it in its 1949 ceasefire agreement with Israel but did not fulfill the terms.

The same day's paper carried a separate article by Williams, a lengthy feature on Israeli settlements. "In contrast to the shifting U.S. stances, human rights groups have taken an unbending position that the settlements are illegal under the Geneva and 1907 Hague conventions," he wrote, quoting at length from a report by Human Rights Watch. No knowledgeable Israelis were quoted on the legal issues, although a strong argument can be made that Human Rights Watch was misapplying the law. Instead, Williams quoted one militant settlement leader as stating, "We don't consider this foreign land," an obviously unpersuasive reply since international law is not restricted to "foreign land."

The building of settlements in the West Bank and Gaza is probably Israel's most controversial policy, one that is unpopular even with many Israelis. There is nothing out of bounds in highlighting them in a feature story or in conveying the sharp criticisms. But there are also arguments to be made in defense of the settlements: that the land was captured in a war of self-defense against Arab aggression; that at Camp David Israel offered to withdraw most of the settlements; that if more than a million Arabs can live within Israel, Jews should be able to live within a future Palestinian state. Williams, however, chose not to convey any of these arguments to his readers. Instead, after quoting Human Rights Watch and several U.S. officials critical of the settlements as well as several West Bank Arabs with touching tales of being victimized by the settlement process or by the settlers, he "balanced" the report by quoting militant Israelis who put their case in a way sure to be off-putting. In addition to the weak point about international law, the

same militant stated: "No government can withstand the pressure [to build ever more settlements], because inside each Jew, there is a small settlement movement. It's the essence of Zionism." To rebut other criticisms, Williams had another Israeli say that settlements are "good for the Arabs. They are employed building the settlements." In short, instead of making an honest effort to achieve journalist balance, Williams wove together sympathetic quotes from Arabs and unsympathetic quotes from Israelis to make a tapestry whose every thread made Israel look bad.

The television coverage of these days of violence was marked by contrasts among the networks. The evening news came on soon after the Israeli attack on Gaza began but before it was clear that Israel intended to occupy some ground. On ABC, Peter Jennings began: "Israel is attacking Palestinian Gaza from land and sea and from the air. . . . Earlier, Palestinians fired mortars into an Israeli town near the border" (April 16). CBS's Dan Rather reported the same story in a different tone: "Israeli helicopters and tanks fired on Palestinian targets in Gaza [to]day. The attacks were in retaliation for Palestinians' shelling of Israeli towns." Jennings's choice of words made the Israeli action sound ominous, and his use of the curious term "Palestinian Gaza" (is there some other Gaza?) conveyed his own conviction that the Israelis had no right to be there.

Jennings pursued this theme the next night as he announced, "The Israelis invaded the independent Palestinian territory of Gaza. . . . The Palestinians are furious, and the Bush administration says it is excessive and disproportionate." Then, Gillian Findlay came on to tell viewers again that "Palestinians are furious," adding that "Palestinians say [Sharon] revealed his true intentions with this attack." This last sentence sounded ominous, but Findlay left it at that, explaining neither what it was meant to imply nor why she had included it. On CNN, Wolf Blitzer's take on the day's events sounded

a lot less alarming and was more enlightening with regard to Israel's motives than Findlay's reference to mysterious "true intentions." "As quickly as it entered, the Israeli government announced it was pulling out of the small corner of Gaza it had reoccupied," stated Blitzer. Then he added: "On Monday, Palestinians in Gaza lobbed mortar shells into Israel. . . . It was seen by Israel as a major escalation."

Jennings's inclusion of Powell's harsh description of Israel's action was entirely in order, but the previous evening, as he and ABC correspondent Hilary Brown reported the Israeli airstrike in Lebanon, they conspicuously refrained from mentioning the U.S. position, even though the State Department had made a strong statement that was reported elsewhere. CBS, for example, in reporting the strikes, mentioned the Syrian and Israeli positions and also that of the United States. It showed State Department spokesman Richard Boucher saying: "We condemn this escalation in the cycle of violence that was initiated by Hizballah in a clear provocation designed to escalate an already tense situation" (April 16). But ABC viewers heard only that "Israeli warplanes hit a Syrian radar position" and that "[t]he Syrian foreign minister said it was a flagrant aggression. Israel said the strike was in retaliation for Saturday's attack on an Israeli border patrol by Hizballah" (April 16). It seemed that ABC was faster to include the U.S. government position when the latter was critical of Israel than when it was critical of Israel's enemies.

Some reporters at CBS might have fit in better at ABC. Apparently to counterbalance Boucher's interpretation that Hizballah was at fault and to put the onus back on Israel, correspondent David Hawkins added this comment: "Regardless of who started it, Israel's air strikes have thrown cold water on attempts to restart peace talks. They also risk turning what's so far been a low-intensity conflict with the Palestinians into a wider

war" (April 16). Hawkins's reportage was repeatedly harsh toward Israel, although others at CBS, such as Rather, took a different tone. Such variation was typical at the networks, with the exception of ABC, where Jennings and his correspondents were uniformly hard on Israel.

On NBC, the analogue to Hawkins was correspondent Andrea Mitchell. As Israel began its assault on Gaza, she reported: "Israel launches a relentless attack on Gaza from the land, sea, and air—for the first time, going back on an agreement, seizing land it gave up seven years ago" (April 17). Not only was this characterization of the incursion somewhat heavy (after all, this "relentless attack" was over in one day), but the part about "going back on an agreement" was false and put blame on Israel unfairly. Nothing in the Oslo process required Israel to foreswear self-defense, nor did the PA hold sovereignty over the territories it governed until a final-status agreement was achieved. In fact, it was the PA that had gone back on the agreement, which explicitly disallowed it to have mortars, much less to fire them into Israel. For Israel to respond to such an attack with military measures was well within its rights under Oslo as well as customary international law.

The harshest broadcast of the week came from CBS's Hawkins on April 19, an unusually long essay putting all of the blame for the ongoing impasse between Israel and the Palestinians on Sharon:

During the Camp David peace talks last year, it was Yasir Arafat who turned down Ehud Barak's peace proposal, insisting on all or nothing. Now Israel's new prime minister, Ariel Sharon, is offering the Palestinians nothing at all. Sharon says he won't give back any more land, especially not in Jerusalem. He also rules out the removal of any Jewish settlements from the Palestinian territories.

The Palestinians, Sharon says, must settle for less than half of the land in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, essentially what they have now.

And since coming to power, the former general has dramatically ratcheted up Israel's military response to terrorist attacks. He's launched air strikes on Syrian positions in Lebanon and invaded Palestinian territory handed back in previous peace deals, drawing sharp criticism even from the United States. Sharon's hardline policy, offering no compromises, is intended to wear down Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. It's all stick and no carrot.

That means more fighting and bleak prospects for peace. Even if Yasir Arafat called an end to the intifada, it's doubtful that he could stop it completely. And Israel refuses to negotiate until all Palestinian violence ends.

It's usually the Palestinians who are criticized for not being serious about making peace with the Israelis. Now that notion is being challenged by an Israeli government that seems unwilling to compromise.

episode 7:

The Dolphinarium





The first of the intifada's massively deadly suicide bombings occurred on June 1, 2001, outside the Dolphinarium, a Tel Aviv disco. It claimed twenty lives, mostly teenage girls. Yasir Arafat at first responded with a vague statement opposing violence in general, but German foreign minister Joschka Fischer, who happened to be visiting Israel and the Palestinian Authority at the time, insisted on a clearer denunciation of the crime. Fischer himself helped compose such a statement, and Arafat put his name to it.

New York Times correspondent Deborah Sontag reported that "for the first time since . . . violence began eight months ago, Yasser Arafat made a public call . . . for an immediate and unconditional cease-fire" (June 3). This sentence may have driven home just how doggedly Arafat had resisted making any such appeal until that moment, something that had rarely been made clear in news reports that devoted many column inches and minutes of airtime to claims that Arafat was incapable of stopping the violence. Sontag's article also quoted an Israeli official likening Arafat to a "zookeeper who opens all the cages of the lions and tigers," referring to his release from custody early in the intifada of known terrorists and bombmakers. But Sontag found the analogy lacking in political correctness, so she hastened to add that this was "a comparison that many Palestinians would find objectionable."

Summarizing the intifada just before the bombing, *Washington Post* correspondent Lee Hockstader repeated yet again, as if it were fact, his debatable belief that the "Palestinians rose up against continued Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip" (May 30). He went on to write that "most Western governments and human rights organizations regard the Jewish settlements as illegal under international law. Israel insists that international law does not pertain to the West Bank and Gaza." Hockstader offered no quote or other evi-

dence for this last sentence, and it was false, a dishonest way of making Israel's position look un-supportable. Israel's true position was not that international law did not apply but rather that Israel's critics' interpretation of the law was erroneous.

A week or two before the Dolphinarium murders, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had announced a "policy of restraint" in the hope that the recently released Mitchell Commission report might prove to be the impetus for an end to the months of violence. U.S. diplomats had called on the Palestinians to reciprocate. Hockstader, however, insinuated that the Israeli policy was fraudulent, writing, "In recent days, as Israeli forces observed what [Assistant Secretary of State William] Burns called the policy of restraint, Israeli bulldozers and tanks entered Palestinian territory and uprooted fields and orchards, Palestinians say" (May 30). There was no way for a reader to know whether this was true and, if so, what the reason might have been. Yet, the day after the Dolphinarium attack, Hockstader reported that the attack had intensified the "pressure on Prime Minister Sharon to renew airstrikes, assassinations and other attacks . . . which had been suspended under a policy of restraint for the last two weeks. . . . On Thursday [the day before the bombing] Sharon encountered a bitter outpouring of criticism for his policy of restraint" (June 2). Apparently, the restraint was not so illusory after all.

The Dolphinarium attack, with so many young, innocent victims, and coming as it did while Israel was pursuing a policy of restraint, created a moment of sympathy for Israel. Furthermore, to the astonishment of many Israelis and most of the outside world, Sharon opted to continue his policy of restraint, and he refrained from retaliating. The result was that very little in the press reports on this occasion exhibited the unfriendliness toward Israel that was evident on many other occasions during the al-Aqsa intifada.

episode 8:

The *Karine-A*





On January 4, 2002, the Israeli government announced that its forces had intercepted a ship, the *Karine-A*, on the high seas laden with arms bound for the Palestinian Authority (PA). This amounted to a serious violation of the Oslo Accords. The principal reassurance that Israel had sought in ceding territory and acquiescing in the prospective establishment of a Palestinian state was that this state would not become a threat to Israel. Two days after the announcement, the Israeli government invited reporters to a show-and-tell session at which all of the arms were laid out on display. These arms made an impressive haul, but a question remained about to whom they belonged.

In the *New York Times*, correspondents James Bennet and Joel Greenberg reported that "Palestinian officials denied any link to the ship," and that U.S. officials "said they had no evidence the weapons were destined for the Palestinian Authority, and instead raised the possibility that the arms were headed to . . . Hezbollah" (January 5). The authors quoted the PA minister of information, Yasir Abed Rabbo, who affirmed, "We insist that the Palestinian Authority has nothing to do with this ship." Similarly, in the *Washington Post*, Hanna Rosin reported that Yasir Arafat "denied having any knowledge of or involvement with the ship, and his information minister [Abed Rabbo] said the announcement of the raid was 'a theatrical game'" (January 5).

The next day, the *Times'* Greenberg reported once again that "Palestinian officials have vehemently denied any links to the shipment" (January 6). And the following day, the *Post's* Rosin reported that "Palestinian officials continued to deny any involvement with the ship . . . and accused the Israeli government of fabricating charges." She quoted the Palestinian minister of international cooperation, Nabil Sha'ath, who stated, "In time, these allegations will prove to

be unfounded.” And she added an excerpt from a statement issued by the PA that said it was “not involved in this incident and such steps are not part of its policies and it can not be involved in any such operations of this sort at a time it is fighting to end violence.”

On January 8, however, the two newspapers carried reports that resolved the question about the ownership and destination of the shipment. The *Post's* Associated Press story ran as follows:

The Palestinian naval captain captured by Israeli commandos with 50 tons of weapons on his ship said today that he was a member of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement and that the arms were intended for the Palestinian-controlled Gaza Strip. 'I'm a soldier. I obeyed orders,' said the captain, Omar Akawi, in a prison interview. He added that he picked up the rockets, mortars and antitank missiles in the Persian Gulf, off the Iranian coast. Akawi, who was captured Thursday along with 12 crewmen in the Red Sea, said he worked in the Palestinian Transportation Ministry and received his instructions from an official in the Palestinian Authority.

Despite confirming that Akawi was “a mid-ranking member of [the PA's] naval unit,” the story proceeded:

The Palestinian leadership . . . continued to insist that the Palestinian Authority had nothing to do with the weapons shipment. 'It's a kind of propaganda, unfortunately,' said Ahmed Qureia, the Palestinian parliament speaker. 'It's a false way to undermine the peace process.' . . . Arafat reiterated today that he knew nothing about the shipment.

That same day, the *Times* ran a similar report by Bennet based on an interview with Akawi, who, it said,

identified himself as a 25-year member of Mr. Arafat's Fatah organization and a naval adviser to the Palestinian Authority's transport minis-

try. . . . [He] said he knew that he was shipping munitions but not the precise contents of his cargo, which arrived packed in submersible canisters. . . . '[T]hey told me it was weapons for Palestine, and I am a Palestinian officer merely doing what he has to,' he said. 'It is my people's right to defend itself.'

In what was perhaps the most damaging statement in Bennet's report because of the duplicity that it underlined, the captain revealed that "he had expected to receive orders canceling his mission after Dec. 16, when Mr. Arafat gave a speech calling a halt to military operations. . . . No such order came." In the same article, Bennet also reported what seemed to be a tactical shift in Arafat's response: "Mr. Arafat told Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign policy chief, that any Palestinian found to be involved in the smuggling would be punished. He said he would welcome international help for a Palestinian investigation of the Israeli accusations."

On the networks, CBS and CNN carried the story of the ship's capture the day it was announced. On CBS, David Hawkins stated:

Palestinian officials say they don't know anything about the arms shipment. One called the seizure an Israeli propaganda stunt, timed to sabotage U.S. special envoy Anthony Zinni's attempt to restart peace talks. They say it's the Israeli government that's not serious about returning to the negotiating table, pointing to continued Israeli raids into Palestinian territory. . . . Both Palestinians and Israelis say they want a ceasefire that will stick. The problem is both sides think the other side's lying.

On CNN, Mike Hanna showed Arafat advisor Nabil Abu Rudeineh stating, "We know nothing about this ship which the Israelis are talking about. . . . We consider it an Israeli propaganda in order to sabotage the mission of General Zinni." And then Hanna concluded: "Both sides remain as suspicious of the other's pledges of peace as ever."

Despite having reported these denials, neither network's evening news chose to revisit the subject during subsequent days to inform viewers that the evidence of PA sponsorship of the shipment had become quite clear. One might have thought that the titillation of the mystery about the ship would have augmented its news value—which was in itself considerable because of the geopolitical implications—and that the combination would have easily justified the airtime. One would have thought, too, that the case for reporting the solution to the puzzle was strengthened for these two networks by the fact that both Hawkins and Hanna were at least to some extent taken in, as shown by Hawkins when he stated “both sides think the other is lying,” and Hanna with his similar words. As it turned out, it was the Palestinians who were lying, they knew they were lying, and therefore they also knew that the Israelis were *not* lying. Hawkins, in short, was dead wrong. Hanna's formulation was broader, but it too was off. Given the ship incident, the Israelis had an ironclad reason for being “suspicious of the other's pledges of peace.” But the Palestinians had no such obvious reason for suspicion of the Israelis, and therefore a probing reporter might have wondered whether the Palestinians' claims to this effect were genuine or were a method of covering their own duplicity.

On January 11, however, CBS anchor John Roberts did report that

Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority announced it has detained two senior Palestinian officials and is seeking another on suspicion of trying to smuggle arms into Gaza. Last week, Israel's navy stopped and seized a Palestinian-owned ship which was carrying fifty tons of weapons and ammunition. The Israeli government blamed Arafat, who denies the charge.⁹

This, at least, informed viewers that the link to the PA had been proved, although the report was credulously agnostic about Arafat's role. Given

that the whole gamut of Palestinian spokesmen had vehemently denied any connection with the ship, this sudden, dramatic shift to the claim that Palestinian officials were involved but that Arafat had no idea might have invited some journalistic skepticism. CBS exhibited none.

On NBC, the story was first reported not on the day the ship was captured, but two days later, at the news conference at which Israel presented the captured arms. Correspondent Martin Fletcher described a "war chest of weapons bought, says Israel, by Yasir Arafat, breaking interim peace accords that limit what weapons and how many Arafat can have" (January 6). This crucial bit of explanation of the diplomatic implications was absent from the other networks' reports. NBC then showed a clip from Palestinian minister for Jerusalem affairs Ziad Abu Ziad, who stated, "We are not involved. We don't have money to buy such weapons, and war is not on our agenda."

Like CBS, NBC did report the PA's announced arrest of two of its own for their involvement with the ship, allegedly behind Arafat's back. But in contrast to CBS's credulous account, NBC's January 12 report also included an interview with the head of Israeli army operations, who insisted that Arafat was behind it all. (And, indeed, he was. It was the proof of this, furnished by Israel to Washington, together with Arafat's denials, that eventually led the U.S. administration to turn its back on Arafat as a peace partner.)

Fox, which did not report the story on its evening news until the day the ship's captain was made available to the press, put it clearly. Correspondent Jennifer Griffin stated, "Palestinian officials have denied knowledge of the shipment, but in an interview . . . the ship's captain confirmed the weapons were destined for the Palestinians" (January 7).

ABC broadcast the story on the evening the Israelis showed off the cargo. After clips of Israeli officials blaming the PA, correspondent

Hilary Brown reported that the "Israelis' claims are hotly denied by the Palestinian Authority" and showed Information Minister Abed Rabbo stating, "We are sure the Authority has nothing to do with such allegations" (January 6). Brown then added, "State Department officials say they have no evidence of Israel's claim and are withholding judgement on the case." Although this made ABC's account seem the most skeptical among the networks of Israel's charges, ABC did not return to the story any time over the next ten days to report Akawi's revelations or other evidence that eventually proved those charges to be true.¹⁰

episode 9:

The Powell Mission





Following a suicide bombing in Netanya during Passover that proved to be the deadliest attack to date, Israel launched "Operation Defensive Shield," its largest military operation of the intifada, on March 29, 2002. For the first time since it had yielded the urban centers of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority, Israel reoccupied these territories, aiming to arrest or kill terrorists and to destroy their weapons and bombmaking facilities. On April 11, while these operations were under way, Secretary of State Colin Powell arrived in Israel for a high-profile attempt at personal mediation of the conflict. After six days Powell left, able to report little progress. Press coverage of Israel's offensive reached a crescendo over the military operation in Jenin, where several blocks of buildings were flattened and where Palestinians claimed that Israeli forces had committed a massacre.¹¹

U.S. officials and many other observers were surprised at Yasir Arafat's refusal to make the gestures Powell sought toward bringing the violence to a halt. *New York Times* correspondent David Sanger explained Arafat's intransigence by shifting the blame onto Ariel Sharon. "Palestinians are so humiliated and enraged at their treatment by Mr. Sharon that no call from the United States [for an end to terrorism] makes much impression," he wrote on April 13, although this analysis conspicuously failed to explain why similar U.S. appeals before Sharon was in office had had no effect. Sanger's colleague Serge Schmemmann also grasped for explanations that would make Arafat's behavior understandable. "Palestinians have been irritated by what they perceive as a double standard from Washington, with pressures on the Palestinians to condemn suicide bombings, but no condemnation of the heavy casualties inflicted by the Israeli Army on Palestinian civilians, which the Palestinians refer to as 'state

terrorism,” he wrote on April 14, as if anyone who genuinely wanted peace might be deterred by such irritation.

Also during Powell's visit, Israel announced that it had captured Marwan Barghouti, chief of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a new wing of Arafat's Fatah movement that had been increasingly involved in suicide bombings and other attacks against Israelis. *Times* correspondent James Bennet worried that “the arrest . . . complicat[es] . . . Powell's effort to arrange a truce” (April 16). He reported, “Palestinians insist that Mr. Barghouti is a politician, not a military man,” something that could be said as well about all of the heads of terrorist groups. Members of the group, Bennet added credulously, “have said they respect Mr. Barghouti . . . but do not act on [his] orders in conducting attacks,” as if they would tell Bennet on whose orders they do act. Bennet closed out his report with a quote from a Palestinian legislator who alleged that Barghouti's Israeli captors “will torture him in a very, very bad way. They want him to say that Arafat supports Al Aksa Brigades.”

The *Washington Post* did not stretch so to put Arafat in a good light, but its correspondent Alan Sipress reached just as far to read malignity into Sharon's actions. Reporting on the side trip that Powell made to meet with Lebanese and Syrian officials, Sipress added this bit of interpretation: “Sharon, unmoved by U.S. demands that he immediately end his West Bank invasion and reluctant to address Palestinian political demands, has sought to turn Powell's attention to other matters” (April 16).

It may have been that Sharon urged Powell to speak to the Lebanese and Syrians, as Israel has often asked U.S. officials to do. But the problem on the Israel-Lebanon border was all too real, and U.S. concern was genuine. Continuing attacks and threats from Hizballah threatened to create a “second front” that could even grow into a full-scale Arab-Israeli war since it would bring Is-

rael into confrontation with Syria. It is unlikely that any prodding from Israel was required to persuade Powell to try to calm these troubled waters. But even if Israel did encourage Powell to address this issue, Sipress's suggestion that it did so out of ulterior motives—namely, to deflect attention from the Palestinians—was either tendentious or uninformed. Far from being some sort of pretext, the Lebanese frontier has long been one of Israel's most urgent security concerns.

Surprisingly, the networks devoted a larger portion of their stories to Powell's mission than the newspapers did, perhaps because their news focus more closely tracks the activities of U.S. government leaders. On ABC, correspondent Gillian Findlay reported that "as he prepares to leave . . . , [Powell] doesn't have what he came for: from . . . Sharon, a timeline for a troop withdrawal. Without that, Palestinians say there is little chance Yasir Arafat will renounce violence" (April 16). This put the onus on Israel, but it was a dishonest formulation. Findlay had been covering the intifada from day one, and she must have known that there was little chance that Arafat would renounce violence whether or not he received a timeline for the end of the Israeli operation. Or, at least, there was little chance that he would make an earnest effort to carry out any such renunciation.

Only days before, Arafat himself had provided an inadvertent reminder of just how unreliable any such declaration from him would be. Powell's arrival had been marred by yet another suicide bombing; this one, which killed six and wounded nearly a hundred in a Jerusalem market, was carried out by a female belonging to Arafat's own al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. In response, Powell called off a scheduled meeting with Arafat until the latter denounced the action. Accordingly, Arafat issued a statement saying, "Our steady principle . . . rejects using violence

and terror against civilians. . . . We declared this position beginning in 1988" (Associated Press, *New York Times*, April 14). Were fourteen years not enough time for ABC to catch up with this game?

CBS, in contrast, demonstrated appropriate skepticism. On April 13, Wyatt Andrews reported:

It sounded just like Arafat proclamations of before, this condemnation of violence. But there on Palestinian TV came a statement in Arafat's name, condemning all terrorist activities that target civilians, whether Israelis or Palestinians, especially the last one that occurred in Jerusalem.

After adding that "Arafat's response passed the Powell test" for rescheduling their meeting, Andrews went on to ask and answer the obvious question: "Why would the secretary accept the condemnation of a bombing from the man widely believed to have sent the bomber? Because Powell is on a peace mission, and he wants a shot at telling Arafat to his face, 'It's time to deliver.'"

The next evening, after Powell's meeting with Arafat, Andrews reported:

There was no commitment from Arafat to stop. Arafat's chief negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said Palestinians want to end the violence but that Israel's West Bank incursion must end first. 'Once the Israelis complete their full withdrawal,' Erekat says, 'we will then carry out our obligations.'

A few weeks later, Israel did withdraw its forces from Palestinian cities (although keeping them on the outskirts). This, however, was not followed by any reduction in violence by Palestinians.

The most remarkable report on CBS was by chief White House correspondent John Roberts on April 17, who showed a clip of President George W. Bush saying that "a murderer is not a martyr . . . just a murderer," and then explained why he found this declaration regrettable. According to Roberts,

Bush's "admonishment reinforced a growing belief in the Arab countries and beyond that the president's Mideast policy is rooted too heavily in domestic support for Israel and ignores the suffering of the Palestinian people." This was thinly veiled code for a denunciation of the "Jewish lobby," frequently expressed abroad but rarely in the United States.

That same evening, Andrews seemed to have forgotten his earlier skepticism toward Arafat, and now pointed a finger at Israel as the offending party:

Prime Minister Sharon, [Powell] said, finally set a weekend deadline to end the West Bank invasion, but the fact that troops are still there now, Powell admitted, killed any chance of achieving a ceasefire. . . . For a week now, the Israelis have said they are withdrawing, but some tanks leave and then return. Israel explains it's just searching for individual suspects, but across whole villages around East Jerusalem, new curfews have been imposed.

On NBC, Andrea Mitchell reported that Powell "called upon Israel . . . to stop using excessive force" (April 13). But this terminology was not Powell's. The Arabs were accusing Israel of excessive force, which Israel denied. Powell had diplomatically avoided pronouncing judgment on the issue, artfully calling on Israel to "refrain from the excessive use of force" without saying whether it already had been guilty of this. Mitchell's subtle paraphrase changed the meaning of Powell's remark and served to smuggle a little editorial into her news report. At the conclusion of Powell's visit, she reported that "U.S. officials say Powell pushed Arafat hard on terrorism and security. But no progress on a ceasefire was possible because Israel has still not pulled back" (April 17). Although Mitchell was consistently harsher toward Israel than her colleagues at NBC were, in this instance it appears that her slant, like Wyatt Andrews's turnabout on CBS, reflected briefings

by a Powell entourage that was upset with Sharon and perhaps with Bush, too. Mitchell hinted at this as she added, "Tonight, Sharon has more leverage than ever over U.S. policy, a frustrating lesson for Powell."

CNN, too, expressed skepticism toward Arafat's statement against terrorism. "It was really . . . very strong language . . . that Yasir Arafat used," reported Andrea Koppel on April 13, too generously, since in truth this language was boilerplate. But she added: "He has condemned acts of terrorism before, but what he has yet to do, say U.S. and Israeli officials, is to translate those words into concrete action."

The next evening, CNN correspondent Jerrold Kessel reported that "Sharon has called Colin Powell's decision [to meet with Arafat] a tragic mistake, fearing it might serve to rehabilitate the Palestinian leader as a peace partner." This was a distorted presentation of Sharon's fears. He had made quite clear his conviction that Arafat could not be a peace partner because Arafat did not really want peace. Sharon did not fear a peace partner; he feared the resurrection of a cloak of respectability for a man whom he saw, with good reason, as a terrorist uninterested in peace. To this, Kessel, who had never in the dispatches reviewed for this study bothered to criticize inconsistencies or hypocrisies in Arafat's positions, pointed to one he espied on the part of Israel's leader. Sharon, he said, "has abandoned his long insistence that there should be no negotiating under fire. Now he's the one who's pressing for negotiating a ceasefire under fire, under his fire." Apparently, Kessel thought he had made a clever observation, but it was too clever; Sharon was not after a ceasefire. Even if he were, Kessel's point made no sense. Ceasefires are only reached when there is fire—otherwise, what is to be ceased?

The arrest of Barghouti elicited this sympathetic portrait from ABC's Peter Jennings on April

15: "He was in favor of the peace process until, as he told an Israeli newspaper, the Israelis didn't withdraw from the territories and went on building Jewish settlements." Gillian Findlay chimed in admiringly that "Marwan Barghouti never hid his beliefs." For CBS's David Hawkins, the arrest of Barghouti provided a lens on Israel's deeper nefarious objectives. "Palestinians insist he's a politician," said Hawkins before interviewing Palestinian leader Sari Nusseibeh, who said, "Marwan is actually—[has] always been . . . an extremely positive force in the peace process" (April 16). Neither interviewer nor interviewee attempted to explain how it could be, then, that Barghouti was credibly charged with masterminding terrorist actions that had killed dozens of Israeli civilians or that he was known to be the head of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, whose very name—"Martyrs"—trumpeted its role in suicide-murder missions. Hawkins rounded out the report with a bit of strident editorializing: "Almost all Palestinians, and even some Israelis, don't believe this is a war just against terrorism. They see it as a war to destroy the Palestinian Authority and prospects for a Palestinian state." This vicious interpretation of Israeli motives ignored the simple fact that the war was the Palestinians' initiative and that Israel had desperately sought an end to the violence. If the Palestinians stopped attacking Israelis, was there any reason to believe that Israel's military action would continue?

During these days, there was much in the *New York Times* about the violence on the ground. On April 13, United Nations (UN) correspondent Barbara Crossette reported, "The secretary-general said the United Nations, with about 12,000 relief workers in the Palestinian camps and settlements, had been getting reports that Israelis had violated the codes of conduct in war." She gave readers no way to know that the fifty-plus-year-old UN relief operation in the Palestinian camps was

far from an independent or objective source. It had become instead an integral part of the Palestinian polity, and the vast majority of those 12,000 relief workers were themselves Palestinians. Similarly, the *Times* ran a Reuters story on April 15 asserting that "the European Union [is] losing patience with Israel's West Bank offensive," a formulation that obscured the fact that the European Union had staked out a strongly anti-Israel position since the outbreak of the violence and indeed before.

Several other *Times* stories implied criticism of Israel. Serge Schmemmann reported that the Israeli offensive had caused "enormous destruction" (April 13). "Editorial Observer" Steven Weisman stated that "Mr. Sharon's drive against the Palestinians has turned out to be more brutal than expected" (April 13). And on April 14, the paper carried Associated Press reports citing Arafat's claims of massacres in Jenin, Ramallah, Nablus, and Tulkarm. Yet, the April 14 issue of the *Times* also ran an illuminating account by Michael Gordon of the nature of the war Israel was fighting, providing context that, except for NBC, was offered in none of the other media reviewed for this study:

For Israeli forces, it is also an especially dangerous mission. This is not an American-style military campaign that uses airstrikes for weeks or even months before ground troops are deployed. It is urban warfare, with soldiers moving [from] alley to alley, house to house, searching for militants amid booby-trapped homes. Twenty-four Israeli soldiers have been killed and 124 wounded since the operation began on March 28.

Operation Defensive Shield occasioned a remarkable *Times* editorial that seemed to reflect the underlying assumption of much of the news coverage. It opined that "real Israeli security will prove elusive until the occupation of the West Bank ends and Palestinians are permitted to . . . establish their state" (April 15). Because this study is concerned primarily with the accuracy

and fairness of reportage, comments on editorials or columns appear only in a few places. Yet, this *Times* editorial embodied such a fanciful leap of faith that it warrants mention. Had the *Times* merely asserted that Israel would continue to suffer trouble from the Palestinians as long as it occupied the territories captured in 1967, the argument would have been hard to gainsay. But the editorial went further. It suggested that the evacuation of the territories and the creation of a Palestinian state would lead to "real security" for Israel. There was not a shred of evidence for believing this. On the contrary, all relevant experience cast it into doubt, beginning with the fact that Israel had never enjoyed security before 1967 and that the current violence had been unleashed in the face of Israel's offer of a Palestinian state containing almost all the territory in question. The *Times* is of course entitled to its editorial opinions, but it is disturbing that such an influential organ should propound beliefs as unreasonable as these.

Although coverage of the allegations of a massacre in Jenin peaked after Powell's visit (and will be the focus of "episode 10" of this study), there were many stories about Jenin that coincided with the visit. On April 13, a nonbylined item on casualty statistics in the *Times* stated that "Israel has officially said 100 Palestinians died in Jenin, but some Israeli officials have put the actual toll nearer 200. Palestinians put the Jenin figure at several hundred." And *Washington Post* correspondents Keith Richburg and Alan Sipress reported, "Palestinians have said that Israeli troops killed hundreds . . . mostly civilians, in . . . Jenin," adding that "Palestinians compared the killing in Jenin to the deaths of Palestinian refugees at . . . Sabra and Shatilla" (April 13). The next day, Richburg and Sipress repeated these figures as well as the Sabra-Shatilla analogy.

On April 15, however, the *Times*' Serge Schmemmann and Joel Greenberg reported a change in numbers: "Once the bulldozers moved in and resistance waned, the [Israeli] army spoke of 100 to 200 Palestinian deaths. But after the ensuing furor, the army today said it was aware of 45 Palestinian dead." The reference to the "ensuing furor" seemed intended to cast doubt on the new figures, and the two authors went on to claim that it was the original, higher Israeli figures "that prompted Palestinian charges of a massacre." This attribution was far-fetched. Arafat, after all, was also crying massacre in Nablus, Ramallah, and Tulkarm, where no such Israeli figures had been put out, and indeed he had been denouncing Israeli "massacres" repeatedly since the first days of the intifada. In the *Post*, Sipress and Richburg now reported that the Israeli army said it had discovered thirty-nine bodies "after searching about half the camp" (April 15).

On ABC, correspondent Dean Reynolds reported on April 14, "Today, at the Israeli cabinet meeting, ministers referred to dozens of dead Palestinians from the fighting in . . . Jenin—considerably below the hundreds to which they referred only days ago." Visiting Jenin, evidently with an Israeli military escort, Reynolds reported that "on the tour, a Palestinian doctor was encouraged [by the Israelis] to offer details which seem to have been rehearsed with soldiers beforehand." Reynolds's sensitive journalistic antennae apparently alerted him to the possibility of getting a doctored story of events. Not once, however, in the period reviewed for this study did anyone at ABC exhibit a similar alertness to the possibility of manipulation by the Palestinians.

On CNN, Wolf Blitzer reported on April 13, "We have new pictures of the devastation in the Jenin refugee camp. . . . Palestinians allege a massacre. Israel says there were hundreds killed or wounded." That same evening, correspondent Sheila MacVicar stated, "The Israeli military is now ac-

knowledging . . . that at least 100 people died” in Jenin. Then, Blitzer interviewed Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian representative to the UN, who charged

obvious war crimes which have been committed . . . the horrible war crime in the refugee camp in Jenin. . . . This was willful killing. This was wanton destruction. This was massacres . . . war crimes under international law . . . this is unheard of.

Two nights later, Blitzer interviewed Sharon, who denied that a massacre had occurred at Jenin and said that Israel now believed that the number of Palestinian dead counted in the dozens. This was followed by an interview with Palestinian minister of international cooperation Nabil Sha'ath, who insisted that the massacre story was genuine. “We don't know the exact number, because already a lot of the bodies have been snatched and buried elsewhere in unidentified graves that we learned about,” he said. “[Sharon] took six days to perpetrate the massacre and six days for a cover-up” (April 15).

The debate about Jenin dragged on, as “episode 10” of this study will show. In the end, the Israeli figures would be vindicated by a UN investigation, while every version put out by the Palestinians would turn out to have been hopelessly erroneous and propagandistic.¹²

episode 10:

The Jenin
'Massacre'





Although Israel's military action in Jenin was mostly ended by April 11, it was not until a few days later that Israel allowed journalists into the area. This may have lent some credibility to claims that a massacre had occurred there, and the reportage of the claims and denials reached a crescendo about a week after the events had taken place.

The first *New York Times* story filed from Jenin was by David Rohde, who reported that "in interviews, [residents] accused Israeli forces of shooting civilians, removing bodies and bulldozing houses with people inside" (April 16). One resident

led a group of reporters to a pile of rubble where he said he watched from his bedroom window as Israeli soldiers buried 10 bodies. 'There was a hole here where they buried bodies,' he said. 'And then they collapsed a house on top of it.'

Rohde acknowledged that the "Palestinian accounts could not be verified," but he seemed to give them the benefit of the doubt: "The smell of decomposing bodies hung over at least six heaps of rubble today, and weeks of excavation may be needed before an accurate death toll can be made."

On April 17, Rohde ran a long story on the complaints of aid organizations that Israel was not giving them sufficient assistance, quoting one unnamed worker as saying "the devastation is worse than I expected. . . . I couldn't have imagined anything worse than this." On April 18, the paper carried Rohde's account of Palestinians digging body parts out of the rubble, seemingly buttressing the massacre claims.

In the early stages of the fighting, Israel lost thirteen soldiers in a single event set off by a booby trap. After that, Israel changed tactics, and instead of entering buildings in pursuit of enemy fighters, used armored bulldozers to knock down buildings from which Is-

raeli forces had been fired upon. On April 18, Rohde reported:

Israeli officials say they issued clear and repeated warnings over megaphones to residents to leave the camp, particularly in areas where houses were bulldozed. But Ms. Daoud, who is blind and partly deaf, said she had never heard any Israeli orders to leave the camp, or the bulldozers flattening houses nearby.

Was the reader supposed to infer that Israel's claims of having given warning were not true?

One of the factors tilting press coverage of Jenin to Israel's disadvantage was the highly visible and agitated role of Terje Roed-Larsen. A Norwegian diplomat working for the United Nations (UN), Roed-Larsen had been a driving force behind the Oslo Accords and perhaps was distraught at seeing his project come to such a bad ending. *Times* correspondent James Bennet quoted Roed-Larsen as stating, "Combating terrorism does not give a blank check to kill civilians" (April 19). This, like most of what Roed-Larsen had to say during this period, was extremely wide of the mark. The subsequent UN report noted that approximately fifty-two Palestinians in all died in Jenin.¹³ By Israel's count, thirty-eight were gunmen and fourteen civilians.¹⁴ Human Rights Watch, known for being highly critical of Israel, estimated that twenty-two of the fifty-two were civilians.¹⁵ That is fewer than the twenty-three Israeli soldiers who died in Jenin. These numbers clearly bespeak a military operation at pains to avoid civilian casualties, the opposite of the picture that Roed-Larsen was eager to paint.

When President George W. Bush applauded Israel's withdrawal from Jenin, *Times* correspondent David Sanger objected: "On a day when Arab, European and United Nations officials were focused on the destruction that the Israeli incursions had left behind, . . . Mr. Bush's comments may bolster Palestinian suspicions that the United States was supporting Prime Minister Ariel Sharon" (April 19).

The reports from Jenin came amid a tense standoff in Bethlehem, where scores of Palestinian gunmen had taken refuge in the Church of the Nativity. *Times* correspondent Serge Schmemmann reported, "The Israelis had begun detaining some wives and mothers of men inside, Palestinians said" (April 17). Some women may have been detained, perhaps with due cause, but it seems very unlikely that any systematic activity of the kind described by Schmemmann took place because no other news organizations reported it—nor did the *Times*, according to the findings of this study, repeat this claim.

Washington Post correspondent Molly Moore painted a vivid picture of the destruction in Jenin. At the same time, however, she got on top of the massacre story days before the *Times* or the networks lent any similar illumination. On April 16, she reported: "Interviews with residents inside the camp and international aid workers who were allowed here for the first time today indicated that no evidence has surfaced to support allegations by Palestinian groups and aid organizations of large-scale massacres or executions by Israeli troops. Thus far, about forty bodies have been recovered." But three days later, the *Post's* John Lancaster was resurrecting the massacre tale with the help of Roed-Larsen and some other international participants. "What we are seeing here is horrifying," said Roed-Larsen, "horrifying scenes of human suffering. . . . Israel has lost all moral ground in this conflict" (April 19). Lancaster also quoted Human Rights Watch official Peter Bouckert, who stated, "I think it's clear that in the end what actually happened in Jenin will fall somewhere in between what the Palestinians are alleging and what the [Israeli Army] claims. But only an independent authority can establish what actually happened."

When the UN conducted its investigation, however, what was "clear" to Bouckert proved incorrect. Far from splitting the difference, the UN's

conclusions coincided more or less exactly with Israel's claims and not at all with those of the Palestinians. Lancaster returned to the subject the next day, writing that "Palestinian officials said many civilians died in the Israeli assault on Jenin" (April 20).

On ABC, Peter Jennings introduced a report on April 17 by Gillian Findlay that he clearly believed—or wanted viewers to believe—constituted a kind of "gotcha" moment, proving the worst of Israeli intentions. It was based on Palestinian claims that Israeli soldiers had torn up the Palestinian Ministry of Education in Ramallah. Jennings began the segment with these words:

If you have listened with even half an ear to the verbal conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians, you will have heard Israelis say repeatedly that whatever they did, it was to root out terrorism. Whereas, the Palestinians have said that Prime Minister Sharon is trying to undermine Palestinian society.

Then he introduced Findlay, who reported:

Amid all the damage—smashed buildings, torn-up roads, power and water systems that no longer work—there has been another casualty here: the Palestinian Authority itself. This is the Ministry of Education: doors blown in, offices trashed, employees who say they were forced at gunpoint to lead soldiers from room to room. . . . The soldiers, [one employee] says, then went for the computers—ripping our hard drives, confiscating financial records, student records. He says they even blasted the ministry's vault, taking canceled checks and \$10,000 in cash.

She then brought on Saeb Erekat, who claimed that "everything of the civilian infrastructure and security infrastructure have been destroyed," before finally giving an Israeli spokesman time for a single cursory sentence in defense of his government's actions. This was the merest bow to balance in a report whose unmistakable import was made clear by Jennings's lead. But did it

really prove what Jennings wanted viewers to believe it did?

Israel may indeed have ransacked the ministry's offices, although the specifics provided by ABC were all from Palestinian sources, leaving reason to doubt such details as the theft of cash. But did this show, as Jennings implied, that terrorism was not Israel's true target, that Israel was only using terrorism as an excuse in a war whose true goal was to stamp out Palestinian national aspirations? Only if one believes that the same Palestinian Authority that sponsored terrorism even while nominally rejecting it, and that repeatedly closed schools in order to send children into the front lines, would be above using its Ministry of Education as a front for terror-related activities. Perhaps Jennings believed this, but his implied accusation of Israeli duplicity meant that Israel, too, must believe Arafat would never misuse his Ministry of Education in this way. And this Israel assuredly did not believe.

Given Jennings's ill-concealed animus toward Israel, Roed-Larsen's fulminations fell upon him like manna from heaven. He began his April 18 broadcast by quoting Roed-Larsen's words that the scene in Jenin was "horrifying, beyond belief." During that week, a new ABC reportorial voice, that of John Yang, was added to the coverage of the conflict, and he was clearly singing from the same page as his colleagues. On April 19, three days after the *Post's* Molly Moore had reported on the absence of evidence of a massacre in Jenin, Yang reported from that city: "There is no firm estimate of how many Palestinians died here. The Israeli armies [*sic*] say it's in the dozens. The Palestinians say it's in the hundreds, maybe the thousands." And the next evening, Yang was declaiming, "All this destruction here in Jenin is becoming a rallying cry for the Arab world. A symbol of Israel's iron-fist approach."

By any reasonable standard, the low number of civilian casualties as compared with the number of Israeli casualties proved just the opposite. An "iron-

fist approach,” such as armies—including Arab armies—confronting terrorism have often taken in other places, would have led to civilian casualties many times higher. For example, when militants in the Syrian town of Hama challenged the rule of dictator Hafez al-Asad in 1982, Asad’s forces leveled much of the town, causing an estimated 20,000 deaths—nearly 1,000 for every civilian that Human Rights Watch said had died in Jenin. *That was an iron-fist approach.*

On CBS, anchor Dan Rather exhibited none of the bias of ABC’s Jennings, but he, too, chose to quote Roed-Larsen. Unlike Jennings, however, he included Israel’s version as well: “Israel says its troops did their best to minimize civilian casualties. . . . But . . . one United Nations official calls Jenin, quote, ‘a sad and disgraceful chapter in Israel’s history’” (April 18). On April 19, CBS correspondent Mark Phillips used a story about Israel’s withdrawal from Jenin to deliver himself of a long editorial accusing Israel of destroying the prospects for peace:

Moderates on both sides here feel trapped in a cycle of violence. . . . Nobody’s expecting the recent relative lull in violence to last. What has this Israeli operation accomplished? . . . It has only reduced, not destroyed, the Palestinian capacity for revenge, and it certainly hasn’t reduced their motivation. Among the casualties . . . have been the voices of moderation and compromise.

Phillips had apparently been assigned to the region just that week, and he sounded as if he were entirely unaware of what had transpired during the preceding year and a half. Such platitudinous moral equivalence had been blown to smithereens by the suicide bombers. It was Arafat and his Fatah group who were supposedly the Palestinian moderates, but they had morphed into the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which was running neck-and-neck with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in its efforts to murder Israeli civilians. And on

the Israeli side, where indeed there were plenty of genuine moderates, the violence they felt "trapped in" was Palestinian violence.

On April 20, Phillips pounded away at his *idée fixe* of moral equivalence. "What happened in Jenin depends on who you believe," he said, citing the contrasting Palestinian and Israeli versions. "Even the UN inquiry . . . isn't likely to end the argument over Jenin. In the bitterness and mistrust of this conflict, each side has basically already made up its mind over what happened there and who is to blame." Of course, in reality, what happened depended not on whom the observer believed. Whatever the state of mind of the two parties, there was an objective reality to these events, and journalists, one would have thought, were under a professional obligation to discover what it was, as best they could, as, for example, did the *Post's* Molly Moore. But not Phillips, who sounded like a modern-day literary critic approaching a "text" of which all constructions were equally subjective, thus equally valid.

NBC's report from Jenin served to illustrate how poor the ABC and CBS coverage was. NBC was no less vivid in portraying the destruction that the Palestinians had suffered, but in a few brief passages it allowed viewers to see the Israeli side, too. It is ironic that a reporter like CBS's Phillips could strain so for artificial symmetry in order to present a surface balance yet fail in a substantive way to tell both sides of the story. On NBC, Tom Brokaw led by saying that Jenin had witnessed "some of the most intense fighting of the war," which had "leveled many homes and killed an undetermined number of Palestinians. On the Arab side, they're claiming it was a massacre. On the Israeli side, they're claiming that is an exaggeration" (April 16). Then correspondent Martin Fletcher reported from the scene:

It's a rough ride into Jenin, but it's worse when you get there. The center of the refugee camp looks like it was hit by an earthquake, but it

was the Israeli army. Palestinians claim there was a massacre here, that close to 500 Palestinians were killed and their bodies taken by Israel and hidden in mass graves.

This gave a pretty clear view of the Arab take on these events, but Fletcher next showed an Israeli officer who said of the massacre allegation, "it's a complete lie." Fletcher went on to summarize the Israeli assessment of the numbers who died in Jenin. At this point his interview with the Israeli was interrupted by a couple of local women who came along and said, as Fletcher translated their words from Arabic: "We don't have food or water. . . . And where are our children? Maybe they're dead. Come with us. . . . You'll find dead bodies." This was pretty strong, seemingly spontaneous testimony for the Palestinian version. Fletcher, however, continued, pointing around him:

But the problem here isn't only death but destruction. The Palestinians laid booby traps everywhere. These white cables were strung all over the camp. They were controlling booby-trap bombs, and here's one of the bombs. To protect their soldiers, the army brought in giant armored bulldozers to simply demolish booby-trapped homes. So, now the question no one can answer yet is: How many more bodies are buried under the rubble?

One could scarcely call this account pro-Israeli, but both sides of the story came across.

On CNN, Sheila MacVicar also provided a balanced account. She did not fail to dramatize the anguish of Palestinian deaths, closing her April 16 report with these words:

How many bodies, how many fighters, how many civilians? No one yet knows. No one even knows how many might be missing. Only a few hundred of the camp's surviving inhabitants are still in their own homes. The rest are scattered and have not yet been counted. It is mostly women and children who are left. Some of them wandered the

camp weeping, crying for lost brothers and sons. And they point to that mountain of rubble and say that is where they lie.

Yet, MacVicar also included the Israeli perspective: "The Israeli military say this was the scene of some of the fiercest fighting, and not a neighborhood, they say, but a fortress . . . the heart of the Palestinian terror infrastructure, and the civilians who lived here, the women and children, they say, were used as shields." She also put an Israeli on camera for a moment pointing out some of the booby traps.

The next evening, Wolf Blitzer interviewed Saeb Erekat, who claimed, "We have 1,600 missing men in this refugee camp [in Jenin]" (April 17). Erekat also called for "an international commission of inquiry to get the results and to decide how many people were massacred. And we say the number will not be less than 500."

On April 19, when Israeli forces withdrew from Jenin, Christiane Amanpour delivered a long report from Jenin that had none of the balance that MacVicar had shown. She spoke of Israeli forces "attacking houses with Apache helicopters and tanks"; of residents who "say they never got any warning"; and of Israeli soldiers "us[ing] Palestinian camp residents as human shields as they went house to house searching for armed militants and booby traps, [which] violates the rules of war." Although her report included more details on the battle than most other television news reports, she managed not to mention the use of booby traps by the Palestinians (beyond the confused reference to Israeli soldiers "searching" for them). It was the killing of thirteen Israeli soldiers by booby trap that had reshaped Israel's tactics in Jenin, but no viewer would have learned this from Amanpour's account. Instead, as she told it, Israel had resorted to razing buildings because of the effectiveness of Palestinian "armed resistance."

Also during this week, anchor Wolf Blitzer conducted an interview with Ismael Abu Shanab,

one of the founders of Hamas, and asked him whether Hamas would “accept an independent Jewish state in this part of the world” if “Israel were to withdraw completely to the 1967 lines” (April 16). Shanab shot back: “We accept Israeli withdrawal. And we said it many times, that we support Israeli withdrawal to 1967.” The evasion could scarcely have been clearer, but rather than press Shanab, Blitzer ended the interview and then summarized: “He seemed to say that Hamas would support a Jewish state in Israel if Israel were to withdraw to the ‘67 lines.” Shanab had said no such thing; accepting Israel’s withdrawal is far different from accepting Israel’s existence. Blitzer, a former reporter for the *Jerusalem Post*, is not unfriendly to Israel nor ignorant of its security concerns. Nonetheless, he seemed to whitewash Shanab’s answer. Perhaps he could not bring himself to accept that Hamas’s undisguised goal is the utter destruction of Israel. But various polls demonstrate that this is precisely what a great many Palestinians and other Arabs say they desire. Unless this brutal fact is absorbed, much else that transpires in the painful struggles between Israel and its neighbors will be seen through a clouded lens.

conclusion





In the preceding pages, I have documented dozens of instances of inaccurate, tendentious, misleading, or unfair items found in the news reports that I examined. So what? To err is human, and journalists trying to cover a bitter, entangled conflict unfolding on many fronts—much of it in secret—are not likely to achieve perfection. And, too, the circumstances in which they work are often dangerous; for that they deserve our gratitude.

There are, however, some faults which ought not to be excused. The most serious of these is bias. By this I do not mean the biases that reporters, like everyone else, may hold within. I prefaced this study by specifying my own bias. Rather, I mean the betrayal of journalistic standards that occurs when reporters allow their biases to color their reportage, when what they purport to be news stories are in fact subtle editorials.

Of the news organizations I examined, the one whose bias was abundantly evident was ABC television, which in almost every episode under study made Israel look worse than it appeared in the reportage of the other networks or the two major newspapers. Invariably, this bias began with the comments of Peter Jennings, who, for example, wanted his viewers to believe that Israel was not really at war against terrorism but rather only using terrorism as an excuse for strangling Palestinian aspirations. Perhaps because Jennings takes a direct hand in writing the news reports and also in selecting many of the reporters (he has the title of “editor”),¹⁶ ABC’s reportage evinced a consistency of slant that I found in none of the other news organizations. During the period under review, viewers of ABC never saw, for example, as did those of other networks, the Temple Mount rioters showering stones and bottles on Jewish worshipers at the Wailing Wall below nor the booby traps in Jenin that impelled Israel to smash build-

ings. They would have learned, falsely, that Jewish settlers proclaimed "days of rage," when in fact it was only Palestinians who did so. They would have heard Palestinian spokesmen denying any involvement in the *Karine-A* arms shipment but would have seen no follow-up story of the proof of Palestinian involvement. And they would have heard many other claims from Palestinian sources without challenge, indeed often reinforced by Jennings and his reporters, such as that Yasir Arafat was completely helpless to stop the violence.

Other news organizations had individuals whose consistent anti-Israel slant stood out, for example, David Hawkins at CBS, Mike Hanna and Jerrold Kessel at CNN, Andrea Mitchell at NBC, Deborah Sontag at the *New York Times*, and Daniel Williams at the *Washington Post*. But unlike at ABC, these voices were balanced by others whose approach was less tendentious.

The best reportage was by NBC's Martin Fletcher. Fletcher was hardly soft on Israel. His coverage, for example, of the destruction of parts of Jenin was as vivid as that of any other journalist, but unlike most others, Fletcher presented a clear vision of the booby traps laid by Palestinian fighters so that his viewers could grasp what Israeli soldiers were facing.

What is the cause of bias against Israel? Perhaps some individuals are endemically hostile to the Jewish state, but such a deep cause is unlikely. A better explanation can be found in an essay by a correspondent for the *Economist* who described the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as "an epic struggle of the weak against the strong."¹⁷ Since journalists often pride themselves on afflicting the powerful, those who see the Middle East in these terms would naturally find themselves siding with the Palestinians.

After bias, the next most serious journalistic failing is ignorance. Most journalists are necessarily generalists, so they cannot fairly be expected to be experts on each area they cover. Yet,

they owe it to their audience to be reasonably well informed, to give themselves a crash course upon being assigned to a new place. The one who most conspicuously failed to meet this standard was Christiane Amanpour, who plunged into Israel apparently not even understanding such elementary facts as that the settlers are Israelis who live in the territories occupied in 1967 as opposed to within Israel proper (which is why they are called "settlers"); not knowing that Ehud Barak represented the dovish side of the Israeli spectrum; and apparently believing that Hamas is opposed to violence.

Beyond the failures of individual journalists or news organizations, I discovered one systemic problem in the course of this study that is probably more important than any one individual's bias. These journalists seem to follow a canon that says when two sides are fighting, it is their obligation to report equally and with equal credence what is said by each. But the quality of the information provided by the two sides in this conflict is highly asymmetrical. By this I mean simply that the Palestinians repeatedly lie. It starts with Arafat and goes down to his many deputies. It seems even to reach to doctors in Palestinian hospitals and to many subjects of apparently unstaged man-in-the-street interviews, such as the Jenin resident who claimed to have watched Israel bury ten bodies under a building.

Palestinian spokesmen asserted vociferously that they had nothing to do with the *Karine-A*. They insisted that 500 people had been "massacred" in Jenin. Amid these claims, Israeli aerial surveillance captured, and released to the press, photos of a staged Palestinian funeral in which the "corpse" could be seen running to the litter and climbing into it.¹⁸ Arafat also claimed that "massacres" had occurred repeatedly in every Palestinian population center. Palestinian first lady Suha Arafat declared in a speech in Ramallah, with Hillary

Clinton present as her guest, that Israel was poisoning Palestinian wells. When Israeli forces found a photo of a two-year-old Palestinian boy decked out as a suicide bomber, Palestinian officials claimed it to be a fabrication until the child's family acknowledged the photo. Arafat claimed to have renounced terror while secretly encouraging it. He declared his intent to conduct a "very serious investigation" of the Ramallah police station lynching of the two Israeli reservists, although nothing of the sort ensued. Nor was the Jericho synagogue that was torched by a Palestinian mob restored, as Palestinian spokesmen had claimed. A Palestinian died in an auto accident, and his body was shown to journalists as a victim of Israeli torture. (It was also shown repeatedly on Palestinian television to encourage rage.) And so on.

On the other side, Israel, while engaging in public relations with all the spin and self-interest that any democratic government is guilty of, nonetheless operates, like other democratic governments, with a presumption of truth-telling. At least twice during these episodes, Israeli spokesmen helped to reinforce stories embarrassing to their own side because that was what the facts, at first glance, seemed to suggest. Only later did Israel discover that these stories were probably false or exaggerated. The first case was the death of Mohammed al-Dura on the third day of the intifada. Eventually, Israel's investigation concluded that the boy had probably died from Palestinian fire, and the research of German television network ARD reached a similar conclusion. But at the time, Israeli spokesmen, eager to put on record their regrets over the tragedy, accepted that Israeli fire had caused his death. The second case was Jenin. At first, Israeli sources said that as many as 200 Palestinians had died, thus fueling the claims of a massacre. Only later did Israel realize that the actual number was in the fifties.

What happens in a conflict where one side, accustomed to operating with a controlled press, will say anything that seems to serve its purposes, without any conscience about its truth value, while the other side attempts to learn and tell the truth, at least to the degree of other democratic governments? Faced with this situation, have the media no obligation beyond reporting "he says, she says"?

The asymmetry of veracity is compounded by other asymmetries. For one, Israel, being a democracy, is rich in critics of its own government. Many of the leads to stories that make Israel look bad originate in the Israeli press, with Israeli nongovernmental organizations, or with representatives of the political opposition. There is no shortage of Israeli academics and intellectuals willing to be quoted or to go on camera criticizing their government's policies toward the Palestinians. There is, on the other hand, no comparable freedom in the Palestinian press. And the willingness of individual Palestinian notables to speak out against their government is sharply circumscribed. About a year and a half into the intifada, voices began to be raised among the Palestinians criticizing corruption and Arafat's style of governance, but only later were a precious few willing to challenge Palestinian violence against Israel. (On the other hand, calls by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and others for greater violence are widely aired and treated with respect.) In many stories I examined for this study, an assertion critical of some Israeli policy, for example, on settlements, would be prefaced with the phrase "even many Israelis believe . . ." And this was undoubtedly accurate. But I never saw, *mutatis mutandis*, a criticism of Palestinian policy with the phrase "even many Palestinians . . ."

Another important asymmetry is that the Palestinians have created a menacing environment for journalists. The Israeli daily *Ha'aretz* reported

in October 2002 that when three Hamas members were killed in Gaza by an explosion, apparently of their own bomb, "A group of journalists who arrived at the scene of the blast, including an AP reporter and a photographer and a cameraman for Associated Press Television News, were assaulted by several Hamas supporters."¹⁹ On August 26, 2002, the Associated Press reported, "The Palestinian journalists union declared . . . that news photographers are 'absolutely forbidden' from taking pictures of Palestinian children carrying weapons or taking part in activities by militant groups, saying that the pictures harm the Palestinian cause." In October 2000, London's *Daily Telegraph* carried an account by a British news photographer who came upon the aftermath of the Ramallah lynching:

I reached for my camera. I was composing the picture when I was punched in the face by a Palestinian. Another Palestinian pointed right at me shouting 'no picture, no picture!' while another guy hit me in the face and said 'give me your film!' I tried to get the film out but they were all grabbing me and one guy just pulled the camera off me and smashed it to the floor. I knew I had lost the chance to take the photograph that would have made me famous and I had lost my favourite lens that I'd used all over the world, but I didn't care. I was scared for my life.²⁰

Indeed, the whole grisly story from Ramallah might not have gotten out were it not for a single Italian film crew that managed to escape with footage of the killing. Ricardo Christiano, the bureau chief of the Italian television network RAI, was so frightened when he learned that the film was being attributed to his company that he wrote a letter, published in the Palestinian press, swearing that it was "not the official Italian television station RAI [that] filmed the events" but another station.²¹ He pledged that "we always respect . . . the journalistic procedures with the Palestinian Authority for . . . work within

Palestine.”²² When this letter appeared, it set off a ruckus in Italy that led to the recall of Christiano. His friends later were quoted as explaining in his defense that of all the European journalists who had received beatings at the hands of the Palestinians, he had been beaten the most severely, leaving him traumatized.

Nor should it be assumed that such violence arises spontaneously from the grass roots rather than being orchestrated by Palestinian officials. When the Palestinian Authority was embarrassed in its relations with the United States by demonstrations of jubilation over the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, *USA Today* reported that “Palestinian Cabinet Secretary Ahmed Abdel Rahman . . . called international news agencies and said the safety of their staff could not be guaranteed unless they withdrew the embarrassing footage of Palestinian police firing joyfully in the air.”²³

Just as there is no indication that news organizations have thought through how to handle the imbalance in truthfulness between the two sides in the conflict, so there is also no evidence that they have weighed the implications of the intimidation aimed at both journalists reporting from the Palestinian areas and Palestinians themselves to discourage dissident opinions. In these respects, the journalistic environment of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not a level playing field.

A similar point was made by the *Washington Post*’s editorial page editor, Fred Hiatt, regarding the U.S. conflict with Saddam Husayn’s regime in Iraq:

Because our default position is to tell the truth—might as well, unless there’s some good reason not to—we have trouble imagining people for whom that is not so, for whom even a whispered conversation far from officials or listening devices can never be considered safe. . . . And we assume, because of our blessed poverty of imagi-

nation, that their officials behave more or less as ours do, maybe lying when pressed, or when they think they can get away with it, but telling the truth when, all things being equal, there seems no reason not to.²⁴

The conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority is often described as a conflict between two peoples. And so it is, in part. But it is also a conflict between an open, democratic society and an authoritarian one in which violence and coercion are endemic. Whereas democratic governments practice public relations or "spin control," authoritarian governments often aim for something more, namely news management or manipulation, which they try to achieve through deceit and intimidation. Treating their domestic news media as servants of the regime, they are little inclined to respect the functions or objectivity of the foreign press.

Reporters tend to be savvy and tough; they are not easy people to con or bully. Nonetheless, authoritarian regimes have often succeeded in twisting coverage to their purposes. Joseph Stalin famously beguiled the *New York Times* into covering up, and even directly denying, the monstrous famine that claimed five to ten million Ukrainian lives in the 1930s. Adolf Hitler lulled the *Times* of London into a benign interpretation of his intentions, for which it issued a poignant mea culpa after World War Two. And during his guerrilla days, Fidel Castro got the *New York Times* and other news organizations to portray him as nothing but a radical democrat, only to acknowledge once he achieved power that he had been a communist all along.

The various U.S. news organizations, as well as the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Society of Professional Journalists, have codes of standards and ethics that guide reporters in dealing with their sources. But none that I have found include instructions for handling the machinations of authoritarian regimes, much less for

trying to balance the competing presentations of democratic and authoritarian adversaries. In the case of the Middle East, that lacuna seems to work to Israel's disadvantage. Yet, it is not for Israel's sake so much as for the sake of their readers and viewers and the effectiveness of their profession that journalists ought to give systematic consideration to the problem of dealing with warring parties that are so dissimilar in how they deal with the press.

Endnotes

1. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Arafat's Gift," *New Yorker*, January 29, 2001, p. 55.

2. Quoted in "First Statement of the Government of Israel" submitted to the Sharm El-Sheikh Fact-Finding Committee (a.k.a. the Mitchell Committee), December 28, 2000, paragraph 183. Available online (www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/go.asp?MFAH0jcb0).

3. Yasir Abed Rabbo, "We Are Not Sending Our Children Out to Die," Palestine Liberation Organization, Negotiation Affairs Department, November 26, 2000. Available online (www.nad-plo.org/eye/opeds9.html).

4. "Drei Kugeln und ein totes kind" (Three bullets and a dead boy), originally produced as a documentary by local television station Hessischer Rundfunk, then broadcast by ARD on March 17, 2002, as an episode of the regular investigative series *Das rote Quadrat* (The red square). See also From Sommer, Allison Kaplan, and Herb Keinon, "German TV Report: Palestinians Likely Killed Gaza Boy," *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2002.

5. Michael Getler, "Tense Times," *Washington Post*, June 9, 2002.

6. See note 4.

7. Ron Kampeas, "Ultimatum Looms for Palestinian," Associated Press Online, October 8, 2000; Barry Schweid, "Albright: Arafat Can Stop Violence," Associated Press Online, October 8, 2000.

8. "IDF: PA Planning Mosque at Joseph's Tomb," *Ha'aretz*, October 11, 2000; Margot Dudkevitch, "Palestinians Refurbish Joseph's Tomb," *Jerusalem Post*, October 11, 2000.

9. In keeping with the general method of this study in examining five-day segments, the dates that I have encompassed for this episode are January 4 through 9. Yet, in considering whether the networks followed through to show the solution to

the mystery embodied in the original story, it would have made no sense to cut off my inquiry arbitrarily on January 9, so I looked at the week beyond as well.

10. This was as far as I searched. It is extremely unlikely that the network returned to the story beyond this point, since it had already grown cold.

11. I have chosen to examine Powell's mission and the battles of Jenin as two separate episodes, even though the five main days of coverage of Powell's diplomacy overlap slightly with the five main days of coverage of Jenin, meaning that coverage of Powell was intermingled with news of the fighting. In keeping with my practice throughout this study of including whatever news stories about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict ran during the days of each selected episode, this episode, which focuses on Powell's mission, includes much material that also concerns Operation Defensive Shield and Jenin. Jenin itself is the focus of "episode 10" of this study.

12. The investigation concluded: "Fifty-two Palestinian deaths had been confirmed by the hospital in Jenin. . . . A senior Palestinian Authority official alleged in mid-April that some 500 were killed, a figure that has not been substantiated in the light of the evidence that has emerged." "Report of the Secretary-General prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution ES-10/10," United Nations General Assembly, July 30, 2002, paragraph 56. Available online (www.un.org/peace/jenin).

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., paragraph 57.

15. Ibid.

16. Gillian Cosgrove, "Brain Drain of Local Journo: Why U.S. Networks Have a Yen for Our Ink-Stained Wretches," *National Post* (Toronto edition), August 17, 2002.

17. Max Rodenbeck, "Broadcasting the War," *New York Times*, April 17, 2002.

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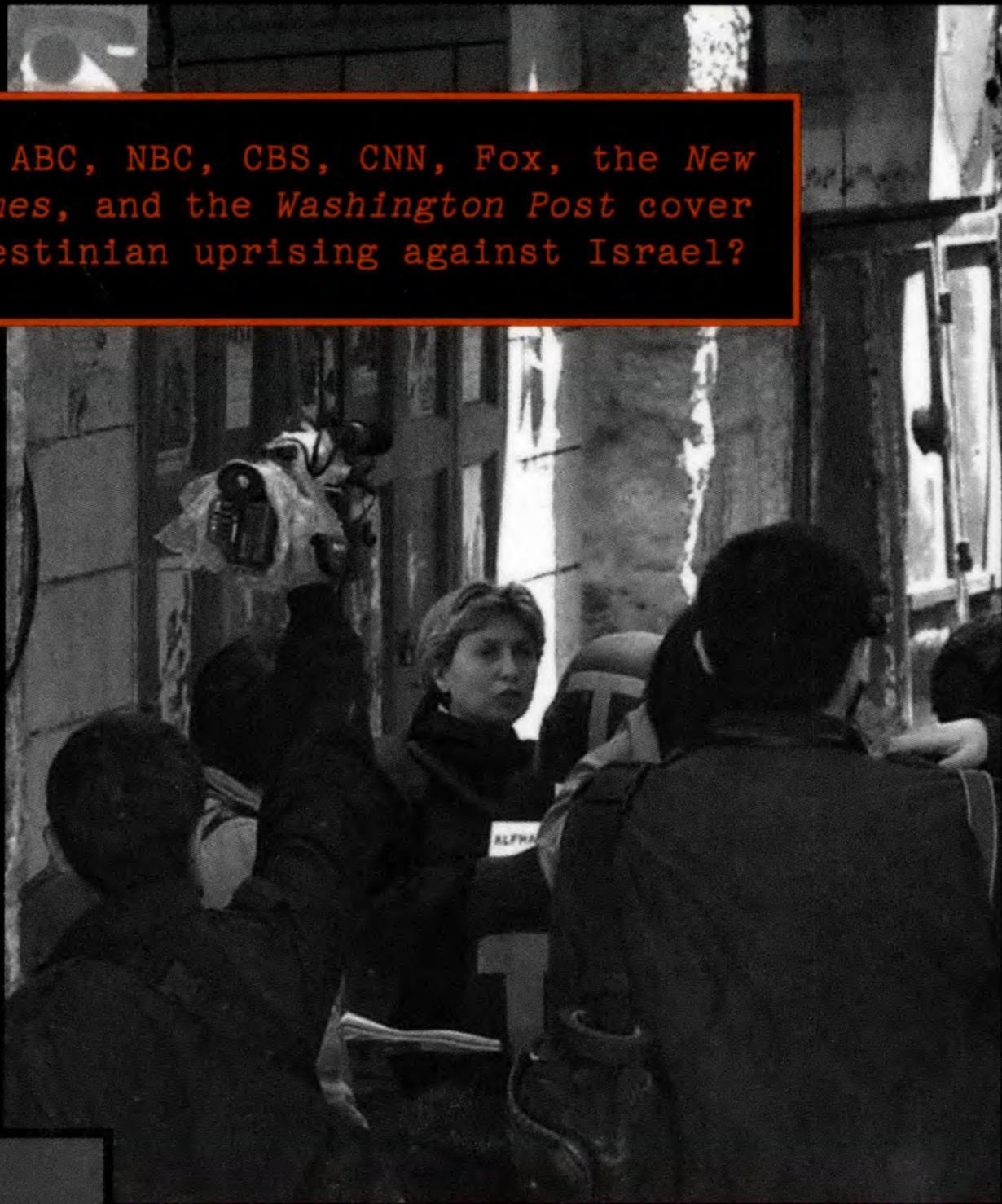
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How did ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Fox, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* cover the Palestinian uprising against Israel?



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