

Counter-Error: Separating Fact from Fiction in the Middle East

[Martin Kramer](#), [Benny Morris](#), and [Hussein Ibish](#)

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How does misinformation arise and become accepted as fact by citizens and leaders? Three scholars discuss the origins and costs of erroneous information in the Middle East.

On October 21, Martin Kramer, Benny Morris, and Hussein Ibish addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. A professor of modern Middle Eastern history at Shalem College in Israel, Dr. Kramer recently published the anthology [The War on Error: Israel, Islam, and the Middle East](#). Dr. Morris is the Goldman Visiting Israeli Professor in Georgetown University's Department of Government and a professor of history at Ben-Gurion University. Dr. Ibish is a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MARTIN KRAMER

The War on Error is a collected volume, a genre against which there is a prejudice. A collected volume does not weave one story. But all the essays included in this one are relevant to a central motif: they contest errors that threaten to become assumed wisdom. The book defines errors as unintentional lapses that leave a gap between reality and its representation. These lapses are never random, however; the form they assume is determined by bias.

The error studied at greatest length in the book concerns the 1948 Israeli conquest of Lydda, specifically Ari Shavit's account in his 2013 bestseller *My Promised Land*. There, Shavit posits that vengeful Israeli troops carried out a large-scale massacre of Palestinian civilians during the operation. The most dramatic scene involves an Israeli attack in which, according to Shavit, a traumatized soldier launched an antitank rocket into a mosque, killing seventy civilians. Shavit said he drew his version from conversations with Israeli veterans taped twenty years ago.

To this reader, elements of Shavit's account seemed theatrical and contrived. As became clear upon further investigation, the same interviewees who spoke to Shavit gave very different accounts of the same event in other interviews they granted, recounting not a massacre, but a battle with two sides.

The most emotive passage in Shavit's chapter claims that after the shooting ended, the Israelis deliberately murdered a detail of Arabs pressed into burying Arab dead, and buried them with the others, in order to cover up the mosque "massacre." In fact, this is directly contradicted by the testimony of an Arab inhabitant of Lydda who himself claimed to have participated in the detail, and by additional testimony of Arabs who heard of the events from others who had been pressed into the detail, taken prisoner afterward by the Israelis, and subsequently released. Thus the most charged passage of the most charged chapter of one of the most widely read books on Israel is easily unraveled.

The episode not only exemplifies how stories are fashioned to fit a specific narrative purpose. It also reveals much about what American Jewish readers, who made the book a bestseller, want to believe and are prepared to believe about Israel. Tales of Israeli guilt now resonate with this audience, a fact that has large implications for the present.

The other chapters of *War on Error* document how similar mistakes afflict a wide spectrum of journalists, scholars, writers, filmmakers, and policymakers. In the last case, such errors can have practical consequences.

For example, when Chuck Hagel was a senator, he was an avid proponent of the notion of "linkage," a Middle Eastern domino theory positing that the region's fate hinges on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When asked about the limits of this theory, he said he was simply repeating what he had been told by Arab leaders. In this case, contrary evidence emerged from Wikileaks diplomatic cables reporting many of Hagel's meetings with those very leaders, during which Israel and the Palestinians rarely came up; rather, the cables show that Arab leaders pressed upon him the dangers posed by Iran, Iraq, and Shiite militancy. At the time, Hagel was emblematic of a group of officials who weaved an Israeli-centric narrative of the region's problems, disregarding many of the fissures that have since torn the Middle East asunder. Linkage ended up distracting policymakers from other conflicts that have redefined the region.

The book also cautions against using analogies as a vehicle to tell stories. Analogies project the familiar onto the unfamiliar (as opposed to comparisons, which measure two familiar things against each other). The term "Islamic fundamentalism" is a prime example, since it invites an analogy to trends in American Christianity that are actually very different from Islamism. The analogy predisposed many people to underestimate Islamism's force. Other chapters deal with the terms "Islamofascism" (problematic as an analogy, though useful as a comparison) and "Arab Spring" (effectively an analogy to Europe that concealed the depth of the Arab crisis).

Today, every government agency, university, and think tank grapples with the war on error -- bias and mistakes are endemic, and no one is totally impervious to them. Hopefully this book will inspire the next generation to be more scrupulous and committed to objectivity.

BENNY MORRIS

The word "error" brings to mind one interviewer's exchange with Israeli Arab Knesset member Ahmad Tibi regarding the Temple Mount. During the conversation, Tibi insisted on using the location's Islamic name, "al-Haram al-Sharif." When the interviewer followed up by asking Tibi if he thought there had ever been a temple on the site, he replied that there are Jewish and Arab narratives, and as an Arab he subscribed to the Arab narrative. The template for this Arab narrative -- that there were no Jewish temples in Jerusalem -- was laid out by Yasser Arafat in 2000, but there is sufficient archaeological and historical evidence to the contrary. Tibi's stance, coming as it does from a medical doctor trained in empirical evaluation, is indicative of the growing propensity to substitute "narratives" for facts.

The incident also points to a difference between Israeli and Arab historiography. Immediately after 1948, Israeli historiography had an explicitly Zionist character, presenting events in heroic terms while sweeping under the carpet things like the Lydda massacre. This generation of "old historians" preferred to omit events rather than lie about them. Yet later Israeli historians have tried to face the country's history more honestly.

In contrast, while there is a good deal of journalism and commentary from Palestinian Arabs, there is very little real historiography covering the conflict, and what exists is often quite distorted. For example, one Birzeit University professor has claimed that the massacres of 1948 were deliberately organized from the top down to induce Palestinians to flee. Yet no such connection exists: while massacres did occur, including at Lydda, there was no policy of massacres, and Israeli authorities investigated and even condemned such incidents. Arab historiography tends to understand events as part of a conspiracy, with no room for randomness or coincidence.

HUSSEIN IBISH

War on Error is more performative than prescriptive or descriptive. Every writer selects the topics of his or her focus. The errors and mistakes targeted in this book -- and a good case is made that these are errors -- all point to a political agenda supportive of the received Israeli narrative. So in that sense, by not being an equal-opportunity prosecutor, the book actually turns into a polemic. It is effectively a polemic against polemics.

The methodology of this book could be applied to other topics and produce a different result. Consider the chapter dealing with false analogies between Israeli behavior and Nazism. The history of analogies linking Palestinians to Nazis is equally egregious, but such instances are not covered. An expanded frame of reference could have resulted in a broader examination of how error is propagated.

Loaded language, including the use of "flight" in reference to the Palestinian refugee problem, also elides another side of the story and reinforces the received Israeli narrative. The epilogue's discussion of "Saidianism" borders on hyperbolic in critiquing Middle Eastern studies. While there are certainly fanatics in the field, there is no large section of academia where error is accepted and critique is not permitted.

One task incumbent on all authors is to interrogate their own motivations and lay them out honestly in their writing. Writing polemics can be productive, but self-critique must be evident in the process. Interrogating one's own beliefs allows a writer to critique other positions in a much more effective way. A helpful benchmark in being

honest and self-critical is to mistrust anything that reaffirms one's self-identification or affiliations. Information that feeds one's outrage or reinforces one's beliefs should be a red flag: it may not be false, but it deserves deep scrutiny.

While *War on Error* is a series of essays, there is still a coherent narrative throughout. The story has a hero, Bernard Lewis, and a villain, Edward Said. The portrayal of these two reads as caricature. Lewis wrote many important works of scholarship, but in many ways he also functioned as a politically instrumental pamphleteer. And while Said was a better critic than politician, a more accurate portrayal of him could have been taken much further than the author's nod toward Said's criticism of Hamas. The impact of the book *Orientalism* on Middle Eastern studies was not necessarily bad. Its value lay not in any specific claim, but in the methodological innovation of marrying Foucauldian philosophy with a critical humanist sensibility. While it may not have worked, it was a fascinating experiment that showed American scholars how French critical theory could be a useful alternative to a Marxist prism.

KRAMER RESPONSE

Some of Ibish's criticisms are valid. However, it should be emphasized that there are no concealed motives in *War on Error*: I am the president of a liberal arts college in Jerusalem who chose to live in Israel, and my commitments do drive my curiosity toward certain topics. Nor do I claim to stand above polemics. My 2001 book [*Ivory Towers on Sand*](#) was admittedly inspired by the polemical approach of Said's *Orientalism*, but polemics do not define *War on Error*. Its value lies in the evidence that it musters. And the focus is not on instances of differing interpretations, but cases where the distance between representation and factual reality is gaping.

As for Nazi analogies, the referenced chapter actually concludes by suggesting that Nazi analogies be altogether avoided. As illustration, a quote is brought from Elie Wiesel, who insisted that nothing be compared to the Holocaust and that comparing Iran to Nazi Germany was "unacceptable." As for the flight of Palestinians, Benny Morris has established that there was a mixture of flight and expulsion, and reference is made to both in the Lydda chapter. The book also includes some conclusions that diverge from what a pro-Israel bias might be expected to produce. Such is the case with the chapter on Martin Luther King Jr. and the Six Day War, which documents King's ambivalence about the war's outcome and his regret that his signature found its way onto a famous pro-Israel letter by leading theologians.

MORRIS RESPONSE

It is a fact that the Palestinian leader Hajj Amin al-Husseini spent the war years in Berlin as an ally of Nazi Germany. This inevitably associated the Palestinian cause with the Nazi war effort. This is a matter of historical fact, though it is sometimes invoked carelessly in polemics.

This summary was prepared by James Bowker.