

Publish It Not

By Jonathan Cook

In the mid-1990s, I arrived in Jerusalem for the first time—then as a tourist—with the potent Western myth at the front of my consciousness: that of Israel as “a light unto the nations,” the plucky underdog facing a menacing Arab world. A series of later professional shocks as a freelance journalist reporting on Israel would shatter those assumptions.

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These disillusioning experiences came in the early stages of the second intifada, the Palestinian uprising that began in late 2000. At the time I was often writing for Britain's Guardian newspaper, first as a staff member based in the foreign department at its head office in London, then later as a freelance journalist in Nazareth. The Guardian has earned an international reputation—including in Israel—as the Western newspaper most critical of Israel's actions. That may be true, but I quickly found that there were still very clear, and highly unusual, limitations on what could be written about Israel.

Particularly problematic for the Guardian—as with other news media—was anything that questioned Israel's claim to being a democracy or highlighted the contradictions between that claim and Israel's Jewish self-definition. The Guardian's most famous editor, C P Scott, was a high-profile lobbyist for Jewish rights in what was then Palestine. He was also instrumental in bringing about the Balfour Declaration—the British government's commitment to the Zionist movement in 1917 to create a "national home" in Palestine for Jews.

Thus, I was not entirely surprised that an account I submitted based on

my investigations of an apparent shoot-to-kill policy by the Israeli police against its own Palestinian citizens at the start of the second intifada was sat on for months by the paper. After I made repeated queries, the features editor informed me that he could not run it because it was no longer "fresh."

Another report about the suspected use by Israel of an experimental type of tear gas against schoolchildren near Bethlehem—and earlier in Gaza—was rejected. Eyewitness testimony I had collected from respected French doctors working in local hospitals who believed the gas was causing the children nerve damage—a suspicion shared by a leading international human rights organization—was dismissed as "inadequate." The foreign editor told me he was concerned that no other journalists had reported the story—leading me to wonder for the first time in my career whether newspapers were actually interested in exclusives.

I also remember arguing with the foreign desk about another story I offered on a new section of the wall Israel was starting to build in Jerusalem, on the sensitive site of the Mount of Olives, in time for Easter 2004. It

About This Issue

Publish It Not, the title of our issue, is taken from Michael Adams's 1975 book of the same name. Adams, a British journalist for The Guardian, was one of the first newsmen to tell of his difficulties in reporting on Israel's brutalities in the then newly occupied West Bank and Gaza. In this issue Jonathan Cook, who also wrote for The Guardian, gives us an update on the current muzzling of the Fourth Estate. (Cook's original manuscript exceeded our space limitation by 4,000 words. His complete article is on our website, www.ameu.org.)

Our book review selection, "My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness," by Adina Hoffman, is reviewed by Jane Adas on page 14. Our video selection is on page 15. The order form for the Hoffman book and videos is on page 16. — John Mahoney, Executive Director

would block a famous procession that had been held for hundreds of years by Christian pilgrims every Palm Sunday, following the route Jesus took on a donkey from the Biblical town of Bethany into Jerusalem. I was flabbergasted when an editor told me it was of no interest. "Readers are tired of stories about the wall," she said, apparently ignoring the fact that the story also raised troubling concerns about the protection of religious freedoms and Christian tradition in the Holy Land.

The most disturbing moment professionally, however, followed my investigation into the death of a United Nations worker, and British citizen, Iain Hook, in Jenin refugee camp at the hands of an Israeli sniper in 2002. As the only journalist to have actually gone to the U.N. compound in Jenin in the immediate aftermath of his death, I was able to piece together what had happened, speak to Palestinian witnesses and later get access to details of a suppressed U.N. report into the killing.

Israel claimed that the sniper who shot Hook in the back believed the U.N. official was really a Palestinian militant holding a grenade, rather than a mobile phone, and that he was about to throw it at Israeli troops. My investigation showed that the sniper's account had to be a lie. From his position on the top floor of a small apartment block overlooking the compound, the sniper could not have misidentified through his telescopic sights either the distinctive red-haired Hook or the phone. In any case, Hook would not have been able to throw anything from out of the compound because it was surrounded by a high concrete wall and a chainmail fence right up to the metal awning that covered the entire site. If Hook had thrown a grenade, it would have bounced right back at him—as the sniper, who had been positioned in the apartment for several hours, must have known.

When I offered this investigation to the Guardian's foreign editor, he sounded worried. Again I was told, as if in admonition, that no other media had covered the story. But it seemed to me that this time even the foreign editor realized he was offering excuses rather than reasons for not publishing. As I argued my case, he agreed to publish a small article looking at the diplomatic fall-out from Hook's killing, and the mounting pressure on the U.N. He had bought me off.

Shortly afterwards I recruited Chris McGreal, the

Guardian's recently appointed Jerusalem bureau chief, to my struggle to get Hook's story told. McGreal, the paper's distinguished South Africa correspondent who covered the apartheid era, had quickly brought a much keener critical edge to the Guardian's coverage of Israel—and, from what I saw, had battled hard for the privilege. He lobbied for the paper to print my article and personally took the project under his wing.

Eventually, the editors relented and reserved a page for my investigation. However, when the story was published, it was half the promised length and had lost a map showing the improbabilities of Israel's account of Hook's killing. The foreign editors later claimed that they had been forced to accept at the very last moment a half-page ad for the page on which my investigation appeared. (I had worked on the foreign desk for many years and struggle to remember any instance where an ad change was made close to deadline.) The editors had cut the second half of the story, the part that contained the evidence I had unearthed.

I was suffering similar setbacks with other mainstream media. The most significant was the International Herald Tribune. Back in 2002, when the IHT was owned jointly by the New York Times and Washington Post, a senior editor in the comment section whom I knew recruited me to the opinion pages, and I enjoyed for the first time the opportunity to write freely in a mainstream newspaper.

However, a short time later, the Washington Post sold its share in the Tribune to the Times and a new comment editor, Serge Schemann, was appointed. He had been Jerusalem bureau chief for the NYT in the late 1990s. Rumors suggested he had been eased out after Israel's media lobby groups in the U.S. took umbrage at his faintly critical reports. I feared he was an unlikely champion for my more outspoken commentaries—and so it proved.

As soon as he was installed, the same pressure groups—the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (Camera) and Honest Reporting—began lobbying against my articles whenever they were printed by the IHT. After one of my commentaries appeared in 2003 suggesting, far from controversially, that the wall Israel was newly building in the West Bank was really a land grab from the Palestinians, my friend at the paper called in shock to say it had provoked "the largest postbag in our his-

tory.” (The Anti-Defamation League had published on its website a pro forma letter of complaint for its supporters.)

Finally, the paper felt compelled to devote a page to a selection of the letters of protest, all of which made the same objection to my use of the phrase “Palestinian homeland” to describe the territory that Palestinians had historically lived on. In addition, Camera submitted a complaint of several thousand words that listed 10 “errors” in my 600-word article. After I argued my case at length to the editors, it was agreed not to publish an apology. However, when my next commentary for the IHT was greeted in the same manner, my days writing for the paper were over. It became ever more difficult to place my reports in newspapers—to the point where I was spending more time arguing the case for a story with an editor (and then defending it afterwards), than I was researching and writing the story.

Most freelance journalists forced into this position would either have learned to tailor their reporting to what was expected by the news desks or have headed off to another conflict zone. I stayed, and struggled on with writing, at first chiefly for the Arab media, then as the author of three books. [*The author's three books are available on AMEU's website www.ameu.org. – Ed.*]

Managing the Spin

Since the visible collapse of the peace process a decade ago at Camp David, Israel has been in the increasingly uncomfortable position of not only being but, more importantly, *looking* like the rejectionist party to the conflict. The impression that Israel has no interest in engaging in meaningful peace talks to create any kind of viable Palestinian state has grown with the almost complete cessation of Palestinian attacks, both the suicide bombers who were once dispatched from the West Bank and the Qassam rocket attacks from Gaza.

In order to justify continuing military assaults on the Palestinians in the occupied territories and its studious avoidance of real negotiations, Israel has had to invest an ever larger share of its energies in managing and controlling the narrators of the conflict—chiefly the Western news organizations and, especially, those in the United States.

Israel needs to maintain its credibility in the U.S. because that is the source of its strength. It depends

on billions of dollars in aid and military hardware, almost blanket political support from Congress, the White House’s veto of critical resolutions at the United Nations, and Washington’s role as a dishonest broker in sponsoring intermittent talks propping up a peace process that in reality offers no hope of a just resolution. The occupation would end in short order without U.S. financial, diplomatic and military support. For that reason Israel makes significant efforts, as we shall see, to put pressure on the journalists themselves. It also targets their news editors “back home” because they make appointments to the region, set the tone of the coverage, approve or veto story ideas, and edit and package the reports coming in from the field.

In the more open media environment of the past decade, however, Israel has also needed to act more aggressively against other types of narrators to ensure the dominance of its own narrative. It has sought to control and limit the scope of local information sources on which Western reporters rely, and delegitimize rival news platforms that could increase the pressure on the Western media to provide better-quality coverage.

Those most immediately in Israel’s sights—and in the greatest danger—are Palestinian journalists because they live and work in the areas Israel wants to remain unreported. They are best positioned to supply the Western media with the raw material needed to show Israel’s aggression towards the Palestinians, including its war crimes, and expose the subsequent cover-ups. Next come dissident Israeli journalists and human rights groups who investigate these same incidents and pose the added threat that they have greater credibility with the international community. And finally there are new problems posed by the growing number of freelance journalists like myself covering the conflict and a new breed of citizen journalists and bloggers created by the rise of the electronic media.

Each element of this web of threats to Israel’s narrative has required its own organized response and, as will become clear, Israel has lost no time in developing a mixture of sophisticated and blunt weapons to use against the media.

That has been reflected in a drop in Israel’s ranking in recent surveys of press freedom. In a 2010 index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, Israel comes in at 86th place for its treatment of journalists

inside its own borders. That puts it behind Lebanon, Albania, Nicaragua and Liberia. It was in 132th place – out of 178 countries – for its repression of journalists outside its own territory, chiefly in Palestinian areas. The two Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and Gaza were only a short distance behind in 150th place

An early whistleblower. The basic principles of media management were developed early on by Israel, as Donald Neff, the Jerusalem bureau chief for Time magazine in the late 1970s, has described. In a 1995 article for *The Link*, he wrote about his “epiphany” during three years covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Rather than a single revelation, his epiphany came as a series of insights that cumulatively undermined his long held belief in the Zionist narrative. His *Link* essay is fascinating not least because of the continuing relevance of many of his experiences more than 30 years later.

One observation Neff makes, however, no longer applies to the current crop of foreign correspondents. He notes the difficulty he faced at the time of his posting in the 1970s in learning about the essentials of the conflict. In part, Neff suggests, he struggled to make sense of what he was witnessing because of a dearth of reliable information in English on Israel’s history and even more so on its then less than 10-year-old occupation. Without a proper context for understanding the conflict, he found himself vulnerable to the misinformation campaigns of Israeli officials, who claimed that the occupations of the West Bank and Gaza were entirely benevolent.

Neff admits he failed to heed the reports of the United Nations, the one body regularly investigating and publicizing the realities of the occupation. Like other foreign correspondents of the time, and those of today, Neff regarded the U.N. as a discredited organization, chiefly because of successful smear campaigns by Israel. Neff paints a disconcerting picture that few Western readers could have appreciated at the time of a press corps that, far from mastering the news agenda on Israel, largely abided by a part self-imposed, part Israeli-dictated news blackout.

Neff points to a series of episodes that contributed to his gradual awakening: a solitary critical report in a reputable British newspaper, the Sunday Times, highlighting the regular use of torture against Palestinians; the leaking to the Hebrew media of the 1976 Koenig report, in which senior officials laid out sug-

gestions for how to rid the country of some of its Palestinian citizens; the role played by one Palestinian in Ramallah, Ramonda Tawil, who not only supplied him with stories but also paid for it with repeated arrests and abuse by Israel; and finally his investigation into an incident in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, in which Israeli soldiers viciously and without provocation attacked Palestinian youths, part of a larger rampage conducted by the army across the West Bank.

There was considerable fall-out from Neff’s increasingly informed reporting, and especially the Beit Jala story. His local bureau staff, all of them Israeli Jews, grew indignant at his coverage and, over the Beit Jala report, actually staged a mutiny. The Israeli media began a campaign of vilification against both him and Time, and Neff found Israelis, including sources, responded to him with a new hostility. Back in New York, resentment among some staff at the magazine increased, and Zionist lobby groups bombarded the office with complaints.

Emotionally and professionally exhausted by the experience, Neff left the region shortly afterwards. He concludes that he was “heart-broken and discouraged by the display of prejudice and unprofessional conduct of my colleagues covering the story, whom I had admired... The experience left me highly skeptical about the wisdom of employing reporters in areas where they are partisans.”

The partisan reporters. Surprisingly, the preponderance of Jewish reporters in the Jerusalem press corps continues to this day, especially among the U.S. contingent. Even a few Jewish reporters regard this as problematic in a conflict where national and ethnic allegiances and pressures are so much to the fore. One American journalist speaking on condition of anonymity, fearing that to go on record would be career suicide, told me that it was common at Foreign Press Association gatherings in Israel to hear the “senior, agenda-setting, elite journalists” boasting to one another about their “Zionist” credentials, their service in the Israeli army or the loyal service of their children. He then added:

I’m Jewish, married to an Israeli and like almost all Western journalists live in Jewish West Jerusalem. In my free time I hang out in cafes and bars with Jewish Israelis chatting in Hebrew. For the Jewish sabbath and Jewish holidays I often get together with a bunch of Western journalists. While it would be conven-

ient to think otherwise, there is no question that this deep personal integration into Israeli society informs our overall understanding and coverage of the place in a way quite different from a journalist who lived in Ramallah or Gaza and whose personal life was more embedded in Palestinian society.

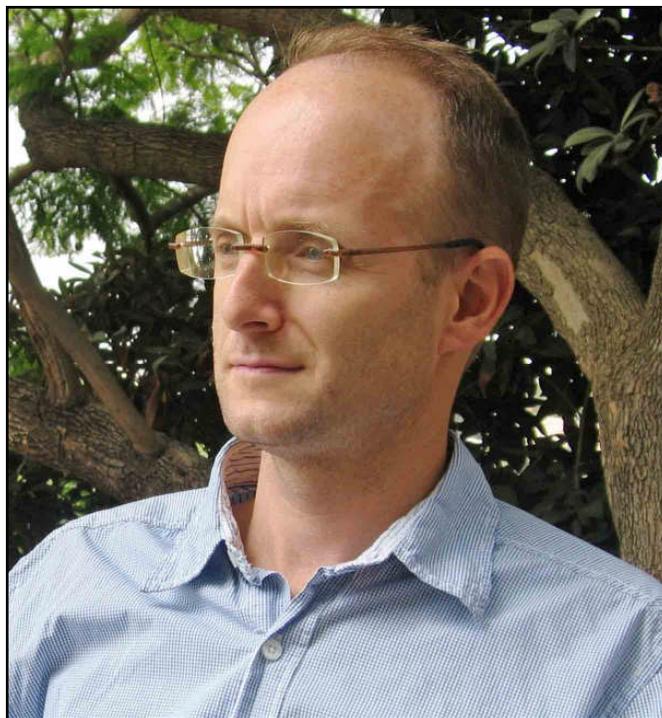
His observations had been prompted by revelations earlier this year that Ethan Bronner, the New York Times' bureau chief in Jerusalem, had a son serving in the Israeli army. The disclosure, which Bronner himself refused to confirm or deny when it first broke, briefly provoked a flood of complaints to the NYT's head office. A column at the time by the paper's public editor, Clark Hoyt, argued that Bronner had a conflict of interest and should be re-assigned.

The paper's editor, Bill Keller, vehemently disagreed: "So to prevent any appearance of bias, would you say we should not send Jewish reporters to Israel? If so, what about assigning Jewish reporters to countries hostile to Israel? What about reporters married to Jews? Married to Israelis? Married to Arabs? Married to evangelical Christians? ... Ethical judgments that start from prejudice lead pretty quickly to absurdity, and pandering to zealots means cheating readers who genuinely seek to be informed."

Keller, of course, willfully ignored Hoyt's point that it was not Bronner's Jewishness that was the central issue; it was his emotional commitment to one side of the conflict through his son's army service. His reporting was already under scrutiny even before the revelations about his son. Bronner had been widely criticized for his bias towards the Israeli government's positions, including by the media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

The NYT's other Jerusalem correspondent, Isabel Kershner, is an Israeli citizen and is married to an Israeli. A recent predecessor of Bronner's, Joel Greenberg, did reserve duty in the Israeli army while he was reporting for the paper, apparently a fact known by the editors but also not considered a conflict of interest. Most of the NYT's correspondents in the past two decades appear to have been Jewish.

That, whatever Keller argues, should be a matter of profound concern to the paper and readers who expect fair coverage. Even putting aside the issue of the likely partisanship of Jewish reporters who iden-



Author Jonathan Cook (Photo by Katie Ramadan)

tify with a self-declared Jewish state either by taking citizenship or by serving in the army, any paper ought to want to promote a diversity of backgrounds among its staff. How would the NYT credibly explain the decision to allow only Chinese-Americans to report on Tibet, or to appoint only Catholic Irish-Americans to cover Northern Ireland, or—for that matter—to allow only men to write about women's issues?

But, more significantly, the NYT's partisanship on Israel is not simply speculation; it is demonstrated in its reporting. Alison Weir of *If Americans Knew*, a U.S. institute for disseminating information about the Middle East, has pointed out the systematic distortions in the paper's coverage. For example, international reports on Israel's human right abuses are covered at a rate 19 times lower than those documenting abuses by Palestinians, and deaths of Israeli children are seven times more likely to be reported than those of Palestinian children. The Times, like other U.S. media, reports endlessly on the plight of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier held in Gaza, while rarely mentioning the 7,000 or so Palestinians—including many women and children, and hundreds who have never been charged—held in Israel's prisons.

Keller goes on to comment about Bronner's con-

nections to Israel: "How those connections affect his innermost feelings about the country and its conflicts, I don't know. I suspect they supply a measure of sophistication about Israel and its adversaries that someone with no connections would lack." If true, why would the NYT not also want to make sure that it employed a Palestinian or an Arab-American in one of its two Jerusalem posts, or even have one of its two reporters based in the West Bank city of Ramallah? Would that not ensure that the Palestinian perspective was reported with an equal "measure of sophistication"?

But there exist more significant reasons why the media might prefer Jewish reporters in Jerusalem. One is that Israel defines even mild criticism of its policies as anti-Semitism, a charge to which the news media are still extremely sensitive. Having a Jewish journalist, or better still one who has demonstrated a commitment to Israel through his own or his child's army service, offers some immunity from such accusations.

Another reason is the importance accorded by all news organizations to gaining access to the centers of power. In a self-declared Jewish state, as news editors understand, Jewish reporters, especially those conversant in Hebrew, will have an important advantage. This is what Keller is obliquely referring to when he talks of Jewish reporters covering the conflict with "sophistication" and being able to make "connections." Keller, like other U.S. editors, is not overly concerned that such connections come at a very high price. U.S. news media are choosing to employ partisan reporters who are dependent on official Israeli sources of information for news in a system where the ultimate professional sin is to be accused of anti-Semitism.

This is hardly an atmosphere in which fearless independence and truth-seeking are likely to flourish.

Muzzling the Media

Silencing Palestinians. Donald Neff, in his *Link* article, described how his office was staffed exclusively by Israeli Jews in the 1970s. That was then generally the case. But the situation began to change during the 1990s as more Palestinians were employed by news bureaus. There were several reasons: the international media were keen to cut costs and Palestinian staff were cheaper; foreign correspondents began heading more regularly into the occu-

pled territories and needed local fixers and translators; Israeli civilians were banned by the Israeli army from entering much of the occupied territories, making them less useful; and with the greater demands of television and the advent of rolling news, media organizations needed people on the ground, especially Palestinian photographers and cameramen, who could capture events as they occurred.

The increasing reliance on Palestinian staff was of great concern to Israel, which was worried both that more damaging images of the occupation would reach Western audiences and that the foreign correspondents would become more friendly with, and dependent on, their Palestinian colleagues. Ultimately, that might lead Western reporters to become more informed about the Palestinian cause.

Israel responded early in the second intifada. In late 2001 the Government Press Office (GPO), a state body that effectively licenses journalists to report in Israel and the occupied territories, began refusing press accreditation to some 450 Palestinian staff employed by international news organizations as well as denying them permits to enter Jerusalem, where the bureaus are located. As usual, Israel used security as the pretext for its policy, arguing that Palestinians entering Jerusalem and Israel might participate in terror attacks. Daniel Seaman, the head of the GPO, urged the foreign media to recruit Israelis instead.

The loss of the press cards posed both a professional and physical threat to Palestinian journalists. They lost the privileges they had enjoyed moving through the checkpoints and around the West Bank. It was also considerably harder for them to prove that they were journalists, making them more likely targets for soldiers as the Israeli army rampaged through the West Bank. According to the International Federation of Journalists, three Palestinian journalists were killed in the occupied territories in 2001, the first full year of the second intifada, and dozens were injured.

The dangers to Palestinian reporters have hardly diminished over the subsequent decade. In 2007, Israeli soldiers shot Palestinian journalists from Agence France-Presse, the Al-Ayyam newspaper and Al-Aqsa TV. Al-Jazeera broadcast footage showing al-Aqsa's cameraman, Imad Ghanem, fall to the ground after being shot as he was running from Israeli gunfire holding his camera on his shoulder. As

he lay immobile, Israeli snipers shot him twice more in the legs. Both limbs were later amputated. A year later, Fadel Shana, a Reuters cameraman, was killed in Gaza as he filmed an Israeli tank firing flechette shells, a non-conventional weapon that releases thousands of lethal tiny darts. One shell was fired at his car, even though it was marked "Press." Amnesty International said it suspected Shana had been killed deliberately.

In the first eight months of 2010, according to a study by Wafa, the Palestinian news agency, 101 Palestinian journalists were injured by rubber-coated steel bullets, tear gas or sound bombs, and 52 were arrested by the Israeli army. In May, Reporters Without Borders pointed out that many of the attacks on journalists occurred as they filmed Israeli soldiers' violence towards Palestinians at regular protests against Israel building its illegal wall on West Bank farmland. For example, Hamoudeh Amireh, a self-taught cameraman who documents Israeli army brutality against demonstrators in his village of Nilin, was shot in the leg in September. The attacks have not been restricted to Palestinian journalists: Al-Jazeera English broadcast footage last year of a soldier firing a tear gas canister directly at one of its journalists, Jacky Rowland, as she reported on a protest at the village of Bilin.

The Foreign Press Association in Israel issued a statement in July warning that Palestinian journalists were being "harassed, arrested and attacked" by Israeli soldiers at demonstrations against the wall. It added that the reporters were being singled out, "before these forces turn their attention to the activists or demonstrators."

Israel's refusal to issue entry permits to Palestinian journalists has ensured that Jerusalem bureaus are again heavily staffed with Israeli Jews. One effect of this on the news available to the Western media has been noted by Alison Weir of *If Americans Knew*. On a visit to the West Bank in 2004, she heard disturbing testimony from a Palestinian cameraman about his treatment by Associated Press, the largest American news agency. AP supplies news reports to thousands of U.S. outlets as well as much of the world's media, making it, as Weir points out, "a major determinant in what Americans read, hear and see – and what they don't."

The Palestinian cameraman told her he had recently filmed an unarmed youth, Ahmad, being shot

in the abdomen by Israeli soldiers in Balata refugee camp, near Nablus. He sent the film to AP's Jerusalem bureau, where it disappeared, never to be sent out for broadcast. Later, when he tried to get the footage returned, he learned that the tape had been erased by the staff. Weir visited Ahmad in the hospital to confirm his injuries. She then went to AP's Jerusalem bureau to speak to its head, Steve Gutkin, about the missing tape. He told her to speak with the head office in New York and threatened to call the Israeli police if she did not leave. Weir spent many months trying to get AP's head office to explain what had happened to the video. Finally she was told: "The official response is we decline to respond."

The very few Palestinian journalists who establish an international reputation and manage to report on the conflict unmediated by the Israeli-staffed bureaus in Israel face different kinds of problems.

One such reporter is Mohammed Omer, based in Rafah, Gaza. He has written regularly for Britain's *New Statesman* magazine and the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. In 2008 he won the Martha Gellhorn prize for journalism and was invited to the awards ceremony in London. He was able to attend only after Dutch officials intervened to get him an exit permit from Gaza and personally escorted him out. On his return, as he crossed over into the West Bank from Jordan on his way back to Gaza, he was made to separate from his Dutch escort. Taken aside by Israeli security personnel, this is what he says took place next:

I was stripped naked at gunpoint, interrogated, kicked and beaten for more than four hours. At one point I fainted and then awakened to fingernails gouging at the flesh beneath my eyes. An officer crushed my neck beneath his boot and pressed my chest into the floor. Others took turns kicking and pinching me, laughing all the while. They dragged me by my feet, sweeping my head through my own vomit. I lost consciousness. I was told later that they transferred me to a hospital only when they thought I might die.

Before he was beaten, the officers from the Shin Bet, Israel's secret police, appeared to be only too aware of who Omer was. They insisted he hand over his "English pounds" – a reference to the £2,500 prize money. Israeli officials later explained Omer's extensive injuries by claiming he had "lost his balance"

during an interrogation over suspicions he was a smuggler. Mohammed concludes: "Could it be that despite their tanks, fighter planes and nuclear arsenal, Israel is threatened by our cameras and computers, which give the world access to images and information about their military occupation of Palestinians?"

Silencing dissenting Israelis. Over the past decade there has been a sharp increase in information about the occupation produced in English by Israelis. This is due to a rapid growth in the number of Israeli human rights groups, the greater use of new technology to provide same-day translations into English of much of the Hebrew press, and improved opportunities for dissident Israeli journalists and bloggers to publish through the internet.

This more extensive reporting of the brutalities of the occupation by Israeli sources has fed into the pressures on foreign correspondents to provide better coverage themselves. Israel has had to respond to this development by delegitimizing dissident Israeli journalists and rights groups and making it much harder for them to operate.

Traditionally, Israel has constrained damaging coverage of its policies through the country's military censorship laws. All articles that might threaten Israel's security—broadly defined—have to be submitted to the censor for approval. That's how, for example, Israel has prevented its journalists from admitting even the existence of the country's nuclear weapons arsenal. The censor was also busy during Israel's month-long attack on Lebanon in 2006, severely restricting coverage, including of such war crimes as the Israeli army's positioning its artillery in civilian areas. But censorship alone has not sufficed in a more pluralistic media environment.

The biggest threat to Israel's narrative is probably posed by Haaretz, Israel's liberal newspaper of record. It has by far the best coverage of the occupation and is widely relied on by foreign correspondents when deciding on their own reports. In recent years it has become much more accessible through its English edition, and an associated website.

Nonetheless, the paper has tended to limit translations of its Hebrew coverage. That policy, sources at the paper tell me, reflects both the determination of the paper's editors to stay within the Israeli consensus as the political climate shifts rightwards, thereby avoiding accusations that the paper is dam-

aging the country's image, and direct pressure from the government. The English-language newspaper and website fail to translate many of the Hebrew stories that are most embarrassing to the Israeli authorities, and remove certain details from other Hebrew reports that present the government or army in a harsh light.

Also noticeable has been the paper's decision to "let go" several prominent journalists and columnists known for their hard-hitting reports. Thus, Aviv Lavie, who unearthed a damaging story in 2003 about Israel running a secret prison where torture was routine, disappeared from the paper shortly afterwards. The paper's chief reporter, the prize-winning journalist Meron Rappaport, who regularly dug up exclusives from the occupied territories, was made redundant in 2008.

Also in 2008, rumors circulated that Haaretz's two most famous reporters, Amira Hass and Gideon Levy, both of whom cover the occupied territories, were to be axed. Following a barrage of criticism, however, both continue to write for the paper.

Nonetheless, in a climate increasingly hostile to dissent, journalists like Hass and Levy have become more marginalized inside Israel, even while maintaining their readership overseas. Levy observed in a recent interview that the Israeli media was "recruiting itself to collaborate with the occupation project" and "playing a fatal role, mainly in maintaining the occupation and the nationalistic and militaristic emotions and sentiments in the Israeli society." Such emotions are on display against reporters who step out of line, such as Chaim Levinson, another Haaretz reporter who has broken many stories about the occupation. In August he was filmed being beaten by soldiers as he tried to report on Jewish settlers taking over a building in the Palestinian town of Jericho.

As well as relying on the Israeli media for stories, foreign correspondents have started to turn to a growing number of Israeli human rights groups. These organizations issue regular reports on different aspects of the occupation, and often launch legal cases in the courts against Israeli government policy. The most famous, such as B'Tselem, Adalah and the Association of Civil Rights in Israel, are treated as sources of reliable factual information by reporters when they compile their stories. This has not gone unnoticed by Israeli officials.

The Israeli government has stepped up a campaign against these groups, known formally as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), since the summer of 2009. That was when two major threats emerged to Israel's defense of its savage attack on Gaza in the winter of 2008, in which 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians, were killed. The first was the efforts of Breaking the Silence, a group of former Israeli soldiers, to publish the testimonies of soldiers who had served in Gaza during the attack. Many of these accounts revealed irregular behavior by soldiers or evidence of war crimes. The second threat was the publication of a damning U.N. report in September 2009 by the respected South African judge Richard Goldstone.

Both Breaking the Silence and Goldstone were soon vilified by the Israeli media and government. Rightwing groups such as NGO Monitor and Im Tirtzu claimed—inaccurately—that much of the Goldstone report drew on information supplied by Israeli human rights NGOs, concluding that these groups had therefore been unmasked as “subversive.” They also argued that it was illegitimate for Israeli human rights NGOs to receive their funding from overseas, and typically from the European Union. The clear implication was that, through their dependence on European funding, the political agendas of the Israeli NGOs had been infected with an anti-Semitic prejudice that many Israelis presume is rife in Europe. The foreign ministry, for example, called on the Dutch embassy to end its funding of Breaking the Silence.

A parallel campaign was also launched against the Zionist Jewish organization, the New Israel Fund, another major financial contributor to good causes in Israel, including to human rights groups. NIF's chairwoman in Israel, Naomi Chazan, was quickly turned into a national hate-figure as extremist groups employed anti-Semitic imagery on billboards across the country, showing her with a horn sprouting from her forehead.

A demand rapidly grew for human rights NGOs to be strictly regulated, with tight restrictions on their foreign funding. Legislation originally proposed in early 2010 and supported by the government was designed to force the NGOs to register as political parties and declare their foreign funding whenever staff spoke publicly. Failure to comply with the regulations would have landed the NGO's staff in jail.

The bill resurfaced in October, having been watered down by a ministerial committee. It still requires strict financial reporting by human rights NGOs of any foreign donations made to them, at the pain of heavy fines for failure to do so.

Silencing the Freelancers. If one figure has come to personify Israel's overtly hostile attitude towards independent reporting it has been Daniel Seaman, the “acting” head of the Government Press Office for a decade until his removal in October 2010. Seaman was replaced by Oren Helman, a former political adviser to the current prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and a man expected to continue Seaman's legacy.

In his 10 years, Seaman firmly established the GPO's ethos, developing a system of regulation that weakened the ability of independent journalists, whether registered freelancers or underground “citizen journalists” reporting for the internet, to cover the conflict.

The citizen or advocate journalist movement emerged at the start of the second intifada as a direct result of the greater presence in the occupied territories of Palestinian solidarity groups, particularly the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). ISM volunteers who were based in Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza that became the main clash-points with the Israeli army quickly realized that the war crimes they were witnessing and photographing were going largely unreported by the mainstream media. Many began filing reports directly to the press and the electronic media.

Their accounts were largely ignored by foreign correspondents, but publication on the internet offered an important resource for researchers as well as evidence that might one day be useful in war crimes trials. Israel responded in the same way as it had done to Palestinian eyewitnesses: by using violence. In a matter of a few months in 2003, half a dozen internationals were killed or seriously injured by the Israeli army, most notably Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall, Brian Avery and James Miller. The latter was a distinguished cameraman but appears to have mistakenly thought he was entitled, like the ISM, to “embed” with the Palestinians.

The effect of this spate of deaths and injuries was to deter many potential ISM volunteers from coming to the region. The remaining activists were sought out by the army in raids into the West Bank and then

deported. Israel also increased its vigilance at the borders to deny ISM volunteers entry. On a smaller scale, there have been continuing attacks on foreigners who stand alongside Palestinians at protests and witness the brutality they face. In May, Emily Henochowicz, a 21-year-old American Jew, lost an eye at an Israeli checkpoint as she demonstrated against Israel's killing of nine passengers aboard an aid flotilla to Gaza. A soldier fired a stun grenade into her face at close range.

Israel's treatment of the passengers on board the flotilla's lead ship, the *Mavi Marmara*, encapsulated many of the military's standard operating procedures towards independent journalists. In September a U.N. inquiry revealed that two of the nine passengers who were killed, including an American citizen, Furkan Dogan, were shot dead as they filmed the violence of Israeli commandos who boarded the ship. Israel then confiscated all media equipment from passengers, which has never been returned. A few edited excerpts of video and audio tape—including at least one that is known to have been doctored—were released by Israel to bolster its case that the commandos were the ones attacked.

Israel's new strategy towards freelancers—together with an implicit threat to foreign correspondents—began to emerge clearly during the so-called disengagement from Gaza in 2005, the removal of a few thousand Jewish settlers from the enclave. Israel required any journalist who wanted to cover the disengagement to apply to the GPO for a place on a limited number of buses that the army was allowing into Gaza each day. Because the enclave was entirely sealed off by an electronic fence and the army, reporters were forced to rely completely on the GPO's goodwill for one of the few places.

The GPO's handling of the disengagement was a warning to journalists that, in circumstances where Israel was increasingly controlling entry to the occupied territories, those who were out of favor with the authorities could be denied the access they needed to do their job. That lesson would be reinforced even more firmly after the 2006 Lebanon attack, when Israel believed it had received too much critical coverage because of its "liberal" policy towards the media. It then effectively punished the whole press corps by sealing off Gaza to all correspondents for the three weeks of its attack in the winter of 2008. In the end, only 15 correspondents selected by the Israeli army were allowed to enter Gaza "embedded" with troops

in the very last days of the operation.

The Foreign Press Association in Jerusalem called this denial of media access to Gaza an "unprecedented" violation of press freedom that "puts the state of Israel in the company of a handful of regimes around the world which regularly keep journalists from doing their jobs."

Israel also denies "Israeli" journalists access to Gaza and areas of the West Bank, on the grounds that it is for their own protection. This rule applies to critical reporters like Hass and Levy. Also included as "Israelis" are journalists like myself, who are not Jewish and do not have Israeli citizenship. However, my residency permit—issued because of my marriage to a Palestinian citizen of Israel—is used as grounds to deny me entry to restricted areas.

In 2006 it became clear that most freelance journalists were being denied both press cards and work visas, thereby effectively denying them the right to continue residing in Israel. This was done by extending strict laws on foreign workers to include journalists. The Foreign Press Association estimates that in recent years more than 90 per cent of its freelance members have lost their cards.

The GPO's power over even established journalists is typified by the experiences of Yngvil Mortensen, a Norwegian reporter. In 2007, when she was on contract with the *Dagbladet* newspaper, she spent 11 months battling the GPO to have her press card renewed. In the end, the card was issued but only after interventions by the Norwegian foreign minister, the Norwegian journalists' syndicate, an Israeli lawyer and the Foreign Press Association.

Mortensen says: "The real problem, I believe, is my coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Israeli embassy in Oslo in December 2006, at the same time as I applied to renew my Israeli press card, wrote an op-ed in *Dagbladet*, covering a whole page, where they accused me of one-sided coverage. Their op-ed was a reaction to a commentary I wrote two weeks earlier about a massacre in Beit Hanoun [in Gaza], where I among many things asked if it is accidental that so many civilians generally are killed in Israeli military operations."

When she was awarded a three-month assignment to cover the Palestinian territories for the daily *Klassekampen* newspaper in early 2010, Mortensen again followed the procedure of applying for a GPO card. The staff told her it would be difficult because

she was a freelancer rather than a staff journalist. Later she received a letter from Seaman declining her application, stating that she had failed to meet the GPO's criteria, though no explanation of how was offered.

She applied to the appeals committee, pointing out that she had in fact met all the written requirements. Later in the year, the committee rejected her appeal, although only on the grounds that her request "was no longer relevant" because the period for which she had requested the press card had expired. The committee did nothing to examine or question the grounds on which the GPO had arrived at its original decision.

Another freelance journalist, Lisa Goldman, submitted a complaint against Seaman to the Civil Service Commission in 2006 following her visit to the GPO office to get a routine renewal of her press card. After an altercation in which she was threatened and sworn at by Seaman, she asked to see his boss. In her letter of complaint, she said he responded: "I am not accountable to anyone. I make all the rules. And just the fact that you have asked me this question means you will never receive a GPO card again." He also told her he would have her investigated by the Shin Bet, the domestic intelligence service.

The New Hasbara

The final battleground in Israel's "spin war" is outside Israel—on internet sites and in overseas newsrooms, especially those in the U.S. and those with a global reach.

Increasingly important among the new media platforms are blogs—especially ones by dissident American Jews such as Philip Weiss at Mondoweiss and Richard Silverstein at Tikun Olam. Weiss has helped to establish and nurture an online community of mainly Jewish writers that speaks with a refreshing clarity about Israel's occupation and the power of the Israel lobby in the U.S. Silverstein, meanwhile, has broken several important stories about Israel leaked to him by Israeli journalists who could not report the issues themselves because of the increasing use of gag orders and censorship.

The readership for these overseas blogs, including among Israelis, is steadily rising. The sites are also freeing Israeli bloggers to become more outspoken: they can relay back to Israeli audiences information from foreign websites without the risk of being first

to break censorship rules.

Also making an impact is the slow rise of non-Western media in English. The most significant is Al-Jazeera, a Qatar-based media company that has now both a website and a TV channel in English. Al-Jazeera, both its English and Arabic channels, is deeply disliked by the Israeli authorities (as it is by the Palestinian Authority). Not surprisingly, the English channel has struggled to find cable distribution deals in the U.S. Still it is demonstrating that a new model of critical but professional reporting about Israel in the mainstream is possible. Other TV channels that are attracting growing audiences are PressTV from Iran and Russia Today.

Perhaps of greatest concern to Israel is that these new media platforms are feeding an interest in a potentially formidable and unifying new campaign against Israel: BDS—shorthand for boycott, divestment and sanctions.

Ranged against these new upstart forces are Israel's powerful and entrenched lobby groups. As well as political groups such as AIPAC targeting the U.S. Congress and the White House, there are sophisticated media lobbies like Camera and Honest Reporting. Their job is to intimidate reporters in Israel by targeting their less-knowledgeable editors overseas with mass letter-writing campaigns and official complaints. A visit to Camera's website, for example, shows a long list of the most important foreign correspondents in Israel over the past two decades. Each has been on the receiving end of one or two major complaints—enough usually to bring them into line. Reporters worry that too many such complaints to their bosses will start to undermine the paper's confidence in them.

But while Camera and Honest Reporting have long been targeting any signs of critical reporting in the mainstream media, new pro-Israel lobbies have emerged to counter threats from the electronic media and the BDS movement. One influential Israeli think-tank, the Reut Institute, has termed these new global forces a "delegitimization challenge" to Israel. The problem was addressed, in particular, at Israel's annual security convention at Herzliya early in 2010 at sessions entitled, for example, "Winning the Battle of the Narrative" and "Soft Warfare against Israel." The key message at these meetings was that the traditional Israeli practice of "hasbara"—a Hebrew term usually translated as "explanation" but really

meaning “propaganda” —had to be reinvented for the new age.

The Israeli government first identified the threats posed by the new media to its mainstream narratives back in 2005, arguing that the country must “improve the country’s image abroad—by downplaying religion and avoiding any discussion of the conflict with the Palestinians.” This led to a new campaign, “Brand Israel,” that has targeted major cities around the world for film festivals and food and wine galas featuring Israeli products. Israel has also encouraged the media to focus on Israel’s innovations in hi-tech industries and stem-cell research.

One venture is Israel21c, whose mission is “to focus media and public attention on the 21st century Israel that exists beyond the conflict.” It is reported to be working closely with AIPAC. Israel21c’s success in manipulating coverage by the mainstream media was signaled by the recent news that CNN had broadcast 15 of the group’s pre-packaged videos over the previous year – “reaching millions of viewers worldwide,” as Israel21c boasted on its website.

In a press release, Israel21c added: “Other encouraging stories chosen by CNN this year describe a mixed Jewish-Arab choir that practices its message of coexistence out loud, and a group of Palestinian and Israeli midwives working together to ensure that pregnant mothers in Israel and the Palestinian territories have safe and natural births. Rather than portraying Israel as a place of conflict and strife, these stories have highlighted Israeli accomplishments in science and technology, arts and culture, and philanthropy.”

The chief target of the new hasbara has been the BBC, the influential British-based public broadcaster that has a large international audience for its TV, radio and internet sites. The popular mood in Britain has turned rapidly against Israel over the past decade, and Israel appears to have been fearful that the BBC might reflect such sentiments. But after much behind-the-scenes pressure from the Israeli foreign ministry and its lobbyists, the BBC has moved in precisely the opposite direction—sometimes to a degree that has shocked the British public and even the British government.

Most notable was its refusal in 2009 to broadcast an appeal for that year’s selected charitable cause—helping the homeless and sick in Gaza after Israel’s 2008 winter attack. The BBC claimed for the first time

in more than 20 years of running such appeals—part of its public service remit—that doing so would compromise the organization’s “neutrality.”

Other signs of the BBC’s loss of nerve are its abandonment of truly independent documentaries on Israel. Instead in recent years it has accepted “soft” documentaries from Israeli production crews. Israeli film-makers have had great success offering as their chief selling-point to the BBC various dubious “exclusives”—typically “rare” interviews with senior military people and views inside Israel’s war rooms “for the first time ever.” Israeli film-maker Noam Shalev, who has specialized in these kinds of productions, has made faux-documentaries like the 2006 “Will Israel bomb Iran?” that have offered little more than Israeli foreign ministry propaganda.

“Death in the Med,” the BBC’s investigation in August 2010 into the killing of nine passengers aboard the Mavi Marmara followed the same compromised format, even though it was fronted by a veteran BBC presenter, Jane Corbin. With a largely Israeli crew, Corbin again offered several “exclusives,” including being present during a training exercise by the “secretive” commando unit that stormed the Marmara, and interviews with the commandos themselves. The illegality of invading a ship in international waters was not discussed, nor was Israel’s theft of the passengers’ media equipment. There was no warning that video footage shown in the documentary was selectively edited by the Israeli government. Audio tape of passengers telling the Israeli commandos to “Go back to Auschwitz” that Israel is known to have doctored was presented as authentic, with Corbin even stating that the insults were “a warning sign.”

This approach looks as if it will be a key element in Israel’s future media strategy. As its grip on the narrative coming directly from the region weakens, it will fight harder to ensure that reporters of all kinds covering the conflict come under intensified pressure. But Israel is also likely to try to bypass local journalists as much as possible, selling its image and discredited myths to those least in a position to question or doubt them. Editors from the overseas news organizations should be among those who can be more easily swayed.

Israel may be struggling to keep its critics at bay, but its Watergate moment is still far off. ■

BOOK REVIEW

*My Happiness Bears No Relation to Happiness:
A Palestinian Life in the Palestinian Century*

By **Adina Hoffman**

New Haven, Yale University Press, 2009

List: \$21.95 ; AMEU price, including postage: \$18:50

Reviewed by **Jane Adas**

One person's story can make genuine to outsiders the world he or she inhabits in a way that facts and statistics cannot. Think of Anne Frank and her diary. The task Adina Hoffman set herself was challenging; rather than telling her own story, she, an American-born Israeli, felt "weirdly compelled to try and write the life and times of this man, the Palestinian poet Taha Muhamad Ali" (p. 3).

Taha, who had only four years of formal education and was voraciously self-taught, was a late-blooming poet. Hoffman took the biography's title from a line in Taha's second collection of poems, *Fooling the Killer*, published in 1989 when the poet was nearly sixty:

Lovers of hunting,
and beginners seeking your prey:
Don't aim your rifles
at my happiness,
which isn't worth
the price of the bullet
(you'd waste on it).
What seems to you
so nimble and fine,
like a fawn,
and flees
every which way,
like a partridge,
isn't happiness.
Trust me:
my happiness bears
no relation to happiness (p. 361)

The second half of the subtitle, "*A Poet's Life in the Palestinian Century*," is as enigmatic as poetry itself. The usual, triumphal sense of the term hardly applies to Palestine. The past century has been one in

which Palestine was neglected under Ottoman rule, betrayed by the British Mandate, and undone by Zionist ambitions; a century in which the small region on the eastern Mediterranean has become an unfortunate focus of global attention.



Author **Adina Hoffman**

The subtitle does, however, reflect the scope of Hoffman's narrative: life in the pre-Israeli Galilean village of Saffuriya, its destruction and the various fates of its villagers turned refugees, Taha as the proprietor of a souvenir shop in Nazareth when Israeli Palestinians lived under military regulations that were not lifted until 1966, the prominent place of poets and poetry in Palestinian cultural life, Taha's return to the site of his vanished village, about which he had written a poem entitled "The Place Itself, or I Hope You Can't Digest It."

Hoffman tells Taha's story with abundant empathy, honesty, and a self-awareness that allows her to see past pre-conceptions to which she might be prone as an Israeli Jew. For example, in a chapter entitled "What Happened," Hoffman is faced with the contradictory memories of two worthy men. Taha recalled three Israeli planes that bombed Saffuriya on the evening of July 15, 1948, prompting the flight of the villagers. Dov Yermiya, a longtime activist for Arab-Jewish cooperation, was the company commander in the IDF's Carmel Brigade that led the assault on Saffuriya the following day. He told Hoffman there had been no planes and no bombs, adding, "There is something called the Oriental imagination" (p. 124). Yermiya's version is backed up by written Jewish accounts of the incident, which seem to trump Palestinians' oral history. Full of doubt about which version to trust and "in search of ink" (p. 130), Hoffman sets out for the IDF archives housed in Tel Hashomer army base. There she discovers the truth of what happened. ■

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