

Are CNN's Iran Reports Biased, Inept or Corrupt?

Al-Jazeera bought access to U.S. public opinion when it purchased Current TV from Al Gore, but it faces stiff competition from CNN when it comes to misleading viewers about the Middle East. Over the last week, CNN has promoted a biased, rebranded image of the Iranian regime on at least three major programs.

CNN's positive spin on Iran is collectively staggering. Did the Iranian regime secure such favorable coverage with payments? Or was CNN just so inept and/or biased that it inadvertently promoted the Iranian regime at every opportunity? Consider each program.

Christiane Amanpour

When Christiane Amanpour interviewed Iranian President Hasan Rouhani, she asked him about his views on the Holocaust. His predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, frequently doubted the Nazi genocide against the Jews, so Rouhani's views on the issue might indicate whether the Iranian regime, under a more palatable facade, has substantively improved. The title of a post on Amanpour's blog reports "Iran's New President: Yes, the Holocaust Happened."

But, as CAMERA noted, multiple independent translations by Farsi speakers conflict with CNN's translation and agree with Fars News Agency's conclusion that CNN mistranslated Rouhani's vague reference to "historical events" as "the Holocaust." Indeed, the fact that Fars—which CNN itself considers a "semi-official" news agency with ties to the Iranian government—rejects any conclusion that the Holocaust was explicitly acknowledged should have caused CNN to question its conclusions and issue a correction.

Despite being challenged also by a *Wall Street Journal* editorial, *Newsweek's* The Daily Beast, and Al Monitor, Amanpour has stood by the accuracy of CNN's translation (which reportedly came from a translator hired by the Iranian government) and has refused to issue any corrections. CNN apparently wants to convince viewers that the new Iranian president does not share the anti-Jewish, ahistorical and extremist sensibilities that have defined the Iranian regime for the last few decades.

To make matters worse, CNN's written summary of the interview excludes a highly objectionable part of Rouhani's answer. In the same breath that Rouhani supposedly acknowledges the Holocaust, he suggests that the Jewish claim to the land of Israel is based only on the Holocaust and—in equally twisted moral and historical logic—suggests an equivalence between the Holocaust and the Israeli “occupation” of Palestine. Indeed, a far more accurate headline for Amanpour's CNN blog would read “Iran's New President: Any Holocaust Is No Justification for Israel's Existence and Was Like Israel's Occupation of Palestine.”

Worse still, CNN has continuously replayed the clip of Rouhani's purported Holocaust “condemnation” to promote Amanpour's program. This brainwashing-style repetition reinforces the inference that CNN naturally wants to promote the repackaged Iran and/or was handsomely paid to do so.

Unfortunately, CNN's biased Iran reporting and distortions continued on two other programs. Both programs featured Ciamak Morsadegh, Iran's only Jewish member of parliament, as their “star witness” testifying to how Iran is Disneyland for Jews. Neither program questioned whether Morsadegh might be a shill for the Iranian regime or how free any Iranian parliamentarian (much less the token Jewish one) is to criticize Iranian policy. No dissenting views, fact-checking or context were included to correct or balance Morsadegh's far-fetched claims.

Fareed Zakaria

In the Zakaria interview, Morsadegh claims that “there were some problems in Iranian Jewish society” in the early days of Ahmadinejad’s presidency “but after that, there was no problem.” But Morsadegh contradicts that dubious claim—and the rosier statements he makes about Jewish life in Iran—when he states that Iran’s Jewish minority does “have some problems.” Of course, Zakaria doesn’t note the contradiction or explore what those problems might be.

Morsadegh also misrepresents reality when he states, “For religious freedom, Iran is one of the most free countries.” Try telling that to Iran’s Baha’i or Christian minorities. Or just consult the International Federation of Human Rights report, which details severe discrimination against Iran’s religious minorities. Shouldn’t Zakaria know such basic facts? Why didn’t he follow up with Morsadegh or at least provide some balancing information from another source after the interview?

Morsadegh also says he is not a Zionist and rejects the behavior of the Israeli government and army. But in a televised interview, was he really free to say “I am a Zionist” or “I condemn my country’s threats to destroy Israel and its support for Hamas, Islamic jihad and Hezbollah”? Could any Iranian public official say such things and survive? Zakaria never points this out.

Reza Sayah

In CNN’s *Connect the World*, Reza Sayah also failed basic journalistic duties, allowing Morsadegh’s misrepresentations to go unchallenged while adding a few of his own. Morsadegh claims, “In the history of Iran ... [there was never any] organized anti-Semitic phenomenon.” What about the thirteen Iranian Jews who were executed for alleged connections to Israel (including Habib Elghanian, the former head of the Iranian Jewish community)? More generally, if life is so great for the Jews of Iran, why did their population drop from over

100,000 in 1948 to under 20,000 today?

Sayah's report touts the fact that Iran has Jewish schools, kosher restaurants and a charity hospital founded and run by Jews, and it preposterously suggests that Jewish life in Iran could somehow compare to Jewish life in Israel ("Sure, it may seem like we're in Israel, but in fact we're in the Islamic Republic of Iran."). Seriously?

Sayah's report continues with glowing reviews for Jewish life in Iran: "'Here they show a lot of respect for Judaism,' says Shahnose Rahanian. 'It's better than many other places.'" Which places? Egypt, where there are just a few dozen Jews left? Compared to Jewish life in any non-Muslim country with a significant Jewish population, Jewish life in Iran is pathetic and doomed to the same extinction that has occurred in nearly all of the Muslim world. Sayah never questions the truthfulness of his interviewees, who are from a tiny and extremely vulnerable minority in an overwhelmingly Muslim country where criticism of Islam—or the regime—can leave the critic dead. Nor does he mention reports that Iranian Jews live in fear that their telephones are tapped.

Sayah reports, "Some Jews here say they've traveled to Israel but home remains Iran," but he fails to mention that the majority of Iranian Jews are elderly and speak only Persian, making emigration much harder (as observed by Iranian-American activist Sam Kermanian).

Sayah mentions that Jews have lived in Persia/Iran since the sixth century BC, when Persia's King Cyrus liberated Jews from Babylonian captivity, but Sayah never discusses the persecution of Jews of in Persia/Iran since then or the likely explanations for their massive "migration."

Both Zakaria and Sayah could have easily interviewed some Iranian-American Jews, many of whom have family still living in Iran, to get alternative perspectives.

Unfortunately, CNN has a long history of anti-Israel bias, as documented by Honest Reporting and CAMERA. Are the above issues part of that problem? Or were Iranian payments involved? CNN must come clean about its Iran “reporting” or lose even more of its already damaged credibility.

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