

Israel vs. the Foreign Media: When the Headlines Make Their Own Headlines

While the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is no stranger to making headlines, a brewing spat between the Israeli government and foreign media means that the headlines themselves—and the journalists behind them—become the story.

A *CBS News* headline from last month, “3 Palestinians killed as daily violence grinds on,” failed to identify those Palestinians as the terrorists who carried out the attack and neglected to mention the attack’s Israeli victim, policewoman Hadar Cohen.

CBS changed the headline—first to “Israeli police kill 3 alleged Palestinian attackers,” and then again to “Palestinians kill Israeli officer, wound another before being killed”—after receiving multiple complaints from media watchdog groups and Israel’s Government Press Office (GPO). On Feb. 9, Member of Knesset Tzipi Livni (Zionist Union) as well as the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee summoned leaders of the Foreign Press Association in Israel for a hearing. Livni said she was troubled by the *CBS* headline.

The Knesset hearing—which came less than a week after GPO Director Nitzan Chen threatened to revoke credentials from reporters over inaccurate reporting—led the chairman of the Foreign Press Association in Israel, *Reuters* regional bureau chief Luke Baker, to slam the messaging of the Israeli government, army, and police.

“We do not agree that the foreign media are biased, and the legitimacy of Israel’s campaign against terrorism is entirely determined by how Israel conducts that campaign. It has nothing to do with the foreign media,” Baker said at the

hearing.

Baker's reportedly hostile attitude at the hearing was not indicative of an isolated frustration, but rather a growing and nearly explosive antagonism between foreign media and the State of Israel. During a mid-February panel discussion in Jerusalem hosted by the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, Joseph Federman—bureau chief for Israel and the Palestinian territories at *The Associated Press (AP)*—said Israel's increasingly strong condemnations of the foreign press are “on the verge of incitement.”

“It has become very unpleasant being a journalist in this country,” he said.

Last summer, the Israeli Foreign Ministry was forced to take down a 50-second satirical animated video on how Gaza is presented abroad following criticism from the foreign press that the video was mocking them. The clip featured a foreign correspondent painting an unrealistically rosy picture of a purported “liberal and pluralistic” life in Gaza, while ignoring terrorists carrying and firing missiles.

Baker argued that the video depicted not how foreign media cover Israel, but instead how the Israeli government perceives that coverage.

“Suggesting foreign journalists are stupid, ignorant, or clueless is a strange way of conducting foreign policy,” Baker said.

Simon Plosker, managing editor of the Israeli media watchdog organization HonestReporting, told that Baker is “underestimating the extent of the problem” on foreign press coverage of Israel. He chuckled at Baker's assertion that among 750 *Reuters* headlines about the current wave of terrorism, only one (which was later corrected) received complaints, while maybe three or four headlines published by other outlets drew complaints.

Plosker argued that headlines, which go on to make their own headlines, are examples of a systemic problem, rather than isolated incidents. The HonestReporting website lists hundreds of examples of media bias against Israel over the years, including a recent headline by the *Los Angeles Times* that stated, "Four Palestinians are killed in Israeli violence," when in fact two of the teens mentioned in the headline were killed while carrying out stabbing attacks—cases of Palestinian violence, not Israeli violence. The other two Palestinians were killed in violent demonstrations initiated by Palestinians.

Baker explained that there are several reasons why hostilities may be surfacing between Israel and the foreign press. For starters, he said that while larger news outlets tend to send their most experienced and knowledgeable people to Israel to cover the conflict, the growth of online-based news outlets and social media means that more "younger, thrusting, eager, and less experienced reporters" are part of the picture. The Foreign Press Association in Israel is comprised of a "non-monolithic" 400 reporters (plus about 200 freelance writers), and their work should not be defined with a single brushstroke, said Baker.

Israel hosts many more foreign correspondents than other Middle East countries who are also engaged in conflicts, in part because Israel is the only country in the region with a free press. Reporters in Israel can get visas, pass a basic security check, and obtain a press card.

In other Mideast countries, the process is much more difficult. Iranian-born academic Majid Mohammadi wrote in December 2015 that Iran keeps visiting journalists on a tight leash in order to control the country's image overseas. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported last summer that Syria "remains an extremely risky place for the press. ... The media are at the mercy of all sides in the conflict, which have consistently shown ... a willingness to use journalists for

their own deadly purposes.”

The robust foreign media presence in Israel is also a manifestation of news outlets’ prioritization of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, argues Matti Friedman, a former Jerusalem bureau reporter for the *AP* and now a popular commentator on media bias.

“Staffing is the best measure of the importance of a story to a particular news organization,” Friedman wrote for *Tablet* magazine in August 2014. “When I was a correspondent at the *AP*, the agency had more than 40 staffers covering Israel and the Palestinian territories. That was significantly more news staff than the *AP* had in China, Russia, or India, or in all of the 50 countries of sub-Saharan Africa combined. It was higher than the total number of news-gathering employees in all the countries where the uprisings of the ‘Arab Spring’ eventually erupted.”

But is the foreign press corps’ size, in and of itself, a factor that sways news reporting against Israel? The American Jewish Committee (AJC) raised the possibility in a blog post that reacted to Friedman’s 2014 *Tablet* article, listing “disproportionate staffing numbers” among what the post called the “Top 3 Reasons for Anti-Israel Media Bias.”

Yet AJC acknowledged, “It’s unclear whether the disproportional staffing is a result of the world’s seemingly endless appetite for news from Israel and Palestinian territories, or whether the vast production ability of all of those staffers serves to create the market.”

HonestReporting’s Plosker told that he doesn’t know whether media bias against Israel has grown in recent years, but he did say that the bias has grown more obvious. Whereas the bias used to be buried somewhere within the narrative of a given article, today Plosker said he sees that more headlines “are screaming bias in people’s faces.” For instance,

an *MSNBC* reporter on live television recently reported that an unarmed Arab man was shot while charging Israeli police, even though the Arab was filmed with a blade in his hand. A 2014 *CNN* headline, "4 Israelis, 2 Palestinians dead in Jerusalem," failed to explain that the two Palestinians murdered the four Israelis.

Echoing the Foreign Press Association's Baker, Plosker noted that the trend of news organizations "parachuting in" inexperienced reporters to cover Israel means the journalists likely lack the nuanced perspective that is needed to write about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

"The framework through which most of the world sees the conflict is that Israelis are the aggressors and the Palestinians the victims," Plosker said. "When you have incidents in which Israelis are being stabbed and the terrorists are being shot at during that act of terror, it can mess with that framework. That's why you see these headlines in which the Palestinian becomes the subject and even the victim of the headline, which personally I find highly unethical."

At the Conference of Presidents panel discussion, AP's Federman was heckled when he said that the news agency prefers to avoid use of the word "terrorist." Baker told that *Reuters* also has that policy.

"We don't use 'terrorist' or 'freedom fighter,'" said Baker. "Those are value-loaded words. We describe what people do and allow the readers to understand and make their own conclusions. ... This is not an attempt to take sides, but an attempt not to take sides."

During the event, Barbara Opall-Rome, the Israel bureau chief for *Defense News*, said that if media use the term "terrorism" to refer to violence against unarmed civilians, the same term should not be used to denote crimes against soldiers or

police.

"We do not consider that acts of terror, because the victims were in uniform at the time," she said.

What about when incidents occur in disputed areas like Judea and Samaria, such as January's murder of Israeli mother of six, Dafna Meir, in her Otniel home?

"She is an unarmed civilian no matter where she lives, but the fact that she lives in Otniel ... blurs the lines for other [media] organizations," Opall-Rome said, noting that for some outlets, attacks that occur outside of Israel's 1967 borders are seen as "collateral damage, the bloody price that we all have to pay for this interminable conflict."

And what about the recent rise in stabbing attacks carried out by Palestinian adolescents?

"I mean, what do you call a 12-year-old wielding a knife, what about a 15-year-old with scissors in her school bag? Is she a terrorist? ... I would argue that this is not bias, that in the case of these lone-wolf attackers, we would call them 'assailants,' we would call them 'perpetrators.' And when the motive is not quite clear, we would call them 'alleged offenders,'" Opall-Rome said.

Baker said media watchdog organizations are starting to overstep their bounds and are too closely aligned with the government, describing them as "lobby pressure groups."

"The best journalists tend to hold a mirror up to any society," he said. "Sometimes, when we (foreign journalists) hold up that mirror, people find the reflection difficult to deal with or different from what the domestic media are writing. They assume it is not accurate, but it may just be a different perspective."

Plosker countered that HonestReporting is an NGO whose job is

simply to inform the government, and that the organization has no intention to infringe on freedom of the press.

“Freedom of the press,” said Plosker, “sets us apart from our Arab neighbors—but to ensure that the press understands that with freedom comes responsibility.”

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