

It's the Media, Stupid

The Middle East media image in the West

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There is little disagreement on the indispensable role of the media in influencing political debate and narrative, thus shaping public discourse.

Among progressives, liberals and most political minorities in the United States and Europe, there is an equal consensus regarding the troubling alliance that is bringing warmongering politicians, ideologues, religious zealots and media moguls together. They alone possess the capabilities to sway the public in any way they wish, or so it seems; they stack a nation's priorities in the way they find most fit; they concoct wars and justify them when they go awry. In short, they manipulate democracy by manipulating the public, using whatever means necessary: fear, misinformation and all the familiar rest.

No other issue has been the victim of such treachery like the Middle East discourse in the West, and particularly that concerning Palestine and Israel. This is a subject that is as old as the conflict itself. Even before the establishment of the state of Israel upon the hundreds of conquered and mostly destroyed Palestinian towns and villages in 1947-48, the founders of Israel seemed utterly aware of the destructive impact of their action on Western public opinion. Israeli historian Benny Morris's commanding book, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* is dotted with instances where - in their secretive dealings - Zionist politicians bickered over the massacring of Palestinians or their overt ethnic cleansing particularly because of how such blatant actions could damage Israel's image in the West, not because of the moral dilemma of the acts themselves.

This 'image' problem has indeed irked Israel since day one and continues to do so; this is why the term 'PR disaster' has always constituted a nightmarish scenario for Israeli politicians throughout the years, and subsequently turned Israel into a master in media spins and crisis management. Israel understood well that in order for its habitually indefensible policies, so evident in the illegal confiscation of land, the oppression of people and the defiance to international law, and so on, to be justified, facts have to be spun, truths have to be hidden and a new discourse, one that defies reality altogether would have to be woven, as it has.

Thus, despite the fact that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the most reported media story on earth, it's the least understood, seemingly the least rational, and most certainly one with the least potential to be resolved. The media's skewed narrative makes the conflict an end in itself; it creates a status quo that is most suitable for Israel's colonial policies and least desirable for Palestinians, who are silently - or so it seems - losing their land, their livelihood and any prospect of freedom, let alone their refugees' right of return.

Israel's impact on the media however, has metamorphosed throughout the years, from that seeking to influence to the one doing its own molding of public opinion. Israel's dedicated media friends, from the New York Times to the British Telegraph are perhaps the largest and by far the most influential interest groups in the media anywhere around the world, a fact that they - understandably so - often rebuff. But the facts are too apparent to deny. According to the findings of a recent study conducted by two top American scholars - Professor John Mearsheimer at the University of Chicago and Professor Stephen Walt of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University - the single largest influence on US foreign policy in the Middle East is Israel's interest, even when it is at odds with the United States own interests. The study cited the Israeli lobby, AIPAC as chiefly responsible for hijacking US foreign policy in the Middle East and has based its apparently thorough research on diverse sources, including uncountable media reports.

Many are already familiar with the 'special' ties between the United States and Israel, which arguably allowed for the latter to steer the foreign policy of the 'greatest democracy on earth' into the Middle East political abyss - whose injurious consequences are likely to diminish the US global import. But most might not be aware of the fact that the media is largely responsible for manufacturing that 'special relationship'. In fact, US interests in the Middle East - be they political, economic, i.e. strategic - have been greatly hampered, thanks to the perpetual, albeit misguided advocacy by Israel's allies in the administration, Congress, media and 'independent' think tanks and endless lists of 'experts' unleashed whenever Israel's image is at risk.

But what has in fact magnified the impact of the Israeli lobby and its influence in the media - whose work on behalf of Israel has exceeded Palestine, Palestinians and even the Middle East as a whole to all kinds of geopolitical boundaries as far as Africa, Asia, Latin America, and of course, Washington itself, also known as 'the other occupied territory' by a former US congressman - was the pitiable and most disorganized response of Palestinians, Muslims and Arabs. Some out of fear, perhaps, chose to disown the matter altogether using whatever injudicious logic they could drum up. Others tried to develop their own media alternatives, which is commendable. However, such mediums have failed - unlike the Israeli media machine - to carry any depth, strategy or sense of unity toward a fixed goal. In fact, it reflected Arab factionalism and brought into question the actual motives behind these 'alternative' ventures.

The result has been catastrophic. Israel's decades-long quest to bolster its media image has done wonders as American public opinion either sees Israel as a lone defender of democracy amid uncivilized Arab polities or not at all aware of the facts, basing its inane understanding of Middle East politics on media half truths that see Arabs as irrational, lazy and inherently violent, with the Israeli being the embodiment of the complete antithesis.

I am afraid that many Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims are themselves content with the status quo and are the least interested in reversing their misfortune or appreciating the immense impact of the media on politics, wars and indeed peace. There is an overall inclination that associates media bias with racial categorization - always the easy answer to all enigmas - which is usually followed by a shoulder shrug and the defeatist impression that 'all is lost', an echo of the same defeatist sentiment that has accompanied the Arab-Israeli conflict since its inception, which is now directly involving the United States, its military, its resources and reputation.

However all is not lost, for even the most focused misinformation can be reversed, no

matter how humble the initiative, how modest the resources. I have said so for many years and many have said it before me and many will continue to echo the same idea: with all due respect "it's the media, stupid." And if one is foolish enough to neglect its import, then maybe one deserves to be burnt by its fire.

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