

# Media Bias and Distortion Fuels War in the Middle East

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Perhaps now more than any other time in human history, objective media is desperately needed—media to inform the masses; to provide voice to the voiceless; and to function as the objective counterweight that scrutinizes the powers that be.

We currently live in an era that can only be described as the most volatile in contemporary history; a time when extremism and terrorism, with all their methods and motives, are on the rise; when human rights violation and political polarization are rampant, and when respect for the international law that protects state sovereignty is systematically corroding, and mainstream media is increasingly betraying the very objective that inspired the founding fathers to have “freedom of press” prominently enshrined in the US constitution.

Can today’s media guard the greater public interest and prevent the next ‘Iraq’, or worse, the next World War?

In his thought-provoking documentary *Orwell Rolls in His Grave*, producer Robert Kane Pappas, together with a lineup of media experts, activists, and academics make a compelling argument that clearly negates any claim of objectivity in most of what mainstream media does. Even more condemningly, they charge that media, by and large, has evolved as unconscionably biased enterprise that poses direct threat to the preservation of democracy (for it became demotivated and indeed coopted by the very powers that it was supposed to hold accountable in the first place).

At a time when media around the world, especially in least likely places such as the Middle East, are gradually reaching new heights in promoting unprecedented political openness, the quality of news coverage, programming, and the overall credibility of the American mainstream media is ironically on a declining trend as more and more media organizations are abandoning objective standards of journalistic ethos and becoming the “facilitators of venomous discourse” and the “purveyors of misinformation and propaganda”.

And nowhere does media bias manifest itself more than in the slanted reporting of the Israeli/Palestinian conundrum where reporting is, unfortunately, single-minded in perspective and predictable in conclusion.

In its report released on July 19th, 2006, the media watchdog FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting) highlighted a closing editorial by (veteran media personality) Bob Schieffer of CBS *Face the Nation* three days earlier in which he did not even bother to project any semblance of objectivity. According to FAIR, Mr. Schieffer adapted a well-known fable “in an attempt to explain the causes of the current conflict—or rather, the lack of causes”.

Here is how he summed up the whole crises and its root cause:

“...when the war broke out in the Middle East, the first thing I thought about was the old story of the frog and the scorpion who were trying to cross a river there. The scorpion couldn’t swim, the frog was lost. So the scorpion proposed a deal, ‘Give me a ride on your back, and I’ll show you the way.’ The frog agreed, and the trip went fine until they got to the

middle of the river, and then suddenly the scorpion just stung the frog. As they were sinking, the frog asked, in his dying breath, 'Why would you do that?' To which the scorpion replied, 'Because this is the Middle East.'

In his one-sided editorial, Mr. Schieffer offered a metaphorical diatribe that erroneously labels the Palestinian people as the "scorpion" in that tale of suicidal exploitation. To support his labeling, he echoed what FAIR referred to as "...the media's conventional wisdom in portraying the Palestinian raid that captured the Israeli soldier as an inexplicable provocation". In that groupthink mindset, the New York Times, in its June 29 editorial titled " Hamas Provokes a Fight", declared that "the responsibility for this latest escalation rests squarely with Hamas," adding that "an Israeli military response was inevitable." But neither Face The Nation nor the New York Times is alone in this crusade of disinformation.

The mainstream media seems to be credulously content with the official Israeli version which asserts that on September 2005 Israel unilaterally handed over "what the Palestinians supposedly wanted", as Mr. Schieffer put it...and that on June 25th, 2006 Israel was flagrantly provoked by an attack carried by a terrorist organization sworn to annihilate the state of Israel who killed two of its soldiers and abducted a third, hence Israel's legal and moral right to do what it did, and pledges to continue to do so till their soldier is returned.

While it is true that Hamas (also Hizballah) is in the State Department's list of terrorist organizations and that members of its armed wing have taken an Israeli soldier hostage while killing two others, that hardly gives the full picture. What's often omitted or underreported is that there are over 9000 (including 1/3 of the elected members of the Palestinian parliament) who, according to the Mandela Center for Human Rights, also include 342 juveniles are held by Israel.

In fairness to the mainstream media, the events they report are often accurate...however, the chronological sequence of these events (that often support one version of the narrative) and indeed the starting point are, at best, conveniently selective. Having said that, seldom (if at all) does mainstream media report the daily life of the average Palestinian man, woman, or child in West Bank and Gaza, and what Israel does in its freehand daily provocations that make life unbearable and often trigger knee-jerk, counter-productive reactions that only perpetuate the all too familiar violent tit-for-tat culture.

Among other forms of torture, terrorization, and provocation, the Israeli Air Force, for example routinely used the sonic boom torture in which they lower the altitude of their F16 fighter jets to fly close to the roofs of buildings and home. [The Sydney Morning Herald](#) and other media sources report a rise in miscarriages, premature births and stillbirths since the Israeli invasion of Gaza. The paper also reports that the sonic boom torture is also used at night when people are asleep to induce terror. "The sound is akin to that of a large bomb, and it can produce panic attacks, shock and nosebleeds (on children)" the report says. "The sonic booms, combined with all the other stress, have a bad effect on the health of pregnant women," added Dr Adnan Radi, a senior obstetrician of Shifa Hospital in Gaza.

The media failed to adequately scrutinize the wisdom in Israel's "inhumane" act to impose extra judiciary economic suffocation aimed to collectively punish the Palestinian people for electing Hamas. On January 2006, Israel decided to withhold the Palestinian monies they collect through taxation- \$55 million a month essential to pay the salaries of civil servants. This, despite Hamas' dramatic change per its modus operandi since it finally decided to partake in the Palestinian elections and uphold a self-imposed cease-fire for 17 months...never mind the day before this new crises exploded, Hamas has signed an agreement with Fatah to form a joint government that recognizes Israel (implicitly).

Once again the media failed to prevent this whole escalation by turning a blind eye to the early reports that Israel was planning months earlier to deliberately provoke Hamas (also Hizballah) into a fatal military confrontation- something that Alex Fishman, an Israeli senior

security analyst and Professor Tanya Reinhardt of Tel Aviv University, and others have charged.

On June 8th the Israeli Army assassinated Abu Samhadana, a senior appointee of the Hamas government, and intensified its shelling of civilians in the Gaza Strip. And according to Professor Reinhardt, "Governmental authorization for action on a larger scale was already given (to be carried) by 12 June, but it was postponed in the wake of the global reverberation caused by the killing of civilians in the air force bombing the next day (Israeli killing of seven members of a Palestinian family picnicking on a beach and wounding 30 others including 13 children)".

Could a similar manipulation of truth be underway vis a vis the invasion of Lebanon?

Well, according to Gerald Steinberg, professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University, the current conflict was being cooked for several years. "Of all of Israel's wars since 1948, this was the one for which Israel was most prepared...By 2004, the military campaign scheduled to last about three weeks that we're seeing now had already been blocked out and, in the last year or two, it's been simulated and rehearsed across the board" he said. "More than a year ago, a senior Israeli army officer began giving PowerPoint presentations, on an off-the-record basis, to U.S. and other diplomats, journalists and think tanks, setting out the plan for the current operation in revealing detail. Under the ground rules of the briefings, the officer could not be identified," he added.

While ironically some media organizations in Israel continue to expose their government's mortal schemes, and set-up forums for rigorous debates on the reckless nature of their governments actions- how they threaten both Israel and world peace and whether or not her heavy-handed reaction and collective punishment would constitute "state terrorism" and "crimes against humanity"- the American media, except certain flashes of symbolic comments made in the passing, are too timid to report, analyze, and objectively debate what's at issue...

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