

Blaming the Victims: American Media and the Israel/Palestine Conflict

By Susan Muaddi Darraj

For the past ten years, I have listened faithfully to National Public Radio (NPR), a station supported largely through the financial contributions of its listeners. Many Americans bemoan the pits that most of our news agencies have sunk into in recent decades, but NPR's in-depth coverage and accurate reporting have usually been like a lifesaving rope tossed into the depths from above. My ten-year-long faithfulness to the radio station, however, came to a bitter end a few months ago. I am now one of thousands of Americans who refuse to set her radio dial to NPR because it has subtly contributed to the growing anti-Palestinian bias already deeply entrenched in American media.

In March 2002, I first heard that Linda Gradstein, NPR's Israel correspondent since 1990, had been accepting cash honoraria from the American Israel Political Action Committee (AIPAC), the most powerful and influential pro-Israeli lobbying group in Washington. She had apparently been accepting these monetary gifts for years, despite the questions of professional ethics this raises. It was not much of a surprise when, in a report about the bombing in Israel by a Palestinian on 9 August 2001, Gradstein replied in this way when asked if Israel was likely to retaliate: "I think Israel has to retaliate. Israel has been saying from now on it will retaliate for every attack. This is the second largest attack in the last ten months of violence... I think Israel has no choice but to respond."

In essence, Gradstein openly advised the Israeli government to attack the Palestinians by proposing this as

the only option available. Would she have advised the Palestinians to retaliate after the damage and destruction recently done in Jenin by the Israeli military? I bet all the money in her bank account that she wouldn't. It's not that she has allowed money to taint her journalism, but the fact that she still reports on the air for NPR, that is most disturbing. Frankly, I am stunned that a reporter who accepted what are essentially bribes from a major political lobbying group, who casually incited violence against the Palestinians, and who compromised her integrity would still have a job at a national radio station.

However, for Palestinian- and Arab-Americans like me, the example of the Linda Gradstein/NPR/AIPAC triumvirate is one more example of how the American media sanctions violence against the Palestinian people by portraying them largely as bloodthirsty terrorists eager for a place

among the *houris** or virgins in paradise. An examination of the language is sufficient to illustrate my point: When a Palestinian blows himself or herself up in a Tel Aviv discotheque or in an open-air market in Jerusalem, he or she becomes a "terrorist." When an Israeli soldier shoots a pregnant woman and kills her husband, who is driving her to the hospital to deliver the child, he is not a terrorist. He is merely following orders or reacting to the "suspicious" circumstances as any soldier would. When young boys are shot as they throw stones at Israeli tanks, the excuse given by the Israeli Defense Forces is that those children were plotting a terrorist attack. However, when the tread on an Israeli soldier's vehicle snaps and he randomly opens fire on a family picking grape leaves, killing a mother and her two children, the American newspapers report that he was "spooked" by what he thought was a bomb. The deaths of the family are "regretted."

Noted a study conducted by Hussein Ibish and Ali AbuNimah of the Opinion-Editorial (Op-Ed) pages of *The Washington Post* from 29 September 2000 (the start of the Al-Aqsa Intifada) through the end of January 2001: "The *Washington Post* printed twenty-seven Op-Eds on the subject, of which twenty were strongly pro-Israeli, two were substantially sensitive to Israeli and Palestinian concerns, while only five were strongly

sympathetic to Palestinian viewpoints. Of the Post's thirteen staff editorials, twelve were strongly pro-Israeli, while only one was somewhat neutral."

The study also analysed *The New York Times'* Op-Ed pages: Of thirty-three Op-Eds, twenty-five were strongly pro-Israeli; of fifteen staff editorials, fourteen were also strongly pro-Israeli.

Ibish and AbuNimah conclude that 81percent of Op-Ed pieces and editorials published by major newspapers within this period were decidedly pro-Israeli. They also discovered that the American media consistently avoids referring to Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem as "occupied territories," though the rest of the world and the United Nations do; that it perpetuates the myth that Palestinian parents are to blame for sending out their children to "be martyred" by Israeli soldiers and weapons; and that Israel uses a tremendous deal of restraint and avoids harming civilians while hunting for terrorists (a myth easily belied by the fact that the vast majority of Palestinians killed in the conflict have been civilians, and of those, almost 40 percent have been children under the age of fifteen).

The media's unbalanced reporting of the conflict only serves to underline steadfast American alliance with Israel. Despite George Bush and Colin Powell's repeated demands for an "immediate withdrawal" and recent insistence on the creation of a Palestinian state (occasionally even using the word "Palestine"), it is American support that subsidises the

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Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem. The greatest flaw of the "peace" process is the continued military support to Israel, to the tune of about US\$3 billion annually, which undermines any claim by the United States that it is an "honest" broker of peace. One cannot be honest when one is arming one side of the conflict—the stronger side, even.

However, American influence goes beyond that of military support and extends to attempted censorship. When Al Jazeera, the popular Arab satellite news station based in Qatar, became a household term in the United States, the American government requested of the Qatari government that it curb Al Jazeera's broadcasts. "Why? What was Al Jazeera showing on its broadcasts that could so deeply offend the Bush administration?" I wondered as I watched. But what I saw were professional newscasters, speaking flawlessly in Arabi al-fusha (classical Arabic); I saw Al Jazeera's star journalist, Walid Al Aomari, wearing a beige vest and grim look as he reported from Ramallah; I saw the destruction of buildings and

the holes in living room walls of Palestinian families; I saw the bodies of several men sprawled on the floor of Arafat's compound, with bullet holes in their heads; I saw the aftermath, uncut, uncensored, of Israeli "attacks" on the West Bank, something the American media usually glosses over. (Once again, language becomes an issue here: CNN and MSNBC, for example, called these actions "incursions," which has a more harmless connotation.)

For example, when a suicide bombing occurs, the American media is sure to detail the victims—their names, ages, what and who they left behind; we even get interviews with their families and profiles of the victims' lives. This is as it should be when someone is violently killed; we, the public, should become familiar with their lives in order to more fully comprehend the horror and tragedy of their deaths. However, many more Palestinian civilians have been killed than Israeli civilians, and in equally horrific ways, but they are rendered as faceless, nameless "Palestinian casualties," their lives crunched to mere numbers in a *New York Times* or *Washington Post* article.

In effect, then, the American media has managed to define "terror" more clearly than the Bush administration, which tends to keep the term conveniently vague and open-ended. According to CNN, MSNBC, and other news networks and programmes, "terror" is damage and death caused by Palestinians, never damage and death caused by Israelis. And even when the refugee camp of Jenin resembles an earthquake zone,

with hundreds missing and feared dead under the rubble of toppled buildings and bulldozed homes, American media sources quibble about whether to call this a "massacre" (although the terrorist attack that killed 29 Israelis seated at the Seder meal in Netanya was swiftly termed the Passover Massacre).

Another tactic of the American media is to repeatedly spin the same, superficial rhetoric during its broadcasts and interviews. Lines like "Israel needs security" and "Israel is determined to root out the terrorists," as well as overstretched comparisons between the conflict and America's own "war on terror," all avoid contextualising the conflict and ignore Israel's very real role in contributing to the failure of the peace process and the violence in the region. The crux of the conflict is the illegal, military occupation of Palestinian land by Israel, despite frequent international condemnation over the years.

Interviewers in the American media, however, rarely ask in-depth questions that focus on the occupation, its illegality, its economic and social impact on the Palestinians, and its stranglehold on Palestinian culture. Instead of intelligent questions (such as "Why does Israel repeatedly call on Arafat to arrest suspected militants as a condition for withdrawal, but then make his police stations and security buildings prime targets of its air strikes?"), interviewers ask frustratingly simple ones such as, "Do you condemn suicide bombings?" (of Palestinian interviewees) and "Is the Israeli military doing its best to pre-

vent civilian casualties?" (of Israeli interviewees).

I would like to see Israeli interviewees asked, "If Israel really wanted peace and always planned to eventually withdraw from the occupied territories, why did it build settlements at a rate that these doubled in the number during the decade since the Oslo Accords were signed?" This acknowledges that Israel is an equal contributor to the chaos and terror in the region. I would like to see Palestinian interviewees asked, "Save the suicide bombings, which are immoral, what other methods are being employed by the Palestinians to resist the occupation?" This acknowledges that suicide bombings and the targeting of civilians are reprehensible, and also that they are not the only methods of resistance. A Palestinian could tell the interviewer about the many decades of protests, demonstrations, boycotts, and other methods of non-violent resistance that the American media never covers.

Such questions are on the minds of many Americans, but they are rarely heard on CNN, MSNBC, and even NPR. If asked, they could stir real discussion and serious debate that could de-polarise the two sides and neutralise the stereotypes of "terrorist" and "terrorised." Both Palestinians and Israelis have been terrorised throughout this conflict, but the terror endured by the Palestinians has not been as "dramaticised." Rather, it has been a 35-year-long terror, endured in muted silence as American media crafts an image that blamed the victims and permitted the terror to continue.☺

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Footnote:

* In Islam, a *hourī* is a beautiful maiden who awaits the devout Muslim in paradise. There are numerous references to the *hourīs* in the Qur'an describing them as "purified wives" and "spotless virgins." Tradition elaborated on the sensual image of the *hourī* and defined some of her functions; on entering paradise, for example, the believer is presented with a large number of *hourīs*, with each of whom he may cohabit once for each day he has fasted in Ramadan and once for each good work he has performed.

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