

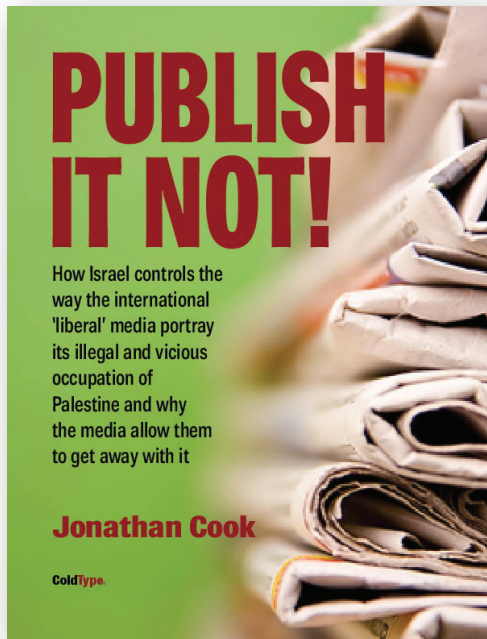
PUBLISH IT NOT!

How Israel controls the way the international 'liberal' media portray its illegal and vicious occupation of Palestine and why the media allow them to get away with it

Jonathan Cook

ColdType





Jonathan Cook is a freelance journalist based in Nazareth, Israel. He is the author of *Blood and Religion: The Unmasking of the Jewish and Democratic State* (Pluto, 2006), *Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East* (Pluto, 2008) and *Disappearing Palestine: Israel's Experiments in Human Despair* (Zed, 2008). © Jonathan Cook 2011

ColdType

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

www.coldtype.net

PUBLISH IT NOT!

Jonathan Cook



Probably like many other journalists, at some point in my childhood I fell in love with the idea of the crusading, fearless reporter – unafraid of bullying figures of authority and always looking out for the little guy. This image was fed by the greatest of all myth-making movies about journalism: *All the President's Men*, the glamorous coupling of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as the daring *Washington Post* reporters Woodward and Bernstein who exposed the corruption of the Nixon presidency Watergate.

Life, of course, has proved to be less simple. Who is the bully and who the little guy? I, like more notable reporters who preceded me, would find that conundrum expressed most powerfully in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the mid-1990s, I arrived in Jerusalem for the first time – then as a tourist – with another potent Western myth at the



A series of later professional shocks as a freelance journalist reporting on Israel would shatter my assumptions about both Israel and courageous reporters

front of my consciousness: that of Israel as “a light unto the nations,” the plucky underdog facing a menacing Arab world ranged against it. A series of later professional shocks as a freelance journalist reporting on Israel would shatter my assumptions about both Israel and courageous reporters.

These disillusioning experiences came in the early stages of the second intifada, the Palestinian uprising that began in late 2000. At the time I was often writing for Britain’s *Guardian* newspaper, first as a staff member based in the foreign department at its head office in London and then later as a freelance journalist in Nazareth. The *Guardian* has earned an international reputation – including in Israel – as the Western newspaper most savagely critical of Israel’s actions. That may be true, but I quickly found that there were still very clear, and highly unusual, limitations on what could be written about Israel.

During my years at the *Guardian*, I

had regularly travelled to the Middle East from where I dispatched a number of reports. Only when I offered articles about Israel itself or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict did I sense a reluctance, even a resistance, to publishing them. The standard of proof required to print anything critical of Israel, it became apparent to me, was far higher than with other countries. Particularly problematic for the *Guardian* – as with other news media – was anything that questioned Israel’s claim to being a democracy or highlighted the contradictions between that claim and Israel’s Jewish self-definition.

The *Guardian*’s most famous editor, CP Scott, who is still much revered at the paper, was an active and high-profile lobbyist for Jewish rights in what was then Palestine. He was also, as I was occasionally reminded by senior *Guardian* staff, instrumental in bringing about the Balfour Declaration – the British government’s commitment to the Zionist movement in 1917 to create a “national home” for the Jews in Palestine.

Thus, I was not entirely surprised that an account I submitted based on my investigations of an apparent shoot-to-kill policy by the Israeli police against its own Palestinian citizens at the start of the second intifada was sat on for months by the paper. Finally, after I made repeated queries, the features editor informed me that he could not run it because it was no longer “fresh.”

What surprised me more were the obstacles to getting stories into print about the worst excesses of the occupation. Was it that such incidents hinted – a little too much, as far as my editors were concerned – at the racist nature of the Jewish state in its dealings with Palestinians generally?

A report about the suspected use by Israel of a new experimental type of tear



A report about the suspected use by Israel of a new experimental type of tear gas against schoolchildren near Bethlehem – and earlier in Gaza – was rejected

gas against schoolchildren near Bethlehem – and earlier in Gaza – was rejected. Eyewitness testimony I had collected from respected French doctors working in local hospitals who believed the gas was causing the children nerve damage – a suspicion shared by a leading international human rights organization – was dismissed as “inadequate.”

The foreign editor also told me he was concerned that no other journalists had reported the story – leading me to wonder for the first time in my career whether newspapers were actually interested in exclusives. I also remember vividly arguing with the foreign desk about another story I offered on a new section of the wall Israel was starting to build in Jerusalem, on the sensitive site of the Mount of Olives, in time for Easter 2004.

It would block a famous procession that had been held for hundreds of years by Christian pilgrims every Palm Sunday, following the route Jesus took on a donkey from the Biblical town of Bethany into Jerusalem. I was flabbergasted when an editor told me that it was of no interest.

“Readers are tired of stories about the wall,” she said, apparently ignoring the fact that the story also raised troubling concerns about the protection of religious freedoms and Christian tradition in the Holy Land.

The most disturbing moment professionally, however, followed my investigation into the death of a United Nations worker, and British citizen, Iain Hook, in Jenin refugee camp at the hands of an Israeli sniper in 2002. As the only journalist to have actually gone to the UN compound in Jenin in the immediate aftermath of his death, I was able to piece together what had happened, speak to Palestinian witnesses and later got access

PUBLISH IT NOT!

to details of a suppressed UN report into the killing.

Israel claimed that the sniper who shot Hook in the back believed the UN official was really a Palestinian militant holding a grenade, rather than a mobile phone, and that he was about to throw it at Israeli troops.

My investigation, however, showed that the sniper's account had to be a lie. From his position on the top floor of a small apartment block overlooking the compound, the sniper could not have misidentified through his telescopic sights either the distinctive red-haired Hook or the phone. In any case, Hook would not have been able to throw anything from out of the compound because it was surrounded by a high concrete wall and a chainmail fence right up to the metal awning that covered the entire site. If Hook had thrown a grenade, it would have bounced right back at him – as the sniper, who had been positioned in the apartment for several hours, must have known.

When I offered the investigation to the *Guardian's* foreign editor, he sounded worried. Again I was told, as if in admonition, that no other media had covered the story. But it seemed to me that this time even the foreign editor realized he was offering excuses rather than reasons for not publishing. As I argued my case, he agreed to publish a small article looking at the diplomatic fall-out from Hook's killing, and the mounting pressure on the UN. He had bought me off.

Shortly afterwards I recruited Chris McGreal, the *Guardian's* recently appointed Jerusalem bureau chief, to my struggle to get Hook's story told. McGreal, the paper's distinguished South Africa correspondent who covered the apartheid era, had quickly brought a much keener



If Hook had thrown a grenade, it would have bounced right back at him – as the sniper, who had been positioned in the apartment for several hours, must have known

critical edge to the *Guardian's* coverage of Israel – and, from what I saw, had battled hard for the privilege. He lobbied for the paper to print my article and personally took the project under his wing.

Eventually, the editors relented and reserved a page for my investigation. However, when the story was published, it was only half the promised length and had lost a map showing the improbabilities of Israel's account of Hook's killing. The foreign editors later claimed that they had been forced to accept at the very last moment a half-page ad for the page on which my investigation appeared. (I had worked on the foreign desk for many years and struggle to remember any instance where an ad change was made close to deadline.)

The editors had cut the second half of the story, the part that contained the evidence I had unearthed. They had printed my investigation without details of the investigation itself.

I was suffering similar setbacks with other mainstream media. The most significant was the *International Herald Tribune*, to which I was briefly able to contribute opinion pieces. This opportunity came chiefly through happenstance. The IHT was then owned jointly by the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Because neither paper was in a position to take full control, the IHT's staff in Paris had an unusual degree of independence in deciding what to publish in addition to syndicated articles from the two parent companies.

A senior editor in the comment section with whom I had worked years before recruited me to the opinion pages in 2002 and I enjoyed for the first time the opportunity to write freely in a mainstream newspaper.

However, a short time later, the *Washington Post* sold its share in the *Tribune*

to the *Times* and a new comment editor was appointed. He had been Jerusalem bureau chief for the NYT in the late 1990s. Rumors suggested he had been eased out after Israel's media lobby groups in the US took umbrage at his faintly critical reports. I feared he was an unlikely champion for my more outspoken commentaries – and so it proved.

As soon as he was installed, the same pressure groups – the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America (Camera) and Honest Reporting – began lobbying against my articles whenever they were printed by the IHT. After one of my commentaries was published in 2003 suggesting, far from controversially, that the wall Israel was newly building in the West Bank was really a land grab from the Palestinians, my friend at the paper called in shock to say it had provoked “the largest postbag in our history.” (The Anti-Defamation League had published on its website a pro forma letter of complaint for its supporters.)

Finally, the paper felt compelled to devote a page to a selection of the letters of protest, all of which made the same objection to my use of the phrase “Palestinian homeland” to describe the territory that Palestinians had historically lived on. In addition, Camera submitted a complaint of several thousand words that listed 10 “errors” in my 600-word article.

After I argued my case at length to the editors, it was agreed not to publish an apology. However, when my next commentary for the IHT was greeted in the same manner, my days writing for the paper were over.

My first three years as a freelance journalist based in Israel were a rapid lesson in the limits of the permissible in reporting and commenting on the conflict. As I began to gain a deeper understanding



Most freelance journalists forced into this position would either have learned to tailor their reporting to what was expected by the news desks or have headed off to another conflict zone

of the issues, and as I became a better reporter (according to everything I had been taught about the standards of “good professional journalism”), the less interest the mainstream media showed in my work. It became more and more difficult to place my reports in newspapers – to the point where I was spending more time arguing the case for a story with an editor (and then defending it afterwards), than I was researching and writing the story.

Most freelance journalists forced into this position would either have learned to tailor their reporting to what was expected by the news desks or have headed off to another conflict zone. I stayed, and struggled on with writing, at first chiefly for the Arab media and then later as the author of three books.

Managing the war of spin

Despite the difficulties I experienced, it is probably easier to report critically about Israel than it ever has been – though I am using “easier” in a strictly relative sense. It is still fearsomely hard. This new tentative openness from the media is in part a result of Israel's recent diplomatic and strategic failures. It should be noted that I submitted my commentary about the land-grabbing wall to the IHT several times before it was finally published in May 2003.

The paper's change of mind came, it was clear to me, because President George W Bush had just given a speech in which for the first time he criticized the wall in much the same terms as I was. Since the visible collapse of the peace process a decade ago at Camp David, Israel has been in the increasingly uncomfortable position of not only being but, more importantly, looking like the rejectionist party to the conflict.

PUBLISH IT NOT!

The impression that Israel has no interest in engaging in meaningful peace talks to create any kind of viable Palestinian state – and that it may even need to perpetuate its own version of the “war on terror” against the Palestinians to maintain its legitimacy – has grown with the almost complete cessation of Palestinian attacks, both the suicide bombers who were once dispatched from the West Bank and the Qassam rocket attacks from Gaza. In order to justify continuing military assaults on the Palestinians in the occupied territories and its studious avoidance of real negotiations, Israel has had to invest an ever larger share of its energies in managing and controlling the narrators of the conflict – chiefly the Western news organizations and their local sources of information.

Although the “spin war” has been conducted on many fronts, it has one central goal: to limit criticism of Israel’s conduct and evidence of its oppression of the Palestinians in the international media and especially in the United States, where, as I had discovered, Israel’s lobbyists are at their most muscular. Israel needs to maintain its credibility in the US because that is the source of its strength. It depends on billions of dollars in aid and military hardware, almost blanket political support from Congress, the White House’s veto of critical resolutions at the United Nations, and Washington’s role as a dishonest broker in sponsoring intermittent talks propping up a peace process that in reality offers no hope of a just resolution. The occupation would end in short order without US financial, diplomatic and military support.

The chief target of Israel’s media war is the Western press corps, and especially the US media, which could threaten Israel’s improbable narratives and its power



The chief target of Israel’s media war is the Western press corps, and especially the US media, which could threaten Israel’s improbable narratives and its power in Washington

in Washington were American reporters to offer a fuller picture of what is taking place and their commentators a better assessment of why it is occurring. Israel therefore makes significant efforts, as we shall see, to put pressure on the journalists themselves. It also targets their news editors “back home” because they make appointments to the region, set the tone of the coverage, approve or veto story ideas, and edit and package the reports coming in from the field.

In the more open media environment of the past decade, however, Israel has also needed to act more aggressively against other types of narrators to ensure the dominance of its own narrative. It has sought to control and limit the scope of local information sources on which Western reporters rely, and delegitimize rival news platforms that could increase the pressure on the Western media to provide better-quality coverage.

Those most immediately in Israel’s sights – and in the greatest danger – are Palestinian journalists because they live and work in the areas Israel wants to remain unreported. They are best positioned to supply the Western media with the raw material needed to show Israel’s aggression towards the Palestinians, including its war crimes, and expose the subsequent cover-ups. Next come dissident Israeli journalists and human rights groups who investigate these same incidents and pose the added threat that they have greater credibility with the international community. And finally there are new problems posed by the growing number of freelance journalists like myself covering the conflict and a new breed of citizen journalists and bloggers created by the rise of the electronic media.

Each element of this web of threats to Israel’s narrative has required its own

organized response and, as will become clear, Israel has lost no time in developing a mixture of sophisticated and blunt weapons to use against the media. That has been reflected in a drop in Israel's ranking in recent surveys of press freedom.

In a 2010 index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, Israel comes in at 86th place for its treatment of journalists inside its own borders. That puts it behind Lebanon, Albania, Nicaragua and Liberia. It was in 132th place – out of 178 countries – for its repression of journalists outside its own territory, chiefly in Palestinian areas. The two Palestinian authorities in the West Bank and Gaza were only a short distance behind in 150th place.

An early whistleblower

The basic principles of media management were developed early on by Israel, as Donald Neff, the Jerusalem bureau chief for *Time* magazine in the late 1970s, has described. In an article for *The Link* 15 years ago, he wrote about what he called his “epiphany” during three years covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, rather than a single revelation, his epiphany came as a series of insights that cumulatively undermined his belief in the Zionist narrative he had grown up accepting. His increasingly critical reporting set him in opposition to other foreign correspondents in Jerusalem and incurred the wrath of Israeli officials and lobbyists in the US. His *Link* essay is fascinating not least because of the continuing relevance of many of his experiences more than 30 years later.

One observation Neff makes, however, no longer applies to the current crop of foreign correspondents. He notes the difficulty he faced at the time of his posting



Few Western readers could have appreciated at the time: of a press corps that, far from mastering the news agenda on Israel, largely abided by a part self-imposed, part Israeli-dictated news blackout

in the 1970s in learning about the essentials of the conflict.

In part, Neff suggests, he struggled to make sense of what he was witnessing because of a dearth of reliable information in English on Israel's history and even more so on its then less than 10-year-old occupation.

Without a proper context for understanding the conflict, he found himself vulnerable to the misinformation campaigns of Israeli officials, who claimed that the occupations of the West Bank and Gaza were entirely benevolent.

Neff admits he failed to heed the reports of the United Nations, the one body regularly investigating and publicizing the realities of the occupation. Like other foreign correspondents of the time, and those of today, Neff regarded the UN as a discredited organization, chiefly because of successful smear campaigns by Israel. Neff paints a disconcerting picture that few Western readers could have appreciated at the time: of a press corps that, far from mastering the news agenda on Israel, largely abided by a part self-imposed, part Israeli-dictated news blackout.

Neff points to a series of episodes that contributed to his gradual awakening: a solitary critical report in a reputed British newspaper, the *Sunday Times*, highlighting the regular use of torture against Palestinians; the leaking to the Hebrew media of the 1976 Koenig report, in which senior officials laid out suggestions for how to rid the country of some of its Palestinian citizens; the role played by one Palestinian in Ramallah, Ramonda Tawil, who not only supplied him with stories but also paid for it with repeated arrests and abuse by Israel; and finally his investigation into an incident in Beit Jala, near Bethlehem, in which Israeli soldiers viciously and without provocation attacked

Palestinian youths, part of a larger rampage conducted by the army across the West Bank.

There was considerable fall-out from Neff's increasingly informed reporting, and especially the Beit Jala story. His local bureau staff, all of them Israeli Jews, grew indignant at his coverage and, over the Beit Jala report, actually staged a mutiny. The Israeli media began a campaign of vilification against both him and *Time*, and Neff found Israelis, including sources, responded to him with a new hostility.

Back in New York, resentment among some staff at the magazine increased, and Zionist lobby groups bombarded the office with complaints. Despite an unexpected investigation held at the instigation of the Israeli president, Ezer Weizman, that confirmed Neff's account of the Beit Jala incident, his report was ignored by other foreign correspondents, including those at the *New York Times*, the US paper of record on which his own editors relied.

Emotionally and professionally exhausted by the experience, Neff left the region shortly afterwards. He concludes that he was "heart-broken and discouraged by the display of prejudice and unprofessional conduct of my colleagues covering the story, whom I had admired. Not only would they not have used the story if it had been up to them, but after Weizman's confirmation some of them confided to me that they had known in their hearts from the beginning that the story was true. This amazing confession struck me as the worst example of bad journalism and ugly prejudice I could imagine. The experience left me highly skeptical about the wisdom of employing reporters in areas where they are partisans."



Adams was finally forced out of his job when in 1968 he tried to bring to attention an ethnic cleansing campaign that had been carried out a short time earlier, under cover of the 1967 war

Partisan reporters

As Neff suggests, there were few reporters of his independent nature in Jerusalem at that time. Both he and an earlier free spirit – Michael Adams of the *Guardian* newspaper – operated largely in a real-news vacuum that made their own reporting seem improbable to their news editors. Adams, who covered the region during and immediately after the 1967 Six-Day war, recounts at length in his book *Publish It Not* his difficulties reporting on the brutalities committed against Palestinians in the newly occupied West Bank and Gaza. Already his colleagues were terming the occupation "the most enlightened in history."

Adams was finally forced out of his job when in 1968 he tried to bring to attention an ethnic cleansing campaign that had been carried out a short time earlier, under cover of the 1967 war. The Israeli army, he learned, had expelled the inhabitants of three Palestinian villages near Jerusalem, razed their homes and then quietly annexed the territory to Israel. Today the villagers' lands are a recreational area known as Canada Park, paid for by Canadian tax-payers, that is popular with ordinary Israelis and widely – and mistakenly – assumed to be part of Israel. Like Neff, Adams was not only radicalized by his experiences but also began to question the motivations of other foreign correspondents. How could they see the same things and yet fail to report them?

Adams concludes that, in large part, Israel's narrative was largely unchallenged in the Western media not because most of the foreign correspondents in Jerusalem were Jews but because they chose to identify closely with one side of the conflict through their commitment to the ideology of Zionism. In many cases that

included taking Israeli citizenship, serving in the Israeli army as a reserve soldier, or sending their children into the army. In claiming citizenship under the Law of Return, which blatantly privileges the immigration rights of Jews over those of native Palestinians (the overwhelming majority of whom had been expelled from their homes by Israel), these reporters were themselves collaborating in the process of ethnic cleansing. How could they not thereby plunge themselves into the most consuming conflict of interest?

Both Neff and Adams suggest that the willful blindness, or self-censorship, of most of the press corps ensured non-Zionist reporters could make no impact on the news agenda. Adams' editor at the *Guardian*, who had already been subjected to intense lobbying campaigns against Adams by Israeli officials in the UK and the paper's Jewish readers, therefore had every reason to find the article about the three ethnically cleansed villages implausible.

Adams writes: "It made it easier for the editor to believe that, if I had not actually invented the story, I must have at least left out of account some justifying factor; it was only some months later, when he sent another correspondent, who was not Jewish, out of England that the story was confirmed and at last published in the *Guardian*. By then, and as a direct result of the argument we had had over this episode, the editor had put an end to my connection with the *Guardian* by telling me that he would never again publish anything I wrote about the Middle East."

Proving their Zionist credentials

Surprisingly, the preponderance of Jewish reporters in the Jerusalem press corps continues to this day, especially among the US contingent. Even a few of the Jew-



Both Neff and Adams suggest that the willful blindness, or self-censorship, of most of the press corps ensured non-Zionist reporters could make no impact on the news agenda

ish reporters themselves regard this as problematic in a conflict where national and ethnic allegiances and pressures are so much to the fore. One American journalist speaking on condition of anonymity told me recently that it was common at Foreign Press Association gatherings in Israel to hear the "senior, agenda-setting, elite journalists" boasting to one another about their "Zionist" credentials, their service in the Israeli army or the loyal service of their children. (None of my sources, it should be noted, felt able to go on the record with such views, fearing it that it would be career suicide.)

He added: "I'm Jewish, married to an Israeli and like almost all Western journalists live in Jewish West Jerusalem. In my free time I hang out in cafes and bars with Jewish Israelis chatting in Hebrew. For the Jewish sabbath and Jewish holidays I often get together with a bunch of Western journalists. While it would be convenient to think otherwise, there is no question that this deep personal integration into Israeli society informs our overall understanding and coverage of the place in a way quite different from a journalist who lived in Ramallah or Gaza and whose personal life was more embedded in Palestinian society."

His observations had been prompted by revelations earlier this year that Ethan Bronner, the *New York Times*' bureau chief in Jerusalem, had a son serving in the Israeli army. The disclosure, which Bronner himself refused to confirm or deny when it first broke, briefly provoked a flood of complaints to the NYT's head office.

A column at the time by the paper's public editor, Clark Hoyt, argued that Bronner had a conflict of interest and should be reassigned.

The paper's editor, Bill Keller, vehemently disagreed: "So to prevent any ap-

PUBLISH IT NOT!

pearance of bias, would you say we should not send Jewish reporters to Israel? If so, what about assigning Jewish reporters to countries hostile to Israel? What about reporters married to Jews? Married to Israelis? Married to Arabs? Married to evangelical Christians? ... Ethical judgments that start from prejudice lead pretty quickly to absurdity, and pandering to zealots means cheating readers who genuinely seek to be informed.”

Keller, of course, willfully ignored Hoyt’s point that it was not Bronner’s Jewishness that was the central issue; it was his emotional commitment to one side of the conflict through his son’s army service. His reporting was already under scrutiny even before the revelations about his son. Bronner had been widely criticized for his bias towards the Israeli government’s positions, including by the media watchdog Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

Also, Keller was writing as though Bronner was an isolated example of a potentially compromised reporter. The problem for the NYT and most of the rest of the US media, however, is that, far from being exceptional, it is the norm for them to assign a Jewish reporter to cover the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

My contact pointed out: “I can think of a dozen foreign bureau chiefs, responsible for covering both Israel and the Palestinians, who have served in the Israeli army, and another dozen who like Bronner have kids in the Israeli army.”

The NYT’s other Jerusalem correspondent, Isabel Kershner, is believed to be an Israeli citizen and is married to an Israeli. A recent predecessor of Bronner’s, Joel Greenberg, did reserve duty in the Israeli army while he was reporting for the paper, apparently a fact known by the editors but also not considered a conflict of inter-



Keller, of course, willfully ignored Hoyt’s point that it was not Bronner’s Jewishness that was the central issue; it was his emotional commitment to one side of the conflict through his son’s army service

est. Most of the NYT’s correspondents in the past two decades appear to have been Jewish.

That, whatever Keller argues, should be a matter of profound concern to the paper and readers who expect fair coverage. Even putting aside the issue of the likely partisanship of Jewish reporters who identify with a self-declared Jewish state either by taking citizenship or by serving in the army, any paper ought to want to promote a diversity of backgrounds among its staff. How would the NYT credibly explain the decision to allow only Chinese-Americans to report on Tibet, or to appoint only Catholic Irish-Americans to cover Northern Ireland, or – for that matter – to allow only men to write about women’s issues?

But, more significantly, the NYT’s partisanship on Israel is not simply speculation; it is demonstrated in its reporting. Alison Weir of *If Americans Knew*, a US institute for disseminating information about the Middle East, has pointed out the systematic distortions in the paper’s coverage. Some notable examples are the fact that international reports on Israel’s human right abuses are covered at a rate 19 times lower than those documenting abuses by Palestinians; and Israeli children’s deaths are seven times more likely to be reported than Palestinian children’s. The *Times*, like other US media, reports endlessly on the plight of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier held in Gaza, while rarely mentioning the 7,000 or so Palestinians – including many women and children, and hundreds who have never been charged – held in Israel’s prisons. Keller goes on to comment about Bronner:

“How those connections [to Israel] affect his innermost feelings about the country and its conflicts, I don’t know. I suspect they supply a measure of sophis-

tication about Israel and its adversaries that someone with no connections would lack.” If true, why would the NYT not also want to make sure that it employed a Palestinian or an Arab-American in one of its two Jerusalem posts, or even have one of its two reporters based in the West Bank city of Ramallah? Would that not ensure that the Palestinian perspective was reported with an equal “measure of sophistication?”

There is the obvious danger that, in a situation where reporters self-select for the Jerusalem beat, it is precisely those who identify most closely with Israel and the Zionist movement’s goals who will be drawn there. But in practice it is the news organizations who ultimately make such selections, often after journalists put themselves forward. Why are they willing accomplices to this conflict of interest or, at the very least, so blind to it? One factor to consider is the degree to which the senior staff of newspapers like the *Times* suffer from a similar partisanship. Both the paper’s publisher, Arthur Sulzberger Jr., and its foreign editor, Susan Chira, are Jewish, with the latter believed to have family in Israel. This would be of little consequence in itself, except for the degree to which these senior executives’ behavior fuels speculation on their own judgments about the conflict.

In October, for example, the Israeli media reported that Sulzberger, Keller and Chira had made a 24-hour stop in the region. Aside from the inevitable meeting with the Israeli and Palestinian prime ministers, they appeared to have dedicated the rest of their time to a “PR tour” organized by the settlers’ council, Yesha, that included a visit to a college in Ariel that the Israeli government had recently declared the first university in the West Bank and to the Barkan industrial



In a self-declared Jewish state, as news editors understand, Jewish reporters, especially those conversant in the tribal language of Hebrew, will have a important advantage

estate, a prime focus of the Palestinian boycott movement. The tour’s dubious purpose was to show the settlers’ guests how much Palestinians benefit from their presence in the West Bank. Was this really the best use these hectic executives could make of their day in the region? But there exist more significant reasons why the media might prefer Jewish reporters in Jerusalem. One is that Israel defines even mild criticism of its policies as anti-Semitism, a charge to which the news media are still extremely sensitive. Having a Jewish journalist, or better still one who has demonstrated a commitment to Israel through his own or his child’s army service, offers some immunity from such accusations.

Another reason is the importance accorded by all news organizations to gaining access to the centers of power. In a self-declared Jewish state, as news editors understand, Jewish reporters, especially those conversant in the tribal language of Hebrew, will have a important advantage. This is what Keller is obliquely referring to when he talks of Jewish reporters covering the conflict with “sophistication” and being able to make “connections.” Keller, like other US editors, is not overly concerned that such connections come at a very high price. US news media are choosing to employ partisan reporters who are dependent on official Israeli sources of information for news in a system where the ultimate professional sin is to be accused of anti-Semitism. This is hardly an atmosphere in which fearless independence and truth-seeking are likely to flourish.

Silencing Palestinians

We will return to the pressures – self-imposed and otherwise – on foreign correspondents. But it is worth considering

PUBLISH IT NOT!

first how Israel has responded to the challenges posed by a more open media environment that has increased – if only marginally – the opportunities for Palestinians, dissident Israelis and freelance journalists to contribute to mainstream news operations. Neff describes how his office was staffed exclusively by Israeli Jews in the 1970s. That was then generally the case. But the situation began to change during the 1990s as more Palestinians were employed by news bureaus.

There were several reasons: the international media were keen to cut costs and Palestinian staff were cheaper; foreign correspondents began heading more regularly into the occupied territories and needed local fixers and translators to help; Israeli civilians were banned by the Israeli army from entering much of the occupied territories, making them less useful; and with the greater demands of television and the advent of rolling news, media organizations needed people on the ground, especially Palestinian photographers and cameramen, who could capture events as they occurred.

The increasing reliance on Palestinian staff was of great concern to Israel, which was worried both that more damaging images of the occupation would reach Western audiences and that the foreign correspondents would become more friendly with, and dependent on, their Palestinian colleagues.

Ultimately, that might lead Western reporters to become more informed about the Palestinian cause.

Israel responded early in the second intifada. In late 2001 the Government Press Office (GPO), a state body that effectively licenses journalists to report in Israel and the occupied territories, began refusing press accreditation to some 450 Palestinian staff employed by international news



The loss of the press cards posed both a professional and physical threat to Palestinian journalists. They lost the privileges they had enjoyed moving through the checkpoints and around the West Bank

organizations as well as denying them permits to enter Jerusalem, where the bureaus are located. As usual, Israel used security as the pretext for its policy, arguing that Palestinians entering Jerusalem and Israel might participate in terror attacks.

Daniel Seaman, the head of the GPO, urged the foreign media to recruit Israelis instead.

The loss of the press cards posed both a professional and physical threat to Palestinian journalists. They lost the privileges they had enjoyed moving through the checkpoints and around the West Bank. It was also considerably harder for them to prove that they were journalists, making them more likely targets for soldiers as the Israeli army rampaged through the West Bank.

According to the International Federation of Journalists, three Palestinian journalists were killed in the occupied territories in 2001, the first full year of the second intifada, and dozens were injured. The dangers to Palestinian reporters have hardly diminished over the subsequent decade.

In 2007, Israeli soldiers shot Palestinian journalists from Agence France-Presse, the Al-Ayyam newspaper and Al-Aqsa TV. Al-Jazeera broadcast footage showing al-Aqsa's cameraman, Imad Ghanem, fall to the ground after being shot as he was running from Israeli gunfire holding his camera on his shoulder. As he lay immobile, Israeli snipers shot him twice more in the legs. Both limbs were later amputated.

A year later, Fadel Shana, a Reuters cameraman, was killed in Gaza as he filmed an Israeli tank firing flechette shells, a non-conventional weapon that releases thousands of lethal tiny darts. One shell was fired at his car, even though it was marked "Press." Amnesty International said it suspected Shana had been killed

deliberately.

In the first eight months of 2010, according to a study by Wafa, the Palestinian news agency, 101 Palestinian journalists were injured by rubbercoated steel bullets, tear gas or sound bombs, and 52 were arrested by the Israeli army. In May, Reporters Without Borders pointed out that many of the attacks on journalists occurred as they filmed Israeli soldiers' violence towards Palestinians at regular protests against Israel's illegal wall-building on West Bank farmland.

For example, Hamoudeh Amireh, a self-taught cameraman who documents Israeli army brutality against demonstrators in his village of Nilin, was shot in the leg in September.

The attacks have not been restricted to Palestinian journalists: Al-Jazeera English broadcast footage last year of a soldier firing a tear gas canister directly at one of its journalists, Jacky Rowland, as she reported on a protest at the village of Bilin.

The Foreign Press Association in Israel issued a statement in July warning that Palestinian journalists were being "harassed, arrested and attacked" by Israeli soldiers at demonstrations against the wall. It added that the reporters were being singled out, "before these forces turn their attention to the activists or demonstrators."

Israel's refusal to issue entry permits to Palestinian journalists has ensured that Jerusalem bureaus are again heavily staffed with Israeli Jews. One effect of this on the news available to the Western media has been noted by Alison Weir of *If Americans Knew*. On a visit to the West Bank in 2004, she heard disturbing testimony from a Palestinian cameraman about his treatment by Associated Press, the largest American news agency. AP supplies news reports to thousands of US outlets as well



He told her to speak with the head office in New York and threatened to call the Israeli police if she did not leave

as much of the world's media, making it, as Weir points out, "a major determinant in what Americans read, hear and see – and what they don't."

The Palestinian cameraman told her he had recently filmed an unarmed youth, Ahmad, being shot in the abdomen by Israeli soldiers in Balata refugee camp, near Nablus. He sent the film to AP's Jerusalem bureau, where it disappeared, never to be sent out for broadcast. Later, when he tried to get the footage returned, he learnt that the tape had been erased by the staff.

Weir visited Ahmad in hospital to confirm his injuries. She then went to AP's Jerusalem bureau to speak to its head, Steve Gutkin, about the missing tape. He told her to speak with the head office in New York and threatened to call the Israeli police if she did not leave. Weir spent many months trying to get AP's head office to explain what had happened to the video. Finally she was told: "The official response is we decline to respond."

The very few Palestinian journalists who establish an international reputation and manage to report on the conflict unmediated by the Israeli-staffed bureaus in Israel face different kinds of problems.

One such reporter is Mohammed Omer, based in Rafah, Gaza. He has written regularly for Britain's leftwing *New Statesman* magazine and the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. In 2008 he won the Martha Gellhorn prize for journalism and was invited to the awards ceremony in London. He was able to attend only after Dutch officials intervened to get him an exit permit from Gaza and personally escorted him out.

On his return, as he crossed over into the West Bank from Jordan on his way back to Gaza, he was made to separate from his Dutch escort. Taken aside by Is-

PUBLISH IT NOT!

raeli security personnel, this is what he says took place next:

“I was stripped naked at gunpoint, interrogated, kicked and beaten for more than four hours. At one point I fainted and then awakened to fingernails gouging at the flesh beneath my eyes. An officer crushed my neck beneath his boot and pressed my chest into the floor. Others took turns kicking and pinching me, laughing all the while. They dragged me by my feet, sweeping my head through my own vomit. I lost consciousness. I was told later that they transferred me to a hospital only when they thought I might die.”

Before he was beaten, the officers from the Shin Bet, Israel’s secret police, appeared to be only too aware of who Omar was. They insisted he hand over his “English pounds” – a reference to the £2,500 prize money. Israeli officials later explained Omer’s extensive injuries by claiming he had “lost his balance” during an interrogation over suspicions he was a smuggler.

Other Palestinian reporters are regularly denied permits to leave the West Bank and Gaza to prevent them speaking to outsiders about the abuses they have witnessed and experienced themselves. Khaled Amayreh, who has had a long career reporting in English for outlets such as Al-Ahram and Al-Jazeera, was recently denied such a permit by Israel even though he had been granted an entry visa from Germany to attend a media conference.

Mohammed Omer concludes: “Could it be that despite their tanks, fighter planes and nuclear arsenal, Israel is threatened by our cameras and computers, which give the world access to images and information about their military occupation of Palestinians? ... Although Palestinians



Other Palestinian reporters are regularly denied permits to leave the West Bank and Gaza to prevent them speaking to outsiders about the abuses they have witnessed and experienced themselves

face this violence daily, the images and our stories rarely travel beyond our borders. Israel seems intent on hiding its oppression of Palestinians under its rule.”

Dissenting Israelis

Over the past decade, since the outbreak of the second intifada, there has been a rapid increase in information about the occupation produced in English by Israelis. The reasons include: a rapid growth in the number of Israeli human rights groups; the greater use of new technology to provide same-day translations into English of much of the Hebrew press; and the improved opportunities for dissident Israeli journalists and bloggers to publish through the internet. The more extensive reporting of the brutalities of the occupation by Israeli sources has fed into the pressures on foreign correspondents to provide better coverage themselves. Israel has had to respond to this development by delegitimizing dissident Israeli journalists and rights groups and making it much harder for them to operate.

Traditionally, Israel has tried to constrain damaging coverage of its policies through the country’s military censorship laws. All articles that might threaten Israel’s security – broadly defined – have to be submitted to the censor for approval. That way, for example, Israel has prevented its journalists from even admitting the existence of the country’s nuclear weapons arsenal. The censor was also busy at work during Israel’s month-long attack on Lebanon in 2006, severely restricting coverage, including of such war crimes as the army’s positioning of its artillery in civilian areas. But censorship alone has not sufficed in a more pluralistic media environment.

The biggest threat to Israel’s narrative is

probably posed by *Haaretz*, Israel's liberal newspaper of record. It has by far the best coverage of the occupation and is widely relied on by foreign correspondents when deciding on their own reports. In recent years it has become much more accessible through its English edition, and an associated website.

Nonetheless, the paper has tended to limit translations of its Hebrew coverage. That policy, sources at the paper tell me, reflects both the determination of the paper's editors to stay within the Israeli consensus as the political climate shifts rightwards (and thereby avoid accusations that the paper is damaging the country's image); and direct pressure from the government.

The English-language newspaper and website fail to translate many of the Hebrew stories that are most embarrassing to the Israeli authorities, and remove certain details from other Hebrew reports that present the government or army in a harsh light.

Also noticeable has been the paper's decision to "let go" several prominent journalists and columnists known for their hard-hitting reports. Thus, Aviv Lavie, who unearthed a damaging story in 2003 about Israel running a secret prison where torture was routine, disappeared from the paper shortly afterwards. The paper's chief reporter, the prize-winning journalist Meron Rappaport, who regularly dug up exclusives from the occupied territories, was made redundant in 2008. (Four years earlier he had been fired by the country's biggest-selling newspaper, *Yediot Aharonot*, which like Israel's other two main newspapers, the rightwing *Maariv* and *Hayom*, is far less tolerant of real journalism.)

At that time, there were many rumors that *Haaretz*'s two most famous report-



Levy observed in a recent interview that the Israeli media was "recruiting itself to collaborate with the occupation project" and "playing a fatal role, mainly in maintaining the occupation and the nationalistic and militaristic emotions and sentiments in the Israeli society"

ers, Amira Hass and Gideon Levy, both of whom write extensively about the occupied territories, were to be axed. Under a barrage of criticism, Amos Shoken, the paper's publisher, stated: "I understand there are those readers who want *Haaretz* to look like a protest [manifesto] against the occupation ... But a newspaper is not a protest [manifesto]; it's a newspaper."

Following the complaints, however, Hass and Levy continued to feature prominently. Nonetheless, in a climate increasingly hostile to dissent, journalists like Hass and Levy have become more marginalized inside Israel, even while maintaining their readership overseas. Levy observed in a recent interview that the Israeli media was "recruiting itself to collaborate with the occupation project" and "playing a fatal role, mainly in maintaining the occupation and the nationalistic and militaristic emotions and sentiments in the Israeli society."

Such emotions are on display against reporters who step out of line, such as Chaim Levinson, another *Haaretz* reporter who has broken many stories about the occupation. In August he was filmed being beaten by soldiers as he tried to report on Jewish settlers taking over a building in the Palestinian of Jericho.

The failure to rid *Haaretz* of its most vocal critics of the occupation appears to have encouraged a change of approach by the authorities. In early 2010 it emerged that the paper's best investigative journalist, Uri Blau, was in hiding in London after the Shin Bet, Israel's secret police, had threatened to arrest him. Blau had published a series of scoops over the previous 18 months that had severely embarrassed the army, including by showing that it had committed war crimes.

Many of his reports drew on classified information passed to him by a soldier,

PUBLISH IT NOT!

Anat Kamm. It was her arrest that led the Shin Bet to Blau. He was ordered to return not only Kamm's documents but also those of all his other sources. Blau refused, presumably more than aware that doing so would risk exposing the identity of his contacts. After nearly a year in hiding, he returned to Israel in October, after the state finally agreed that he would need to hand back Kamm's documents only. By press time for this article, it was too early to know if he would be prosecuted.

Nonetheless, whatever the outcome, the Shin Bet's move had two transparent goals: to scare off potential whistleblowers from contacting investigative journalists such as Blau; and to warn other reporters that they faced a campaign of persecution should they follow in Blau's path. This tallied with new policies in the army, reported by *Haaretz* in July, to monitor troops' phone calls and require polygraph tests to find the source of leaks. As well as relying on the Israeli media for stories, foreign correspondents have started to turn to a growing number of Israeli human rights groups.

These organizations issue regular reports on different aspects of the occupation, and often launch legal cases in the courts against Israeli government policy. The most famous, such as B'Tselem, Adalah and the Association of Civil Rights, are treated as a source of reliable factual information by reporters when they compile their stories. This has not gone unnoticed by Israeli officials.

The Israeli government has stepped up a campaign against these groups, known formally as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), since summer 2009. That was when two major threats emerged to Israel's defense of its savage attack on Gaza in winter 2008, in which 1,400 Palestinians, most of them civilians, were



The second threat was the publication of a damning UN report in September 2009 by the respected South African judge Richard Goldstone

killed. The first was the efforts of Breaking the Silence, a group of former Israeli soldiers, to publish the testimonies of soldiers who had served in Gaza during the attack. Many of these accounts revealed irregular behavior by soldiers or evidence of war crimes. The second threat was the publication of a damning UN report in September 2009 by the respected South African judge Richard Goldstone.

Both Breaking the Silence and Goldstone were soon being vilified by the Israeli media and government. Rightwing groups such as NGO Monitor and Im Tirtzu claimed – inaccurately – that much of the Goldstone report drew on information supplied by Israeli human rights NGOs, concluding that these groups had therefore been unmasked as “subversive.”

The rightwing groups also argued that it was illegitimate for Israeli human rights NGOs to receive their funding from overseas, and typically from the European Union. The clear implication was that, through their dependence on European funding, the political agendas of the Israeli NGOs had been infected with an anti-Semitic prejudice that many Israelis presume is rife in Europe. The foreign ministry, for example, called on the Dutch embassy to end its funding of Breaking the Silence.

A parallel campaign was also launched against the New Israel Fund, another major financial contributor to good causes in Israel, including to human rights groups. NIF is a Zionist Jewish organization that aims to promote democratic values in Israel. Its chairwoman in Israel, Naomi Chazan, was quickly turned into a national hate-figure as rightwing groups employed anti-Semitic imagery on billboards across the country, showing her with a horn sprouting from her forehead.

A demand rapidly grew for human

rights NGOs to be strictly regulated, with tight restrictions on their foreign funding. Legislation originally proposed in early 2010 and supported by the government was designed to force the NGOs to register as political parties and declare their foreign funding whenever staff spoke publicly. Failure to comply with the regulations would have landed the NGO's staff in jail.

The bill resurfaced in October, having been watered down by a ministerial committee. It, however, still requires strict financial reporting by human rights NGOs of any foreign donations made to them, at the pain of heavy fines for failure to do so. So far it is unclear whether the legislation will also seek to disqualify the NGOs from assisting in international inquiries such as Goldstone's.

One of the bill's authors, Zeev Elkin, has said the legislation will "prevent a recurrence of the Goldstone report, which is mostly based on material provided by Israeli organizations ... financed by foreign states. The NGOs sometimes cooperate with foreign bodies that use them to infiltrate messages or acts opposed to Israeli interests."

Sidelined freelancers

If one figure has come to personify Israel's overtly hostile attitude towards independent reporting it has been Daniel Seaman, the "acting" head of the Government Press Office for a decade until his removal in October 2010. Seaman was replaced by Oren Helman, a former political adviser to the current rightwing prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, and a man expected to continue Seaman's legacy. In his 10 years, Seaman firmly established the GPO's ethos, developing a system of regulation that weakened the ability of independent journalists, whether regis-



In a matter of a few months in 2003, half a dozen internationals were killed or seriously injured by the Israeli army, most notably Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall, Brian Avery and James Miller

tered freelancers or underground "citizen journalists" reporting for the internet, to cover the conflict.

The citizen or advocate journalist movement emerged at the start of the second intifada as a direct result of the greater presence in the occupied territories of Palestinian solidarity groups, particularly the International Solidarity Movement (ISM). ISM volunteers who were based in Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank and Gaza that became the main clashpoints with the Israeli army quickly realized that the war crimes they were witnessing and photographing were going largely unreported by the mainstream media. Many began filing reports directly to the press and the electronic media.

Their accounts were largely ignored by foreign correspondents, but publication on the internet offered an important resource for researchers as well as evidence that might one day be useful in war crimes trials. Israel responded in the same way as it had done to Palestinian eyewitnesses: by using violence.

In a matter of a few months in 2003, half a dozen internationals were killed or seriously injured by the Israeli army, most notably Rachel Corrie, Tom Hurndall, Brian Avery and James Miller. The latter was a distinguished cameraman but appears to have mistakenly thought he was entitled, like the ISM, to "embed" with the Palestinians.

The effect of this spate of deaths and injuries was to deter many potential ISM volunteers from coming to the region. The remaining activists were sought out by the army in raids into the West Bank and then deported. Israel also increased its vigilance at the borders to deny ISM volunteers entry.

On a smaller scale, there have been continuing attacks on foreigners who

PUBLISH IT NOT!

stand alongside Palestinians at protests and witness the brutality they face.

In May, Emily Henochowicz, a 21-year-old American Jew, lost an eye at an Israeli checkpoint as she demonstrated against Israel's killing of nine passengers aboard an aid flotilla to Gaza. A soldier fired a stun grenade into her face at close range. Israel's treatment of the passengers on board the flotilla's lead ship, the Mavi Marmara, encapsulated many of the military's standard operating procedures towards independent journalists. In September a UN inquiry revealed that two of the nine passengers who were killed, including an American citizen, Furkan Dogan, were shot dead as they filmed the violence of Israeli commandos who boarded the ship. Israel then confiscated all media equipment from passengers, which has never been returned. A few edited excerpts of video and audio tape – including at least one that is known to have been doctored – were released by Israel to bolster its case that the commandos were the ones attacked.

The GPO has developed a parallel strategy to limit the ability of registered freelance journalists to operate in the occupied territories. Freelancers pose a bigger potential threat to Israel's narrative than the established foreign press corps. They less often have personal ties to Israel and its Jewish identity; they are less dependent on official – Israeli – sources of information and are therefore more likely to report things from the ground; and they are generally younger, more idealistic and more desperate to make a name for themselves by finding stories other reporters have missed, including ones that involve risk-taking. Freelancers began arriving in greater numbers at the start of the second intifada as the Western media's interest in the failed peace process grew. Israel's



Freelancers pose a bigger potential threat to Israel's narrative than the established foreign press corps

new strategy towards freelancers – together with an implicit threat to foreign correspondents – began to emerge clearly during the so-called disengagement from Gaza in 2005, the removal of a few thousand Jewish settlers from the enclave. Israel required any journalist who wanted to cover the disengagement to apply to the GPO for a place on a limited number of buses that the army was allowing into Gaza each day. Because the enclave was entirely sealed off by an electronic fence and the army, reporters were forced to rely completely on the GPO's goodwill for one of the few places.

At the time, I wrote an open letter to newspaper editors explaining why I would not be among the reported 3,000 journalists seeking to get into the Gaza settlements:

“I am opposed in principle to the idea of being shepherded around by the army while covering this event. How is this not just another form of ‘embedding’? But in any case I am told seats on the coaches will be extremely limited, maybe only a few dozen, and are bound to be snapped up by the media big-hitters. Independent journalists like myself, particularly ones who have not curried favor with the Israeli authorities in the past, are almost certain to be left out of the running. I suspect, however, that a ‘pool reporter’ more favored by Israel will be sure to find a seat and doubtless will be offering copy to those media not represented by their own correspondent.”

The GPO's handling of the disengagement was a warning to journalists that, in circumstances where Israel was increasingly controlling entry to the occupied territories, those who were out of favor with the authorities could be denied the access they needed to do their job. That lesson would be reinforced even more

firmly after the 2006 Lebanon attack, when Israel believed it had received too much critical coverage because of its “liberal” policy towards the media. It then effectively punished the whole press corps by sealing off Gaza to all correspondents for the three weeks of its attack in winter 2008. In the end, only 15 correspondents selected by the Israeli army were allowed to enter Gaza “embedded” with troops in the very last days of the operation. In response, the Foreign Press Association in Jerusalem issued a statement: “The unprecedented denial of access to Gaza for the world’s media amounts to a severe violation of press freedom and puts the state of Israel in the company of a handful of regimes around the world which regularly keep journalists from doing their jobs.”

Seaman took a different view: “Any journalist who enters Gaza becomes a fig leaf and front for the Hamas terror organization, and I see no reason why we should help that.” Seaman’s real goal, however, was to stop the reporting of war crimes being committed by Israeli troops in Gaza. He was largely successful. As the *New York Times* noted at the time, the hundreds of foreign journalists who were barred from entering Gaza had only “access to Israeli political and military commentators eager to show them around southern Israel, where Hamas rockets have been terrorizing civilians.”

Today it is impossible for freelance journalists without a GPO card to get into Gaza – the ban also technically applies to many areas of the West Bank, though ingenious reporters can usually find a way to get around the checkpoints there. From conversations with journalists, it appears that unwritten regulations require that freelance reporters wanting to enter Gaza not only have a GPO card but also



Israel also denies “Israeli” journalists access to Gaza and areas of the West Bank, on the grounds that it is for their own protection

have a formal written assignment from an accredited news organization beforehand. In practice, such requirements exclude almost all freelancers and end one of their main professional roles: seeking out stories the staff correspondents have overlooked.

Israel also denies “Israeli” journalists access to Gaza and areas of the West Bank, on the grounds that it is for their own protection. This rule applies to critical reporters like Hass and Levy. Also included as “Israelis” are journalists like myself, who are not Jewish and do not have Israeli citizenship. However, my residency permit – issued because of my marriage to a Palestinian citizen of Israel – is used as grounds to deny me entry to restricted areas.

In 2006 it became clear that most freelance journalists were being denied both press cards and work visas, thereby effectively denying them the right to continue residing in Israel. This was done by extending strict laws on foreign workers to include journalists. The Foreign Press Association estimates that in recent years more than 90 per cent of its freelance members have lost their cards. Explaining the new policy, Seaman told *Haaretz*: “There have been many cases when journalists have been illegal residents.” In the first year of implementation of the rule, more than 60 freelance journalists were reported to have been denied work visas and lost their press cards.

The true aim of the rule change was revealed in the case of Joerg Bremer, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*’s correspondent. Like many journalists, freelance and staff alike, Bremer had been residing for many years in Israel on a regularly renewed work visa. He had probably done so, like many other correspondents, because his other option – ap-

PUBLISH IT NOT!

plying for Israeli residency or citizenship – would have made him ineligible to travel through much of the Arab world and also denied him entry to Gaza. Technically, Israeli law allowed him to reside in Israel on a work visa for only five years. Traditionally, however, Israel had not enforced the law in the case of two professions: journalists and academics.

Seaman decided to change that policy. In 2006 Bremer, who had been in Israel for 15 years, discovered that for the first time his visa was not being renewed automatically. Instead his case would be reviewed by a new committee. Concerned, Bremer contacted Seaman, who told him: “Of course you’ll get it, but there are some we don’t want, and that’s why I like the committee.”

Bremer told a *Haaretz* reporter that he considered the use of a committee in this manner “political.” “It’s not right for the permit to be a matter for a committee, a favor. The foreign journalists can’t have the same status as foreign workers.”

When Seaman was confronted with Bremer’s comments, he responded with a series of angry outbursts: “I told him not to make noise ... I feel like screwing him over just because of this ... He’s a piece of shit.”

Bremer had understood that the purpose of the committee was to weed out most freelance journalists, as well as some staff journalists considered hostile to Israel, by denying them work visas. The policy would also make other foreign correspondents aware that their continuing presence in Israel was dependent on the favor of the GPO. It was, like the places on the Gaza buses, a very blatant attempt to impose a patronage system.

Such a system is most definitely now in place. The GPO’s power over even established journalists is typified by the experi-



She received a letter from Seaman declining her application, stating that she had failed to meet the GPO’s criteria, though no explanation of how was offered

ences of Yngvil Mortensen, a Norwegian reporter. In 2007, when she was on contract with the *Dagbladet* newspaper, she spent 11 months battling the GPO to have her press card renewed. In the end, the card was issued but only after interventions by the Norwegian foreign minister, the Norwegian journalists’ syndicate, an Israeli lawyer and the Foreign Press Association.

Mortensen says: “The real problem, I believe, is my coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The Israeli embassy in Oslo in December 2006, at the same time as I applied to renew my Israeli press card, wrote an op-ed in *Dagbladet*, covering a whole page, where they accused me of one-sided coverage. Their op-ed was a reaction to a commentary I wrote two weeks earlier about a massacre in Beit Hanoun [in Gaza], where I among many things asked if it is accidental that so many civilians generally are killed in Israeli military operations.”

When she was awarded a three-month assignment to cover the Palestinian territories for the daily *Klassekampen* newspaper in early 2010, Mortensen again followed the procedure of applying for a GPO card. The staff told her it would be difficult because she was a freelancer rather than a staff journalist. Later she received a letter from Seaman declining her application, stating that she had failed to meet the GPO’s criteria, though no explanation of how was offered.

She applied to the appeals committee, pointing out that she had in fact met all the written requirements. Later in the year, the committee rejected her appeal, although only on the grounds that her request “was no longer relevant” because the period for which she had requested the press card had expired. The committee did nothing to examine or question

the grounds on which the GPO had arrived at its original decision.

Another freelance journalist, Lisa Goldman, submitted a complaint against Seaman to the Civil Service Commission in 2006 following her visit to the GPO office to get a routine renewal of her press card. After an altercation in which she was threatened and sworn at by Seaman, she asked to see his boss. In her letter of complaint, she said he responded: “I am not accountable to anyone. I make all the rules. And just the fact that you have asked me this question means you will never receive a GPO card again.” He also told her he would have her investigated by the Shin Bet, the domestic intelligence service.

Fellow correspondents warned Goldman against lodging a formal complaint against Seaman, saying he would seek to ruin her career in Israel. “Several of my colleagues reported having experienced or witnessed similar confrontations with Mr Seaman. They all said that my only option was to write a letter of apology (one friend told me I should ‘crawl’). The consensus opinion is that Mr Seaman is a civil servant who has become corrupted and sadistic by his power and by the fact that he does indeed seem to be unaccountable.”

The hasbara offensive

The final battleground in Israel’s “spin war” is outside Israel – on internet sites and in overseas newsrooms, especially those in the US and those with a global reach.

On the one side, there are many new media platforms for distributing information about the occupation. Increasingly important are blogs – especially ones by dissident American Jews such as Philip



The final battleground in Israel’s “spin war” is outside Israel – on internet sites and in overseas newsrooms, especially those in the US and those with a global reach

Weiss at Mondoweiss and Richard Silverstein at Tikun Olam. Weiss has helped to establish and nurture an online community of mainly Jewish writers that speaks with a refreshing clarity about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the power of the Israel lobby in the US. Silverstein, meanwhile, has broken several important stories about Israel leaked to him by Israeli journalists who could not report the issues themselves because of the increasing use of gag orders and censorship.

The readership for these overseas blogs, including among Israelis, is steadily rising. The sites are also freeing Israeli bloggers to become more outspoken: they can relay back to Israeli audiences information from foreign websites without the risk of being first to break censorship rules. Also making an impact is the slow rise of non-Western media in English. The most significant is Al-Jazeera, a Qatar-based media company that has now both a website and a TV channel in English. Al-Jazeera, both its English and Arabic channels, is deeply disliked by the Israeli authorities (as it is by the Palestinian Authority).

Not surprisingly, the English channel has struggled to find cable distribution deals in the US. However, it is demonstrating that a new model of critical but professional reporting about Israel in the mainstream is possible. Other TV channels that are attracting growing audiences are PressTV from Iran and Russia Today. Perhaps of greatest concern to Israel is that these new media platforms are feeding an interest in a potentially formidable and unifying new campaign against Israel for BDS – shorthand for boycott, divestment and sanctions.

Ranged against these new upstart forces are Israel’s powerful and entrenched lobby groups. As well as political groups such as AIPAC targeting the US Congress

PUBLISH IT NOT!

and the White House, there are sophisticated media lobbies like Camera and Honest Reporting. Their job is to intimidate reporters in Israel by targeting their less-knowledgeable editors overseas with mass letterwriting campaigns and official complaints. A visit to Camera's website, for example, shows a long list of the most important foreign correspondents in Israel over the past two decades. Each has been on the receiving end of one or two major complaints – enough usually to bring them into line. Reporters worry that too many such complaints to their bosses will start to undermine the paper's confidence in them.

But while Camera and Honest Reporting have long been targeting any signs of critical reporting in the mainstream media, new pro-Israel lobbies have been needed to counter threats from the electronic media and the BDS movement. One influential Israeli think-tank, the Reut Institute, has termed these new global forces a “delegitimization challenge” to Israel. The problem was addressed, in particular, at Israel's annual security convention at Herzliya in early in 2010 at sessions entitled, for example, “Winning the Battle of the Narrative” and “Soft Warfare against Israel.” The key message at these meetings was that the traditional Israeli practice of “hasbara” – a Hebrew term usually translated as “explanation” but really meaning “propaganda” – had to be reinvented for the new age.

The Israeli government first identified the threats posed by the new media to its mainstream narratives back in 2005, arguing that the country must “improve the country's image abroad – by downplaying religion and avoiding any discussion of the conflict with the Palestinians.”

This led to a new campaign, “Brand Israel,” that has targeted major cities



One venture is Israel21c, whose “mission is to focus media and public attention on the 21st century Israel that exists beyond the conflict”

around the world for film festivals and food and wine galas featuring Israeli products. Israel has also encouraged the media to focus on Israel's innovations in hitech industries and stem-cell research. One venture is Israel21c, whose “mission is to focus media and public attention on the 21st century Israel that exists beyond the conflict”.

It is reported to be working closely with AIPAC. Israel21c's success in manipulating coverage by the mainstream media was signaled by the recent news that CNN had broadcast 15 of the group's pre-packaged videos over the previous year – “reaching millions of viewers worldwide,” as Israel21c boasted on its website.

In a press release, Israel21c added: “Other encouraging stories chosen by CNN this year describe a mixed Jewish-Arab choir that practices its message of coexistence out loud, and a group of Palestinian and Israeli midwives working together to ensure that pregnant mothers in Israel and the Palestinian territories have safe and natural births. Rather than portraying Israel as a place of conflict and strife, these stories have highlighted Israeli accomplishments in science and technology, arts and culture, and philanthropy.”

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine in detail the extent of Israel's recent success in bringing into line the global news providers and their 24-hour rolling services. The chief target has been the BBC, the influential British-based public broadcaster that has a large international audience for its TV, radio and internet sites. The popular mood in Britain has turned rapidly against Israel over the past decade, and Israel appears to have been fearful that the BBC might reflect such sentiments. But after much behind-the-scenes pressure from the Israeli foreign ministry and its lobbyists, the BBC

has moved in precisely the opposite direction – sometimes to a degree that has shocked the British public and even the British government.

Most notable was its refusal in 2009 to broadcast an appeal for that year’s selected charitable cause – helping the homeless and sick in Gaza after Israel’s 2008 winter attack.

The BBC claimed for the first time in more than 20 years of running such appeals – part of its public service remit – that doing so would compromise the organization’s “neutrality.” Other signs of the BBC’s loss of nerve are its abandonment of truly independent documentaries on Israel. Instead in recent years it has accepted “soft” documentaries from Israeli production crews.

Israeli film-makers have had great success offering as their chief selling-point to the BBC various dubious “exclusives” – typically “rare” interviews with senior military people and views inside Israel’s war rooms “for the first time ever.”

Israeli film-maker Noam Shalev, who has specialized in these kinds of productions, has made faux-documentaries like the 2006 “Will Israel bomb Iran?” that have offered little more than Israeli foreign ministry propaganda.

“Death in the Med”, the BBC’s investigation in August 2010 into the killing of nine passengers aboard the Mavi Marmara followed the same compromised format, even though it was fronted by a



The illegality of invading a ship in international waters was not discussed, nor was Israel’s theft of the passengers’ media equipment

veteran BBC presenter, Jane Corbin. With a largely Israeli crew, Corbin again offered several “exclusives,” including being present during a training exercise by the “secretive” commando unit that stormed the Marmara, and interviews with the commandos themselves.

The illegality of invading a ship in international waters was not discussed, nor was Israel’s theft of the passengers’ media equipment. There was no warning that video footage shown in the documentary was selectively edited by the Israeli government. Audio tape of passengers telling the Israeli commandos to “Go back to Auschwitz” that Israel is known to have doctored was presented as authentic, with Corbin even stating that the insults were “a warning sign.”

Certainly this approach looks as if it will be a key element in Israel’s future media strategy. As its grip on the narrative coming directly out the region weakens, it will fight harder to ensure that reporters of all kinds covering the conflict come under intensified pressure. But Israel is also likely to try to bypass local journalists as much as possible, selling its image and discredited myths to those least in a position to question or doubt them. Editors from the overseas news organizations should be among those who can be more easily swayed.

Israel may be struggling to keep its critics at bay, but its Watergate moment is still far off.

WRITING WORTH READING FROM AROUND THE WORLD

ColdType

www.coldtype.net