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MIDDLE EAST: THE FAULTLINE

Media omissions, army lies

by AMIRA HASS *

Contents

Middle East in freefall

Palestinian hopes in tatters

Jerusalem: city of conflict *

Jerusalem: myth and reality *

'We are still the enemy' *

Deheisheh days

Media omissions, army lies

Children in the line of fire

A chronology of confrontation and negotiation

Little Boy

A necessary evil? *

Ill-gotten gains *

Index on corruption *

How to play the aid game

Double challenge confronts Belgrade *

Dead end for Balkans 'Marshall Plan' *

Venezuela waits for superstar's magic to work *

'Little people' rally to their hero *

Old guard fights back

Venezuela: the dates

Kenya's battle for biodiversity

Since the outbreak of what has become known as the Aqsa intifada, the Israeli media have been going by the declarations of military and civilian spokesmen. Normally this information is fairly precise, but this time it is full of lies, omissions and imprecision. One example: journalists were led to believe that the excessive use of force to disperse demonstrators was justified by the danger to which Israelis soldiers and civilians were exposed. This was the case on 29 September at Friday prayers at the Aqsa mosque when, according to army spokesmen, overexcited youths threw stones at Jews praying at the Western Wall.

The Israeli human rights organisation B'tselem published a report which confirms the version of Palestinian eyewitnesses. It says the stones were aimed at the armada of Israeli police whose presence on the Aqsa precinct was a provocation. What is more, the police did not use tear gas to stop the stone throwing but immediately opened fire with rubber-covered bullets which kill when fired at close range, as was the case here. The blood shed on this holy Muslim place unleashed a wave of anger throughout the country and the death of young Palestinians added fuel to the fire.

By 24 October 115 Palestinians had been killed and 4,500 wounded in the occupied territories, plus 12 dead and 1,650 injured inside Israel proper. On the Israeli side there were eight dead. It took dozens of B'tselem teams of investigators to verify the circumstances of each of these dramas. But all the witnesses have reported that, since the start, the Israeli army almost never used tear gas, despite the fact that it is an extremely effective way of dispersing crowds without casualties. Instead, the army regularly used snipers who targeted demonstrators, aiming at the upper part of their bodies in the first days of the clashes 70% of the dead and wounded had been hit above the belt, according to Palestinian medical sources.

Most of the Israeli media swallowed the story that the soldiers had only used weapons if their lives were in danger. It took filming of the gunfire to demonstrate that this was not the case; only then did the army admit to some "deplorable mistakes". The only possible conclusion is that the army had given the order to shoot in order to put an end to the disturbances. As we know, the opposite happened.

happened.

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On 6 October the army spokesman reported that soldier acting as outposts for the settlement of Netzarim in the Gaza Strip had twice opened fire on Palestinians who were shooting at them. On that day four Palestinians died and 24 were wounded at this crossroads. I was there. The spokesman failed to say anything about the dozens of isolated shots and bursts of gunfire that had come from the settlement itself. He also forgot to mention that soldiers, positioned on distant surveillance towers, had used submachine guns against thousands of unarmed demonstrators. The aim was clear: to dissuade the young protesters from approaching the Israelis fortified forward positions. In this case, the soldiers were not defending their lives.

The spokesmen had reported almost all the shootings by armed Palestinians. But the Israeli media were unaware of two facts. First, in general armed Palestinians only opened fire when the crowd had already been strafed by snipers out to kill. Second, Palestinian shots were singularly wide of the mark, as shown by the toll of victims on either side. In addition, Palestinian officials condemned what they called this "shooting at the sun".

The media meticulously detailed every clash of this sort, described as a "heavy bombardment" of the Israeli military outpost. In so doing, it reinforced the feeling among public opinion that Israel was facing a war launched by an army of similar strength to its own. Based on army information, Israel radio also reported that Palestinian ambulances were transporting tires and weapons to the scenes of the clashes. In fact, the Palestinians could easily use private vehicles to do this. In addition, the Red Cross is present everywhere the clashes take place and it controls the ambulances. This was a piece of disinformation to cover the outrageous attacks on the ambulances by Israeli troops and the killing of one of their drivers.

The names of the Palestinian victims were never reported on radio, TV or in the newspapers (apart from Haaretz): their anonymity spared the Jewish public from seeing the grief of their families. It was easier to present the events as a plot orchestrated by the Palestinian Authority. But in fact, Yasser Arafat knows that all big clashes and widescale agitation will one day rebound on his own authoritarian regime and its failure to keep its promise to create a truly independent Palestinian state.

All this disinformation crowns seven years of distorted coverage of the Oslo process. In general, the Israelis have been blind and deaf to the complaints of the Palestinians, for whom the interminable peace negotiations were bringing neither justice nor dignity. Undeniably, Oslo has locked the population of the Palestinian territories into so many fragmented cages, reinforced the settlements and tied economic development to Palestinian acceptance of a new form of Israeli control.

* Correspondent for *Huaretz* (Tel Aviv) in the Palestinian territories, author of *Drinking the Sea*. Henry Holt, New York, 1999

Translated by Wendy Kristianasen

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