

New York Times Journey to Israel/Palestine to Be Led by Israeli “Expert” Who Called on Countrymen to ‘Kill and Kill’ Palestinians

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Over the last two months, as Israel first cracked down on the West Bank and then launched a massive attack decimating the Gaza Strip, *The New York Times* has come under repeated and justified criticism, notwithstanding some occasional good reporting from Gaza. That criticism has focused on *The Times* bias and double standards, downplaying of Israeli attacks, and tendency towards stenography – uncritically repeating Israeli government talking points, however outlandish they may be.



Arnon Soffer, [from the NYT](#)

The examples are too many to list, but most recently they include casting Hamas as the side that has repeatedly broken truces and extended the fighting, asserting that Israel carried out “targeted bombings with limited civilian casualties” in recent attacks that killed numerous Palestinian civilians, [as documented by Peter Hart of FAIR](#). They include [Ali Abunimah](#) and [Greg Mitchell](#) ridiculing *The Times* for labeling an Israeli attack that collapsed a 12-story apartment building in Gaza “audacious,” as well as the Palestinian human rights organization Al Mezan’s repeated [criticism of The Times](#) for refusing to correct a factual error about civilian casualties, for undermining of human rights workers in Gaza and thus supporting Israeli impunity.

But as someone who criticizes *The Times* reporting regularly, I’m still occasionally taken aback by new examples of how far *The Times* bias on Israel and Palestine extends and how deeply embedded it is at the paper. [A tweet yesterday](#) from long-time Guardian reporter Chris McGreal provides another surprising indication of this phenomenon. McGreal tweeted, “The ‘featured expert’ of NYT readers trip to Israel-Palestine is Arnon ‘the Arab counter’ Soffer. So no bias there then.” Soffer is a politically influential Israeli professor whose views have helped to provide the “intellectual” justification for Israel’s policy of carrying out regular massacres in the Gaza Strip, as well as for ghettoizing and marginalizing Palestinians in other locations.

Arnon Soffer’s views

McGreal was referring to a new *Times* venture called “[Times Journeys](#)” which calls on people to “... Travel with The New York Times. Return Smarter. Gain Understanding. Return Inspired.” One of its upcoming “journeys”, “[The Israeli-Palestinian Conundrum](#),” set for

November 7 – 15, 2014, features Arnon Soffer as one of the four “experts” for the journey. In a 2006 *Guardian* series on parallels between Israel and apartheid South Africa, [McGreal described Soffer](#) as a geographer who had “spent years advising the [Israeli] government on the ‘demographic threat’ posed by the Arabs.” Soffer’s views have been called racist by, among many others, Palestinian activist [Omar Barghouti](#) and Israeli [Idan Lando](#), and Soffer’s been labeled a fascist by Israeli [Haim Bresheeth](#).

Soffer is obsessed with treating Palestinians as a “demographic threat” to be crushed in order to maintain a Jewish state that must be preserved at all costs, including by unilaterally creating borders to separate Palestinians from Israeli Jews, then killing the trapped Palestinians, and by countering Palestinian population growth within Israel. Some of Soffer’s more frightening views have been outlined in 2004 and 2007 interviews with the *Jerusalem Post*’s Ruthie Blum.

In the 2004 interview, which is no longer available online but [can be found here](#), Blum called Soffer “the originator of Ariel Sharon’s separation plan” and an advocate for Israel’s Gaza “disengagement.”

Soffer explained, “When 2.5 million people live in a closed-off Gaza, it’s going to be a human catastrophe. Those people will become even bigger animals than they are today, with the aid of an insane fundamentalist Islam. The pressure at the border will be awful. It’s going to be a terrible war. So, if we want to remain alive, we will have to kill and kill and kill. All day, every day.”

“If we don’t kill, we will cease to exist. The only thing that concerns me is how to ensure that the boys and men who are going to have to do the killing will be able to return home to their families and be normal human beings.”

He continued, “This is what will happen after separation. If a Palestinian cannot come into Tel Aviv for work, he will look in Iraq, or Kuwait, or London. I believe that there will be movement out of the area. Responding to Blum’s question, “Voluntary transfer?” he answered, “Yes.”

In the [2007 interview with Blum](#) he argued that he had been misunderstood in 2004, explaining, “I didn’t *recommend* that we kill Palestinians. I said we’ll *have* to kill them.” Hardly better. Then he explained further, “Our government has woken up. The only ones making noise are leftists and so-called human rights lawyers who only care about the well-being of cats, dogs and Palestinians, but never about Jews.”

On the subject of Israel’s Palestinian citizens, 20% of Israel’s population, Soffer warned, “the Israeli Arabs are enclosing the country from the Upper Galilee all the way around... As for the Arabs of the South: They’re the bridge between Gaza and Judea-Samaria... if we fail to keep that bridge closed, Katyushas will be launched from Kalkilya to Tel Aviv – right onto the Stock Exchange.” Soffer concluded, “we have to fortify ourselves with a fence. Then, whoever tries to cross it gets a bullet to the head.” And if we don’t shoot them, “then, we’ll cease to exist.”

A 2011 article in Israeli paper *The Marker*, [translated to English by the Electronic Intifada](#) which has [documented Soffer’s views and analyzed](#) their implications, outlined Soffer’s views on the threat posed by Israel’s Bedouin citizens. The article explained that,

“Soffer added that the Bedouin population is managing to take over every clear plot of land.” He concluded, “The government must start taking action, and not flounder in the defense. We do not have another country. If I am not wrong about this terrible map, and I hope that I am wrong, Israel will simply be destroyed.”

Those who are unfamiliar with Israeli politics may be frightened to learn that in 2007 Soffer described himself, probably accurately, as “in the center, which is why both the Left and the Right attack me.” In light of Soffer’s depiction of Palestinians as “animals” who Israelis must “kill and kill and kill” “all day, every day,” against whom the Israeli government must act against urgently even within Israel, it is very disconcerting to imagine what “Times Journeys” participants who listen to Soffer might “return inspired” to do.

Subtle Echoes of Soffer’s Views in *The Times*’ Reporting

I was unable to figure out who at *The Times* does manage “Times Journeys,” though [a Times press release quotes](#) “Michael Greenspon, general manager, The New York Times News Services and International.” An FAQ section on “Times Journeys” explains that, “Times Journeys is operated independently of the New York Times Travel desk or other departments and members of the newsroom.”

While there may be a clear management separation between “Times Journeys” with their endorsement of Soffer, and the newsroom, there are elements of *The Times* reporting that include disturbing echoes of some of Soffer’s views – his understanding of Jewish privilege as fundamental to Israeli identity, and his vision of Palestinians as demographic threats who must be countered militarily. This reporting suggests that the worldview that allowed *The Times* to select Soffer as an appropriate “expert” without blinking, permeates the newspaper as a whole.

Despite daily reporting on Israel and Palestine, Palestinian citizens of Israel (generally called Israeli Arabs by *The Times*) are very infrequently mentioned by the paper, though they make up 20% of Israel’s population. In *The Times*’ daily reporting on Israel’s war on Gaza over the last month-and-a-half, I was able to locate [only two sentences](#) in *The Times* about Israel’s Palestinian citizens. In contrast, The Times Jerusalem Bureau Chief Jodi Rudoren twice reported on opinion polls of Israeli Jews only, showing what she described as very strong “Israeli” support for the assault on Gaza. In [a July 26th article](#), she reported, “A poll of Israeli Jews conducted for Channel 2 News on Wednesday showed more than 8 in 10 were satisfied with Mr. Netanyahu, a 25 point jump from before the ground invasion began.” In [an August 5 article](#), Rudoren again reported, “Several polls find that as many as nine out of 10 Israeli Jews back the prosecution of the war by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.” Israeli Jewish views were all that *The Times* felt merited mention. *The Times* has not bothered to report on Israel’s Palestinian citizens opposition to the war, including, including for example, [an opinion poll](#) showing that at least two-thirds oppose the war.

The [much-criticized August 5 Jodi Rudoren](#) article analyzing Palestinian casualties in Gaza, which was also the subject of [Al Mezan’s complaints](#), uses Palestinian demographic and casualty information to classify Palestinian civilian casualties by age according to their likelihood to be “terrorists” whose killing is therefore justified according to the Israeli government. As I [reported previously](#), in that article, Rudoren puts aside research by the UN and organizations like Al Mezan, and classifies Gazan males between the ages of 20-29 as “the population most likely to be militants.” Palestinian children between the ages of 15-17 are called “men” and “women,” and Palestinian males from 15-60 who were killed by Israel

are described as part of “a mix of male civilians and combatants, though breakdowns are disputed.” This treatment of all Palestinian males aged 15-60 in Gaza as all suspect and guilty to varying degrees and thus appropriate candidates for assassination is only a few steps removed from Sofer’s depiction of Palestinians as “animals” who must be killed.

I have documented [other examples](#) of *The Times* recent reporting that serves to justify Israel’s wholesale killing and destruction in Gaza. Others have documented *The Times* reporters’ seeming [thorough embeddedness](#) within mainstream [Israeli Jewish](#) life that seems to contribute to generating that sort of reporting.

The bigger question for *The Times*

Some will probably try to assert that the inclusion of [Nadia Hilou](#) and Hanan Ashrawi, two Palestinians, among the four *Times*’ experts balances Soffer. But of course we all know that *The Times* would never endorse an “expert” who offers killing Israeli Jews as their overriding policy prescription.

I would like to believe, perhaps naively, that publicizing Soffer’s views and his selection as a *Times* “expert” may lead some right-thinking liberals at *The Times* and outside to actively oppose his involvement in “*Times Journeys*.” However, the much bigger and more appropriate question is whether or not *The Times* will take a deeper look at the related views and attitudes that seem to pervade the paper, that certainly inform aspects of the paper’s reporting on Israel and Palestine, and that led to Soffer being chosen, or whether his selection will simply be written off as a decision made by a new and less well-informed department of *The Times*.

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