

New York Times Lets Unnamed Officials Smear Critics as ‘Terrorists’

Anonymous attacks violate paper's policy

By [FAIR](#)

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

In two stories this month, *New York Times* journalists allowed anonymous government officials to smear critics as terrorists and terrorist sympathizers—a shocking violation of the paper’s explicit rules against allowing anonymity to be a cover for attacks.

In a [February 22](#) story about Khader Adnan—the Palestinian hunger striker challenging the Israeli practice of holding prisoners without trial—reporter Isabel Kershner wrote:

An Israeli official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, called the deal over Mr. Adnan “a workable arrangement” since ultimately he will be almost completing his four-month term of detention.

“We faced a dilemma,” the official said. “On the one hand we did not want any harm to come to him, or the wider danger in that. On the other hand it is not healthy to set a precedent that every time a Palestinian terrorist goes on hunger strike, he gets a get-out-of-jail-free pass.”

The “deal” is a reference to Israel’s offer to free Adnan by mid-April.

The anonymous Israeli official is declaring Adnan a terrorist. If Israeli officials know this to be the case, they need not detain him without charge; they could bring a case against him under anti-terror laws. So the *Times* is granting anonymity to a government official to declare Adnan a criminal, despite the lack of any publicly available evidence that this is the case.

Earlier this month, in a story ([2/6/12](#)) about a new Bureau of Investigative Journalism [report](#) about CIA drone strikes targeting rescuers and funerals, the Times [granted anonymity](#) to a U.S. official who equated the nonprofit news outlet’s researchers with Al-Qaeda sympathizers:

A senior American counterterrorism official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, questioned the report’s findings, saying “targeting decisions are the product of intensive intelligence collection and observation.” The official added: “One must wonder why an effort that has so carefully gone after terrorists who plot to kill civilians has been subjected to so much misinformation. Let’s be under no illusions—there are a number of elements who would like nothing more than to malign these efforts and help Al-Qaeda succeed.”

Both examples clearly violate the paper’s [stated standards](#) on the granting of anonymity.

That privilege is to be used rarely, should be “the subject of energetic negotiation” and should “tell the reader as much as possible about the placement and motivation of the source.” The policy also bars granting the cover of anonymity “to people who are engaged in speculation,” and states directly: “We do not grant anonymity to people who use it as cover for a personal or partisan attack.”

In these cases, government officials are being granted anonymity to attack individuals critical of those governments’ policies. The privilege the *Times* extends to these powerful figures means they are shielded from any accountability for their words.

The *Times*’ anonymity policy has been discussed frequently over the years (Unclaimed Territory, [11/24/05](#)), among critics of the paper (FAIR Action Alert, [2/16/07](#)) and even within the *Times* itself ([3/22/09](#)). These most recent violations suggest that the *Times* needs to figure out, once and for all, whether it will follow its own rules.

ACTION:

Contact *New York Times* public editor Arthur Brisbane and encourage him to write about these recent violations of the *Times*’ own policies on granting anonymity. Granting anonymity to government sources to smear critics is journalistically indefensible.

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