

When Propaganda Masquarades as News

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[USA](#)

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The week-long Israeli onslaught against largely defenseless Palestinians in Gaza that began on November 14 provides a basis for assessing how Western corporate media whitewash the war crimes of America's foremost ally in the Middle East. There are three often intertwined techniques consciously applied to such news coverage—historical context, sourcing, and objectification of the enemy to be targeted. Such practices can readily transform journalism into propaganda that acts to abet such crimes while at the same time allowing journalistic institutions to still claim the mantle of “objectivity.”

Such methods are on full display in the reportage of Israel's most recent operation in Gaza. The use of such propaganda fits within a broader campaign of media disinformation that subdues potential outrage—particularly in the US—over Israel's overwhelming use of force against an oppressed and vulnerable people, most of whom are civilians.

Meaningful historical context for understanding Israel's aggression is almost entirely absent from most Western news coverage of the event. If present, such context would illuminate Israeli government officials' true motivations for a military venture that involved 750 airstrikes in four days alone. “Operation Pillar of Defense,” Nile Bowie observes,

launched just months away from Israel's elections, is a calculated component of the Netanyahu government's strategy to topple Hamas and continue absorbing Palestinian territory. Decades of occupation and apartheid have shaped the current scenario; Israel has dehumanized an entire people by seizing their land and forcing them into prison-like ghettos. Adherents to political Zionism have shown contempt for a genuine political solution to the Palestinian conflict, and the Netanyahu administration is poised to crush all opposition to the Jewish state.[1]

Major Western media focused instead on the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) November 14 assassination of Hamas leader and Palestinian hero Ahmed al-Jabari, while blatantly omitting the fact that he was also a major figure in negotiations for a long-term truce between Hamas and Israel freshly brokered by Egypt. Hours before Hamas strongman Ahmed Jabari was assassinated,” Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper reported the day following the assassination, “he received the draft of a permanent truce agreement with Israel, which included mechanisms for maintaining the cease-fire in the case of a flare-up between Israel and the factions in the Gaza Strip.”[2]

Apart from Western alternative media such critical details were quickly dispatched to the memory hole. Major news outlets almost systematically relied on Israeli government, military, and intelligence sources to shape its coverage, where Jabari was reviled as “the commander of the military wing of Hamas.” Reuters, for example, proceeded to source an

IDF spokeswoman who proceeded to lay out the dominant frame for the coverage. “This is an operation against terror targets of different organizations in Gaza,” she declared. “Jaabari [sic] had ‘a lot of blood on his hands.’ Other militant groups including Islamic Jihad were on the target list.”[3]

A similar report in the UK *Telegraph* taking the tack of Israeli official pronouncements beings with the lead, “Ahmed Jabari probably didn’t event hear the missile that killed him, launched from a drone in the skies over Gaza City as he drove an ordinary saloon car through a quiet residential street.”[4] Emphasis on Jabari’s military status and alleged criminal and terrorist activities invariably legitimates Israel’s flagrant barbarism. Further, by holding Jabari up as a dangerous renegade supposedly representative of the Palestinian people the stage is set for attacks on civilians that are much more readily rationalized in the public mind.

Honest contextualization of the crisis leading readerships to greater understanding would involve consulting and publicizing both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives—an undertaking Western journalists are now adept at through their routine discussions with Syrian “activists” reporting on the alleged atrocities committed by the Syrian Army against Syrian citizens and the gallant Free Syrian Army “rebels” in that close by theatre.

In the case of Gaza, however, such media are apparently unable to locate well-heeled Palestinian “human rights activists” exiled in London who receive routine reports from like-minded “activists” on the ground in Gaza. If such activists are functioning their reports are not seeing the light of day.

Press coverage further underlines what clearly does not exist in Gaza: a parity of deadly force between the IDF and Palestinians and, moreover, Israel’s victimization at the hands of militant Palestinians. Terms such as “clash,” “conflict,” and “violence” misleadingly suggest exactly these conditions and anticipate permissible actions in a field of battle provided for under the Geneva Conventions. Such terms contrast greatly with aerial attacks using state-of-the-art weaponry on unarmed women and children.

Nevertheless, CBS News presented a timeline of events in Gaza that fit well alongside Israel’s public relations maneuvers seeking to downplay the IDF’s overt aggression. “Israel launches Operation Pillar of Defense in response to days of rocket fire outside of Hamas-ruled Gaza. The offensive, which included 20 airstrikes, resulted in the assassination of Ahmed Jabari, the military commander of Hamas.”[5]

Another failure to provide adequate context and sourcing involves Israel’s relentless drive to build more settlements on Palestinian lands under Benjamin Netanyahu and Ehud Barak while firmly refusing Palestinians a right of return. This is one of the most essential and yet misunderstood pieces of the puzzle for understanding Israeli-Palestinian relations. Yet such important historical factors are largely devoid from the prevailing Western media frame through which the Gaza tragedy is viewed.

A LexisNexis Academic search in newspaper and magazine articles and broadcast transcripts for November 13 to November 21 using the terms “Israel,” “Gaza,” and “Hamas” yields 2,203 citations. Of these, less than ten percent (205) mention “settlements,” while barely two percent reference “human rights.”

Given the relevant history and facts most observers would conclude that at the end of the day the leading concepts—land rights, human dignity, justice and respect—must be

understood and reconciled before there can be peace in Palestine. The fact that much of the American public especially is misinformed or unaware of the profuse atrocities and injustices committed with its tax dollars and tacitly in its name attests to the continued centrality of propaganda, made all the more effective in its thoroughgoing attempt to masquerade as news.

Notes

1. Nile Bowie, "Gaza and the Politics of 'Greater Israel,'" Global Research, November 17, 2012 <http://www.globalresearch.ca/gaza-the-politics-of-greater-israel/5312107>
2. Nir Hasson, "Israeli Peace Activist: Hamas Leader Jabari Killed Amid Talks on Long Term Truce," *Haaretz*, November 15, 2012 <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/israeli-peace-activist-hamas-leader-jabari-killed-amid-talks-on-long-term-truce.premium-1.478085>
3. Ibrahim Barzak/Reuters, "Ahmed Jabari Dead: Hamas Militant Chief Killed in Israeli Airstrike," *Huffington Post*, November 15, 2012 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/14/ahmed-jabari-dead-hamas-militant-chief-israel-airstrike_n_2129308.html
4. Nick Meo, "How Israel Killed Ahmed Jabari, Its Toughest Enemy in Gaza," *Telegraph*, November 17, 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/israel/9685598/How-Israel-killed-Ahmed-Jabari-its-toughest-enemy-in-Gaza.html>
5. CBS/Associated Press, "Timeline of Recent Israel-Gaza Violence," CBSNews.com, November 20, 2012 http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57552203/timeline-of-recent-israel-gaza-violence/

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James F. Tracy was a tenured Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Florida Atlantic University from 2002 to 2016. He was fired by FAU ostensibly for violating the university's policies

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