

The Power of Narratives: How Western Media Amplifies Terrorist Propaganda

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By Mitchell Bard/JNS.org October 04, 2024

Once respected for their journalistic integrity, The New York Times and The Washington Post have appeared since Oct. 7 locked in a race to lower standards. Both have printed misinformation and biased narratives under the guise of reporting. The examples are legion and will probably fill future books, but a good summary can be found in a single day--Sept. 28--when the Post published four articles riddled with inaccuracies, misleading information, pejorative language and sloppy editing.

The papers have made excuses for their failings in reporting on Gaza, claiming limited access on the ground, which has necessitated relying on "reporters" who regurgitate Hamas propaganda. They have no obstacles to sending correspondents to Lebanon.

However, as in Gaza, where Hamas controls the outflow of information, Hezbollah has similar control over the reporting from Lebanon, yet all but a handful of journalists fail to acknowledge this blatant manipulation. Photos are staged, casualty numbers are

exaggerated, and reporters frequently acknowledge their inability to verify what they are reporting but publish it anyway.

In one story on the then-prospective Israeli ground operation, Miriam Berger and Heidi Levine continue the Post's refusal to characterize the massacre on Oct. 7 as a terrorist attack. In their telling, "Militants streamed out of the enclave to kill 1,200 people in the surprise assault."

"Israel," they said, "responded with a military campaign that has killed more than 41,000 Palestinians in Gaza, most women and children," according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

They don't say the information is coming from Hamas, that they have not verified it, and that numerous studies have shown the figures are bogus. They don't accept any figures coming from Israel. Still, even if they ignore the estimate by the Israel Defense Forces of killing 18,000 terrorists, they know for a fact that not all the dead Palestinians are civilians. They don't examine whether some of the "children" were men in their late teens who were members of Hamas.

Equally egregious is the unquestioned repetition of Hezbollah's casualty claims in Lebanon. The Post uncritically reports a death toll of 600, citing Hezbollah-run Lebanese Health Ministry statistics. The article directly below says the number of casualties is 700. This sloppiness speaks to a longstanding pattern of carelessness and bias exemplified by the media parroting the casualty numbers fabricated by Yasser Arafat's brother during the 1982 Lebanon War.

Hezbollah deliberately underreports its casualties while exaggerating civilian deaths. Before the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah admitted that 512 of its fighters and 79 terrorists from other groups had been killed. This suggests that nearly all Lebanese casualties were combatants, yet the Post refuses to scrutinize these numbers.

The Post also engages in the familiar scoreboard approach to coverage where Israel is demonized for not playing fairly by allowing its citizens to be killed. The narrative is always the same: Israel is cast as the aggressor, guilty of a "disproportionate" response, while its enemies, who hide behind civilians and fire rockets indiscriminately, are portrayed as victims. Israel "loses" because the box score is always lopsided with more dead Palestinians and Lebanese than Israelis, and its image suffers.

Unsurprisingly, the paper found an obscure analyst, Brian Finucane, to suggest that Israel's responses are not proportional because of its obligation to protect civilians. Even though Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah located his command center under an apartment building, Finucane insisted Israel still had to consider whether the harm to civilians was excessive in relation to the military advantage. He does not say whether Israel's strike on the building where Nasrallah was hiding was proportional but acknowledges that before the attack, Israel had told residents to vacate buildings near Hezbollah interests.



The lead story on the front page about the targeting of Nasrallah provided the predictable theme of the ongoing propaganda campaign. The Lebanese prime minister is quoted saying Israel was waging a "war of extermination," echoing the false accusations of "genocide" in Gaza. The truth is that Israel warns civilians to leave areas it plans to attack, thereby giving up the element of surprise, and carefully targets the terrorists who have been bombarding it for nearly a year with rockets and drones

Israel is also vilified for trying to protect civilians. When Israel alerts people to move away from areas they plan to bomb, journalists spin this as forcing people out of their homes and "never-ending searches for shelter." If no warning is given, Israel is pilloried for killing innocents indiscriminately. This no-win narrative dominates coverage.

As in Gaza, reporters proclaim that the fighting has "set off a spiraling humanitarian crisis." Besides displacing people, it bears little resemblance to the plight of Palestinians. One difference, which journalists ignore, is that President Joe Biden forced Palestinians to remain in Gaza to be Hamas cannon fodder, whereas Lebanese civilians can and have fled to Syria and safer parts of Lebanon.

Remarkably, or maybe not so oddly, the Post's front-page story on the assassination of Nasrallah made no mention of the fact that he and his organization killed more Americans in terror attacks than any other organization except Al-Qaeda on 9/11.

Leaders of dozens of countries spoke at the U.N. General Assembly, but other than Biden, the Post gave the most attention to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech, which it treated with disdain. As they have done throughout Netanyahu's tenure, reporters use pejorative adjectives to describe him. In this case, his remarks were called "swaggering" and "bellicose."

Journalists always know who to speak to for the quotes they want to support their narrative. Finding critical ones is easy to get by talking to State Department Arabists. The chief Arabist, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, at least spoke on the record with his now fruitless and repetitious calls for a ceasefire with no acknowledgment that Hezbollah started the war and will not end until it is defeated. As in Gaza, Blinken sees the violence against Israel in the north as an inconvenience and distraction for the United States that should be stopped at any cost to Israeli security.

Anonymous Arabists--the proverbial "senior State Department officials"--naturally blame Israel for "escalation" and for the responsibility for "bigger and more deadly cycles of violence." No mention is made of the roughly 8,000 rockets fired at Israel that forced the evacuation of some 60,000 people from northern Israel.

The Post said the officials "underscored the recruitment book that Israel's attacks have given to groups like Hezbollah and Hamas." The reporters would never think to ask whether the United States should stop attacking ISIS or Al-Qaeda because it perpetuates a cycle of violence and encourages more people to become terrorists.

The story about Netanyahu's speech mentioned that "scores of diplomats walked out" but didn't specify who they were. Was it the Arab and Muslim states only? Did any Europeans walk out? Israel's enemies and critics routinely walk out when its representatives speak at

the United Nations.

The authors of that story, John Hudson and Michael Birnbaum, parrot Hezbollah propaganda that the attacks on Israel are in solidarity with Hamas. Hezbollah was building up its arsenal to attack Israel, which it is committed to destroy, long before Oct. 8. As the IDF discovered after launching its ground operation, and previously suspected, Hezbollah had planned its own Oct. 7-type attack and was likely preempted by Hamas invading first.

These reports reflect not just journalistic bias but an overt attempt to shape public opinion against Israel, repeating lies and amplifying terrorist propaganda.

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