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David Bar-Illan

The Loaded Dice of the Foreign Media are There to Stay

In addition to his lengthy newspaper career, David Bar-Illan, the executive editor of *The Jerusalem Post*, is an international concert pianist and a recipient of the Liberty Medal of the City of New York for cultural contributions to America.

His articles have appeared in many publications in the United States and Israel. In 1985-1986, he hosted the weekly public affairs program "International Dateline" on American cable television.

Bar-Illan is convinced that, despite Israel's massive concessions in its agreement with the PLO, the strong anti-Israel bias of most major print and electronic media will not disappear in the future.

He disagrees with the commonly-held view that the world media are motivated by anti-Semitism, but he is not quick to accept the oft-repeated explanation that Israel is expected to live up to higher standards, either. This, he insists, is nothing more than a trap from which Israel has no chance of escaping unscathed.

Despite the deepset biases, Bar-Illan says there may be a temporary lull in misreporting about Israel.

"There is likely to be a period in which some of the media, which deep down are concerned about the fate of Israel, will be more favorable in their reporting," he says, adding, "I do not expect that period to last very long. We have to keep in mind that the initial agreement signed in September 1993 is not the final one. The trickiest issues remain to be negotiated.

"What is happening now is an interim step," he notes. "The Arabs have made it very clear that there will be much bigger demands on Israel in the future. We will see this when the arguing about Jerusalem starts, and when

the actual authority of the Palestinians in what is now known as the administered territories has to be defined.”

Bar-Illan doubts that the world media will laud Israel for its bold steps. Rather than saying, “The Israelis have made concessions which nobody expected them to make; now it is the Arabs’ turn to compromise on a few points,” he predicts that most of the players will go right on doing what they have done until now: picking on Israel and urging it to make more concessions.

And when that doesn’t happen, Bar-Illan expects the foreign media to attack Israel for not yielding further to the Arabs.

Israel has cornered itself into a very weak negotiating position, Bar-Illan says. “Once you establish peace as the ultimate goal, there is absolutely nothing which the other side cannot demand in its name,” he says.

“Why should some old stones in the Old City of Jerusalem be more important than the mountains of Judea and Samaria?” he asks rhetorically. “If you want to make peace and the only way to do so is to give up these mountains, then you’ll give them up, as well as everything else.” The implication is clear: one you’ve given up the mountains, what possible reason could remain to hold onto the “old stones”?

This approach may ultimately lead to what Bar-Illan terms “the peace of the grave”. The other arguments used to pressure Israel into making concessions are equally chilling. For instance, Israel should make peace now because it is strong. “The result,” Bar-Illan says, “is that we make ourselves weak by making peace after which we will not have peace at all. That is obviously very silly logic.

“If one can have peace by not having a country, then why not give it up?” he asks, bringing the situation to its extreme. “The Arabs offered us citizenship in a Palestinian country long ago.

“If one chooses to believe that by signing a piece of paper and by saying one will achieve peace instead of looking at facts on the ground, one will not get anywhere except into trouble, like many countries have before,” Bar-Illan warns.

These prevailing views create an *a priori* difficult situation for Israel as far as its image in the media is concerned. When Israel is lauded for

concessions, and when the majority of the media outlets espouse views that may not truly be in Israel's best interests, he asks, what other outcome could anyone expect?

Against this background, Bar-Illan develops the multiple arguments on which his forecast about the future attitude of the media toward Israel is based.

“The assumption of most foreign media is that the Palestinian cause is a just one,” he says. “Here is a people seeking liberty, freedom, self-determination, which is as good as motherhood. Israel should give it to them. If it does not, it is in the wrong.”

But Bar-Illan says that this reason is not what truly motivates the media. “If it were, we would see the same clamor for the Basques, Corsicans, Bosnians or even Serbs in Bosnia. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of such causes. There are so many ethnic groups fighting for self-determination that if the media had wanted them to be treated like the Palestinians, the world would be totally fragmented.

“The true reason that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is much more in the news lies in the complete disproportion between the two sides. On the other side, there are not only the Palestinians but all the Arabs,” he says. “Their 22 states wield vast power and have major resources. They provide a big market for the West and are thus a strong force in world politics. If they did not back the Palestinian cause, people would care about it exactly like they do about the Basques in Spain, which is not at all.”

He cites the late Billy Carter, brother of the former US president, who put it bluntly: “There is a hell of a lot more Arabs than there is Jews.” Bar-Illan puts it more eloquently: “The general mood in the West is that it cannot ignore what the Arabs want. Billy Carter was right as far as the figures are concerned. There are 120 million Arabs and four million Jews in the region. If you look around the world, you can add another billion Arabs and Moslems, but not even ten million more Jews. No matter how much immigration Israel has, these facts of life will never change.”

Bar-Illan doesn't believe the anti-Israel bias began with the Western media. “I do not think it has anything to do with a paper's dependence on Arab money,” he says. A general atmosphere and attitude toward a problem is created by governments. Western governments treat the Israeli-Palestinian

issue completely differently from the way they treat any other self-determination issue for the reasons that I have recounted.

“The media are influenced by that. The press can claim that they are very independent, but once it becomes fashionable to think about the relationship between the Palestinians and Israel in a David-and-Goliath context, almost everybody follows the trend. The general mood thus created is an anti-Israeli mood.”

But there’s more to it than that, Bar-Illan notes “We are Jews, and Israel is a Jewish state. There is something very newsworthy about Jews doing the kind of things we are doing.

“The fact is that Jews are doing things which they were not supposed to do, according to the stereotype, like shooting at demonstrators or chasing terrorists. Charles Krauthammer, a columnist for *Time* and *The Washington Post* who is a rare exception to the main trends, puts it succinctly: ‘Jews is news.’

“This is a very charitable interpretation. One could assume that there is also an undercurrent of anti-Semitism in the media. I do not say that, because I believe that there are many other reasons for their attitude toward Israel. There is also an undercurrent holding Israeli to what is called a higher standard. This means nothing but a double standard.

“I do not expect the media to hold us to the same kind of standards they apply to dictatorial states around us, like Syria, Egypt or Jordan,” Bar-Illan stresses. “I do expect them to treat us the way other democracies are treated, but that is not the case.

“Once somebody else is in a state of war, many actions are understood and forgiven,” he says. “Again, there is a double standard applied here. Everybody is talking about the transfer of populations in Yugoslavia without batting an eyelash. Even if Israelis wanted such a transfer today, it would not be possible.”

This double standard has a deep impact on the media. Bar-Illan says, “I have found it almost impossible to talk to foreign media about the justice of the Israeli cause. The conditioning of the media is more powerful than anything we can do. That is what I mean by the preference for the Palestinian cause; the mood in the West is very concerned about the Arab market.

“Israel’s public relations effort is very bad, but I do not know whether a better one would affect the media the way we think it might. If we convince every single person in the media that we are the underdogs and the Arabs are the Goliaths, it will not make the slightest difference, because they want to believe that we are in the wrong. The underdog-overdog issue is just an excuse; the facts of life do not matter here.

“When the United States had to quell riots in Los Angeles in 1992, it took 55 dead in one day and that was it,” he says. “Most were killed by the police.” He doesn’t even state the comparison. It is clear.

“A similar approach was taken in Somalia. The United Nations Army is supposed to be super-careful. They are not fighting for their land or protecting their homes. They are there to bring peace, yet when they are confronted with a demonstration in which women and children throw stones they shoot and kill. That has happened over and over again, and it is accepted. Such accidents happen throughout the world and nobody pays attention.

“If we had done what the United States did in Los Angeles or what the United Nations did in Somalia, it would have been a scandal forever,” Bar-Illan says. “We would have been reminded of it over and over again.”

He maintains that Israel takes great care in its approach because it fears world opinion. “The intifada began at the same time in Jordan as it did in the territories administered by Israel,” he says. “The Jordanian police killed 12 people. Since then, there has not been a real disturbance in Jordan. Their system is really a life saver, except that Israel cannot apply it. We are constrained by democratic laws, and on top of that we worry about our image.

“Our judgement was wrong in assuming that if we behave nicely, people will like us,” he says. “It does not work that way. In the end, you kill more people by being nice. The Israeli army has killed close to 1,000 Arabs in five-and-a-half years of the intifada.

“This is about the same number as that of Arabs killed by other Arabs during the intifada,” he adds. “But that doesn’t make any difference, because nobody in the world cares about those Arabs. When one speaks about the intifada death score, one only talks about people killed by Israel. In retrospect, it would have been much better had we used a much tougher method at the very beginning, and finished it right there and then.”

Israel made other mistakes, according to Bar-Illan. “Allowing television cameras into areas of intifada disturbances was like waving a red rag in front of a bull. I believe that cameras are not part and parcel of the free press by some kind of law. You could have limited access to newspapermen without cameras.

“The cameras are what made the riots pay,” he says. “They made the rioters believe that they could get to the world’s consciousness. Later, the foreign networks supplied video cameras to citizens in the territories. This is not only wrong; it is professionally unethical.

“I used to say that the media are much less relevant than they think they are,” he notes. “The media seem to think that they are God, or at least the most important estate in our life. Now that I have investigated the media for such a long time I tend to believe that we do not feel their impact on a day-to-day basis. Over the years, however, they do have an eroding effect.

“The whole concept of the Palestinians’ being a small people oppressed by huge Israel, when the facts are the opposite, is at least partly, if not greatly, the result of day-to-day reporting by the foreign media.

“Many distortions about Israel have entered encyclopedias, textbooks and maps which must be ascribed to the long haul of year after year of media antagonism to Israel,” he explains. “The foreign media have created a certain conventional wisdom which was never there before. The fact is that Israel has been in the media’s bad graces more or less since 1967. The cumulative effect is very clear.”

Bar-Illan quotes detailed studies which prove this media bias clearly. One study analyzed how much space four major US newspapers devoted to the Sabra and Shatilla massacres, in which about 350 people – mostly terrorists or men of fighting age – were killed, and for which Israel had, at most, indirect responsibility.

“The study found that more inches were devoted to this even than to all other world wide massacres combined during the almost 40 years since World War Two,” he says. “Thus, the issue of media bias against Israel is much more than just an impression. There are other studies similar to that one.”

Bar-Illan also sees factors in Israel that strengthen the attitude of its external critics. “Nothing makes the conscience of a media person – most of the time I believe that there is such a thing – easier than to be able to say, ‘What do you want from me? Read what this or that Israeli writes. He says exactly what I say, if not worse.’”

“It is very difficult to tell an NBC correspondent in Israel to be more Zionist than an Israel Television reporter,” Bar-Illan notes. “Until *The Jerusalem Post* changed hands in 1989, many of the foreign media would say, ‘What do you want from us? *The Jerusalem Post* wrote in exactly the same vein and tone.’”

“There was even a journalist from the *Chicago Tribune* who almost got a Pulitzer Prize for a story he copied from *The Jerusalem Post*. He was caught, and deprived of the prize. The fact remains that he felt so close in his attitude to what *The Jerusalem Post* was then writing that he could copy a story, lock, stock and barrel.

“Every country has its ultra-liberals,” Bar-Illan says. “The communists used to quote Americans like Ramsey Clark, Angela Davis and Jane Fonda and say that they reflected the real America. Everybody knew that was a joke, because they represented a fraction of a percent of the public.

“The Israeli case is more complex, because ultra-liberals represent a few percent of the population and are very vocal,” he allows. “Also, intellectuals comprise a relatively large percentage of the ultra-liberal establishment. There ultra-liberals are already preparing the concept of Jerusalem as a divided city, one half of which will be the capital of Israel and the other half will be the capital of Palestine.”

How much do individual journalists count? Bar-Illan says they do, to some extent. “*The Washington Post* was notoriously anti-Israel for many years. Now it has somebody here who is not pro-Israel but is a very decent correspondent. He is different from his predecessors in that he believes that no matter how he feels about anything he must report the news as fairly as possible.

“The present correspondent of the *New York Times* is also much more professional than his predecessors were. In major newspapers like that, it is possible to find some decent people who believe in the tenets of journalism. They believe the ethics of the profession require them to say there is one side of the story and there is another side of the story.

“If, however, one takes the correspondent of the *Guardian*, an English paper, one hears only one side plus their propaganda. He always reminds one of the saying that no prostitute does anything without the approval of the madam of the brothel. One wonders whether the man was chosen because he was anti-Israel, or if he became anti-Israel because he knew that his bosses would love his work.

“In major newspapers, though a lot of editing is done, stories usually get printed more or less the way they are filed. In television, the anchorman sets the tone. Here one does not know whether the correspondent knows better or not, or just caters to the anchorman’s wishes.

“The correspondent can take film for half an hour, but the editor chooses what you see. That is perhaps a minute and a half, which can be very selective and very tendentious.

“The BBC is by far the worst offender when it comes to Israel,” Bar-Illan says. “There, everything I said before was extremely charitable. I shall only give one example of its malice. A few years ago a coffeehouse collapsed in Arab East Jerusalem due to structural problems. The most striking thing about it was that Jews and Arabs worked together to save lives.

“Even strong PLO activists like the deputy Mufti of Jerusalem were stunned by that cooperation. The BBC did not say one word about it. They only mentioned that Arabs suffered. They repeated the libel that a bomb had been put in there.

“This was a totally distorted report, leaving out the one phenomenon that should have made news all over the world: the fact that Arabs and Jews worked together to save lives at a time when the intifada was at its height. This is not a politically significant event. From the political sphere, there are hundreds of examples of BBC malice.”

Bar-Illan offers another example of malice from a US network. Before the intifada started, a fanatic Moslem killed two Jews who were more than 90 years old while they sat at a bus stop on Jaffa Road in Jerusalem. After stabbing them both to death, he was chased and caught by a crowd. Bar-Illan notes that the terrorist was a huge person with a big knife. The crowd was very brave to chase him. In New York, people would not have done that.

“The Peter Jennings show on ABC starts with a headline and a commercial,” Bar-Illan says. The headline that day was that a lynch mob had almost killed an Arab in Jerusalem. Then came the commercial and then you heard the story of what happened. It takes malice to do that. I do not believe it has anything to do with whom you favor in this war between the Davids and the Goliaths.”

Is there no way for Israel to get a better image in the foreign media?

“If the Arab purchasing power was not so great, our stereotype might change,” Bar-Illan says. “There are, however, mainly bad scenarios of how Israel can get good press: if it looks like we are going to be defeated, or if we are in danger of being attacked in a real war. There is probably enough of a conscience around to worry about us in such a case. The reason I say this is that when we were showered by Scuds, the general attitude among the media was not bad.

“During these attacks, we somehow got back to our former role. We were sitting in sealed rooms like mice, waiting for the bombs to fall. This fits the world’s image of Jews precisely.

“If one is very cynical, one could say that the media sympathy may have been because at that point Saddam Hussein was the bad guy. It is very possible that Saddam Hussein was the bad guy not because he attacked Israel, but because he was against the Americans and the other nations of their coalition. I feel, however, that at a moment of truth, if it came to an actual possibility of being endangered, more people in the media would treat us sympathetically.

“Jews are very sympathetic people, as long as they are victims,” he repeats. “When they are not victims, they are not. If Katyushas fell on Tel Aviv, there might be a more sympathetic twist to it. At least more sympathetic than when they fall on Kiryat Shemona. That is my feeling, but I am not sure that I am right.”

In light of all he has said, does Bar-Illan think that Israel should not have made any concessions to test the peace process?

“I did not say that Israel cannot make concessions,” he replies. “Various arrangements can be worked out. I do not believe, however, that having a Palestinian state run by the PLO on the outskirts of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem is the solution Israel should want.

“From the Iranian border to such a state, there may be a large stretch of land controlled by radical Arab states,” he explains. “Whether there will be three heads, two heads or one head to that mass of land is not the point. It is a landmass which is likely to be controlled by radical Arabs. I obviously do not believe that the Middle East has changed as much as Foreign Minister Shimon Peres believes it has changed.”

But Bar-Illan does not despair of any hope for peace. He sees an optimistic scenario in the long term.

“There is the possibility that the Arab countries will become democratic,” he says. “Then, Israel will not have the same image among the Arabs as it has now. Everybody dismissed that as an impossibility now. I think that in ten or 15 years it is a distinct possibility.”

It isn't necessarily as much of a pipedream as it may seem at first. After all, Bar-Illan concludes, “In the past, anybody who said that the Soviet empire would become democratic would have been considered mad.”