



PERSPECTIVES

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How Can We Help Foreign Journalists Understand Israel?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Zionist organizations and the Israeli government devote incalculable resources to the effort to contain the damage caused by news reports and opinion pieces that portray Israel inaccurately and unfairly. The conventional response is for Israeli diplomats and *hasbara* activists to bombard journalists with angry emails and reader comments. It would be much more productive to encourage journalists to learn both sides of the story, even compensating them financially to do so.

Israel's traditional approach to the problem of slanted journalism—angry letters, op-eds, and comments—is failing. Despite the valiant and intelligent efforts of the pro-Israel community, biased and misleading reporting about the Israeli-Arab conflict is as prevalent in 2020 as ever. This frustrating balance sheet has strengthened Israelis' conviction that the world hates their country and that the root of journalistic hostility towards Israel is the atavistic antisemitism and/or anti-Israel prejudice of Western journalists.

This deduction is certainly correct in many cases, but instead of spending energy and resources in a vain pursuit of alleged antisemites and self-hating Jews, it would be more sensible to make an effort to understand the sociological and psychological dynamics that drive international journalists to believe and promote Arab and leftist narratives about Israel.

The first dynamic is the very human tendency to seek out the company and friendship of like-minded people. In the case of foreign reporters with a progressive bent, this means hobnobbing with Israeli intellectuals, academics, and NGO workers while in Israel. These milieus are notorious for their ignorance about religious Judaism, lack of appreciation for the millenarian Jewish connection to the entire Land of Israel (including the biblical areas of

Judea and Samaria renamed the West Bank [of the Transjordanian kingdom] in 1950), and persistent claim that rightwing Israelis and particularly Jews in the West Bank are primitive and fanatical.

Once the “enlightened Israeli opinion” about the conflict is heard, foreign reporters tour the Palestinian Authority (PA). In Bethlehem and Ramallah, Arab courtesy and hospitality together with moving litanies about supposed Israeli abuses erase all hope that these journalists will attempt to understand why some Jewish Israelis support hawkish parties.

The end result is that most foreign journalists assume they are being fair and even-handed because they hear and understand the views of elitist Jews and polished Palestinians. Due to these sociological dynamics (and also to the language barrier), most journalists never meet West Bank Jews like the late Rabbi Froman, who worked for reconciliation between Jews and Muslims. Neither do they meet Palestinian homosexuals who fled the Palestinian-controlled territories for Israel in fear of their lives. Even less are they exposed to the PA-controlled mass media and press, let alone to Hamas broadcasts or to mosque preachers who deride Israel and Jews on a daily basis in the vilest of words and incite Palestinians to strive for Israel’s destruction.

This journalistic ignorance urgently needs to be challenged. A promising strategy to educate journalists in Israel and abroad who report about the Israeli-Arab conflict is the establishment of an online platform where they are provided with quality literature about Judaism, Jewish history, Zionism, Arab history, Palestinian nationalism, and Islamic jihadism.

Access to these resources would allow journalists to learn facts and opinions they will never learn at receptions in foreign diplomatic missions or while relaxing in the lounges of the fancy hotels popular among expatriates in Israel.

To encourage journalists to take advantage of these resources, those who do so and are able to demonstrate the historical, cultural, and religious literacy they have acquired should be compensated. Given that reading and learning demands time and energy, rewarding the effort of these journalists would be no different from compensating college students who choose to study Judaism. Journalists could prove the knowledge they acquire by, for example, passing online tests.

Given the diminishing salaries and budgets of journalists, offering them a monetary incentive to educate themselves about the conflict from a variety of viewpoints would be a relatively inexpensive yet extremely effective way of advancing Israeli interests. Bringing the voices of settlers, Jewish refugees

from Muslim countries, and victims of Islamic violence to the attention of foreign journalists would help the world understand Israel better.

This initiative would not limit the freedom of foreign journalists. It could instead ensure that they use that freedom to understand the conflict rather than rush to pass ill-informed judgment.

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