

THE US-ISLAMIC MEDIA CHALLENGE:  
Twenty Versions of One Event—  
Similarities and Differences

By

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with

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This report is a revision of a paper prepared by scholars at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and the RAND Corporation for presentation at the U.S.-Islamic World Forum on February 19, 2006. It includes data gathered since the 2006 Forum, as well as comments from participants at that 2006 meeting. The U.S.-Islamic World Forum is a conference of global leaders hosted by the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution and the Government of the State of Qatar.

This research paper is dedicated to  
Walter Shorenstein, without whose  
financial support and genuine enthusiasm  
for a free and vibrant press around the  
world it could not have been done.

This is an update of an academic study of the global coverage of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in August-September, 2005, based on “content analysis” research done by scholars at Harvard University and the Rand Corporation. Preliminary findings were presented at the Doha Forum in February 2006. At the time the research began, the subject of the study was the obvious one. The Israeli withdrawal from Gaza had just been completed. Now, of course, the issue of the Gaza withdrawal has been superseded by the Hamas victory in the Palestinian elections of 2006, the summer 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, the deteriorating situation in Iraq, and the on-going clashes between Fatah and Hamas.

Although subjects change—clearly more than once in the past year--the standards for covering the subject/story should not. Journalism, while not following any fixed libretto, ought to follow standards of professionalism recognized in many parts of the world—the search for truth, objectivity, detachment. The operative words in the last sentence are “ought to,” because these standards are not followed in some parts of the world.

Shortly after the US invasion of Panama in December, 1989, then-Director of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Marvin Kalb, having finished a 30-year career as Chief Diplomatic Correspondent for CBS and NBC, decided to launch a research project on media coverage of the invasion. At the beginning, Kalb thought that the project ought

to focus on US coverage—after all, it was a US invasion. But, on reconsideration, he broadened the project to include the coverage read and seen in three other countries—Mexico, because it was Panama’s neighbor; Spain, because it shared Panama’s language and culture; and Germany, because it could be said to represent Europe, America’s biggest and closest ally.

New to his career as a scholar, still imbued with the essentially naïve belief that journalists all over the world shared a common perception of reality and truth, no matter what the story may be, Kalb assumed that the media of all four countries would cover the invasion in much the same way. The ingredients were crystal clear: the invader was the United States; the invaded was Panama; the purpose was clear, at least to the extent disclosed—it was to interdict the flow of drugs from Latin America to the United States and to capture the drug-dealing president Manuel Noriega. No surprises were anticipated.

The study proved to be anything but boring. Though it could be argued that Kalb should have anticipated the result, he was in fact surprised to learn, when the research was completed, that the four countries had four different perspectives on the invasion, each mirroring its own policies, experience, and culture. Mexico reported the invasion as another example of “Yankee imperialism.” Spain saw it as a form of political arrogance. Germany thought that one result was that the invasion weakened America’s ties to its European allies.

Not to exaggerate the importance of the Panama study, many American reporters, credited it with tearing away from their eyes a faded veil of innocence and naïveté about the role of the media in reflecting reality and conveying essential truth. Following on

their unhappy experience in Vietnam, they began to appreciate a new way of understanding their professional obligations. There was clearly the American model of journalism, based on a pursuit of truth derived from objective data and independent resources, but there were other models as well, none less deserving of respect and understanding. They learned in time that there was no single truth, no single reality, no one way of reporting a story. In many parts of the world, the government provided the media with the necessary resources and expected not only friendly, but also obedient coverage. In other parts of the world, political parties owned the media and demanded sympathetic coverage. Journalists were not independent operators and observers; they were party members, who shared party goals and aspirations. Depending on the model, journalists produced different copy; but regardless of the model, they influenced public opinion and affected public policy.

Scholars of international relations offer another explanation. It is called constructivism—that is, examining the role of identity and ideas in policy formulation. Stripped of academic jargon, this means that every reporter, who is the product of a certain culture, background, religion and nationality, approaches the coverage of any story with a predisposition to see “reality” from a pre-set perspective. This can vary, of course. Depending on his or her level of professionalism, a reporter can be more or less “objective,” more or less driven by a determination to be “fair and balanced.” Still another reporter can find the highest degree of professional satisfaction from presenting the story with a “narrative flow” consistent with his national or religious beliefs.

These views were all echoed by the journalists who participated in the two media sessions at the 2006 Forum. Faisal al Kasim, from *Al-Jazeera*, argued that each side (the

US and the Arabic language media) reflected its own political biases, and he added that in the Arab world US views were seen as Israeli views. Furthermore, representatives of *Al-Jazeera*, in interviewing done in Doha by Carol Saivetz, stated that the network covered all the news, but then “contextualized” the reporting. In his presentation at the session, Rami Khouri, of the *Beirut Daily Star*, offered that Arabic language media had gotten better, but that neither side had done a good job in (re)presenting the other.

If there was a dominant theme of the sessions it was whether or not the media followed/reflected public opinion or whether or not they create opinion. Several of the Arabic language journalists felt that they were doing a great job educating their audiences. At the same time, others noted that viewers/listeners go where they find resonance with their own views. Khouri noted that, in his view, media were driven by public opinion, but the ideological biases of certain outlets were clear. It would thus seem fair to conclude that journalism reflects reality and also influences reality. One thing is certain—it does not create reality.

### ***A Very Brief History of the Israeli Decision To Withdraw From Gaza:***

The second Palestinian intifadah began in September, 2000, and casualties quickly mounted on both sides. In late 2003, then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, frustrated by the pace and direction of negotiations, began speaking to his colleagues about a total disengagement from the Palestinians. On December 18, he made vague references to “unilateral” actions, including the possibility of building a wall or fence on the West Bank. Sharon’s deputy, Ehud Olmert, was first to discuss an actual Israeli

pullout from Gaza. On April 16, 2004, these early glimmerings of major policy shifts appeared in the Israeli media. The changes, as leaked, included: a full withdrawal of troops and settlers from Gaza, except for the Philadelphi Corridor; continuing control of Gaza's airspace and operation of the Erez industrial base; and evacuation of four small settlements in the northern West Bank.

No Israeli denied the leaks. Suddenly a new and dramatic element entered the Palestinian-Israeli dialogue. Sharon rushed to Washington to win President George Bush's support not just for the Gaza pullout, which was in the bag, but also for continued Israeli control of several large settlements abutting Jerusalem. In an exchange of letters, Bush said that a full Israeli withdrawal from "territories occupied in 1967" was no longer "realistic." Armed with this American concession, instantly denounced in the Arab media, Sharon won his government's approval of the Gaza pullout. The Knesset saluted its acceptance in October, 2004. The Israeli Cabinet concurred in February, 2005, though some members of Sharon's Likud party worried that the withdrawal would be seen by the Arabs as a sign of Israeli weakness. The date for the start of the pullout was set for August 14, 2005.

The Israelis considered the pullout to be a "unilateral" action, but Yassir Arafat's death in November, 2004, allowed a degree of unanticipated cooperation between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Mahmoud Abbas, the new Palestinian president, traveled to Gaza and persuaded Hamas, the radical resistance movement rising in power and importance, to observe a ceasefire.

On August 14, 2005, the first day of the withdrawal, Sharon appeared on Israeli television and acknowledged that Israel could not hold on to Gaza forever. Settlers were

urged to get out of their homes voluntarily by noon, August 15. Most obliged; some resisted. Then, specially trained soldiers went door-to-door, encouraging the remaining settlers to leave by midnight, August 16. The following day, August 17, television cameras focused on the one major moment of violence throughout the entire withdrawal, when fighting erupted at an abandoned synagogue between settlers and soldiers. As the soldiers gradually imposed order, the settlers reluctantly left the synagogue and Gaza. One sticking point with the Palestinian Authority was the proposed demolition of 20 synagogues. Finally, after last-minute talks, the synagogues were “deconsecrated” but not destroyed, an example of Middle East flexibility under the gun.

On September 11, the last of 3,000 Israeli troops left Gaza. It was anticipated that the Gaza pullout would create a national trauma in Israel. It did not happen. Perhaps, as Yarom Decker, Washington bureau chief of Israel TV, suggested, it was an exaggerated concern from the very beginning. “We have a very short memory,” Decker said. “We have already forgotten we were in Gaza for 38 years.” The Palestinians rejoiced, and President Abbas called the day “historic and joyful.”

### ***The Research Design:***

Just as in Panama, a newsworthy story occurred in Gaza; from near and far, journalists flocked to the scene. Their reporting influenced public opinion and then public policy in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and the United States. By their very nature an omnipresent intrusion into politics and diplomacy, the global media pose an instantaneous challenge to governments everywhere. From cable television to the



Internet, a new and growing technology has wired the world, and no event, whether in Falluja or Gaza, can escape the scrutiny of the lens, the wires, the cables, and the journalists, who are now unshakable players on the global scene. Their reporting, often live, raises questions and shakes assumptions that used to shape public opinion and policy. Their role is now large, awesome, and inescapable. They are as important to the ultimate resolution of a problem as statesmen, economists and think tank experts. This example of media research proves the point.

Encouraged by Walter Shorenstein, founder of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, now the leading research center for the study of the media's impact on public policy, Kalb decided to launch a major research project on media coverage of the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza. His approach, similar to the one adopted to study the coverage of the American invasion of Panama in 1989, was to examine the media in those countries directly affected by the withdrawal and then in those countries less directly affected in a pattern of concentric circles growing out of Gaza. He could not examine all the media—that was clear. Obviously the Israeli and Palestinian media would be studied, as would the pan-Arab media since they too influence events in the Middle East. Because of their power and importance, the American media were also chosen. And, because the European media were important, but not all of them could be analyzed for reasons both of time and resources, the German media were picked. Finally, the Malaysian media were selected because Malaysia represents an Asian perspective, English is widely used, and it is a largely Muslim, but non-Arab, nation, which might therefore have a particular interest in the story.

The coverage of a single event—the Gaza pullout--by twenty different news organizations would be studied, using the tested academic methodology of “content analysis,” to determine and collate the placement of stories, the quantity and density of the reporting, the number and the use of sources, and, if possible, the tone of the coverage. Was it fair? Did it reflect an honest rendition of what happened? What were the similarities? What were the differences? And why?

Specifically, the media selected for special study were:

--In Israel: *Ha'aretz*, *Kol Israel*, TV Channel 2 and *Yediot Aharonot* (Friday editions).

--In Palestine: *Al-Quds* and *Al-Ayyam*, and selections from the Voice of Palestine.

(Many Palestinians generally watch Israeli or Jordanian television or an Arab-language cable operation, such as *Al-Jazeera*.)

--Pan-Arab media: *Asharq al-Awsat*, *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*

--In Germany: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, ZDF radio and television.

--In Malaysia: *New Straits Times*, *Malay Mail* and *Utusan*.

--In the United States: ABC News, CNN, National Public Radio and the *Washington Post*.

The study proved to be so broad and ambitious that it quickly became apparent that Harvard alone could not do the job in the time at hand. David Aaron, the Director of RAND's Center for Middle East Public Policy and a former Deputy Director of the National Security Council, was approached, and he agreed to provide essential resources for the project. It could not have happened without his help. Aaron promptly assigned Dr. Eric Larson, Senior Policy Analyst, and a computer analyst, Michael Egner, to help frame and conduct the research and then collate it into clear and comprehensible slides.

Their joint responsibility was the American, German and Malaysian media. My Harvard colleague, Dr. Carol Saivetz, who teaches Middle East Politics and International Relations, assumed responsibility for a team of graduate students, who did the “content analysis” for the Israeli, Palestinian and pan-Arab media.

We initially intended to study 20 media outlets in all. However, we had difficulties gathering data for the several of the outlets. For some, we could not gain archival access to web sites; in addition, neither *Al-Arabiya* nor *Al-Jazeera* provided the students with the necessary materials. Thus most of the analysis which follows reflects only those media for which we had either transcripts or text of the coverage. Our original report included 71 slides, a summary of which was presented at the time. This update includes fewer charts and graphs, but the original set of slides is available upon request.

### ***Research Results:***

“Content analysis” research is a very distinctly academic methodology, and it often is visualized in graphs or charts. Our data raise several questions: What does it mean that the Israeli newspaper *Yediot Aharonot* used 85 sources in its reporting on the Gaza pullout, 83 of whom were Israeli? It might mean that *Yediot Aharonot* focused primarily on Israelis and ignored Palestinians, which is understandable, but not necessarily balanced, journalism. Can National Public Radio in the U.S. be considered “fair and balanced” in its reporting if it used as sources 13 Israelis who favored the pullout and 11 who opposed it? The answer would appear to be yes.

In this revised version of our report, we will provide an excerpt of the original slides accompanied by explanatory notes from Carol Saivetz of Harvard and Eric Larson of Rand. These notes represent their understanding of the data. They may conform to your understanding; they may run counter to your understanding; but we hope they trigger a wide-ranging discussion of all views. The point is to learn.

### ***The Israeli, Palestinian, and Pan-Arab media***

#### ***By Carol Saivetz:***

The slides which accompany this report represent a synopsis of our major findings. In the original full set of slides, there were four groupings for each media outlet—the total number of words for the media outlets graphed across the time frame of the project; the number of quotes by type (more below); “perspectives”; the 7-day moving averages for types of quotations.

For both the Israeli and Arabic language media, there were variations in the trajectories of the story (7 and 11). For example, our data show that that *Ha’aretz*’s coverage peaked prior to the beginning of the actual withdrawal; in contrast, *Kol Yisrael* devoted most words to the withdrawal between the initiation of the withdrawal and the start of the forced evacuations. For the Arabic language media, *Al-Hayat* devoted more words to the story than either *Al-Quds* or *Asharq Al-Awsat*. *Al-Quds*’ coverage peaked just prior to the beginning of the withdrawal, while the coverage in the two London-based dailies peaked following the stand-off at the synagogue.

For our analysis of the types of quotations for each of the outlets, our categories were: Israeli Government, Israeli Opposition, Israeli military or police, Israeli

settlers/protesters, other Israeli, Palestinian public officials and security forces, Palestinian militants, Palestinian Gaza residents, other Palestinian, and “other.” One of the things that should be noted is that some of the outlets offer more differentiating reporting, that is citing Palestinian militants and Gaza residents or distinguishing between Israelis who supported or opposed the withdrawal. Interesting patterns appeared in both the Hebrew and Arabic media. For example, the comparison among the Israeli media outlets reveals that both *Ha’aretz* and *Yediot* quoted far less extensively from Israel Government sources than *Kol Yisrael* (8, 9, 10). The latter two outlets quoted only Palestinian public official and security forces. In contrast, the data for *Ha’aretz* show some differentiation among Palestinian sources quoted. Among the Arabic language media, *Asharq Al-Awsat* quoted primarily from Palestinian officials, with another significant number of quotations from Palestinian militants. A bit more than a quarter came from Israeli sources, but divided among government spokesmen, settlers, and pro-withdrawal advocates. In contrast, *Al-Hayat* devoted more space to alternative points of view—other Palestinian, Palestinian residents of Gaza, Israeli opposition, and other Israeli media sources. Finally, *Al-Quds* quoted from Palestinian officials, and other Palestinian sources, but also presented more quotations from Israeli security forces and outside sources (12, 13, 14).

It is certainly true that each side primarily quoted from its own sources and this would seem to corroborate what the journalists at last year’s Forum told us: Each side remained confirmed in the views of its respective side. However *Ha’aretz* and *Al-Quds* offered more nuanced coverage than the other media outlets. In the period prior to the start of the withdrawal, *Ha’aretz* quoted more frequently from pro-withdrawal sources,

but in the period between the actual start of the withdrawal and the beginning of forced evacuations, more quotations came from anti-withdrawal and Palestinian sources. This shifts again after the standoff at the synagogue. Between August 21 and September 11, *Ha'aretz* quotes much more frequently from pro-withdrawal groups. *Al Quds* stands in marked contrast to the two London-based papers. Although *Al-Quds* devoted little space to Israeli anti-withdrawal quotations, it quoted from Israeli pro-withdrawal sources much more than the other two. It is also interesting to note that in the period before the forced evacuations began, Palestinian sources were more numerous than Israeli. But beginning as the forced evacuations started, the number of Israeli pro-withdrawal quotations and the number of Palestinian quotations track fairly evenly (data available on request).

As an additional measure, we also looked at how many perspectives were quoted in any one story. For *Kol Yisrael*, the overwhelming number of stories contained only the view of the Israeli Government, with a far smaller number citing Palestinian sources. For *Yediot*, while the perspective is also primarily Government sources, it does include a small number of Israeli pro- and anti-withdrawal sources, as well as an even smaller number of stories that include both Palestinian and pro-withdrawal Israeli sources in the same article. *Ha'aretz* included a larger number of articles that contained in the same story both pro- and anti-withdrawal sources. For *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat*, the majority of quotations come from Palestinian sources. The differences lie in the fact that *Asharq Al-Awsat* has fewer stories with only Israeli pro-withdrawal quotes and fewer that quote both Israeli pro-withdrawal and Palestinian sources simultaneously. As might be expected *Al-Quds* cites primarily Palestinian sources, but some articles cite Israeli perspectives. Additionally, there is a small number of stories that quote Israeli pro- and

Palestinian sources together, and others that cite, as well, Israeli pro- and Israeli anti-sources together.

### ***The U.S., German, and Malaysian Media***

***By Eric Larson:***

As with the Hebrew and Arabic language media, our categories for the four American sources, (CNN, ABC, NPR, and *The Washington Post*), three German sources (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* [FAZ], *Die Zeit*, and ZDF) and three Malaysian sources (*The New Straits Times*, *The Malay Mail*, and *Utusan*<sup>1</sup>) were the same. We also include a fifth measure: an impressionistic count of story themes.

In terms of word count (1), CNN had the greatest single day of coverage (approximately 37,000 words on August 18, the day of the dramatic synagogue standoffs), coverage dropped below that of nearly every other source within a few days after the evacuation of the last Gaza settlement on August 22. Similarly, ABC peaked sharply as the forced evacuations began (on August 17) and dropped even more sharply once the evacuation was over. NPR and *The Washington Post* maintained more substantial coverage, but still peaked on red-letter days. Both FAZ and ZDF (15) also peaked on August 15, while *Die Zeit* actually peaked several days before the withdrawal and covered the actual withdrawal less. Malaysian sources as a whole seemed to provide the least coverage (20).

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<sup>1</sup> *Utusan* is not translated into English. Therefore, we have aggregate story and word counts for this source, but not detailed quote information.

Our data indicated that all four American sources followed roughly the same pattern of quotation sources: 60% Israeli, 30% Palestinian, and 10% other (give or take 5%). However, for CNN (3), the overwhelming majority of Israeli quotes came from settlers and protestors, while this group represented only the plurality of Israeli quotes in the other three American sources. In the German media, *Die Zeit* (18) quoted much more significantly from settlers and protestors than did the other sources. Finally, while *The Malay Mail* (22) again had an American-style quote distribution, *The New Straits Times* (23) was notable in that it quoted from Israelis and Palestinians exactly evenly (27 quotes each).

Also as with the Middle East media, we attempted to gauge balance by looking at which kinds of sources were quoted and when. Among the U.S. sources, CNN (3) broadcast the largest number of stories in which only the Israeli anti-withdrawal group was quoted. In contrast, ABC's (4) coverage contained a roughly even distribution of perspectives, while both NPR (5) and the *Washington Post* (6) commonly filed stories with the Palestinian perspective only (though only narrowly so). Both of these latter sources also appeared very unlikely to quote both from Palestinians and the Israeli Anti group in the same story. At which points the U.S. outlets quoted from the several groups also varied among them. CNN, for example, had the most per-day, per-group quotes on the first day of the withdrawal, August 15, with approximately 25 Palestinian quotes; yet quotes from the Israeli Anti Group actually peaked several days before the withdrawal begins. While ABC seemed to have "quote-heavy" days in which it draws roughly equally from all three groups (and this was somewhat true for NPR as well), *The Washington Post* almost appeared to alternate between Palestinian days and Israeli days .



All three German sources (17, 18, 19) were more likely than their American counterparts to include more than one group perspective in the same story. Again, however, these pairings were generally Israeli Pro with Palestinian or Israeli Pro with Israeli Anti; Palestinians and settlers/protestors rarely seemed to share the same story. Of the Malaysian sources, *The New Straits Times* (22) was noticeable in that nearly half of all stories displayed fell into the Palestinian-only group. FAZ appeared to do the same, while the other two German sources completely stopped quoting from the Israeli Anti group as soon as the synagogue standoffs ended on August 18. Finally, of some interest is the near-complete cessation of *all* quoting in American television sources once the evacuation phase ended on August 22.

For our analysis of the U.S., German, and Malaysian media, we also looked at thematic coverage(2, 16, 21): That is, a first-cut count of what each story was really about. Six themes were identified:

- 1) Israeli Loss (e.g., settlers saying goodbye to their homes)
- 2) Israeli Clashes (e.g., standoffs between Israeli protestors and police)
- 3) Palestinian Hope (e.g., celebrations and planning in the aftermath of withdrawal)
- 4) Palestinian Instability (e.g., militant boasts, shootings after the withdrawal ends)
- 5) Planning and Implementation (“dry” reporting on numbers, details of withdrawal)
- 6) Politics and Analysis (e.g., on the future of Gaza, Israeli elections, or diplomacy)

For example, theme counts of American sources reveals an apparent divide between television sources, which predominantly reported on Israeli clashes, with print and radio sources that focused more on political/analytical issues. German sources

seemed similarly analytical, along with near-zero levels of the more personal themes (Israeli Loss and Palestinian Hope). Malaysian sources were split, with *The Malay Mail* displaying a TV-style focus on clashes, and *The New Straits Times* running more political/analytical themes. *The New Straits Times* also had the largest gap between the Israeli Loss theme and the Palestinian Hope theme, with 0% for the former and 13% for the latter. German and U.S. sources tended to present these two themes in roughly equal amounts.

### ***Concluding Questions:***

It is not our purpose or desire to draw conclusions from what by necessity has to be incomplete data. As noted at the outset, we were not always able to gain access to archived news stories. Moreover, our data in many ways raise as many questions as they may have answered. Are there similarities between Israeli media coverage of the withdrawal from Gaza and the Arab media coverage? Is there a professional overlap? Are there differences? And what are the reasons for the differences? How do the media affect public opinion—and public policy?

Finally, could one seriously argue, after examining the granted incomplete data in this study, that there is a single truth to be reported? Or do journalists create realities, which in time become accepted truths? Two related and equally important questions arise from the discussions at last year's Forum about how journalists do their job. As the journalists in attendance examined our data about how the several media covered the Israeli pullout from Gaza there was tremendous attention to questions of fairness and

balance. Yet, no one questioned whether or not there was a difference between bias and government censorship. And in a related vein, is the best that can be hoped for a multiplicity of outlets or should it be balance within one outlet or publication? We hope to expand on these questions with our follow-on study of the coverage of the 2006 Lebanon war.