



# ADC SPECIAL REPORT

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## HATE PROPAGANDA IN THE ARAB MEDIA

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### Violence sells newspapers

Teenagers are blown to bloody pieces in Jerusalem while eating a pizza. A huge bomb is dropped on a house to kill a Palestinian terrorist leader. The US threatens war against Iraq if its demands for unfettered weapons inspections are not met. Israeli forces capture and defuse a car bomb on its way to an Israeli city, as large as the bomb that killed hundreds in Oklahoma. These are the awful Middle East news items that dominate the pages of our mainstream media. It's understandable: bad news is good news for newspaper publishers. Extreme violence fascinates the public and sells newspapers. We can read ghastly news and all feel slightly safer because it's happening somewhere else.

### Antisemitism in the Arab media

In our fascination with the violence, however, we may tend to overlook some of the insidious processes that help provoke it and fuel it. A case in point is the way in which the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is presented in the Arab media. Despite the 1977 Egyptian/Israeli peace agreement, despite the 1993 peace agreement in Oslo, despite the further comprehensive peace offer made by former Israeli PM Barak and rejected by Yasser Arafat at Camp David two years ago, despite the second and more murderous intifada instigated by Palestinian terrorist groups, the media in Arab countries continually portray Israel as the aggressor and the Palestinians as victims.

If this portrayal of the conflict were merely couched in the language of normal political reporting, it might make unpleasant reading for Israelis and their supporters, but it would at least be understandable and perhaps even tolerable. But it isn't being written that way at all. Instead, Arab publications frequently draw upon every conceivable antisemitic stereotype. The obvious purpose is not to engage in civilised political debate, but to stir up irrational hatred towards Israel and Jews. One can find antisemitic material in the media of most Arab countries. Not just in extremist states such as Syria — which one might expect — but in so-called moderate states like Egypt, officially at peace with Israel. Since all Arab countries are dictatorships or ruled by autocratic kings, since all the media in those countries are government controlled, the hate campaign clearly has the support of the political elites.

### Suppression of honest Arab journalists

Not a single voice is raised in the media against the hate campaign. No doubt there are people who value tolerance, fairness and truth in Arab countries, but they have no chance of having their voice heard in the mainstream Arab media. It is easy to understand why this is so. Government control ensures compliance and opposing voices are suppressed. Honest journalists are threatened if they fail to conform to propaganda requirements. A recent Associated Press report by Ibrahim Barzak (26/8/02) conveys a sense of how Arab journalists are forced to toe the line. He notes how the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate criticised the use of children in military activities — at first sight an entirely proper, moral viewpoint — but then also ruled that if children were to be used in this way, it was "absolutely forbidden" to take photographs of them doing so. Why? Simple: such pictures, said Tawfik Abu Khousa, deputy chairman of the syndicate, harmed the image of the Palestinian people and the credibility of Palestinian journalists. "We have decided to forbid taking any footage of

armed children, because we consider that as a clear violation of the rights of children and for negative effects these pictures have on the Palestinian people," he said. The syndicate's statement said footage of armed children served "the interests of Israel and its propaganda against the Palestinian people."

Note the logic here: it's not the actual **use** of armed children that is detestable, the real problem is the negative **image** that results. As for the "credibility" of the journalists, one would have thought that publishing the truth normally enhances a journalist's credibility. At least, that's the way it works in democratic countries. Barzak reports that Palestinian photographers have told of attempts by Palestinian officials and militias to keep them from taking pictures considered unfavourable, sometimes using threats and coercion. One suspects, therefore, that "credibility" should be read as "ability to continue breathing".

### Five antisemitic themes

The hate campaign in the Arab media usually draws upon five common antisemitic themes. Some are medieval, while others draw on distorted versions of twentieth century history.

**The deicide charge.** All mainstream Christian churches have long rejected the ancient and false accusation that Jews were responsible for the death of Christ. It is being revived in the Arab media. The Palestinian Authority's TV station recently broadcast a sermon by the head of the Latin Church in Gaza, not only repeating the accusation, but also embellishing it. Jews were accused not only of killing Jesus, but of killing Christians and Muslims as well.

**Blood libel.** For centuries, antisemites have spread the lie that Jews use human blood for ritual purposes, most commonly in baking *matzah*, the flat bread eaten on Passover. Nonsense, of course: Jews are forbidden to eat blood. It isn't kosher. It is remarkable that a modern Arab academic can still find virtue in not only disseminating this inflammatory medieval myth, but in adding a creative new twist to it. Thus we find Dr Umayma Ahmad Al-Jalahma, an academic at Saudi Arabia's King Faisal University, describing in grotesque detail how "Jewish vampires" place non-Jewish victims in a "needle-studded barrel", then drain and dry the blood for use in "pastries" for the festival of Purim. This, said the learned author, was "a well-established fact".

**Jewish conspiracy theory.** A continuing theme of Jew-haters for the past century is conspiracy theory, the insane idea that a small group of Jews control everything of importance: the banks, the media, the US Congress, you name it. This favourite theme of antisemites the world over has been freshly exploited in the Arab press. Y. Aladiri, writing in the on-line *Syrian Times*, asks rhetorically, "Who does rule America?" (no prizes for guessing his answer) and goes on to repeat the calumny that the Israeli Mossad had prior knowledge of the events of September 11. The Palestinian Authority's *Al-Quds* claimed that the American media are "controlled by the Jewish power", an idea echoed by Iran's *Teheran Times*, which asserted that "Zionist Jews control the mass media in the United States".

Two other lines of antisemitic propaganda have a more modern twist.

**Comparisons of Zionism with Nazism.** If these medieval themes fail to ignite sufficient hatred, Arab propagandists have been steadily working away for more than a quarter century at another line of truth inversion. This is to compare Israel with Nazi Germany, and portray Palestinians instead of Jews as the new victims. It ought to go without saying that the analogy is entirely false. The typical Nazi response to an attack by an underground resistance group was to round up several hundred civilians and massacre them. Israel's military actions, in contrast, have been solely aimed at capturing (and sometimes killing) terrorists and preventing further attacks by destroying terrorist infrastructure. None of this impresses the Arab media. The Egyptian government daily *Al-Ahram*, for example, carried an article by Salah ad-Din Hafez which refers to the "annihilation crime against the Palestinian people" and the "Zionist Holocaust". In the same paper, Muhammed as-Sayyid Said writes of the "Nazi-Zionist state" and manages to engage in some psychological projection by

referring to "massacre celebrations" by Israelis. (The only recent massacre celebrations over the death of civilians were by some Arabs celebrating September 11.)

In Saudi Arabia, the English language on-line *Arab News* warned of "an impending Palestinian Holocaust" and compared Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon with Adolf Hitler. The government daily, *Al-Riyadh*, referred to Sharon's "horrible massacres, which exceeded the Nazism massacres". Numerous cartoons in Arab dailies combine caricatures of Sharon with swastika symbols

**Holocaust denial.** In the very same week that it published numerous articles comparing the treatment of Palestinians to Hitler's Holocaust, Egypt's *Al-Ahram* carried an article by Ibrahim Nafi that called the Holocaust "one of the biggest lies on the world stage". *Al-Akhbar* published a lengthy piece by Fatma Abdallah Mahmoud, which called the Holocaust "a fabrication" and announced that Hitler was "completely innocent". Mahmoud's main complaint was that Hitler didn't do the job: "If only you had done it, brother, if only it had really happened..." Not to be outdone, the Saudi *Al-Riyadh* scorned Israel's annual memorial day for Holocaust victims, claiming that the deaths of six million Jews were "lies".

Put side by side, the absurd irrationality of antisemitism is displayed with blinding clarity in these two Holocaust themes. The Palestinian holocaust was worse than the Jewish holocaust, which didn't happen?

### **What can we learn from history?**

Actually, there **is** a history lesson that can be learned from the Holocaust, but it is diametrically opposed to the one that Arab propagandists wish to transmit. The "Zionism equals Nazism" lie is an attempt to retell the Eichmann story, with Israelis cast as the new killers and the Palestinians as their unfortunate victims. The more instructive lesson from the Holocaust is the Goebbels story, which highlights the crucial role of the Big Lie in preparing the German population for connivance in mass murder. Auschwitz was built of bricks, but it was constructed on a foundation of words. Years before the *Einsatzgruppen* began their murderous work, long before the gas chambers were built at Auschwitz, Nazi propagandists were hard at work. The German people were fed an incessant diet of antisemitic hate propaganda in newspapers, films, street posters and schoolbooks. The consequences are well known. We now know that many ordinary people are capable of being turned into mass killers by indoctrinating them with lies and hate propaganda. It's not difficult: just portray your own culture as superior, the "only true way", blame some identifiable target group for all the ills that beset your own society, and finally denigrate the members of that group as inferior beings, unfit to live amongst you, perhaps even unfit to live at all. The numerous antisemitic incidents in many countries during the past year display a disturbing historical parallel to the events in Germany in the mid-1930s. Goebbels would no doubt have understood perfectly well what is happening today.

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