

John E Richardson (2004) Excerpt from *(Mis)Representing Islam: The racism and Rhetoric of the Broadsheet Press*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins

Normalisation of Israeli aggression

It is worth bearing in mind that pronouns such as 'Us' and 'Them', 'Our' and 'Their', 'Self' and 'Other', etc. do not have any meaning other than their immediate application: their meaning is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in the context of specific reports, and actors included as 'We' and 'Our' in some reports (for example, the manner in which British newspapers positioned the French government during the NATO bombing of Serbia, 1999) are positioned as 'They' and 'Theirs' in others (for example, the manner in which French government are repositioned when debating/reporting the EU or the Euro). When analysing news reports in which it is not immediately clear who are being included in the position 'Us', it is possible to work backwards from this ideological double strategy, identifying whose opinions and social activities are represented positively and whose receive criticism. The negotiated status of the position 'Us' is clear in a number of articles, not least in the book review **The Holy Terror**, where the brutal dictator, the last Shah, is rhetorically welcomed into the fold (*Sunday Times* Books supplement, 18 January 1998; see previous chapter).

When reporting Israel and Palestine, the sampled broadsheet newspapers predominantly positioned Israel and Israeli Jews as 'We', thereby assuring their positive representation; and conversely, Palestine and Arabs - and not only *Muslim* Arabs - were positioned as 'They', prefacing a negative representation.¹ First, the acceptance of Israeli argumentation is clearly noticeable in the symbolic annexation of illegally occupied land. What this means is that 'Arab lands gained by violent invasion and illegally occupied by Israel' are very rarely so labelled, with the broadsheet press preferring to label such areas as the nominalisation 'the occupied territories' or increasingly as 'Israeli settlements'. For example, when Binyamin Netanyahu approved plans to build in Jabul Abu-Ghneim - a move illegal under both the UN convention and the Oslo Accord - the broadsheet press unerringly used the Hebrew name for this area of East Jerusalem: Har Homa. In one report the *Independent* went so far as to describe the annexation as "the Jewish neighbourhood planned for the outskirts of the city" (11 December 1997), providing the kind of euphemistic gloss that the Israeli government would no doubt consider to be very useful.

These strategies of symbolic annexation - facilitated by journalists' nominalising, backgrounding or deleting significant information - are also reflected in broadcast news coverage of Palestine, as illustrated in the recent work of Philo (2002). Through analysis of television news coverage of the 'intifada' between 28th September and 16th October 2000 (89 bulletins), Philo (2002) argues that coverage is characterised by biases of both omission and commission - specifically the lack of historic

contextualisation and stark “differences in the manner in which both ‘sides’ were presented” (p.4). Crucial information providing background and context to the violence and repression in Palestine, and the informed (sometimes critical) commentary of Israeli insiders - which are regularly included in the Hebrew press despite stringent and rigorously enforced military censorship (see Shahak, 1997) - rarely resurfaces in the British news media. The openly discussed planned military provocation of Iran was, for example, discussed earlier. Moving forward for the moment, another more recent example of British journalists failing to gain new angles from stories printed in the Israeli press, was the criminal invasion of the Jenin refugee camp under the banner of ‘Operation Defensive Shield’. Reinhart (2002: 151), quoting a report from *Ha’aretz* written by Amir Oren, shows that prior to the military offensive into Jenin, the Israeli Army studied “relevant historical precedents” - including the Nazi takeover of the Warsaw ghetto:

In order to prepare properly for the next campaign, one of the Israeli officers in the territories said [...] it’s justified - and in fact essential - to learn from every possible source. If the mission will be to seize a densely populated refugee camp, or take over the Casbah in Nablus, and if the commander’s obligation is to try to execute the mission without casualties on either side, then he must first analyse and internalise the lessons of earlier battles - even, however shocking it may sound, even how the German army fought in the Warsaw ghetto. (originally in: Amir Oren, ‘At the gates of Yassergrad’, *Ha’aretz*, 25 January 2002)

Later, *Yediot Aharonot* repeatedly published articles criticising the Israeli Army’s ‘D-9 bulldozer units’, which worked around the clock during the destruction of Jenin, ‘erasing’ the centre of the refugee camp by systematically demolishing hundreds of civilian homes. Tsadok Yehezkeli interviewed a bulldozer driver who proudly admitted demolishing homes for 75 hours without a break:

[...] Many people were inside houses we started to demolish. They would come out of the houses we were working on. I didn’t see, with my own eyes, people dying under the blade of the D9. And I didn’t see houses falling down on live people. But if there were any, I wouldn’t care at all. I am sure people died inside these houses, but it was difficult to see, there was lots of dust everywhere and we worked a lot at night. I found joy with every house that came down, because I knew they [the Palestinians] didn’t mind dying, but they care for their homes. If you knocked down a house, you buried 40 or 50 people for generations. If I am sorry for anything, it is for not tearing the whole camp down. (originally in: Tsadok Yehezkeli, *Seven days Weekend* magazine, *Yediot Aharonot*, 31 May 2002; cited in Reinhart, 2002: 164-5)

Information such as this surprisingly frank discussion of Army tactics, the policy of indiscriminate destruction of occupied civilian homes and the anti-Palestinian hatred which characterises the comments of the Army reservist in the second excerpt, were absent from British media coverage of the Jenin massacres. The ability of the Israeli Army, and later the Israeli government and Judiciary, to *deny* the massacre, to obstruct and eventually scuttle the planned UN investigation and to replace their early

mortality figure with the staggeringly low estimate of 55 dead (see Reinhart, 2002), was in no small part attributable to the absence of commentary and contextualisation from 'inside' sources.

Further, using the results of focus groups representing a cross-section of ages and backgrounds, Philo (2002) shows that these and other distortions of news coverage of Israel/Palestine have resulted in a measurable impairment of public understanding. For example, despite there being around ten times more Palestinians killed and injured since the start of the al-Aqsa intifada (1,306 Palestinians officially killed (of whom 239 were under the age of 18) and 100,047 injured between 29th September 2000 and 2nd June 2002 - from www.jmcc.org), "only 30% of our sample of 300 young people believed this to be so. The same number believed either that the Israelis had the most casualties or that casualties were equal for both sides" (Philo, 2002: 3).

Second, explicit Israeli plans to consolidate lands taken through violent conquest are uncritically accepted. For example, a report headlined **Likud politician calls for Palestinian state** (*The Times*, 28 November 1997), shows a characteristic lack of critical insight into the reported claims of Likud chief whip Meir Sheerit, the Israeli politician central to the story. The opening paragraph of the story, written by Christopher Walker, reads:

A leading member of Binyamin Netanyahu's ruling Likud party yesterday backed the creation of a limited Palestinian state in a new challenge to the policy of the embattled right-wing Israeli Prime Minister.

Through the use of the noun phrase "a new challenge", this excerpt clearly suggests that the "limited Palestinian state" proposed by Sheerit represents a change in direction, or perhaps a move *forward*, for the previously obstructive Likud party. This argumentative line is reiterated in the paragraphs which followed, suggesting, for example, that Netanyahu was stalling the 'peace process' in order to placate the demands of "extreme right-wing Jews furious that he plans to hand back more West Bank land to Palestinians". Against this party policy, Sheerit's "challenge" is described as a "surprise conversion" towards the objectives of the Oslo agreement.

On face value, Sheerit's comments do indeed appear to be quite radical. He is quoted as saying: "I think it is possible to achieve peace with the Palestinians"; and that "The most important thing is to initiate the establishment of a Palestinian state while we are still in power." However, lower down the article, details are given which should have cast serious doubts on the equity of Sheerit's planned "final settlement peace offer". Walker writes: "Under his proposal, Jerusalem would remain under Israeli sovereignty, the Jordan river would remain Israel's border and Israel would annex most of the 144 Jewish settlements." As anyone at all familiar with the region and its national borders should know, this plan would, of course, result in the legitimised *expansion* of Israel to include most of the land illegally occupied since 1967: East Jerusalem, the whole of the West Bank (in line with a border at the Jordan

river) and 144 other 'settlements' which, although unspecified, must logically lie in territory *other* than the West Bank - presumably in Syria and Gaza. Not only does this plan go unexplained, uncontextualised and uncriticised, by presenting it in contrast to Netanyahu's "uncompromising" stance, Walker's report quite logically implies that it represents a compromise. This in turn supports Israel's claims to being the conciliatory party in the dispute and further undermines the Palestinian objections to the continued legalised theft of land which both this proposal and the Oslo Accords represent.

Third, violence proposed by Israel against sovereign (Muslim) states often goes similarly uncriticised by the broadsheet press - take the report **Israel steps up plans for air attacks on Iran** (*The Times*, 9 December 1997) for example. As the headline suggests, the article, again written by Christopher Walker, reports the "options" available to Israel in forming their "military contingency plans to neutralise Iran's Russian-backed missile and nuclear weapon programme". The 'need' for such a plan, already hinted at in its description above, was clearly articulated by the Israeli Defence Minister, Yitzhak Mordechai:

"A country like Iran possessing such long range weaponry - a country that lacks stability, that is characterised by Islamic fundamentalism, by an extremist ideology that is striving to become a superpower in the Middle East - is very dangerous."

Such an accusation represents the classic approach of the propagandist, as illustrated by Ellul (1965: 58): "He who wants to provoke a war not only proclaims his own peaceful intentions but also accuses the other party of provocation. [...] He who wants to establish a dictatorship always insists his adversaries are bent on dictatorship." Israeli foreign policy, Shahak (1997) suggests, is not driven by "the 'wish for peace', so often assumed as the Israeli aim" (p.3); rather, like all states, Israel has "hegemonic aspirations. A state aspiring to hegemony in an area cannot tolerate other strong states in that area" (Ibid.). Should Iran have made similar argumentative claims about the hegemonic political ambitions, the religious fundamentalism (of, for example, the Gush Emunim) and the extremist ideology of Israel, they would no doubt be presented as either laughable or another example of Iranian belligerence. However, Shahak (1997) shows that such argumentative claims from Iran would, in fact be well founded:

Since the spring of 1992, public opinion in Israel is being prepared for the prospect of a war with Iran, to be fought to bring about Iran's total military and political defeat. In one version, Israel would attack Iran alone, in another it would 'persuade' the West to do the job. The indoctrination campaign to this effect is gaining in intensity. It is accompanied by what could be called semi-official horror scenarios purporting to detail what Iran could do to Israel, the West and the entire world when it acquires nuclear weapons as it is expected to a few years hence. (Shahak, 1997: 54).

Shahak illustrates this point by quoting “respected and influential Israeli experts or commentators on strategic affairs” (1997: 58) whose opinions are regularly included in mainstream Israeli newspapers. Daniel Leshem for example, a member of the Centre for Strategic Research at Tel Aviv University, has been quoted proposing to “create the situation which would appear similar to that with Iraq before the Gulf crisis” (1997: 55; originally in *Al Hamishmar*, 19 February 1993). His proposed foreign policy is as sinister as it sounds:

Iran claims sovereignty over three strategically located islands in the Gulf. Domination over those islands is capable of assuring domination not only over all the already active oil-fields of the area, but also over all the natural gas sources not yet exploited. We should hope that, emulating Iraq, Iran would contest the Gulf Emirates and Saudi Arabia over these islands and, repeating Saddam Hussein’s mistake in Kuwait, start a war. [...] This prospect is in my view quite likely, because patience plays no part in the Iranian mentality. But if they nevertheless refrain from starting a war, we should take advantage of their involvement in Islamic terrorism which already hurts the entire world. (Ibid.)

The report **Israel steps up plans for air attacks against Iran** should be viewed as part of this belligerent anti-Iranian heritage.

Returning to Walker’s report, the greater part of the article is dedicated to describing “the two main options” that “Military planners are studying” as part of this anti-Iran plan. Either: “hitting Iranian missile plants in the cities of Shiraz, Kuramabad, Farhin and Semnan with the ‘long arm’ of its airforce, or targeting foreign scientists at the facilities rather than the buildings themselves.” Walker then goes on to give further breathless descriptions of “advanced F15I fighter planes” and “surgical air strikes” identical to the well trodden rhetoric of militaristic techno-philia (discussed further in Chapter 6). Conspicuously absent from the discussion is any recognition of the *intrinsic illegality* of the plan, Israel’s blind contempt for human life in proposing to bomb another nation without making any consideration for the welfare of Iranians, and the uncritical acceptance of Israel’s seeming *right* to act accordingly on the part of Walker. Such a tacit support for the proposed Israeli offensive could only be achieved after: first, Iranian human life is degraded to a point where it is thought to be disposable; and second, Israel are licensed to engage in any and all illegal activities since (following their rhetorical repositioning into the in-group ‘Us’) they are perceived to be acting for ‘the greater good’.

Attempted assassination of Khaled Meshal

A similarly nonchalant attitude towards state-sponsored terrorism (at least when it’s perpetrated by ‘Us’ and directed towards Muslims) characterise the manner in which British broadsheet newspapers reported Mossad’s attempted assassination of the leader of Hamas’ politburo, Khaled Meshal. The exact details of the attack are still somewhat obscure, but this much is clear: on 26 September 1997, as

Mr Meshal was entering his office building in the Jordanian capital Amman, two men approached him from behind and pressed a device to his ear. Meshal heard a loud noise, fell to the ground and immediately started shaking uncontrollably. The two men escaped in a waiting car containing a further two men, but were arrested later in the day by Jordanian police at which point they produced Canadian passports and were identified as Sean Kendall and Barry Beads. However, the two men refused to see the Canadian diplomat, their passports were discovered to be forgeries and when the remaining two assailants took refuge in the Israeli embassy suspicions gave way to an Israeli admission of guilt. Canada withdrew its ambassador to Israel; Israel brokered a deal to release Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of Hamas and, in what King Hussein called a “gesture of peace”, deport him to Jordan. Finally, Israel was forced to send an ‘antidote’ to the Jordanian hospital where Meshal was recovering, fuelling speculation that the device was a chemical or biological weapon.

Interestingly, in the recent Israeli army attacks on the refugee camp at Ramallah a new and mysterious poison gas was used. Although Israeli officials insist that this was merely tear gas, Palestinian civilians were admitted to hospitals suffering very similar symptoms to those exhibited by Meshal - muscular pain, severe spasms and, in some cases, paralysis. The Israeli Army have repeatedly refused to reveal this gas’ active component, thereby inhibiting the work of doctors treating the afflicted and prolonging their suffering.

The leniency-verging-on-flippancy with which the broadsheets approached this story is characterised a *Guardian* article headlined **Mossad own goal rebounds on PM** (4 October 1997) - the sporting metaphor of the headline already diminishing the significance of the reported action. The attempt on Meshal’s life resulted in hardly a word of criticism: the failed assassination is described as a “bungled attack” which has set “a bizarre new benchmark” in Mossad’s “colourful history”, the facts of which “are reminiscent of a paperback thriller.” The reporter, Julian Borger, preferred to focus on the potentially negative effect which the *failure* of the mission will have on Netanyahu’s credibility and political career. For example, a bold, closed captioned quote read “There is a growing feeling this government can’t get it right - it just goes from screw-up to screw-up”, drawing attention to the *failure* of the attack rather than its unquestioned illegality. Any mention of international law, of ‘terrorism’ or the implications of a sovereign state assassinating its political and/or criminal opponents was carefully avoided. Indeed Borger reframes the attempted assassination as another entry on the list of Mossad’s “*daring exploits*” (emphasis added). Other examples on the list included “the raid on Entebbe and the abduction of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann”, thereby minimising the opportunities to object to the attempted assassination of the politician - these are, after all, the dashing boys of Mossad.

The report in the *Independent*, although arguing that “the attempted assassination” (also described as “zany”) showed that Israel was “responding to political challenges in a very primitive way”,

also chose to frame the attack as a(nother) failure of Netanyahu's government rather than as a terrorist act (**Bibi flounders in sea of troubles after Hamas fiasco**, 4 October 1997). The *Telegraph* also avoided any suggestion that the "botched assassination attempt" amounted to state-sponsored terrorism, although they did make repeated and extended allegations of Meshal's involvement in Hamas' terrorist actions, despite his working for the party politburo rather than its armed wing (**Hamas leader tells how he survived murder attempt**, 4 October 1997). Similarly *The Times* labelled the attack as the "botched Mossad secret service operation in Jordan", and further suggested that "the Israeli public [had] expressed concern that the already fading image of Mossad's invincibility has suffered a severe blow" (**Calls for inquiry over Mossad plot**, 4 October 1997). Somewhere along the line, the fact that a state had attempted to assassinate a politician was lost.

The Sunday broadsheets were equally prone to normalising the attack on Meshal. In a report headlined **Netanyahu censored by Hamas truce offer** for example (*The Sunday Times*, 19 October 1997) the assassination attempt received the by now standard description of being a "bungled" operation. In addition, the report lower down stated:

Netanyahu points to polls showing support for his decision, made after a suicide bombing in Jerusalem on July 30, to eliminate senior Hamas figures. But critics say the risk to the delicate relationship with Jordan should have ruled out carrying out any assassination attempt on Jordanian territory.

Note that it is not the plan to "eliminate senior Hamas figures" which "critics" balked at, but rather Netanyahu's decision to allow it to occur on Jordanian territory. The simple illegality of Netanyahu's plan, not to mention the scandalous possibility that the Israeli government may have developed an explicit 'shoot-to-kill' policy in 'dealing with' its political or even *criminal* opponents, are concerns which the journalist neither acknowledges nor criticises.

Finally, in an article summarising the consequences of the attack, the *Sunday Times* reported that an Israeli committee set up "to investigate a *bungled* attempt by Mossad agents to assassinate one of the leaders of Hamas, the *Islamic fundamentalist group*, is expected to recommend the dismissal of Danny Yatom, the head of the service" (**'Arab hunter' bids to control Mossad**, 9 November 1997; emphases added). The favourite to succeed Yatom was Meir Dagan - "a man who knows no fear" who during the first *intifadha* formed two "hit squads, codenamed 'Cherry' and 'Samson', to carry out assassinations in the West Bank and Gaza". Other than this obvious qualification to head Mossad, based as it is on a clear willingness to not let things as insignificant as the law or even basic humanity get in the way of operations, Dagan is also said to have:

- “established a covert death squad called ‘Rimon’ (grenade)” which “gunned down dozens of terrorists”;
- “helped to establish a unit of about 30 soldiers acting as a hit squad in southern Lebanon”;
- and is regarded as “one of the army’s leading ‘Arab hunters’.”

The possibility that this man could head Mossad worried the reporter, Uzi Mahnaimi, who stated that his appointment “could seriously threaten Middle East stability” since he “is known to favour an increase in assassinations of those deemed subversive to Israel.” In contrast to the “gifted but uncontrollable” Dagan, the journalist, Mahnaimi, represents Danny Yatom as a reliable choice to continue leading Mossad, despite “the debacle in Amman”. In the only evidence which the article provides in support of Yatom - taken from Yatom’s own testimony “before the security services committee of the Knesset” - Mahnaimi suggests that Yatom “opposed the attack on Meshal, *preferring a plan to kill another target on a different continent.*” That such scant regard for human life could be included in a broadsheet news report, not only without criticism but also in *support* of Yatom’s suitability in leading Mossad, is particularly disturbing.²

The whole approach of the British Broadsheet press to the reporting of Mossad’s attempted assassination of Khaled Meshal was characterised by a low estimation of (Arab-Muslim) life, and their simultaneous acceptance of Israel acting with such murderous impunity - with some reports implying that Israel were justified in attempting to kill Meshal and other opponents. In this way, the reporting of the attempted assassination represents an archetypal example of the ideological square: whilst the terrorist acts of Hamas (‘Meshal’s fundamentalist group’) are condemned, the equally terrorist act of Israel in attempting to assassinate him (‘or perhaps they should have killed someone else’) with a chemical/biological weapon, are implicitly accepted since they attracted no significant criticism.

As an epilogue to these events: Meir Dagan was eventually made Head of Mossad in September 2002, by his long time friend and wartime commander Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. The close association between Sharon and ex-General Dagan (also an active Likud member) developed and was cemented during the Yom Kippur war of 1973, when Dagan was the first officer to cross the Suez canal under Sharon’s command. After replacing his more diplomatically orientated predecessor Ephraim Halevi, one of Mossad’s first policy decisions under Dagan’s leadership was, ‘coincidentally’, to authorise the assassination of individuals in ‘friendly foreign countries’ deemed to be a ‘threat’ to Israel. Although Israeli officials have refused to either confirm or deny that it has authorised such terrorist actions, the change in policy was revealed by former Mossad agents during interviews with the press agency UPI, and later confirmed by US intelligence officers.³ The first recorded example of this ‘new wave’ of assassinations took place on or around 2 March 2003, when Abu Mohammed al-Masri, the

alleged head of al-Qaeda in Lebanon, was killed by a car bomb as he arrived at mosque. Reacting to the murder, an Israeli security source said: "For us, there is now no difference between al-Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, Hamas, Hezbollah and others [...] We refer to them all as the Islamic terror syndicate" (in **Mossad hardman in first foreign kill**, Uzi Mahnaimi, *Sunday Times*, 9 March 2003). This is the first evidence that when it comes to "targeted killings", the "unconventional", "daring" and "controversial" Dagan ⁴ will not make the same mistakes as Danny Yatom: he will make sure his targets are dead.

¹ At time of writing, the end of 2002, this schematic representation of Israel/Palestine has undergone a partial shift. Newspapers' positioning Israel as 'We' has become problematic due to the seeming 'shoot to kill' policy of the Israeli army and, particularly, the growing number of Palestinian children killed by Israeli troops. There is, however, a residual level of identification in the press (in the sense of 'identifying oneself with') illustrated by journalists representing the violence as Palestinian *action* (however ineffectual) and resulting Israeli *reaction*. Although this does represent a significant shift from the framing of the conflict as 'Palestinians/Muslims attack; Israelis defend' shown in this sample, it still provides a defence (however tenuous) for Israeli violence and ignores the ongoing proactive and provocative policies of, amongst other things, humiliation, intimidation, incarceration, house demolition and torture practised by Israel in the occupied territories.

² Despite Yatom's long and close friendship with Binyamin 'Bibi' Netanyahu, Ephraim Halevi replaced him as the Head of Mossad in 1998.

³ **Israel unleashes its death squads**, Queensland Newspapers, 18 January 2003, cited on *Indymedia* (www.indymedia.org.il/imc/israel/webcast/47449.html) consulted 25 March 2003.

⁴ Quoted in: **Insights into new Mossad chief Meir Dagan**, *Israeli Press Review* (www.lebanonwire.com/0209/02091717DS.asp) consulted 25 March 2003.