**Fear and Trembling: Western Media and Hamas**

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Every few years, Israel is seemingly overcome with an insatiable lust for blood that can apparently only be satisfied with otherwise inexplicable attacks on Gaza -- or so innocent consumers of Western media are likely led to conclude from the coverage of the conflict.

With depressing regularity, each military confrontation between Israel and Hamas triggers the same old, tired cycle of misinformation among much of the international media. Instead of providing much-needed context, Israel’s defensive war against Islamist terrorists hiding among their own civilians is turned into a simplistic morality play where, like in a sports match, the side with the higher score, i.e. casualty figures, wins.

No decent human being could not feel compassion and sorrow over the scores of dead Palestinian civilians. But the almost pornographic close-ups of injured and killed Palestinians without explaining the central role Hamas plays in their deaths and injuries do more to confuse then enlighten the public.

In many ways, CCTV coverage of the conflict without the networks’ editorial picture selection and emotional but information-lacking voice-overs would probably do a better job at informing the public.

Yes, we would still see the destruction caused by Israeli shelling but the CCTV cameras would also catch Hamas terrorists firing from civilian areas, show how the IDF is dropping leaflets warning civilians ahead of bombings and broadcast how civilians are used as human shields -- all important elements of this war usually missing from the coverage.

Occasionally, though, the truth slips out, often almost accidentally. Take for example the July 15 story in the Washington Post, headlined, “While Israel held its fire, the militant group Hamas did not.” In the seventh paragraph we suddenly read that the Shifa Hospital in Gaza City had “become a de facto headquarters for Hamas leaders, who can be seen in the hallways and offices.”

This is reported almost in passing, without further analysis. It seem neither the journalist nor his editors realized the enormity of this information. The leadership of one of the warring parties is hiding in a hospital, a clear war crime validating Israeli accusations. But instead of this becoming headline news, triggering further reporting by other journalists, we get nothing but silence.

Or take this July 8, New York Times story, “Israel Warns Gaza Targets by Phone and Leaflet.” In one of the rare instances the media bothered to detail to what extraordinary length Israel goes to protect Palestinian civilians, Gaza resident Salah Kaware tells the reporter that he received a personal call from Israel urging him to leave the building.

The second paragraph contains this bombshell: “’Our neighbors came in to form a human shield,’” he said, with some even going to the roof to prevent a bombing.”

Amazingly, the reporter did not take further note of this incredible admission from a Palestinian, which again validates Israeli accusations usually treated with much skepticism.

What explains this all-too-often context-lacking coverage, the absence of investigative reporting into Hamas crimes? Part of the answer seems to be fear.

On Tuesday, Italian journalist Gabriele Barbati sent out the following tweet: “Out of #Gaza far from #Hamas retaliation: misfired rocket killed children yday in Shati. Witness: militants rushed and cleared debris.”

Despite the fact that Hamas rockets have a high rate of misfiring and civilians are often caught in the middle of intense urban warfare, every Palestinian civilian casualty is automatically assumed to have been caused by Israel. And so when a strike killed several children in Shati refugee camp, the media rushed to blame Israel even though the IDF said it did not target this site.

Israel’s investigation concluded that a Palestinian rocket fell short, and instead of killing their intended civilian targets in Israel, killed the Palestinian civilians.

Mr. Barbati’s reporting not only supports Israel’s version of the events, it raises a far greater question. Are foreign journalists working under the constant threat from Hamas and thus “self-censoring” themselves? Is this why we don’t see coverage of Hamas terrorists firing rockets from civilian areas, the use of human shields and other war crimes?

Palestinian journalist Radjaa Abou Dagga, for example, wrote an article for French newspaper Libération, published July 23, detailing how Hamas intimidated him, forcing him to leave Gaza, and how Hamas terrorists use a section of Shifa hospital, just a few meters from the emergency room, as their offices, confirm the earlier Washington Post story.

The next day, Mr. Dagga asked Libération to remove his article from their website, apparently out of fear for his family still in Gaza. Other Western journalists have been caught removing Hamas-critical tweets without explanation while others have been prevented by Hamas from leaving Gaza.

It wouldn’t be the first time that Western journalists play by Palestinian rules. In 2000, Ricardo Cristiano, from the Italian state television RAI, published a letter of apology in Arabic over the filming of the lynching of two Israelis in Ramallah. Mr. Cristiano promised to "respect" the "rules" laid down by the Palestinian Authority, and pledged to prevent similar images being shown in the future.

Whatever the reason is for today’s miscoverage -- fear, ignorance or bias -- we are not getting the true picture from Gaza.