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Aggressors and victims on both sides of the wall

In election week, Israelis and Palestinians agree on one thing: the Western media is biased

By Vincent Graff

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Arnold Roth did not choose to become entangled with the international media. That decision was taken for him by Izzedine al-Masri, a Palestinian man who walked into a Jerusalem restaurant four-and-a-half years ago with a bag containing nails and explosives strapped to his body. When al-Masri blew himself up, he took Roth's 15-year-old daughter, Malki, and 14 other people with him.

Today, Roth is often approached by news gatherers from abroad looking for his reaction to the latest development in Israeli politics. He is considered and thoughtful but he objects to the fact that, as he sees it, media organisations from abroad paint Israel as a bully. "In Western countries, the broad perception of Israel is of it being powerful and privileged," said Roth. "For someone like me, whose daughter was murdered by people who danced in the street afterwards, it is hard to take that viewpoint."

I met Roth in Palestinian East Jerusalem last week. We were standing in the shadow of the 8 metre-high concrete wall Israel has built to protect itself from suicide bombers - sparking condemnation worldwide. Roth had been invited there by Sky News, to talk terrorism and democracy with its Middle East correspondent, Emma Hurd.

I spent much of last week with Hurd, her producer and crew as she attempted to report Israel's election to a British audience. We travelled to West Bank settlements, to Arab East Jerusalem, and secular Jewish Tel Aviv. Hurd asked tough questions, dissecting a complicated political landscape. And I never heard anyone complain about bias in Sky's coverage of the Middle East.

But when I talked in general terms to Israelis about the press and broadcasters, the story was always the same. Not one of them thought Israel's image abroad was good. Most blamed the media. Interestingly, nor did I find one Palestinian who was happy with the media. When the injustice of one's own life feels so overwhelming, one is tempted to think outsiders should pay more attention - and that they are ignoring you for a reason.

I should lay my cards on the table. I am many things: a journalist, British, Jewish though not religious. I was last in Israel was 20 years ago. I would not describe myself as a Zionist but I respect the fact that Israel is a democracy in a sea of dictatorships and I am certain the country ought to exist. I also recognise that Israel is surrounded by many nations that do not share that view.

David Horovitz, editor of the Jerusalem Post, believes journalists from outside Israel rush to snap judgements. Take the security barrier. It has made Palestinians' lives more difficult, but that is only half the story, said Horovitz. "Newspapers never talk about the thousands of Israeli children whose lives it has saved." Nor can they show the pictures of these children - unlike the Palestinian youngsters who have been injured or killed by the Israeli army. "Certain parts of the media are in the grip of an extreme misconception about who is the aggressor and who is the underdog," said Horovitz.

His argument deserves house room. But it is also true that Israeli deaths receive more coverage than Palestinian ones. This may be because Jewish fatalities tend to occur in large groups, in everyday situations. Palestinian deaths tend to happen one or two at a time, at the hands of soldiers or police.

Every time a Palestinian or a Jewish Israeli expressed their dismay at the portrayal of their people and plight, I asked the same question: why is the media biased against you? The answers were depressing.

Listen to the words of Arye, a Jewish settler on the West Bank and Nisreen, a Palestinian housewife who lives a few miles from him in East Jerusalem. "Maybe it's because of all the Arab oil," said Arye. Nisreen countered: "The Jews are very powerful, in London and across the world."

They would not admit it, but these two people, who wear different clothes, eat different foods and pray to different Gods, have more in common than they think.

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