

# Calling Out the Tellers of Anti-Israel Lies

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## COMMENTARY

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Media coverage of, and academic writings about, Israel routinely betray the intellectual integrity that should govern both. Israel has paid a steep price; the Palestinians perhaps even more so.

It would be difficult to quantify precisely the damage inflicted by the omissions, distortions, and accusations that routinely disfigure portrayals of Israel. Still, the steady flow of malicious propaganda posing as news and scholarship poisons the debate about a complex and tragic clash between two peoples. The frequent characterizations of Israel as a moral and political monster — a state supposedly guilty of colonialism, apartheid, and all manner of war crimes and crimes against humanity including forced population transfer, ethnic cleansing, and

genocide — reinforce Palestinian expectations that their demands be met immediately and in full while bolstering Israeli suspicions that they can't get a fair hearing in the court of public opinion and can't secure a just deal under the international community's auspices. Gross untruths about Israel drive the parties further apart, not only defaming Israel but also setting back the legitimate interests of the Palestinians, whose cause they are contrived to advance.

Emphasizing your side's merits and the other side's defects is only human, and partisan reporting is an old story. The new story is that in service, for the most part, to progressive political goals, Western journalists and professors have flouted their professional obligations in order to erect an edifice of falsehoods about Israel.

To catalogue the falsehoods, expose their authors, and set the record straight requires prodigious research and painstaking documentation, a grasp of contemporary political realities, and a synoptic, historically informed understanding of the larger Israeli-Arab conflict. With the 2014 publication in Hebrew of "Tasiyat Hashkarim," which became a bestseller in Israel, journalist Ben-Dror Yemini established that he was the man for the task. His "Industry of Lies: Media, Academia, and the Israeli-Arab Conflict," just appearing in English translation from Hebrew, will prove indispensable to those politicians and policy makers, journalists and professors, and members of the general public who believe that getting the story right in the Middle East is inseparable from advancing the cause of peace.

Yemini, with whom I have had the pleasure of discussing Israeli politics for several years, is a columnist at Yediot Aharonot, Israel's second-most widely read newspaper. A lawyer by training, he also served as opinion-page editor at Maariv, another leading outlet. He is counted among a small number of eminent center to center-left public intellectuals — including Professor Emeritus Shlomo Avineri, Professor Emerita Ruth Gavison, Professor Yossi Shain, Dr. Gadi Taub, and Professor Alexander Yakobson — whom the left often confuses with conservatives because they are proud Zionists.

Unlike the Israeli right, they generally opposed the country's West Bank settlement policy, and today, for the most part, object to building outside the large settlement blocs — in effect small cities that nearly everyone expects to remain under Israel's control. They do not hesitate to criticize the government when it deviates from the liberal and democratic principles on which the country was established, while insisting that Israel was properly founded as also, and should remain, the nation-state of the Jewish people. Since the eruption of the Second Intifada in 2001 -- following Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat's flat-out rejection of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's 2000 Camp David peace proposal -- Yemini and those of similar sensibility have highlighted the major obstacles to peace posed by PA intransigence, PA incitement against Israel, and the Sunni and Shia jihadism that pervades Israel's harsh, unstable neighborhood.

Yemini's book deals with these obstacles but focuses on another formidable impediment to easing the conflict: the multitude of lies — not imprecise reporting, debatable interpretations, or occasional errors and lapses in judgment, but rather demonstrable falsehoods — whose purpose is to delegitimize Israel and place it beyond the pale. The lies, he argues, take several forms.

“The insidious lie” is constructed out of half-truths and suppressed information. For example, in 2010, writing in the New York Review of Books, journalist Peter Beinart claimed that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “rejects the idea of a Palestinian state.” Beinart cited a book by Netanyahu published in 1993 — a time when the idea was also rejected by most of the Israeli left, including then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin — while omitting mention of Netanyahu's groundbreaking 2009 Bar-Ilan address, in which he became the first Israeli prime minister, right or left, to endorse a Palestinian state.

“Lies of proportion” attach terms denoting thoroughgoing evil — say, “apartheid” — to common forms of discrimination that can and should be corrected within the system. Such is the case with the condition of Israel's Arab citizens who, while accorded full civil and political rights, nevertheless face remediable discrimination similar to — in many cases less severe than — that to which ethnic minorities in European countries are subject. Lies of proportion also include condemnations wildly at odds with transgressions. In 2013, Yemini notes, the U.N. Human Rights Council “adopted 25 Resolutions, four for all the other countries in the world and 21 against Israel.”

“Lies based on true stories” present an inflammatory statement or violent action as if it were representative of the society as a whole. It is all too common for reporters and academics to dwell on the outrageous utterances or deeds of fringe figures in Israel while ignoring the country's pluralistic fabric. Yemini rightly calls attention to Israeli versions of popular reality TV shows in which the viewing public votes to determine the winner. Between 2013 and 2015, Israelis chose as champions an Arab Israeli on “Master Chef,” another Arab Israeli on “The Voice,” an Ethiopian Jewish woman on “Big Brother,” and a Filipino foreign worker on “The X-Factor.”

“Academic lies” are the work of professors who exploit their university positions and scholarly authority. Yemini quotes Professor Ilan Pappé, a notorious inventor of Israeli crimes who, in a 2004 book, brazenly justified contempt for the historical record: “My bias is apparent despite the desire of my peers that I stick to facts and the ‘truth’ when reconstructing past realities. I view any such construction as vain and presumptuous.”

Then there is the “the Big Lie,” which distorts reality so grotesquely that ordinary people assume that nobody would have the effrontery to promulgate it if it weren't true. “The contemporary version of the Big Lie turns Israel, a country that harms innocent bystanders

less than any other party to a conflict of similar proportions, into a state that carries out genocide,” writes Yemini. “Meanwhile, terrorists and Hamas members, who publicly announce their intentions to exterminate the Jews, become ‘freedom fighters.’”

In a particularly revelatory chapter, Yemini explores the social and economic well-being of West Bank and Gaza Palestinians. “Israel’s control,” Yemini writes, “has not gotten in the way of Palestinian prosperity.” To the contrary, citing an array of charts and graphs covering life expectancy, infant mortality, and education, he shows that “by all objective measures,” Israel’s administration in Gaza, which ended in 2005, and the West Bank, which continues, “only accelerated the rate of development in these areas — despite, not because of, the best efforts of the Palestinian national movement,” placing Palestinians well ahead of the vast majority of Middle East Arabs.

Imagine how much nearer Palestinians might be today to ruling themselves if our progressive media and academy got in the habit of telling the truth about Israel.

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