

Questions on the media coverage of Gaza?

NEW YORK, AUGUST 20, 2005 – The week of the great Gaza disengagement is over – and what did we learn? We learned that even a rightwing government in Israel is capable of taking initiatives for peace as well as for war, And that its army and police can act in a disciplined and non-violent manner despite a history of complaints of excessive force and human rights abuses

We learned that Israel is as divided as the United States, fragmented along many political and religious faultlines.

We learned that not all Israelis are believers in American democratic values nor are they the legendary pioneers and Kibbutzniks who made the desert bloom. Many are hard-core true believers in a wild-eyed messianic missions who put biblical beliefs above international law.

We learned that there are Jewish fanatics – who some in the Israeli Defense Force called “lunatics” – who are driven by as much hatred and fundamentalist dogma as anyone on the “other side.” And many of them are not natural born “Sabras” either – but hostile transplants from Brooklyn.

We learned again that Jews also commit violent acts of terror as in the unprovoked killing of Palestinian workers or the assaults on soldiers with acid.

We learned that the TV media can still cover events outside the United States not just affecting Americans, with some depth and for more than a sound bite even when Michael Jackson or Madonna are not around.

Note, the emphasis on “some depth” because the coverage was deeply flawed and all too characteristic of the simplistic way TV news covers politics.

TV thrives on conflict, drama and the plight of “sympathetic” victims. Initially, at least the settlers played that role in what was pictured as a tragic dilemma that forced good people to lose their heir homes and faith in their leaders.

CNN compared their protests to the passive resistance of the American civil rights movement with many stories featuring crying women and beleaguered men of God. Israel itself was pictured sympathetically as country that was

doing the right thing against its own interests.

As it became clear that many of the resisters were not settlers at all, they were turned into vague “sympathizers” or “activists” standing up for their country and religion. Only later when some turned violent, did the news frame change and it was clear that many had violent agendas.

Even as the Israeli media branded them “infiltrators” and right-wing extremists, CNN was caught up in the images offered up with little historic context or background/

We never really learned who “they” were, what they believed, or who was funding them.

Or, for that matter, funding the disengagement which rewarded most of the families who did go willingly from their state sanctioned subsidized communities with \$400,000 apiece, presumably to be paid eventually by US taxpayers.

Most importantly, we never really learned WHY this was happening and how Ariel Sharon, once called by some the King of the Jews, and by others, the Butcher of Beirut for the atrocities committed there under his watch, suddenly turned into a peace activist. All he would say is “The changing reality in this country, in this region, and in the world required another reassessment and changing of positions.”

Israeli writer Hillel Schenker was mystified. “So why is he doing this?, “ he asked in the Nation. “The bestselling book Boomerang, by journalists Ofer Shelah and Raviv Druker, claims that he wanted to divert attention from corruption scandals involving himself and his sons, something that Sharon categorically denies. His senior adviser lawyer Dov Weisglass lists a number of reasons: concern when senior pilots and officers in elite combat units became refuseniks, declaring that they could no longer serve in a growing immoral occupation...”

Did you hear any of these factors reported in the coverage?

What about the legal aspects or does law and UN resolutions matter only when Washington wants them to matter to find a legal pretext to invade Iraq? As the respected Lebanese journalist Rami G. Khouri explains:

“The Israeli colonization of the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, the Golan Heights and other occupied Arab lands is a crime, by at least three compelling measures. It is explicitly prohibited by international law and the 4th Geneva Convention’s proscription of an occupying power moving its civilians into the

lands it occupies. It is condemned by name in dozens of UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. And it is rejected by the bilateral policies of the entire community of nations, which refuses to acknowledge Israeli sovereignty in the occupied lands.”

I watched hours of coverage and heard little mention in the US of the way the ongoing occupation violates international law. I saw little about reported new land grabs by Tel Aviv in Jerusalem while these costly to maintain settlements in Gaza was being surrendered. Could it be that some “facts on the ground” were just being traded for others?

Palestinian Human Rights activist Mazin Quemsiyeh labeled the coverage a “media circus. “There has been a media circus fed by a huge Israeli government PR effort to drum up sympathy for the “painful” relocation of settlers from Gaza (<2% of total settler population). But who are these settlers and why were they brought there in the first place? Is Israel really leaving Gaza or merely switching to occupying it from outside rather than from inside? Will Gaza become a large open air prison with its population held hostage as Israel control its airspace, natural resources, and access? Few journalists dare to ask.”

To these questions, we can add others. What role did Condoleeza Rice play behind the scenes in forcing Sharon’s hand? Could she be trying to eke out a victory for President Bush;’s badly battered foreign policy in Israel, in positive contrast to the continuing debacle in Iraq? She knows how important progress there is to the Administration’s worldwide crusade against militant Islam.

Does the growing scandal of the Israel lobbying group AIPAC which has been found to have passed on secrets from Us government officials to Israel, have anything to do with this? Could the Saudis be using their economic clout quietly with threats of an oil boycott? Who and what is pulling the strings?

We have heard a lot about issues of war and peace, but very little about the interests in play.

In short, what is really going on behind the scenes?

Yes, this region has always been a labyrinth of intrigue but after a week of hot footage and emotional storytelling, we are left with more questions than answers. Did the coverage engage or disengage you? What do you know now that you didn’t before?

If you think you can trust the mass media to tell us the whole story, think again.