



WHAT GOES UNSAID

Reframing American Media Coverage of the Israel-Palestine Conflict

By Marda Dunsky

On July 18 last year, the latest Gaza war entered its eleventh day. Israel was stepping up its ground incursion into the coastal strip to battle Hamas militants. In nearly two weeks of Israeli bombardment from the air and Hamas rocket fire, the death toll had topped 280 Palestinians and two Israelis.

The same day, some six thousand miles and seven time zones to the west, fallout from the conflict had spread to midtown Manhattan. Across the street from the headquarters of the *New York Times*, the pro-Israel media watchdog group CAMERA—the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America—unveiled its latest three-story billboard castigating the newspaper’s coverage of Israel. Over an image of a rocket, the billboard proclaimed: “Hamas attacks Israel: Not surprising.” Over an image of a pen, it continued: “The New York Times attacks Israel: *Also* not surprising.” CAMERA concluded its admonishment: “Stop skewing facts. Stop the key omissions. Stop the Anti-Israeli Bias.”

Accusations by pro-Israel as well as pro-Palestine partisans about American mainstream media bias have long been a feature of the Israel-Palestine conflict. But overlooked amid the vitriol over contested narratives—in which journalists are caught in the metaphorical crossfire—is a serious and long-running failure of the coverage: U.S. media reporting on the conflict has become an echo chamber where key contextual factors are left unreported or underreported. One of the most important omissions is the impact of U.S. Middle East policy on the trajectory of the long conflict.

The echo chamber reflects, amplifies, and reinforces the pattern of failed negotiations and large-scale bloodletting and destruction. It routinely chronicles ongoing eruptions of communal violence and the consistent trend of Israeli settlement expansion. But

◁ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, March 3, 2015, Washington, DC. *Doug Mills/The New York Times/Redux*

it rarely analyzes or questions these patterns or the critical part the United States has played in the failed negotiations and perpetuation of the violence. The coverage thus reinforces a limited if not deeply compromised public discourse and a stagnant policy.

Fighting the Media War

The struggle over narratives was again evident during the fifty-day Gaza war of 2014—and one in which journalists themselves participated. As seven hundred reporters from forty-two countries arrived to join the 750 already stationed in Israel, media commentators watching from a distance engaged in debate over war coverage on air, in print, and online.

On July 21, for example, MSNBC commentator Rula Jebreal expressed disdain over the network's coverage, having criticized CNN earlier. "We are disgustingly biased when it comes to this issue," Jebreal said. "Look at how [much] airtime [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and his folks have on air on a daily basis. . . . I never see one Palestinian being interviewed on these same issues."

The next day, MSNBC's Chris Hayes countered Jebreal, asserting that U.S. coverage was being defined by images of destruction in Gaza. In fact, Hayes said, there was much chatter "about how the Israelis are losing the media war for the first time." Two days after that Jeremy Scahill, an investigative reporter for the *Intercept*, weighed in on HuffPost Live. Calling the Gaza war "a massive massacre and one epic series of war crime after war crime," Scahill argued that "Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli propagandists are largely given carte blanche to say what they want on American television with very little pushback."

Later that week Fox News aired a MediaBuzz segment in which commentators debated the topic: "Is Hamas Winning Propaganda War Versus Israel?" Fred Francis observed that "Benjamin Netanyahu has been on television so much you would think he was an anchor or co-anchor on some of these shows." Lauren Ashburn asserted that Israel was losing the media war. "They only have the face of Benjamin Netanyahu," she said. "You can't compete with dead bodies." Indeed, by the next day the lopsided body count had risen to more than one thousand Palestinians and fifty Israelis.

In November, *New York Times* Public Editor Margaret Sullivan addressed complaints about the newspaper's Gaza war coverage: "I have received hundreds of emails from readers on both sides of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, complaining about *Times* coverage. And though email is a cold medium, their furor has practically burned through the screen." Sullivan concluded that while not infallible, the paper's coverage is fair, and its point of view "seems to reflect baseline beliefs that Israel has a right to exist and that Palestinians deserve a state of their own." She quoted her

colleague, Foreign Editor Joseph Kahn: “We’re being asked to be partisans. And we’re not partisans.”

Nonetheless, accusations of partisanship persist. In January CAMERA, still claiming that the *Times* distorts facts, downplays Palestinian violence, and holds Israel to a double standard, launched another billboard with a jab at the paper’s motto “All the News That’s Fit to Print.” CAMERA’s version read: “The New York Times Against Israel: All Rant. All Slant. All the Time.”

Allegations of slanted narratives have come from within journalistic ranks as well. Matti Friedman, a former reporter and editor at the Associated Press Jerusalem bureau, leveled a broadside attack on media coverage of Israel in the *Atlantic* in November. Friedman lamented editorial decisions among media outlets that he claimed “appeared to be driven by ideological considerations rather than journalistic ones,” resulting in an anti-Israel bias. He further alleged that correspondents have been co-opted and intimidated by Hamas. AP sharply dismissed Friedman’s charges of editorial slant; correspondents including *New York Times* Jerusalem Bureau Chief Jodi Rudoren and CNN’s Karl Penhaul have rejected claims of Hamas intimidation.

“We’re Not Suckers”

If bias is at work in U.S. media coverage, it does not appear to be a deliberate, premeditated, or systematic tilt toward Israelis or Palestinians. Mainstream U.S. reporting on the Gaza war in fact reflected overall balance and a range of Israeli and Palestinian points of view. A notable exception continued to be Fox News, which routinely tilts toward Israel in sourcing and structuring its reports. Otherwise, mainstream coverage across the board focused on impact, scope, and drama in a war that ultimately claimed the lives of approximately 2,205 Gazans (1,483 of them civilians, including 521 children) and seventy-one Israelis (sixty-six soldiers and five civilians, including one child), according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Headlines on reports about Israel and its supporters pointed to anxieties of Israelis living near the border with Gaza, American Jews supporting wartime Israel, and the overall mood in the country, including the strain that the war imposed on relations between Jews and Arabs.

In Israel’s South, Families Worry About the Future of Life Near Gaza *New York Times*

Tunnels Lead Right to the Heart of Israeli Fear *New York Times*

An Israeli App Tracking the Gaza Conflict Has Followers Near and Far *New York Times*

Playing It Safe Indoors—and Close to Bomb Shelters *USA TODAY*
 The Immigrant Soldiers Dying for Israel in Gaza *TIME*
 Birthright Trips to Israel Continue Despite Mideast Conflict *New York Times*
 Dissent Quieted with Most Israelis Behind Gaza War *Associated Press*
 Jews and Arabs in Israel More Estranged After War *Washington Post*
 As Gaza War Ebbs, Israeli Arabs Feel Under Threat *Christian Science Monitor*
 Mideast Tensions Force Arab-Israeli Writer to Leave Jerusalem *National Public Radio*

Headlines over stories reported from Gaza, which absorbed the majority of the war's material impacts, reflected Palestinians' immediate physical and emotional traumas as well as opinions on what, if anything, had been gained.

In Crowded Gaza, Civilians Have Few Places to Flee *National Public Radio*
 Conflict in Gaza Takes Toll on the Young *Wall Street Journal*
 Loss of Shelter and Electricity Worsens a Crisis for Fleeing Gazans *New York Times*
 In Fatal Flash, Gaza Psychologist Switches Roles, Turning Into a Trauma Victim *New York Times*
 As Israel and Hamas Claim Victory, Gaza Residents Ask What Was Gained *Los Angeles Times*
 A Boy at Play in Gaza, a Renewal of Warfare, a Family in Mourning *New York Times*
 Month-Long War in Gaza Has Left a Humanitarian and Environmental Crisis *Washington Post*
 In Gaza, Grief, Anger—and No Small Measure of Pride *New York Times*
 About 80 Gaza Clan Members Squeeze Into One Household *Los Angeles Times*
 Subtle Voices of Dissent Surface in War-Torn Gaza *Associated Press*
 As War with Israel Shatters Lives, More Gazans Question Hamas Decisions *Washington Post*
 In Gaza, Emotional Wounds of War Remain Unhealed *Associated Press*
 For a Gaza Athlete, There Is Nowhere to Run *New York Times*

The same even-handed approach was evident in U.S. mainstream media editorials about the conflict. Between July 18 and August 6, the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* each ran three editorials on the Gaza war, all six duly noting Israeli and Palestinian suffering. While the editorials focused on the conduct of the war as it

was unfolding, they also made references to longer-term political strategies—how the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority (PA) should deal with each other, and each with Hamas. Nevertheless, not one of the six editorials suggested even indirectly that U.S. policy on the conflict should be reassessed, much less changed.

Israeli media strategy, however, does have a notable effect on how the narrative is driven, especially by official sources—but not to the hyperbolic extent claimed by Jebreal. Israel’s upper hand in the power dynamic of the conflict extends beyond sovereignty, military prowess, and economic strength to its well-oiled communications apparatus, charged with disseminating *hasbara*—the approximate Hebrew equivalent of “explanation.” Israel is simply unmatched in its well-organized and well-prepared contingent of representatives who speak to American media audiences from a number of vantage points: the prime minister’s office, the foreign ministry, and the military; as well as its ambassadors to the U.S. and UN.

The tenacity with which Israeli communications officials deal with journalists was expressed by Nitzan Chen, director of the Government Press Office, at a November conference in Israel on media management of the Gaza war. “If they spit on us, we don’t say that it’s rain,” Chen was quoted by the *Jerusalem Post*. “If a correspondent lies ... we don’t give up. We pick up the phone, we reprimand, and if need be we threaten, because we’re not suckers.”

The *Post* further reported that military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner said his office had 2,500 encounters with journalists in the course of the fifty-day conflict—embedding them with Israeli military units and guiding fifty media outlets to Hamas tunnel entrances from which journalists broadcast live—and that the Israel Defense Forces reached 570 million people on Facebook in six languages.

A notable exception in reaching beyond the easily accessible preponderance of Israeli official sources was scored by PBS interviewer Charlie Rose, whose fifty-five-minute interview in Qatar with Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal was broadcast in late July.

Ways of Seeing

News, analysis, and opinion about the Israel–Palestine conflict are easily accessible online from scores of American and international mainstream media outlets, as is a range of related content from multitudes of bloggers and partisan sources. But coverage by U.S. mainstream outlets that have reporters on the ground in Israel and Palestine is particularly relevant. These organizations—numbering approximately two dozen—have distinct potential to inform American public opinion and influence U.S. policy precisely because they gather and disseminate information according to professional standards and are not partisan by design.

However, these outlets also generally speak in an American idiom that reflects and too rarely challenges official U.S. government consensus on the conflict. The media coverage internalizes the official Washington narrative that the conflict will be resolved through bilateral negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians aided by the good offices of the United States.

The problem is one of framing rather than of intentional bias. The media's channeling of the Washington consensus not only implies a false symmetry between Israel and Palestine but also erroneously positions the United States as a dispassionate mediator. The truth is that Israel is the overwhelmingly stronger party in the conflict, and U.S. policy has contributed and continues to contribute to that strength.

U.S. media coverage fails to articulate and investigate the role that American interests play in perpetuating the conflict. In the decades since the Oslo Accords of 1993, which failed to result in the envisioned secure Israel and independent Palestine, media coverage has continued to refer to U.S. policy in a manner that is cursory and reactive rather than probing, with little explication of its scope or consequences.

Such framing skirts detailed reporting on the asymmetry of the conflict and the obstacles this presents to a negotiated settlement. According to the World Bank, the gross domestic product (GDP) of Israel, with a population of 8.3 million, is approximately \$290 billion, and its GDP per capita is around \$36,000. The West Bank and Gaza Strip—with a combined population of 4.5 million living in non-contiguous territories under significantly different economic and political conditions—have a combined GDP of approximately \$11 billion and a GDP per capita of about \$2,700.

U.S. policy accentuates this lopsided power dynamic. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), American aid to Israel has totaled approximately \$124.5 billion in routine U.S. bilateral assistance (not including special military and economic supplements) since 1949—making Israel the largest cumulative recipient of U.S. foreign aid since World War II. Sixty percent of the aid has been in the form of military grants. Economic grants of approximately \$32.5 billion, combined with the stimulus that military aid provides the Israeli economy through its defense industry, have widened the power gap between Israel and Palestine in economic as well as security terms.

Since the signing of the Oslo Accords, the United States has granted approximately \$65 billion in bilateral aid to Israel and committed (but not allocated in full) more than \$5 billion in aid to the PA, based in the West Bank under the leadership of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The latter aid includes \$769 million allocated mainly for nonlethal assistance for PA security forces, trained under U.S. supervision to counter the proliferation of Hamas and like groups in the West Bank.

However, aid to the Palestinians can have political strings attached. In response to the PA's application for membership in the International Criminal Court late last

year (which became effective April 1, and enabled the PA to submit its first war crimes allegations against Israel in late June), Republican Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky introduced legislation to block U.S. funding until the PA withdrew its request; and seventy-five of a hundred senators signed a letter to Secretary of State John Kerry backing this demand. The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized: “The Palestinians Repay America/Obama has no choice but to cut off the \$400 million in U.S. aid.” The cutoff has not yet happened, but the message was clear all the same.

From 2007 to 2014, the PA received a total of approximately \$8.4 billion in support from the United States, the European Union and its member states, the Arab League, and other donors, according to the State Department. U.S. aid to Israel during this same period—virtually all of it in military assistance—totaled \$22.5 billion.

Qualitative Military Edge

American media coverage broadly downplays the strategic relationship between the United States and Israel and the impact it has on the conflict. The contextualizing factor of the symbiotic nature of the U.S.-Israeli military relationship—unshakable even amid escalating squabbles between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government—goes largely unreported.

For decades, a guiding precept of U.S. policy toward Israel—rooted in regional geostrategic interests and bolstered by cultural affinity and support by domestic lobby groups that the Palestinians lack—has been to preserve Israel’s Qualitative Military Edge in the Middle East. Since 2008, virtually all American aid to Israel has taken the form of military grants of approximately \$3 billion a year. While maintaining this Cold War-era strategy in the present day assures the United States of continued regional power by proxy, it also has the contradictory if unintended consequence of compromising the oft-stated American objective of brokering Israeli-Palestinian peace.

According to the CRS, military aid to Israel accounts for approximately half of all U.S. foreign military assistance and 20 percent of Israel’s defense budget. Israel is required to use approximately 75 percent of this aid to buy weapons from U.S. arms manufacturers and may use the remainder to patronize its own arms industry, which ranks among the top ten arms exporters worldwide.

In December 2014, it was reported that Israel signed a deal with the United States to buy fourteen F-35 fighter jets at \$110 million each from Lockheed Martin, with another seventeen to be acquired in 2017. These thirty-one aircraft and nineteen previously purchased will form two stealth fighter squadrons of twenty-five planes each. According to the *Jewish Daily Forward*, if the deal is completed, Lockheed Martin has agreed to buy \$6 billion worth of security equipment from Israel.

Israel's enormous military advantage vis-à-vis the Palestinians (and other adversaries) is not routinely referred to in U.S. mainstream media coverage of the conflict. When it does come up, it is usually in reference to Israel's defensive needs and capabilities. A week into the Gaza war, the *Washington Post* published an infographic on the Iron Dome defense system stating that "most rocket attacks on Israel are low-tech assaults met by a high-tech defense. ... Iron Dome's 90-plus-percent success rate suggests that fewer than 10 rockets hit protected zones. No casualties were reported." To date, according to the CRS, the U.S. has invested \$1.28 billion to develop Iron Dome jointly with Israel—accounting for 38 percent of the \$3.35 billion in supplementary U.S. funds allocated for U.S.-Israeli missile-defense programs since 2006.

However, U.S. mainstream media coverage does routinely echo the consistent emphasis that U.S. officials place on Israel's right to defend itself—a resounding theme during the 2014 Gaza war. On July 29, the Senate unanimously passed a widely reported resolution supporting Israel's right to defend itself from Hamas rocket attacks. "I condemn Hamas terrorism," Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said. "We stand with Israel and its right to defend itself."

On August 2, Pentagon spokesman Rear Admiral John Kirby told reporters: "We respect the right for Israel to defend itself. ... It is made more difficult when Hamas hides behind civilian targets, deliberately puts civilians in harm's way, and indiscriminately fires rockets into Israel." Rosemary DiCarlo, deputy U.S. permanent representative to the UN, told the General Assembly on August 6: "Let us remember how this conflict started. Hamas launched repeated rocket attacks at Israel. Hamas deliberately, willfully targets civilians. No nation can accept such attacks, and Israel has the same right to self-defense as every other nation."

Spread of Settlements

U.S. media framing also downplays how Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—and de facto U.S. acceptance of them for decades—constitute a driver of violence and an obstacle to peace. While presenting itself as an "honest broker" in the conflict, in fact the United States—despite official policy and some largely rhetorical objections—has effectively enabled the building of settlements in contravention of international law and consensus in territories Israel has occupied since 1967.

The Fourth Geneva Convention explicitly prohibits occupying powers from settling civilians on occupied territory. In 1979 and 1980, the UN Security Council affirmed three resolutions conferring applicability of the convention on "the Arab territories occupied by Israel in 1967, including Jerusalem" and declaring the settlements built by Israel in those territories to have "no legal validity."

The Israeli settler population in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, meanwhile, has reached some 650,000—about 10 percent of Israel’s Jewish citizens. All but ignored by the mainstream media in reports about faltering or failed peace negotiations is the fact that the number of West Bank settlers has more than tripled since the signing of the Oslo Accords.

U.S. mainstream media outlets occasionally refer to the importance of the settlement issue and routinely cover the Israeli government’s serial announcements about ongoing settlement expansion. However, the coverage often relies heavily on balancing Israeli and Palestinian perspectives, without much original in-depth reporting in the field on how settlement activity in the aggregate affects chances for peace. References to international law and consensus are cursory except when the United Nations weighs in with substantial assessments from time to time.

In January 2013, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and CNN were among American outlets that covered a UN Human Rights Council report on Israel’s settlement policy since 1967. It concluded the settlements are “a mesh of construction and infrastructure leading to a creeping annexation that prevents the establishment of a contiguous and viable Palestinian state and undermines the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination.” Downplaying this critical factor in the conflict, a *Washington Post* editorial headlined “Overheated Rhetoric on Israeli Settlements” instead stressed the realpolitik of settlement expansion—which, the *Post* argued, has taken place “almost entirely [in] areas that both sides expect Israel to annex through territorial swaps in an eventual settlement.”

American Contradictions

The question is: How eventual? The substitution of conflict management for conflict resolution is another significant flaw in U.S. policy, and it permeates media framing. The media echo chamber seldom highlights the glaring gap between U.S. aspirations to broker a peace agreement and effective American actions that would enable this.

In his landmark speech to the Islamic World from Cairo in 2009, President Barack Obama stated: “The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop.” On a visit to Ramallah in 2013, however, Obama urged Palestinian President Abbas not to precondition restarting negotiations on an Israeli settlement freeze. In February 2011, the Obama administration cast its first veto in the UN Security Council, opposing a resolution that condemned Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem as illegal. The 14-1 vote had the support of U.S. allies including Britain and France, but the Obama administration blocked the resolution for being “unbalanced and one-sided.”

The rejection fit a familiar pattern: The United States has used its veto seventy-nine times since 1970; forty-two of those vetoes—more than half—have been cast to shield Israel from international censure, much of it related to Israeli settlement in occupied territory.

U.S. mainstream media reported the veto but not how it squares with U.S. policy that supposedly opposes settlements and supports the establishment of a Palestinian state. Similarly, the media report on individual Israeli announcements of settlement activity but not on the overarching issue: how the spatial-demographic realities of the West Bank—where settlers account for 12.5 percent of the population, but Israel controls 60 percent of the territory—undermine the prospects for successful negotiation of a two-state solution.

Indeed, the issue of the settlements became a key factor in the eventual collapse of the Obama administration's most serious effort to negotiate a peace deal, led by Secretary Kerry from July 2013 to April 2014. While Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were discussing the future of disputed territory, its complexion was being changed underfoot, with Israeli settlement activity continuing throughout the negotiations.

Three weeks before the talks collapsed, a commentary published in *Politico* urging Kerry to “stand firm” focused attention on the obstacle of settlements. Though signed by various former senior American policymakers including Zbigniew Brzezinski, Frank Carlucci, Lee Hamilton, Thomas Pickering, and Carla Hills, their bipartisan argument achieved no apparent traction elsewhere in the media. The authors wrote in part:

U.S. disapproval of continued settlement enlargement in the Occupied Territories by Israel's government as “illegitimate” and “unhelpful” does not begin to define the destructiveness of this activity. Nor does it dispel the impression that we have come to accept it despite our rhetorical objections. Halting the diplomatic process on a date certain until Israel complies with international law and previous agreements would help to stop this activity and clearly place the onus for the interruption where it belongs.

The Kerry-led negotiations broke down on April 29, 2014, a month after the Israeli government reneged on the fourth stage of an agreement to release Palestinian prisoners. On that day, the Israeli outlet *Ynetnews* reported that according to the Israeli NGO Peace Now, during the talks 4,868 housing units had been built for settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—three-quarters of them in isolated settlements not likely to be annexed to Israel in a peace deal—and that the Israeli government had approved another nine thousand units to be built in the near future.

Senior American diplomats, in anonymous interviews with the *New York Times*, immediately made it clear that Israel's aggressive pursuit of new settlements had "sabotaged" Kerry's mediation efforts. Two weeks after the collapse, the *Times* published a post-mortem that was notable for its pointed emphasis on high-level U.S. disapproval of Israeli settlement policy. "At every juncture, there was a settlement announcement," the *Times* quoted one official on condition of anonymity. "It was the thing that kept throwing a wrench in the gears."

However, the report did not address the inherent contradiction between American rhetoric and practice, or the effect of that contradiction on the peace process.

Reframing the Coverage

And so, negotiations having failed once again, the conflict spiraled into the third Gaza war since 2008. The end of negotiations was followed by an uptick in communal violence resulting in grisly murders of Israeli and Palestinian teenagers, with calls for vengeance rippling through both societies. Israeli raids on suspected Hamas targets in the West Bank were met by a flurry of Hamas rockets from Gaza, shredding the thin connective tissue of the conflict anew. By the end of the 2014 Gaza war, nearly 2,300 people were dead, the vast majority of them Palestinians; ruin and devastation continue to permeate much of the Gaza Strip, where damages have been estimated between \$4 billion and \$6 billion, and human suffering will continue for years to come.

Given the way U.S. geopolitical interests are defined in the region, there is unlikely to be a paradigm shift anytime soon in U.S. policy on the conflict. Nonetheless, replacing the media echo chamber with a determined effort to reframe the coverage so it reflects the impact of U.S. policy on the conflict could increase public understanding of this important contextual factor. Over time, perhaps, a more informed public opinion could influence policymakers to reconsider a policy that has resulted in repeated failure over many decades. Recent manifestations of this failure include Netanyahu's election rhetoric that he will not allow a Palestinian state to be established on his watch, and the Palestinians' strategic shift from faith in U.S. mediation to campaigning for the UN to set a deadline to end the Israeli occupation.

The challenge for the media, in essence, is to see what can't be readily seen and to say what can't be easily said. Coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict should be domestic as well as foreign, reporting on the Washington axis. The United States has invested enormous financial and political capital in maintaining Israel's strength and mediating the conflict overall—and the negative impacts of that investment reverberate throughout the Arab and Islamic worlds. The Israel-Palestine conflict is a bona fide U.S. national security issue and should be reported as such.

Meanwhile, coverage of the conflict relies heavily on Israeli and Palestinian sources as well as their partisan supporters. Virtually absent in the mix are nonpartisan experts such as active and retired U.S. intelligence, military, and diplomatic officials, as well as academic Middle East specialists. Such sources could analyze and provide context on developing events, international law and consensus, and the critically important impact of U.S. policy—if only they were asked. Coverage coming out of Washington should be transparent, analytical, balanced, and hard hitting.

A recent example of the general failure to cultivate and use expert, nonpartisan sources could be seen in the media buzz Netanyahu created during the Gaza war with a tweet that compared Israel's fight against Hamas with the West's battles against Islamist extremist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). "Hamas is like ISIS. ISIS is like Hamas," went the Israeli prime minister's tweet. "They're branches of the same tree."

Repeated and left unchallenged, such statements become part of media discourse. Journalists covering the conflict should investigate how the motivations and goals of Hamas differ from those of ISIS and other Islamist groups, as well as how the literal text of the Hamas charter correlates to the movement's actual political and military practices.

In the field, reporting from Israel and the Palestinian territories should tell the largely untold story of the aggregate effects of Israeli settlement expansion on the peace process—in particular its physical and material impacts on prospects for the two-state solution that remains the ultimate goal of U.S. policy. Comprehensive, balanced coverage requires more than piecemeal stenography and dramatic narrative arcs. It requires thoroughgoing, fact-based investigation on the ground, illustrated with maps and video.

The *New York Times* made a substantial contribution to telling this story in March, when it published a detailed and graphically rich report headlined "Netanyahu and the Settlements." Appearing days before the recent Israeli election that Netanyahu would win, the report was replete with references to settlement expansion threatening prospects for a two-state resolution of the conflict. Describing decades of Israeli settlement building in the West Bank and the rapid rate of expansion under Netanyahu, the report included maps and still and interactive aerial photos of settlements in various stages of growth. Palestinians were not quoted directly in the report, however; nor did it depict the physical obstacles and barriers to Palestinian movement and territorial contiguity that the settlements impose.

Media organizations have become increasingly adept at fighting charges of bias, and ensuring the kind of accurate and balanced coverage needed for doing so. But the task of reframing media discourse will be equally if not more difficult, because sensitivities about what is legitimate and allowable in mainstream discourse about the conflict run high and deep. At a White House ceremony during the Muslim holiday

of Eid Al-Adha in October 2014, Kerry was—uncharacteristically for an American politician—forthright in linking the dynamics of the conflict to other instability in the region, and ultimately to American interests.

As I went around and met with people in the course of our discussions about the [ISIS] coalition ... there wasn't a leader I met with in the region who didn't raise with me spontaneously the need to try to get peace between Israel and the Palestinians, because it was a cause of recruitment and of street anger and agitation that they felt—and I see a lot of heads nodding—they had to respond to. And people need to understand the connection of that.

The Israel-Palestine conflict revolves around the aspirations and suffering of two peoples in the Middle East. But it is also about U.S. policy. Weaving the details of this critical contextual factor into the fabric of coverage is perhaps the greatest challenge of reporting the Israel-Palestine conflict. But the potential payoff is great—because if things can be said, then they can be known. And if they can be known, then other things can change.