
BATTLE



**The
American
Media
and the
Intifada**

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JIM LEDERMAN

BATTLE LINES

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and the Intifada

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WESTVIEW PRESS
BOULDER • SAN FRANCISCO • OXFORD

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Published in 1993 in paperback by Westview Press, Inc., 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, Colorado 80301-2877, and in the United Kingdom by Westview Press, 36 Lonsdale Road, Summertown, Oxford OX2 7EW.

First published in 1992 by Henry Holt and Company, Inc

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data available upon request

Printed and bound in the United States of America



The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39 48 1984

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Acknowledgments

No matter how much effort an author expends in researching and writing, no book is a purely individual effort. Many of those who aided in the production of this book, from typesetters to copy editors, I have never met. But I would like to thank them all. Particular thanks are due to those who in one way or another actively supported this project and shepherded this volume from its infancy as an idea, through the innumerable rewrites, to the concrete object you hold in your hands. Marvin Kalb, Gary Orren, and Ellen Hume, who directed and administered the Shorenstein Barone Center at Harvard University while I was in residence as a fellow, provided the environment and research facilities that allowed me to begin the work. Nathan Appleman provided the seed money to begin the research. Several fellow fellows at the Center, especially Timothy Cook, David Yepsin, and Beth Knobel, took the time and effort to read and comment on parts of the manuscript. I also received invaluable comments from Yitzchak Oron. Harry Sindel provided important technical assistance. Thanks are also due to all the journalists and spokespersons who agreed to be interviewed.

My agent, Mildred Marmur, and my editor, Marian Wood, deserve special praise for their commitment and help.

However, all their efforts would have been for nought had it not been for the support I received from my family. I am deeply grateful to

my mother, Florence, and my sister and brother-in-law Dinah and Mervin Kerzner, for their backing; to my children, Shai, Rachel, Micha, and David, whose patience I sorely tried; and most of all, to my wife, Miriam, who read and critiqued almost every draft.

To anyone whom I may have forgotten to mention, I offer my most sincere apologies.

Jim Lederman
Jerusalem, Israel.
March 1991

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On December 8, 1987, an Israeli semitrailer smashed into a battered Peugeot near the Erez military checkpoint that divides the Gaza Strip from Israel. Four Palestinians riding in the car were killed. In itself, the incident was hardly newsworthy. It was but one of more than six hundred fatal accidents that occur on Israeli roads each year. But this accident would prove different. The following day, a rumor spread through the Jabalya refugee camp near the site of the accident that the crash had been no accident. It had been a deliberate act of revenge for the murder of Shlomo Sakle, a forty-five-year-old Israeli businessman, in the city of Gaza the previous Sunday. As this rumor spread, a crowd gathered in the center of Jabalya and began to demonstrate. An Israeli patrol sent in to restore order was soon surrounded by a crowd of young Palestinians hurling bottles and bits of rubble.

Introduction

There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.

—Machiavelli

The soldiers shot their way out, killing a seventeen-year-old youth and wounding an estimated sixteen others.

The next day, the demonstrations were repeated. By the third day, when demonstrations had spread to the West Bank, the U.S. press, especially television, had begun arriving to record the events. At the end of the third day, when the journalists went back to their offices to file their stories, six Palestinians had been killed by Israeli army gunfire, including an eleven-year-old boy and a fifty-seven-year-old woman. That was enough to convert a local incident into an international news event. More violence was soon to come. A chain reaction that eventually was to become known as the "intifada"—an Arabic word meaning "to shake" or "to shake off"—had begun.

The *intifada*, the popular uprising of the Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied territories, was political theater, carried out in the streets and broadcast by television to an audience of millions. It was a superb example of the interaction of the press, domestic politics, and international relations in the new information age. Although the word *intifada* continues to be used to describe the ongoing violence in the Israeli-occupied territories, the actual period of the shake-up of old concepts and old ideas was relatively short, lasting only a few months. By April 1988, the revolt against the old, established leadership in the West Bank and Gaza and the Israeli occupation had been largely institutionalized. All of the political and social trends within the Palestinian community, like the competition for power between secular nationalists and Moslem fundamentalists, had become well established. All of the organizations that were to take part in the ongoing struggle had carved out roles and positions for themselves.

It took the Israelis somewhat longer to realize the extent, the depth, and the staying power of the rebellion, but by June, Israeli attitudes and military practices had largely solidified as well. So, too, in June, after months of probing and experimenting with various formulas in the hope of finding a political breakthrough, the position of the United States was set, and the basic principles guiding Washington's actions did not change in the two years to come.

Although the foreign press was among the first to recognize and to publicize the extent, breadth, and depth of the rebellion, its coverage

went through a number of phases before becoming fully routinized in a lasting form in the fall of 1988.

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), the slowest of all of the political bodies to react, took until February 1989 before its position was more or less clarified. But by November 1988, the trends within the organization already were apparent.

Thus, by the end of the first year of the revolt, and certainly since early 1989, what we have seen on the streets, in the political back rooms, in the newspapers, and on our television screens are repetitions of, or variations on, basic themes, attitudes, and practices that had developed in each of the protagonists during the first year of the uprising.

The U.S. foreign press played a leading role both in raising the subject of the uprising as a matter for international public discourse and debate and in projecting the ebb and flow of the rebellion to the world. But the press coverage was not the result of some sudden, inexplicable, volcanic upwelling. Like the intifada itself, the reporting was the product of processes that had been under way for many years. In regional terms, the personal and professional baggage the resident correspondents brought to their tasks was the product of innumerable small and large confrontations they had had with the other players over previous years, anticipations of what their editors would expect from them under the circumstances, prior experiences they had had elsewhere, and their own perception of what modern foreign journalism entails. In global terms, the press's coverage of the intifada was a major way station in the development of modern foreign reporting, situated between the fall of the shah of Iran and the massacre in Tiananmen Square and the demise of communism in Eastern Europe; some of the journalists who covered the intifada also had covered the events in Tehran, and others were to report later on the events in Beijing and in Eastern Europe.

In many ways, the conditions under which journalists operated during the intifada were considerably different from those found in Iran, China, and Eastern Europe. Unlike most of the countries in Eastern Europe and Iran, almost all of the major American news organizations had full-time bureaus in Israel. Unlike places like Romania and Bulgaria, Israel had excellent communications facilities. Unlike Iran or the Eastern European

countries, the distances between the scenes of events were relatively short and therefore the most important events could be easily covered. Unlike all three other venues, Israel had an established, active, and relatively free press on which the foreign journalists could lean. Israel is a democracy with a wide range of public voices and a plethora of publicly active institutions. (While not free to vote and lacking a free press, the Palestinians are free to speak out as individuals and many are thoughtful and articulate.) Israel has well-established technical and journalistic support services, like stringers, translators, television technicians, and camera crews. Journalists are also free to import almost any equipment they need that is not available locally. Thus, in a purely technical sense, the press was working under best-case-scenario conditions when the uprising broke out.

The same cannot be said for the other four protagonists in the drama: the Israelis, the Palestinians in the occupied territories, the United States, and the PLO. The Israeli government was seriously divided over policy and the direction the country should take. Its planning mechanisms were sorely wanting. And its systems of co-optation and control over the Palestinians and the foreign press had broken down. The Israeli army and police force were ill equipped and untrained to deal with a large-scale popular uprising. But most of all, the nation as a whole, from its top leadership down, was psychologically unprepared to cope with the shock that comes when the myths, conventional wisdom, and wishful thinking that had guided Israeli actions for years finally were shown to be ethereal props.

The Palestinians in the occupied territories blundered into a media success of remarkable proportions. But just as the Israelis were unable to react imaginatively to changed circumstances, the Palestinians were unable to capitalize on their own achievements. Early on, they understood the roots of their success and they had a bedrock of public institutions on which to build and consolidate their gains. But they lacked both the experience and the moxie to move beyond rebellion. Having overthrown the old order, the youngsters in the streets had little more to offer than their tenaciousness. Divided, drunk on the euphoria of the moment, and chained to their own myths and wishful thinking, the new leaders were unable to make the existential leap from anarchic, violent conflict to polit-

ical opportunism. Instead they soon staggered from one self-destructive act to another.

The United States, which had adopted a policy of benign neglect toward the Israeli-Arab dispute for the previous two years, found that its appreciation of how to deal with the Middle East conflict also was bankrupt. The old techniques of government-to-government and elites-to-elites intervention were unsuitable for a popular uprising like the intifada. Bound by the constraints of traditional diplomatic practice, lacking a clear, realistic policy in the region as a whole and in the occupied territories in particular, the State Department was vulnerable to pressures from vested interest groups and the press as well as incapable of developing new models for mediation that the dynamic situation demanded.

The PLO also was caught by surprise by the uprising. But it, too, was so entrapped by its ideology, by its past, and by its *modus operandi*, that it could not react imaginatively to the opportunities being presented. More ponderous in its decision-making processes, and more risk averse and hidebound in its attitudes than any of the other parties, the organization failed to adapt. Although it had the potential to play a major role in guiding the rebellion to a political denouement, its inability to create new concepts and new lines forced it to remain largely in the wings.

Such widespread unpreparedness inevitably leads to "surprises" and crises. And the intifada was a crisis of the first order for all of the participants.

As a dramatic story with a broad cast of characters, set against the backdrop of the Holy Land, the intifada probably was destined to become a major news story. But additionally, in recent years, public, press, and diplomatic interest has shifted away from the traditional focus on great power contests to the ethnic and regional conflicts and sudden popular uprisings against traditional authority that threaten to be more internationally destabilizing in the long term. In this age of increasing international interdependence, small, seemingly localized conflicts can have a disproportionate impact on the lives of people thousands of miles away.

Beyond this, new, cheap, user-friendly imaging technologies and high-speed communications have changed the very nature of journalism,

international diplomacy, and public perceptions of the world. The intifada was one of the first major regional, interethnic conflicts—to which the press had wide access—to arise following the advent of the new information age. It is thus a signpost to the kinds of international events that may await us in the future. How each participant reacted to the events is a case study in itself. Of greater import, however, is how they reacted to each other, at a time of confusion, when old beliefs were collapsing all around them.

Coming as it did at the beginning of a period of enormous change in the fine matrix of international politics, it was inevitable that the intifada would raise disturbing and provocative issues about patterns of political behavior, international diplomacy, and foreign reporting in the late twentieth century. Indeed, among other subjects, it threw into sharp relief some basic questions about established concepts of political crisis management, the capacity of the public and special-interest groups to shape governmental policy, the ability of outside powers to intervene effectively in intraregional disputes, the role of foreign reporters, the nature of foreign reporting, journalistic ethics, the relationship between reporters and those in authority in countries of which the reporters are not citizens, and the impact new communications technology is having on political and social processes.

I had been a foreign correspondent in the Middle East for twenty years when the intifada broke out, having worked over the years for such organizations as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, the *New York Post*, and National Public Radio. I had covered seven wars and innumerable public demonstrations. But when I went to Gaza during the first week of the rebellion, I realized that this time things were different. This was not a demonstration of strength, organized by some leadership from above. This was a popular uprising. Children, some no older than seven, were in control of the streets. My car window was smashed by a rock thrown by a child who might not have been even that old. As I interviewed members of the elite and the older generation, I quickly realized that in only a few days, the social structure of Gaza had changed beyond recognition. Leadership had passed from men and women in their sixties and seventies to those in their teens or barely into their twenties. It was

a situation for which almost no one was psychologically prepared, including the press.

When I was awarded an Appleman Fellowship by the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center for the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University in September 1989, I decided to do my research on those early days of the rebellion. I was aware that the coverage had been very controversial and had generated a great deal of criticism both in the United States and in Israel. However, until I arrived in Cambridge, I had not seen or read any of my colleagues' work. I had spent the previous six months interviewing many of my colleagues and had assumed that my only major obligation to the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center—the writing of a short discussion paper—would present few difficulties. I could not have been more wrong. The material proved to be extraordinarily rich. As the body of research material grew, virtually every premise with which I had begun this project had to be discarded. Instead of a short discussion paper, this book-length study is the result.

The central question I began with was what happens in a democracy when a government faces a major political crisis with important and potentially damaging international implications, and when there is an established foreign press corps operating under best-case-scenario circumstances. In particular, I wanted to explore how American foreign policy and the domestic political decision-making process in foreign countries has been influenced by the new information age—when the time for rational consideration of problems is compressed and secrets are few.

To ensure that I would be dealing with a true best-case scenario, I established the following criteria for my study. Each media outlet studied had to have had a bureau in Israel for at least ten years, with an orderly change of correspondents and bureau chiefs during that time. This eliminated most of the parachutists—except those working within the framework of an established bureau. It also eliminated some news organizations that had undergone internal traumas. The bureau had to file on an almost daily basis, without the advantage of an end-of-week opportunity for synthesis. The individual journalists had to be personally responsible for their work by having a byline or an on-air introduction. This eliminated the weekly newsmagazines. The media outlets had to have had a record of influencing Washington's political decisions on the Middle East. I therefore chose not to deal with the regional American newspapers that have

full-time correspondents in Israel. Finally, since this was to be a story of the American foreign press, I wanted all of the outlets to be American owned and operated. Moreover, they had to have had a recent record of financial and administrative institutional stability. This eliminated operations like Reuters and UPI.

For practical purposes, I needed organizations whose work was recorded in a public archive that was easily accessible. Thus, both the radio networks and Cable News Network (CNN) had to be eliminated from the project, too. All of the television material, for example, was taken from the excellent Vanderbilt Archive. I wanted my focus to be on daily foreign journalism and so I ignored magazines, week-in-review sections, special documentaries, op-ed pieces, editorials, cartoons, and columns.

Altogether, I watched, logged, and analyzed tapes of about eight hundred nightly newscasts by the three main commercial television networks in the United States. Some of the more complex broadcasts had to be viewed more than forty times each. In addition, I reviewed more than two thousand dispatches from the Associated Press (AP) and fifteen hundred reports from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* as well as, for comparative purposes, about one thousand articles that appeared in the Israeli press. This material was supplemented by my own notes and the radio reports I sent at that time.

I have used few quotes from journalists in this book because once I began my archival research in depth, I discovered that there was an enormous gap between what most of my interviewees said they had done or had intended to do and what I actually found in the public record. I therefore chose to let the material I found speak for itself. The interpretations are my own and I take full responsibility for them.

What I found after months of bleary eyes was surprising, enlightening, and at times frightening. The material I chose to include in the book represents only the highlights of the press's coverage of the first year of the uprising, but I think that it accurately represents all of the important journalistic and political trends that developed during that time—and the effect those trends had on all of the main participants.

Journalists often are accused of being ahistorical. From my interviews, it is clear that that allegation certainly is true of the correspondents'

and spokespersons' perceptions of how coverage of the Middle East developed. Because most reporters and spokespeople are rotated frequently, only a very few could remember back to the period before 1982 and the start of the Lebanese War. For almost all, it was as though this one single event changed the course of coverage in the Middle East. Nothing could be further from the truth. I therefore chose to devote a large section of this book to tracing the cumulative, incremental changes that took place in the nature of the coverage and journalists' perceptions of the story over a period of two decades. Without this historical background, the events and actions of the participants often are inexplicable.

I also set out to discover how adherence to established story lines—and in the case of the broadcast media, technology and production values—influenced the substance of the reports being sent. In other words, events tend to be interpreted in the light of preconceived themes—even when those themes no longer apply in whole or in part. In television and radio, the accepted and preconceived production style and the technologies available to reporters also play an enormous role in how a story is presented. Therefore I also have devoted considerable space to analyzing the story lines, the technologies, and the production styles used by the various reporters.

All of this background information would be little more than a curiosity, however, were it not for the fact that news reports can and do influence public perceptions and the acts of public policy makers. The intifada is an almost classic case of how the press influences public policy and is, in return, influenced by policy makers.

As I have mentioned, the intifada was a political crisis of considerable proportions. During crises, many well-established defenses designed to protect the participants in normal times break down. It is then that hidden attitudes, modes of thought, inherent weaknesses, and even the defense structures themselves become most apparent. The book concludes by looking at some of the issues that arise when these usually ignored or misinterpreted phenomena become apparent to the careful observer.

In toto, this is a critical insider's look at how and why we who participated in presenting the intifada to the world behaved in a particular place and at a particular time. The journalists who took part in these events can

count a considerable number of successes in bringing to light and explaining the events that occurred. There were, however, a notable number of failures. And they have been dealt with in depth. A few of the basic questions raised by this study may, in the end, be unanswerable. But there are many lessons that can be learned from the press coverage of the intifada that go beyond the relatively narrow confines of the Middle East and the period of December 1987 to December 1988. If we as journalists are to fulfill our designated roles in society and to learn from our mistakes, we must be open to thoughtful criticism—and the criticism should start with ourselves.