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**One murder, two stories**

**In Israeli and Palestinian newspapers, it's a case of battling histories.**

In a front-page story on Dec. 12, Ha’aretz, one of Israel’s top newspapers, reported that the Israeli Defense Force “shot and killed Anwar Ahmad Himran, a senior activist in the Islamic Jihad,” at about 1 p.m. in the West Bank city of Nablus.

The killing, at least according to Ha’aretz, appeared to be the straightforward death of a terrorist who lived and died by the sword. After all, not only was the 28-year-old Himran “suspected of being involved in the bomb attacks on Jerusalem’s Mahane Yehudah market two years ago” but he “may also have been involved in the bomb attacks in Jerusalem and Hadera in the last two months in which four Israelis died.”

The same day, a front-page article in Al-Ayaam, one of the three main Palestinian newspapers (along with Al-Quds and Al-Hayaat Al-Jadeeda), reported that “the Occupation forces assassinated yesterday a student in Al-Quds University who was a member in Islamic Jihad, next to one of [the] university branches … in front of dozens of student and citizen eyewitnesses.” The article further described Himran as “married and the father of three children” who had “left the [university] bookstore around 1 p.m., and when he approached the road soldiers opened fire … Dozens of people saw what happened, including some children who were playing near the scene.”

The newspaper diligently quotes an unnamed IDF spokesman, who alleges, “Soldiers opened fire when [Himran] was shooting at our base.” But the story then dutifully refutes this charge, with four different reasons: the “base is hidden from the place Himran was assassinated … [and] is a kilometer away,” and “the place of the assassination is lower than the mountain” where the base is located, and “dozens of eyewitnesses said that [Himran] was unarmed.”

In Ha’aretz, Himran is described as a terrorist the IDF was justified — perhaps even happy — to have killed. Al-Ayaam, meanwhile, did mention that Himran belonged to the Islamic Jihad, but chose to characterize him as a student assassinated on his way from class, a family man who now leaves behind three children and an unarmed Palestinian shot dead by the “Occupation forces.”

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One event. Two versions. Since violence broke out in this region on Sept. 29, more than 360 people have been killed and more than 10,000 have been injured, most of them Palestinians. Played out in the respective media, the “Rashomon”-style retelling of the deaths seems to lack any objective reality. Often, the spin is obvious, depending on whether the victim is described as “terrorist” or a “martyr,” or whether the victim was “killed” or “assassinated.” There’s also the difference, of course, in the lexicon: calling the Israeli army the “IDF” or the “occupying forces” conveys two extremely different ideas.

But as the beleaguered peace talks continue in the Middle East, what’s at stake is not only the immediate political future for the Palestinians and Israelis but a defense of each side’s version of recent history. The New York Times reported last fall that Palestinian textbooks don’t even recognize the current state of Israel, using pre-1948 maps of Palestine to teach children geography; Israeli textbooks, meanwhile, stick closely to heroic Zionist narratives and avoid any Palestinian perspective. Newspapers, the textbooks of the adult world, only continue the work begun by grade school teachers.

This can be seen as well in the coverage of a Palestinian man killed Nov. 9 in Beit Sahour, a Palestinian village southeast of Bethlehem.

Ha’aretz reported that the 37-year-old man, Hussein Abayat, was killed by the IDF in a helicopter raid. The article quotes an IDF official who explained that Abayat, a senior Fatah official, “masterminded and carried out gunfire attacks in the Bethlehem area in recent weeks.” The Jerusalem Post, another leading Israeli newspaper, added that Abayat had been “responsible for a series of bloody operations against Israelis over the past six months.” In addition, the Post quotes Eitan as saying that “the attack was launched after the IDF received intelligence that Abayat was on his way to carry out an attack on [Israeli] soldiers.” Both Israeli newspaper articles also mention that two Palestinian women were “killed” in the helicopter raid.

The story according to the Israeli papers: A terrorist was justifiably killed.

Al-Quds, meanwhile, runs with a headline that reads: “Israel Assassinates the Head of the Military Team of Fatah, Two Women were Martyred in the Attack.” However, its article did not connect Abayat in any way to criminal activity committed against Israeli citizens. Instead, its article reported the particulars of Abayat’s “political assassination,” in addition to describing the lives of the two Palestinian women “martyrs” who were also killed by the “occupying forces.”

The story according to Al-Quds: Martyrs all the way around.

Still, at other times, the strongest spin is silence. On the morning of Nov. 8, at approximately 8:15 a.m., an Israeli woman was shot and killed on the border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

The next day’s lead article in Ha’aretz, headlined “Woman Killed in Gaza Ambush,” reported that the 25-year-old Noa Dahan was the victim of a “terrorist attack” on her way to work. The article quoted two co-workers of Dahan at a customs terminal describing her as someone who “believed her work was a bridge to peace,” and that she “had done her best to help Palestinian merchants.”

Dahan’s death, meanwhile, was not mentioned in Al-Quds, Al-Hayyat or Al-Jadeeda. These newspapers instead ran articles on Palestinians who had been killed the previous day, describing the particulars of each “martyr” who had been killed at the hands of the “occupying forces.” In addition, each paper also reported that one of the wings of Alia Hospital, a major Palestinian hospital located in the West Bank city of Hebron, had been “attacked” in “barbaric bombings” by the IDF.

The damage caused to Alia Hospital, meanwhile, was not mentioned in Ha’aretz.

The two events most widely publicized since the violence began are the [death of the 12-year-old Palestinian Muhammad Al-Dura](http://www.salon.com/2000/10/07/jamal_2/) and the [killing of two Israeli soldiers in Ramallah.](http://www.salon.com/2000/10/13/israel_17)

Al-Dura was killed on Sept. 30 in crossfire between the IDF and the Palestinian police, in the Netzarim junction section of the Gaza Strip.

Ha’aretz did not publish a paper on the following day because it fell on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, when Israeli publications cease operations altogether. Still, Al-Dura’s death did not merit a mention in Ha’aretz’s next issue, on Oct. 2, save for a brief front-page article listing Palestinians who had died over the same weekend.

Furthermore, Ha’aretz did not attribute the boy’s death to either the IDF or the Palestinian police. In fact, a recent article in Ha’aretz cited an IDF spokesman, Gen. Yom Tov Samia, saying the IDF’s own investigation into Al-Dura’s death showed that due to the angle of the shooting it was “more probable” that the youth was killed by shots from the Palestinian police than by shots from the IDF.

In contrast, the young boy’s death received a maelstrom of Palestinian media coverage. The coverage in Al-Ayaam, for example, makes it clear who the newspaper thinks is responsible for Al-Dura’s death. The front page of the paper’s Oct. 1 edition shows a picture of Al-Dura nestled under his father’s arm moments before the young boy was killed. The text of the article was taken from Reuters, but the title — “They Killed Mohammed Between His Father’s Hands” — clearly was not. Although the “they” of the article’s title is left unsaid, the continuation of the article, on Page 10, made it clear who was guilty. Underneath a sequence of eight second-by-second photographs of Al-Dura’s death is the caption “televised pictures of the deadly moments showing the brutally barbaric crime of the Israeli occupation forces.” The article continued, “as if the human fear tempted an Israeli beast or more [Israeli beasts] to continue the crime on the father’s child so that he would die.”

“Afterwards,” it went on, “[the IDF] killed the ambulance driver, Basam Balbisee, age 45, because he dared carry the child’s body.”

Pictures of Al-Dura are still posted on walls of Palestinian-owned shops and buildings throughout the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as in the Old City of Jerusalem. Al-Dura has become the poster boy for the Palestinian community in the current fighting; he has become the Palestinian Elián González, decades of victimhood summed up in one innocent, tragic young face.

To Palestinians it is clear that the IDF shot Al-Dura, but to many Israelis it is not. Some Israelis, such as Yosef Duriel, an engineer who was part of the initial Israeli investigative team looking into Al-Dura’s death, subscribe to the theory that the Palestinian police shot Al-Dura themselves in order to shed a negative light upon the IDF and gain greater sympathy from the international public. (Duriel was dismissed from the investigative team after making this accusation.)

Similarly, the Oct. 12 deaths of two IDF soldiers by a Palestinian mob at the Palestinian Authority police headquarters in Ramallah caused two dramatically different accounts. According to an article published in Ha’aretz on the day after the killing, titled “A Fatal Wrong Turn,” the two soldiers “made the mistake of their lives, taking a wrong turn as they drove to their military base at Beit-El, near Ramallah.” Upon reaching a Palestinian Authority roadblock the “Palestinian [police] arrested the Israelis at gunpoint and ordered them to drive to the Ramallah police station.” Soon thereafter, “about a dozen [Palestinian] men climbed into the police station through a window and a few minutes later, gunshots were heard. Two men then opened up the window, sticking their bloody hands out. The crowd roared with approval.”

The text of the Al-Quds article was taken from Reuters, and was not significantly different than that of Ha’aretz. However, the end of it reports, “The Palestinians said that the two soldiers were under cover,” despite the IDF’s claims to the contrary. The theory that the soldiers had not made a wrong turn but were undercover IDF agents on assignment in Ramallah only received minimal mention in the article, but it has been circulated widely among Palestinians and within Arab media in general.

It was expanded upon further in the Oct. 19-25 weekly English edition of Al-Ahram, the daily Arabic edition of which is the oldest newspaper in the Arab world. It reads, “The two soldiers, disguised as Palestinians and reportedly carrying explosives, sub-machine guns and guns with silencers, were apprehended in downtown Ramallah while attempting to enter the funeral procession for a Palestinian youth killed by Israeli snipers. Nobody knows for sure what the two musta’arabin” — Israeli army commandos disguised as Arabs – “were planning to do. But most Palestinians, including two PA officials, seemed absolutely convinced the two soldiers were planning a killing spree.”

Ironically, perhaps the only thing both sides can agree upon is the unfairness of CNN’s coverage of the current crisis. On Nov. 14, the Jerusalem Post quoted a senior Barak official saying, “Israel feels that the coverage [by CNN] has not been objective.” In an op-ed in the Oct. 23 issue of Al-Quds, a prominent political analyst at a Palestinian think tank writes: “Since the first day of the Aqsa Intifada CNN’s top priority was to conceal or divert the attention of viewers from the massacres of the occupation … CNN [has] played with figures and statistics … concealing the hard facts.”

So regardless of what form of peace agreement may eventually be reached, the next generation of Israeli and Palestinian children will be learning two different lessons, especially concerning who can claim to be the real victims of the violence. The difference can be traced back to May 14, 1948, when the state of Israel was established. To Israelis, May 14, the Day of Independence, is a national holiday and is celebrated by many Jews around the world with music and family barbecues. Palestinians, however, engage in intense mourning on this day they call Al-Nakba, commonly translated as the catastrophe, or the uprooting. They raise black flags, protest against Israeli soldiers and most recently observed a communal, mournful moment of silence.

Regardless of how the violence is covered in the newspapers, the mourning will no doubt continue. And the media, knowingly or not, will continue to fuel the hatred that provides each day’s banner headlines.