

MERIA

ANTI-ZIONIST AND ANTISEMITIC DISCOURSE ON THE GUARDIAN'S "COMMENT IS FREE" WEBSITE

By Hadar Sela*

The British newspaper, the Guardian, has been described as waging a high-priority campaign against Israel in its pages and on its popular website. Does the evidence available--especially regarding the latter--support this opinion, and if so, in what way does this bias express itself, how far-reaching are its effects and consequences, and what--if anything--can be done to counteract it?

The *Guardian* is Britain's third most read newspaper after the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Times*. As is the case with many newspapers, the sales of its print edition are declining: In January 2009, its daily circulation was 358,844 (a drop of 5.17 percent from January 2008) and by March 2010, its daily circulation had fallen further to 283,063. However, this trend has been offset by the *Guardian's* decision to expand the publication of all its material, together with that of its sibling paper, the *Observer*, online without charge. In January 2010, the *Guardian's* website was the most popular of all UK newspaper sites, with some 37 million unique users per month, 12.6 million of whom were British. In 2008, it was runner-up in the "Webby Awards" for the best political blog, and in 2009, the guardian.co.uk site won the "best newspaper" category in those same awards.

Describing itself as "the world's leading Liberal voice," the *Guardian* takes a left-of-center stance. A poll by MORI in April to June 2000 showed that 80 percent of the *Guardian's* readers were Labour voters. A 2005 poll by the same organization indicated that 48 percent of *Guardian* readers voted Labour and 34 percent voted Liberal Democrat. In the same year, Sir Max Hastings was quoted as saying "I write for the *Guardian* because it is read by the new establishment." In the 2010 UK elections, the *Guardian* backed the Liberal Democrat party, which for the first time in its history gained a foothold in British government.¹

As is the case with British society as a whole, the *Guardian's* viewpoints have shifted during its 189-year history. Its most famous editor C.P. Scott was a personal friend of Chaim Weizmann and the paper supported the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. The *Guardian* also lent its voice to British actions in Northern Ireland, supported the coalition forces in the first Gulf War, and was in favor of NATO intervention in Kosovo, but the newspaper's staff gradually shifted to the left and even far left over the last couple of decades, while those with contrary views have been pushed out.

Since 2000, the paper has attracted increasing criticism of its anti-Israeli bias with Lord Greville Janner QC, former chairman of the Board of Deputies of British Jews (from 1979 to 1985) describing it as "viciously and notoriously anti-Israel,"² and journalist Julie Burchill, who left the *Guardian* for the *Times* in 2003, citing a "striking bias against the State of Israel"³ as one of her reasons for doing so. The *Economist* named the *Guardian*, together with the *Independent*, as one of the main examples as to why "[m]any British Jews are of the opinion that press reporting on Israeli policy is [so] spiced with a tone of animosity 'as to smell of anti-semitism'."⁴

Criticism of the *Guardian's* anti-Israel bias is directed especially toward its online "Comment is Free" section which hosts comment and political opinion while allowing the general public the chance to participate in the discussion in its comments section. The majority of articles concerning Israel appear in

the sub-section “CiF Middle East.” The Community Security Trust (an organization dedicated to the security of the British Jewish community) identified “Comment is Free” as one of the main purveyors of antisemitic hate in the British mainstream media in both its 2007⁵ and 2008⁶ reports entitled *Anti-Semitic Discourse in Britain*, and Zionist Federation co-vice chairman Jonathan Hoffman produced a 57-page report on the subject, which was submitted to the UK Parliamentary Committee Against Antisemitism in July 2008.⁷

The phenomenon of anti-Israeli bias and provision of a platform for antisemitic hate speech on “Comment is Free” is comprised of a number of differing factors, which operate simultaneously. One of these factors is the method of moderation of comments employed on the discussion forums. Unlike many other blogs or websites, the *Guardian* first publishes comments and only later deletes those considered to be in breach of its guidelines.⁸

The most frequently breached guideline is that which refers to “racism, sexism, homophobia, or other forms of hate-speech.” In an e-mail response to one complaint about lack of moderation, a *Guardian* moderator wrote on February 21, 2008, “Perhaps I should emphasise again that we do not have 24 hour

moderation, and that moderators do not read every comment posted to the site.” Recognizing the existence of the problem, then CiF editor Matt Seaton responded to questions regarding the potential for improvement in the quality of moderation in relation to the introduction of new software in 2008 by saying “I can’t promise you that anti-Semitic comments and other hate speech will disappear from the site overnight, but (from early June) I think you will notice a progressive improvement.”

The result of the *Guardian*’s method of moderation is two-fold. Not only does it put the onus for the reporting of antisemitic comments and the demand for their deletion via the “report abuse” function upon those members of the general public who consider it to be their voluntary task to monitor CiF (a resource upon which the *Guardian* openly admits it relies), it also means that racist hate speech--for example comparing Israel to apartheid South Africa or the Nazi regime--is not infrequently left standing on the CiF site. Moreover, those offensive comments that are deleted often take an unacceptable amount of time to disappear and are hence read by many visitors to the site before they do.

The screenshot shows three comments from the 'Comment is Free' forum on the Guardian website, dated June 2, 2010. Each comment includes a user profile picture, name, timestamp, and a menu of actions (Recommend, Report abuse, Clip | Link).

- Comment 1:** User **brianrouth**, 2 Jun 2010, 11:26AM. Text: "hopefully the Arab world will end the nazi regime of Israel without interefereence by the USA...". Actions: Recommend? (3), Report abuse, Clip | Link.
- Comment 2:** User **yaleleli**, 2 Jun 2010, 1:30PM. Text: "During WW2 and under the German Nazi regime if you helped a Jew you were a hero, a good man. Now under the Israeli Fasist regime if you want to help a Palestinian you are a villain. Why there is such a difference? But i have to admit that Israelis were great students of the Third Reich. Instead of making capms all over the place, they just make a whole territory a huge concentration camp. And whenever they want, they kill a few hundreds of them. But you have to remember that time has changes. And next time Israel is in plight, i dont think that there will be many volunteers to help. Jew Heil.....". Actions: Recommend? (0), Report abuse, Clip | Link.
- Comment 3:** User **park2711a**, 2 Jun 2010, 2:32PM. Text: "I have great sympathy for the suffering of the Israeli during the Second World War, however, this sympathy has gone, I feel sadden what Israel has become. Presently Israel is a symbol of cruel, inhuman and irrational - Nazi of modern day". Actions: Recommend? (0), Report abuse, Clip | Link.



WilliamBapthorpe
6 Jan 2010, 1:08PM

Recommend? (0)

Report abuse

Clip | Link

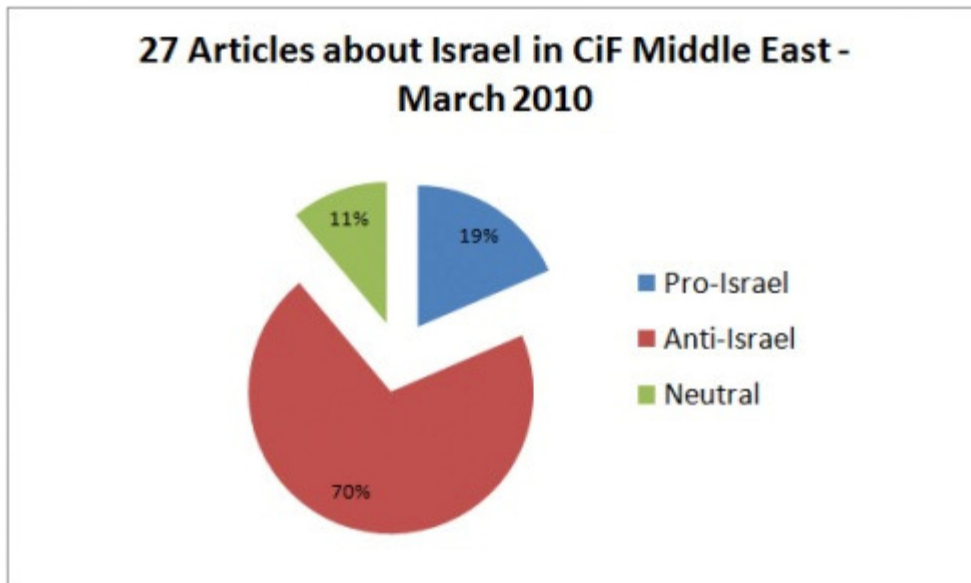
@Iwouldntifwere you

Somebody should patiently explain to the Israeli's that settlements are illegal under international law

We've been doing that for the last forty years til we're blue in the face. Sadly there's only one way to deal with these religiously motivated maniacs who think their superstitious beliefs trump international law. 1. We ask them to leave their squats, kindly. 2. If they don't, we force them to at gunpoint. 3. If they still refuse, they must be slaughtered, every last man, woman and child.

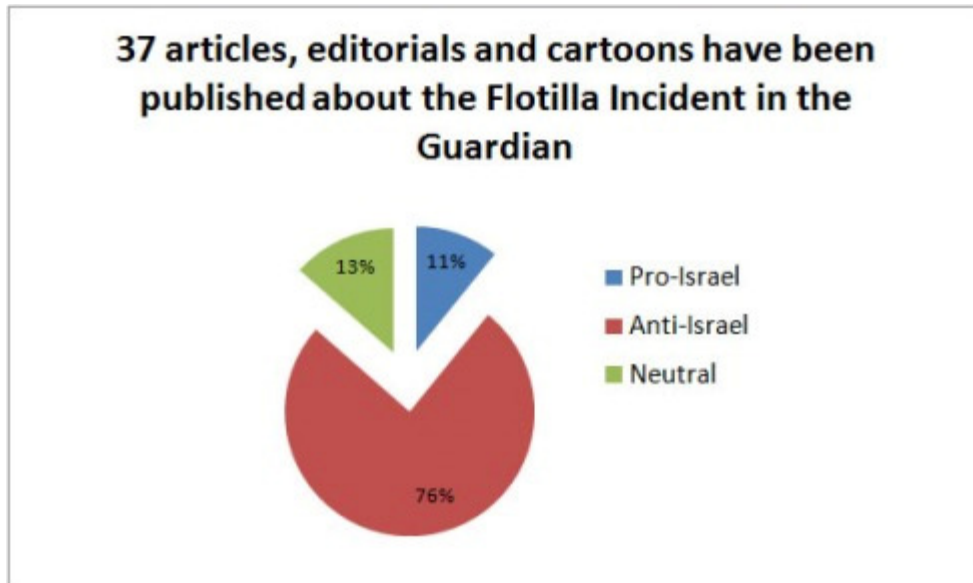
A second factor in the expression of the *Guardian's* anti-Israeli bias is the number of CiF articles concerning Israel compared to the number of articles about the rest of the Middle East. Data gathered by the monitoring site "CiF Watch" for the month of March 2010 shows that out of a total of 66 articles on the

subject of the Middle East, 41 percent were on the subject of Israel while the remaining 59 percent covered the whole of the rest of the region. Of those 27 articles about Israel, 70 percent took an anti-Israeli stance, 19 percent a pro-Israel stance, and 11 percent were neutral.⁹



In the period from May 31, 2010 to June 11, 2010, in response to Israel's apprehension of the "Free Gaza" flotilla, 37 opinion pieces, editorials and cartoons (excluding actual news

items) were published on the "Comment is Free" website, of which 76 percent could be categorized as being hostile towards Israel.¹⁰



Items published by the Guardian on Gaza flotilla incident between May 31, 2010 and June 9, 2010.
Source: CiF Watch Website

Included in these were articles by Daphna Baram (“Israelis Must Speak Up for Gaza Activists”), David Grossman (“The Gaza Flotilla Attack Shows How Far Israel Has Declined”), Lauren Booth (“Why We Sailed to Gaza”), Seumas Milne (“If Gaza’s Relief Is a Step Closer They Won’t Have Died in Vain”), Linda Grant (“Israel’s Vivid Act of Piracy May Yet Turn the Tide of Global Opinion”), and Ibrahim Kalin (“Turkey Deserves an Apology from Israel”). Overall, the *Guardian*’s coverage of this event cast Israel as the aggressor and transgressor of international law, while severely downplaying--and often completely ignoring--the role of the IHH in this incident and its links to terrorist organizations that pose a danger to Israeli security.

A report by “Just Journalism”¹¹ describes the manner in which the *Guardian* under-reported the Israeli Defense Forces video footage depicting activists aboard the Mavi Marmara attacking Israeli soldiers, and even presented this evidence as public relations material, refusing to adequately incorporate it into its broader narrative of the incident. The *Guardian*’s Jerusalem correspondent Harriet Sherwood wrote on June 2, 2010 that “Israel insists its troops came under sustained and unprovoked attack, pointing to what it claimed

was cast-iron video evidence and soldiers’ testimony.”¹² In a June 4, 2010 article, *Guardian* commentator Linda Grant stated that “[n]o amount of showing videos of the peace activists attacking the abseiling Israeli soldiers will answer the question: what were the soldiers doing there in the first place and why would the passengers not defend themselves against their attackers.”¹³

The *Guardian*’s biased manner of reporting the flotilla incident was by no means exceptional in its overall coverage of events in Israel. The third factor dictating the general tone of its site is the choice of writers invited to contribute to “Comment is Free.” Some are openly anti-Zionist and not infrequently advocate a one-state “solution” to the conflict, employing sometimes slanderous language in order to delegitimize the State of Israel. Examples of the types of message put across by regular *Guardian* writers and the kind of language employed can be seen as follows.

During Operation “Defensive Shield” in April 2002, Seumas Milne wrote:

The stories of brutality and destruction filtering out of the Jenin refugee camp have become increasingly ominous. While independent observers have been kept out--along with ambulances and UN blood

supplies--the Israeli army has rampaged its way through the hillside shanty town, overwhelming desperate Palestinian resistance. Hundreds are reported killed, including many civilians.... This is where wars against terror end, with screaming children forced to drink sewage and piles of corpses being cleared by bulldozers.”¹⁴

In August 2008, the Israeli CiF writer Seth Freedman wrote:

Describing the situation in the West Bank as a form of apartheid causes offence to some, despite all the clear evidence justifying the term. The same people object to the wanton destruction meted out in villages by the IDF being likened to pogroms--the word having been somehow arrogated by certain Jewish people for their exclusive use, and only then in relation to the Jews' own historical suffering.¹⁵

In September 2008, Ben White, author of *Israeli Apartheid: A Beginner's Guide*, accused Israel of ethnic cleansing and apartheid: “The ethnic cleansing of historic Palestine 1948 that made it possible to create a Zionist state are not simply history. Israel continues its efforts to erase Palestine from the map; like in the occupied territories, where an apartheid regime of privileges separates Israelis from the stateless Palestinians.”¹⁶

In December 2008, Neve Gordon, an active member of the campaign for an academic boycott on Israel, stated that Operation Cast Lead was part of an Israeli election campaign: “The assault on Gaza is also being carried out to help Kadima and Labour defeat Likud and its leader Binyamin Netanyahu, who is currently ahead in the polls.”¹⁷

Antony Lerman suggested in June 2009 that Israel was guilty of deliberate state-sponsored racism: “ ‘Certain anti-Zionist comments are racist, but certain actions of the state of Israel are definitely racist,’ Rabbi Wittenberg writes. ‘I've heard from people and I've seen with my own eyes that they're not

accidental but part of a clear policy of wanting to remove non-Jewish inhabitants from certain key areas.’”¹⁸

In addition, contributors such as Hamas Political Bureau Head Khalid Mish'al, John Pilger, Tariq Ramadan, Azzam Tamimi (an open supporter of Hamas), George Galloway, Tony Greenstein (a founding member of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign and Jews for Boycotting Israeli Goods), as well as Ghada Karmi are occasionally invited to write for CiF. For example, during Operation Cast Lead, the Guardian saw fit to print the following version of events leading up to the military campaign written by Khalid Misha'al:

For 18 months my people in Gaza have been under siege, incarcerated inside the world's biggest prison, sealed off from land, air and sea, caged and starved, denied even medication for our sick. After the slow death policy came the bombardment.... This river of blood is being shed under lies and false pretexts. For six months we in Hamas observed the ceasefire. Israel broke it repeatedly from the start.”¹⁹

To present a counter view, articles are periodically commissioned from writers who do recognize the Jewish right to self-determination such as Petra Marquadt-Bigman, Daniel Levy, or Jonathan Spyer, but these articles are inevitably in the minority.

In 2005, the European Union Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) produced a working definition of antisemitism,²⁰ which includes among its categories of antisemitism in relation to Israel “[d]enying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, e.g., by claiming that the existence of a State of Israel is a racist endeavor”; “[a]pplying double standards by requiring of it a behavior not expected or demanded of any other democratic nation”; and “[d]rawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policies to that of the Nazis.” Examples of such categories of antisemitism and others from within the EUMC's document are to be

found upon the “Comment is Free” website both in the below the line comments and in above the line articles, together with delegitimization of Israel and dehumanization of its citizens. Commenting on an article in the *Guardian* on April 18, 2009, Robin Shepherd, director of international affairs at the Henry Jackson Society, wrote: “The denigration of

21

The *Guardian*’s worldwide outreach via the internet and its weighty influence among the opinion- and policy-making strata of British society (a significant proportion of vacancies in the public sector including education, media and the government are advertised on the *Guardian*’s pages), have caused its unbalanced approach toward coverage of events in the Middle East and the spread of antisemitic hate speech on its internet forum to become a source of concern to many of those trying to oppose antisemitism in the UK. The effect upon public opinion and notions of socially acceptable forms of criticism of Zionism and Israel within Britain is far from negligible; indeed, increasingly hostile attitudes toward Israel and individual Israelis are to be witnessed at all levels of British society, from the House of Lords to trade unions and universities. By extension, these attitudes are liable to have a negative effect upon the lives and wellbeing of British Jews, the majority of whom identify strongly with Israel.

Unfortunately, neither British government initiatives against internet hate-speech nor the Press Complaints Commission appear to be effective in trying to address these problems. The undisputed and ever-growing influence of the internet means that as a respected and influential member of the mainstream media, the *Guardian* is contributing to the fact that an anti-Israeli stance has become a socially acceptable position within British society. As Eran Shayson, a senior analyst at the Reut Institute, pointed out as recently as January 2010,²² the UK (and particularly London) acts as a major “hub” in moves to attack the legitimacy of Israel’s existence, due to its influence as a media, cultural and academic

the Jewish state in modern Europe has now become part of such an edifice of hatred and bigotry that there are no longer any taboos. It is now possible to say anything, literally anything, about Israel, however grotesque and defamatory, and to feel no shame, to invite no censure.”

centre combined with the global impact of the UK as an English-speaking country.

Attempts to counteract the *Guardian*’s influence in distorting perceptions of Israel and the concurrent effects upon antisemitic discourse in the UK, as well as upon public and governmental opinion, have so far been left to a minority of independently active concerned individuals and the recently formed grassroots organization CiF Watch, functioning on an entirely voluntary basis. Despite the severely limited resources available, significant progress has been made in both pressuring the *Guardian* to improve its moderation policies and in counteracting the anti-Israeli bias. However, if British public opinion is to be influenced positively and the delegitimization of Israel is to be contained, resources need to be invested and a proactive stance taken toward redressing the bias found in the *Guardian* and other UK media.

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NOTES

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