

"Words Can Kill, Too" – Media Monitoring Project

January 2005

Abstract

When Thy Enemy Falls

Coverage of Arafat's Death in the Israeli Media

This is the first report issued by **Keshev** in the project "Media Monitoring—Words Can Kill, Too". This unique project, carried out in coordination between **Keshev**, an Israeli organization, and **Miftah**, a Palestinian organization, examines media coverage on both sides of the conflict. The goal of the project is to change patterns of media coverage in Israel and in the Palestinian Authority that give expression to prejudice, incitement and defamation, misrepresentation, de-legitimization and dehumanization of the other side.

This report examines coverage of Arafat's illness and death in three Israeli daily newspapers (*Yediot Aharonot*, *Ma'ariv* and *Ha'aretz*) and in the main television news editions (Channel 1, Channel 2 and Channel 10), from the first reports of his illness on October 25, 2004, until November 19, a few days after his burial.

Below are the principal findings of the report:

1. Introduction: Arafat Dies but the Conception Lives

Israeli media reports on Arafat's condition reflected, more than anything, the "conception" that has taken hold in recent years in Israel, which maintains that there is no Palestinian peace partner and that Arafat alone is responsible for what has transpired in the region. This problematic conception was exposed in full force in internal disputes within Israeli military intelligence that were revealed in a series of interviews published in "*Ha'aretz*" beginning in the middle of 2004. In these interviews, former senior military intelligence officers, Gen. Amos Malka, Amos Lavi and Matti Steinberg, strongly criticized the outlook adopted by the security establishment and the government of Israel, which held that Arafat is solely responsible for the collapse of the peace process and the wave of violence that has consumed the region.

In its news coverage of the past few years, the Israeli media has adopted this "conception" almost without criticism. An examination of the coverage of Arafat's death reveals that the conception underlies reporting about the man himself, his potential successors and Palestinian society in general.

2. The Man with the Hairy Face, the Kaffiyeh and the Pistol: Arafat's Image as He Lay Dying

In general, Israeli media outlets represented Arafat in his dying days as a mythical figure, Satanic, a larger-than-life enemy, and his death was anticipated with explicit rejoicing at his downfall. Headlines in *Yediot Aharonot* and *Ma'ariv* frequently featured denunciative and disparaging expressions like: Good Riddance, Has His Day, Arafat's Finished, the Man with the Hair on his Face, Man of Blood and Man of Evil, Arch-terrorist, and Matters as Dead.

Anticipation of Arafat's death and delight at his impending demise were expressed in such headlines as: "The Arafat Era, Finally, Approaches its End" and "How Much Longer Must We Wait?" (*Yediot Aharonot*, Nov. 8, Nov. 11).

In profile stories and descriptions of the image and life of Arafat those components that were consistent with the "conception" were emphasized and those that contradicted it were minimized. On the Channel 2 news, Ehud Ya'ari stood out in portraying Arafat's demonic image, which he interspersed with anecdotes and testimony about Arafat's real intentions. Oded Granot, on Channel 1, on the other hand, did not negate "the conception", but nevertheless depicted Arafat's image in a less impassioned manner and gave expression to other more complex sides of his character, including his role in the peace process and his support for a two state solution.

3. "The Palestinians Spread Declarations": Who Knows Best How the Chairman Feels?

A prominent phenomenon found in almost all of the media outlets examined in this report was contempt for Palestinian sources of information. Almost all of the media outlets clearly distinguished between "reliable" sources and Palestinian sources. In news reports, Palestinian sources never "say" or "announce"; they "spread declarations," "maintain their version," "continue to insist," "disseminate information," "assert," or at times they "admit," and so on. Special contempt was reserved for the PLO representative in Paris, Laila Shahid. The report presents several examples that show how assessments of Arafat's condition were derided and dismissed when they were expressed by Palestinian sources, but the same assessments were presented as undisputed fact when they were made by Israeli sources, sometimes in the same newspaper and on the same page.

4. The Woman by His Side: The Media and Suha

The media's treatment of the Chairman's wife and her conduct at his bedside in the hospital was characterized by a certain colorfulness that was reminiscent of gossip columns, replete with Orientalistic and chauvinistic elements. *Yediot Aharonot* and the Channel 2 news edition were especially prominent in this regard. In *Yediot Aharonot* the headlines spoke of Suha as a demonic woman, motivated by money and ruling with a high hand over Arafat's circle: "Blonde Ambition," "The Young Woman Whose Eyes

Shine at the Millions of her Inheritance," who plans "Burning Revenge against Abu Mazen" while "Her Finger is on the Respirator Button". Only in some profile stories, published in back pages, it was possible to find, a more complicated picture of Suha's role and her motives, such as, for instance, the reasons for her distance or distancing from her husband, but these details do not make it into the headlines. On Channel 2, the news anchors did not miss an opportunity for amusement with chauvinist jokes about Suha and open disdain for her and her motives. Thus anchor Gadi Sukenik allowed himself to summarize the subject in a few words: "Not much of a relationship, but it was worth it".

5. "Shock and Confusion on the Palestinian Street": What Do They Think of Arafat on the Other Side?

Reporting on what transpires on the other side is one of the most important roles of the media, especially in places and situations where there is crisis and conflict. Though the Israeli media referred to the mood and reactions on the Palestinian side, almost every media outlet that was examined did not base its descriptions of Palestinian reactions on significant Palestinian sources and what was depicted was superficial and general. Aside from Amira Hass of *Ha'aretz*, who lives in and reported from Ramallah and was able to present a more complex and deeper picture, most reporting was limited to chance conversations with Palestinian passersby. Each of the media outlets gave a different picture of Palestinian attitudes toward Arafat's condition. Some spoke of "fear," "mourning" and "shock" on the Palestinian street, and some of "indifference" and "lack of interest"—with the same degree of decisiveness and generalization.

6. "Battles of Succession in the Palestinian Authority": A First Step toward the Next Conception?

Newspaper headlines and television news anchors' pronouncements generally dealt with "battles of succession" and an "expected outbreak of violence", even while the reporters themselves reported assessments (including those of the Israeli security system) that foresaw a smooth transfer of power, orderly elections and Palestinian unity at the difficult moment of the death of their leader. In advance of the funeral, headlines in all of the newspapers warned of riots. A report in *Yediot Aharonot*, for example, declared "The Masses Are Liable to March on Jerusalem, Police and IDF at Highest State of Alert". But articles in the same edition featured assessments by security forces that maintained that the funeral would pass quietly. In "Ha'aretz," the headlines also emphasize a frightening scenario: "Highest State of Alert in the Police and IDF, Police Worried: Demonstrative Attacks and Riots on the Temple Mount". The bottom line is that none of the furious prophesies presented in the headlines materialized.

7. "Returning the Guns to Them": Is a New Era of Israeli Gestures Really Beginning?

Opposite the image of Palestinians in newspaper headlines and news broadcasts, an image that consists of indifference and violence, anarchy and battles for succession, the media outlets presented a positive and conciliatory view of the Israeli side. The steps taken by Israel following the Chairman's death were presented as gestures toward the Palestinians: The government permits Arafat to leave to receive medical care anywhere in the world and will agree to his return to the Muqata'a; Israel will allow East Jerusalem Palestinians to vote in the elections; the IDF exercises restraint during the mourning period; the IDF allows Palestinian policemen to carry weapons, and more. Even when

reports in the same media outlets made it clear that the "gestures" were offered in response to pressure on Israel from the United States, and even when it was reported that the gestures were made for lack of an alternative or were conditioned on certain Palestinian behavior, the headlines almost universally presented these moves as generous acts by the Israeli side.

8. "Is the Chairman's Death Good?"—The Media and Abu Mazen

In the media's treatment of Arafat's successors, especially Abu Mazen, the conception that there is "no partner" weighed heavily, making it possible to identify the first signs of the next "no partner" conception. Headlines such as "A New Middle East," "A New Era," and "Now There's a Partner" jubilantly stressed that a new era has begun and created expectations for substantial change following the death of our greatest enemy, thus solidifying Arafat's existence as the "non-partner". Referring to his replacement, Abu Mazen, the Israeli media offered three principal explanations, all of which led to the same conclusion: Abu Mazen is Arafat's successor and is no different from him (therefore there is no partner); Abu Mazen is different from Arafat but weaker than him (therefore there is no partner because he will not be able to bring about change); Abu Mazen is different from Arafat and able and willing to accept Israel's demands (therefore, as soon as this is revealed not to be the case, he will immediately become a non-partner). Building up the expectation for rapid change is indicative of an outlook that does not give a full picture of the complex reality and of the point of view of the other side.

9. Conclusion: Toward the Days Ahead

After four years in which the vast majority of the Israeli media embraced the old conception, in the period that we examined it was possible to identify the first signs of a new optimism, but also of a new conception, one that says: In Arafat's time, he was alone responsible for the situation; now that he is gone, our hands are extended in peace but we "understand" that after his death there is still, apparently, "no one to talk to". In the media's coverage of Arafat's final days there is virtually nothing that might lead Israeli news consumers to understand the extent to which the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict depends on both sides, and not just the other side. The optimism emanating from the Israeli media after Arafat's death is qualified, and it is based on complete disregard for Israel's role in the conflict. We hope that this report and its conclusions will help bring certain changes to the conduct of the Israeli media, changes that will make possible coverage that is more balanced and more responsible and less impassioned, that will present the full picture of reality to the public, its complexity and the contradictions that we live with. Although words can kill, they can also offer hope.