
Could French Reporting on Israel Reflect a New Understanding?

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The media in France show an inordinate interest in the Middle East and more specifically in the Palestinian issue and Israel. Not a day passes without a news item, an article, and several blog posts on the subject. Each year ushers in a new crop of essays on this topic, while other weighty matters, such as human rights in China or the never-ending food crisis and endemic corruption in Africa get short shrift. The subject never fails to fascinate the public. Writing about the settlements or the blockade of Gaza will prompt hundreds of talkbacks, a fact well known to editors of websites such as Rue891, which rely heavily on advertising to survive.

BLATANT BIAS AGAINST ISRAEL?

Supporters of Israel in France accuse the media of a blatant bias against the Jewish state which finds expression in one-sided reporting and ignores books and essays that make the case for Israel. This claim is disputed vociferously by the mainstream press. Before passing judgment on the issue, and in order to investigate its root causes, it is necessary to take a closer look at another claim, namely, that the French media is neither free nor independent. According to a recently released documentary film, *The New Watchdogs (Les nouveaux Chiens de Garde)*,² the French media lack diversity. The same political pundits appear constantly spouting the same message. The film's trailer spells it out clearly:

The media boast of being a “counter-power.” Yet most newspapers, radio and television stations belong to industrial or financial groups closely linked to the government. Within a confined ideological perimeter, there are more carefully prepared information, immovable pundits, celebrities

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who have earned nothing to deserve their reputation, faked confrontations and tit for tats.³

Under the title “The Sheep of Panurge,”⁴ *Marianne Magazine*⁵ recently protested against this state of affairs:

Hollande, Ayrault, Montebourg, Sarkozy, Europe, fiscal policy, genetically modified organisms, Syria, football...whatever the subject, the major media demonstrate a seamless unanimity. A new manifestation of the *pensée unique*⁶ which leads sometimes to disinformation...like fans at a football match, all media with one voice shout together, criticize, denounce and shower with praise; in a word, they say the same thing about the same events at the same time.

The New Watchdogs has been careful not to blame one side or the other. *Marianne*, however, does not hesitate to place the onus on the right: “Journalists who obviously belong to the right...have set up in-house radio and television studios.” *Marianne* also is not afraid to give names; one of them is the French publicist Eric Brunet. This has raised a few eyebrows since Brunet came to the opposite conclusion in his book, *Belonging to the Right: A French Taboo*,⁷ published in 2006. There he analyzes several surveys which displayed a definite leftist slant. According to one of them, conducted a few weeks before the French presidential election of 2002, only six percent of the journalists who were polled admitted to belonging to the right. Despite that fact, more than half of French voters vote for the right. The book contains a provocative chapter, entitled “A Good Journalist Comes from the [Far] Left.”⁸ Brunet lists a number of journalists who are former members of Trotskyite and Communist movements and on the payroll of the highly respected daily *Le Monde* and its monthly magazine *Le Monde Diplomatique*, as well as the flagship journal of French Communism, *L’Humanité*, or the far-left daily *Libération*. Brunet asserts that his conclusions apply equally to all media outlets, including radio stations and television channels.

Six years after the publication of the book, in the wake of the 2012 presidential election, Brunet wrote on his blog⁹ that there had been no change, and that, during the campaign, surveys showed that forty percent of the voters believed that the press had favored the Social Democratic candidate, Francois Hollande, who won the election. According to Brunet, only ten percent thought the media had favored outgoing president Nicholas Sarkozy. When it came out, *Belonging to the Right: A French Taboo* was a bestseller and went into a third and fourth printing. Despite its popularity, none of the newspapers saw fit to discuss it or refute its allegations. In fact, the book was not reviewed by a single French newspaper, magazine, or monthly. Only blogs and websites made positive comments. In a lengthy

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interview published in *L'Express* on October 8, 2012,¹⁰ Brunet asserted that after the publication of his book, he was ostracized for years by his colleagues who did not like the way he portrayed them.

“A GOOD JOURNALIST MUST BE PRO-PALESTINIAN”

Regarding the Middle East and the alleged bias of the media, one of Brunet's points was that “a good journalist must be pro-Palestinian.”¹¹ It led him to wonder about the way the left had propagated the Palestinian narrative and associated itself with militant Islam. Although some might easily have overlooked such a provocative statement made by a well-known member of the right, they would find it much harder to refute the arguments of the French author Caroline Fourest, a staunch pillar of the left and a frequent critic of Israel. Fourest has published two thought-provoking books on radical Islam and the left: the first, *Brother Tariq*, devoted to Tariq Ramadan, in 2004, and the second, *The Temptation of Obscurantism*, in 2005.¹² In an interview with *L'Express* in 2005,¹³ she was adamant on the subject, stating:

I too proclaim that I belong to the left. I believe that today fundamentalism is a central question which divides us. In order, so they say, to fight Western imperialism, Israel's colonial policy or dictatorships in some Maghreb countries, people who claim to have ideas similar to mine view Muslim fundamentalists—particularly the Muslim Brotherhood—as a movement toward greater democracy or even as a liberation movement, to the extent of excommunicating whoever criticizes fundamentalism, either by accusing him of Islamophobia or of having been subverted by “Bushism” or “Sharonian” thinking....

She thereby alluded to the former president of the United States, George W. Bush, and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, traditional targets of the French left.

Thus, one may safely conclude that there is indeed a definite bias in favor of the Palestinian cause and against the state of Israel in French media as a whole, with the exception, of course, of publications such as *Actualité Juive* and other journals and radio stations which belong to the Jewish community and their affiliated blogs. By and large, the French media are reluctant to offer a platform to a book that calls their integrity into question and which cannot be easily refuted. Publishers do not take risks by bringing out books which they know will not be treated fairly, or, more often than not, will get no coverage at all. This author corresponded with the editor of a medium-sized publishing house who asked not to be identified by name. The reply was as follows:

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Sincerely, the question of knowing what we are allowed to publish today is a huge problem for me. I do feel that books can or should profoundly affect readers, but how to get them to read them? What is obviously a duty is out of reach for a small publisher. There are too many problems, among them the advertising blitz of the bigger houses which favor some authors and tends to marginalize other publishing outlets. In other words, if occasionally we can print the books of some selected authors, works by lesser-known writers are far more difficult to market both in the press and in bookstores. *Books which do not conform do not see the light of day,—or if they do, they are met with deafening media silence.* (Emphasis added)

For Philippe Karsenty, the well-known public figure who exploded the myth of Muhammad al-Durrah, “French media do not show what is positive regarding Israel and amplify what can be seen as negative. Therefore, censorship is simple: avoid whatever is favorable to Israel. Books thought to favor of Israel are simply ignored. It is a very effective form of censorship.”¹⁴

A FLOURISHING BUT—ALSO BIASED—PUBLISHING INDUSTRY

The publishing industry in France is congratulating itself on a steady, if small growth, with seventy thousand new titles published in 2011 compared to sixty-seven thousand in 2010. According to the official site of the French government, twenty-four percent of the new titles and twenty-five percent of sales are devoted to fiction, with nonfiction a respectable four percent.¹⁵ The rest consist mainly of textbooks, specialized and technical books, albums, and books for children and youth. In short, books on current affairs, politics, and history compete for the approximately three thousand slots available.

Despite the fierce competition, aspiring authors acknowledge that books do eventually get published. Yet it is difficult to ascertain the criteria for success or failure, acceptance or rejection. In fact, there are two factors involved which may not necessarily be complementary. First, the publisher must find the book of sufficient interest, and second, he or she must feel reasonably confident that the book will sell. After a book has been vetted for political correctness and market potential, getting it into print is only the first step. Someone has to tell the world that the book has appeared. This does not always happen.

Two years ago, a slim pamphlet of barely thirty-two pages in French, thirteen in English, written by the nonagenarian Stéphane Hessel, achieved remarkable success, selling an unprecedented million copies within several months in France alone. By the end of 2011, according to *Time Magazine*, some four million copies

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in thirty languages had been sold.¹⁶ The sensational title was *Indignez-vous* (*Get Mad!*), and the *Times Literary Supplement* remarked that this was a

rousing call to reject apathy and engage in a “peaceful insurrection” against all the injustices that blight the contemporary world.... Above all, *Get Mad!* is eloquently indignant about the persistent violations of Palestinian rights by Israel, with the complicity of the international community. In this context, Hessel champions the Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign against Israel. He is particularly appalled by Israel’s war in Gaza (in 2008/9), which [allegedly] killed more than 1,400 Palestinians¹⁷ and subsequently trapped the entire population of the territory in an “open air prison.” He notes soberly, “for Jews to perpetrate war crimes is intolerable.” He ends by endorsing the legitimacy of Palestinian resistance in terms analogous to those used by Charles de Gaulle in his prophetic warning to Israel in 1967: “We must recognize that when a country is occupied by infinitely superior military means, the popular reaction cannot be only non-violent.”¹⁸

It is noteworthy that this short pamphlet includes a lengthy tirade against Israel and the Jews. This may have been the key to its success. Of course, the author, Stéphane Hessel, is a distinguished war hero, a German-born French diplomat, and a fairly well-known writer. However, it is doubtful that the book would have attained such worldwide exposure and admiration had it not dovetailed so neatly with the prevailing political correctness of the French press and its definite bias against Israel along with insidious slurs against Jews who are presented as wholeheartedly embracing the cause of Israel and, thereby, acting as accomplices to “crimes” committed by that country.

AND YET THE VOICE OF ISRAEL IS NOT STILLED

One might have received the impression that this bias would preclude the publication of books defending the Jewish state. However, that is not the case. Sympathetic authors such as Jacques Tarnero, Shmuel Trigano, Pierre-André Taguieff, Guy Millière, Michel Gurfinkiel, Georges Bensoussan, and others have written and published dozens of books analyzing Israel’s history, current problems, and future. Such books rarely receive reviews in the mainstream media or are mentioned on cultural television programs; they seldom are bestsellers. In fact, few of these books have sold well, though there are enough sales to enable them to find publishers. In most cases, these writers turn to small, relatively obscure publishing houses and rely on word of mouth, friendly blogs, community papers and the

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radio for publicity. Many faithfully attend the book fairs organized throughout the country by groups such as WIZO, B'nai B'rith, and local Jewish communities. There they manage to sell enough copies for satisfactory annual results. They have also learned to use the new social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, to inform their faithful followers of their new offerings. An additional problem is that their books are not easily found in local bookstores, which prefer to stock bestsellers or books with favorable reviews in the mainstream press. Fortunately, there are new outlets such as the FNAC, *Fédération Nationale d'Achats des Cadres*, (National Shopping Federation for Managers), and more recently, the French site of Amazon where books may be ordered online and are usually delivered free of charge to addresses in France.

There is, of course, a huge drawback to what appears at first to be a fairly satisfactory solution: these authors often preach to the choir. Their books reach friendly audiences, not the general public, while messages such as those of Stéphane Hessel go viral.

Recently, however, cracks have been appearing in the overall façade of political correctness. Following the horrific assault on a Jewish school in Toulouse, where three Jewish children and a rabbi were deliberately murdered by a Muslim militant in March 2012, and the recent surge of attacks on Jewish places of worship and on Jews in general, an uneasy awakening has been taking place in the French media, albeit gradually. Valiant efforts were made to present the Toulouse killer as a lone wolf, and other incidents were attributed to the purported “legitimate” anger of decent Muslims confronted with alleged Israeli war crimes. It took the discovery of additional local jihadi cells and terrorists who do not hesitate to open fire on the police for the French to realize that their targets were not only the Jews but French society as a whole. France is coming to grips with a type of Islam which it had long tried to ignore. In what can be seen as a kind of long-overdue *mea culpa*, *Le Monde* devoted its editorial of October 8, 2012, to “Islamism and Antisemitism in France,” stating: “The weekend has confirmed a sinister reality: there are in France groups determined to do violence against the Jews.”¹⁹ It was followed in turn by *Le Nouvel Observateur* with an in-depth study of anti-Semitism in France.

Although it would be too much to hope that recent events will be enough to change the media's attitude toward Israel, they may become more receptive to a different approach to the Middle East conflict. After all, nearly two years into the Arab Spring, very few people still believe that if the Palestinian issue were solved, peace would break out. The protracted uprising in Syria with its atrocities and terrible toll on the civilian population has opened many eyes, as have the ongoing efforts to impose sharia law in Tunisia and Egypt. It will be interesting to see whether a serious change of perception will have an effect on France's book trade and mainstream media.

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NOTES

1. <http://www.rue89.com>.
2. http://www.allocine.fr/film/fichefilm_gen_cfilm=194641.html.
3. Les médias se proclament “contre-pouvoir.” Pourtant, la grande majorité des journaux, des radios et des chaînes de télévision appartiennent à des groupes industriels ou financiers intimement liés au pouvoir. Au sein d’un périmètre idéologique minuscule se multiplient les informations pré-mâchées, les intervenants permanents, les notoriétés indues, les affrontements factices et les renvois d’ascenseur. Id.
4. Allusion to the tale by Rabelais in which, after a sheep is thrown into the sea, all the others jump in too and drown with it.
5. *Marianne*, October 27, 2012.
6. “Single thought,” a French euphemism for mainstream conformism.
7. *Être de Droite, Un tabou français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006). Reviewed by Michelle Mazel, *Jewish Political Studies Review* 19, 1–2 (Spring 2007): 186–188.
8. P. 99
9. <http://www.ericbrunet.fr/?p=1268>.
10. http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/media-people/media/eric-brunet-etre-un-journaliste-etiquete-de-droite-a-ete-pour-moi-un-vrai-calvaire_1171546.html#xtor=AL-447.
11. P. 142.
12. *Frère Tarik: discours, stratégie et méthode de Tarik Ramadan; La tentation obscurantiste*. Both books published by Bernard Grasset (Paris).
13. http://www.lexpress.fr/actualite/societe/religion/la-gauche-fait-elle-le-lit-de-l-islamisme_483948.html?xtmc=Caroline_Fourest&xtcr=16.
14. Personal communication, October 9, 2012.
15. http://www.dgmic.culture.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/Chiffres-cles_2010-2011.pdf.
16. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2102243-2,00.html>.
17. These were primarily Hamas terrorists.
18. <http://williambowles.info/2011/04/14/a-time-for-outrage-in-france-by-sudhir-hazareesingh>.
19. http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/10/08/islamisme-et-antisemitisme-en-france_1771724_3232.html.

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