

WHY ISRAEL?

United Media syndicated column

October 26, 2000

Indonesia, population 210 million, is in shambles, possibly facing total anarchy. A civil war is raging in Sudan. AIDS is decimating sub-Saharan Africa. There are violent separatist movements in France. In Columbia and Venezuela, it is a question whether the gangsters are in charge, or the government. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein is the government, the whole government. Robert M. Steele says there are 26 limited but severe conflicts, 78 lesser conflicts, 15 genocidal campaigns and 178 violent political struggles. That's normal.

So why does what's happening in Israel almost invariably get more attention in the media than all the rest put together?

Jesus was born there. According to the Bible, Moses saw it dimly across the Jordan. Muslims believe that the prophet Mohammed ascended to heaven from the Dome of the Rock. It's got history.

It's a journalist's dream town and easy to cover. The beaches are beautiful. The babes in bikinis on the beaches are beautiful. Tel Aviv has a night life. The distinguished Jerusalem Post is an English language newspaper. Ha-Aretz, the so-called New York Times of Israel, publishes an English edition. It's pretty safe; more Israelis have been killed in automobile accidents than by Palestinians since the beginning of Intafada II. Your byline gets on the front page; your face gets on the evening news.

Would you rather be posted in Riyadh? Cairo? Benghazi?

It's easy to be an expert. Israel is a free country with a free press offering a wide array of opinion. In recent years, the Israeli intellectual left has presented a full menu of pro-Palestinian revisionist history. (It is a condition familiar to Americans who lived through the Vietnam War.) When the Palestinians spontaneously throw stones and firebombs in spontaneous demonstrations, the international press bureau chiefs are spontaneously called in advance. It's hardly necessary. Over the years, Israel has provided police radios to correspondents.

This is not how the game is played in Baghdad, nor Damascus, nor Algiers. Journalists don't get to see the stone-throwers; anyway, in those countries stone-throwers have a low life expectancy. In fact, of the 22 nations in the Arab League, stretching from Mauritania to Oman, covering about 4,000 miles, there is no truly democratic government, the only such region in the world. This imbalance in the public relations war should sound familiar: It's a pretty good match with the positions of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Scenes of horror were on television every night from Vietnam. But screens were blank about what the Soviets were doing in Afghanistan.

And, in Israel, to whose advantage does this work?

Until the 1967 war, it helped Israel. I liked the voice-over: "Brave Jewish settlers surrounded and attacked by Arab armies, fighting to survive, and winning." I believed it then and still do. But Israel's 1967 victory gave the Palestinians the underdog card, and they have played it masterfully. Now the intense media coverage works against Israel. Israelis

worry about "hasbarah," or public relations.

I believe Israel is right in the current conflict. Prime Minister Barak almost gave away the store at Camp David. Yassir Arafat said he wants it all, which he won't get. A month ago, Ariel Sharon, with prior agreement from the Palestinian Authority, took a legal (if provocative) stroll on the Temple Mount.

With 12-year-old boys pushed forward as human sacrifices to stark television footage, the Palestinians got their groove back, attacking Israeli border checkpoints. Round One of the war for "international public opinion" apparently went to Arafat. One prize was an obscenely tilted U.N. Security Council resolution, voted on by such peaceful democratic stalwarts as China, Namibia and Mali. America, with uncharacteristic gutlessness, abstained, in part to prevent terrorism, and got the terrible tragedy of the USS Cole anyway. Two other U.N. resolutions singled out Israel alone for the violence, leading U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke to say the General Assembly is a "a forum to beat up on Israel." Much inflamed, the "Arab street" jumped up and down, increasing the international "need to do something." Fifty synagogues were torched and trashed in France.

But suppose I'm wrong; suppose Israel is wrong. Or suppose that the whole situation is just a close call, where power determines outcomes, as it has since time immemorial, and as it has in the history of every nation now extant.

If what is going on in Israel were happening in most any other of the 26 limited but severe conflicts, 78 lesser conflicts, 15 genocidal campaigns and 178 violent political struggles, it would not be

big news. Chances are you'd never hear about it.

So, for now, the public relations offensive is working against democratic Israel. Free countries have many advantages, but not all of them. This a bearable disadvantage, just as it was for democratic America during the Cold War. Remember the outcome of the Cold War.

Ben Wattenberg is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and is moderator of PBS's "Think Tank."

© 2000, *Newspaper Enterprise Assn.*