



ISRAEL NEWS

*A collection of the week's news from Israel
From the Bet El Twinning / Israel Action Committee
of Beth Avraham Yoseph of Toronto Congregation*

Israel's violent destruction through massive internal propaganda efforts.

Even when independent media outlets use their best efforts to report the facts in a credible way, they sometimes get it wrong. For instance, on November 27, the Jerusalem Post reported a quote made by an Arab diplomat to AFP news agency in Riyadh claiming that the Bush Administration had bowed to the Arab demand to force

Commentary...

Lies and Deceits By Caroline Glick

In a Paris courtroom last month, after seven long years, the myth of Muhammed al-Dura finally unraveled. That myth, propagated in a report by France 2 television network on September 30, 2000, falsely accused Israeli soldiers of killing a Palestinian child named Muhammad al-Dura while he was crouched behind a barrel with his father at Netzarim junction in the Gaza Strip.

An IDF probe into the incident, ordered by then-OC Southern Command Maj.-Gen. Yom Tov Samia, has ruled out the possibility that the gunfire that apparently harmed the boy was fired by IDF soldiers.

Last month, France 2 was ordered to show the 27 minutes of uncut footage its cameraman testified he filmed at the scene that day and from which the 55 second news story of the purported shooting of al-Dura by IDF soldiers emerged. Charles Enderlin, France 2's permanent correspondent in Israel who reported the story, made a grand entrance into the courtroom where Philippe Karsenty is appealing a libel conviction he received last year after Enderlin and France 2 sued him for publishing an article arguing that the al-Dura story was a hoax.

In the courtroom, in seeming defiance of the court order, Enderlin showed an 18-minute film - which eyewitnesses claimed was obviously heavily edited - of the events of the day. Although apparently doctored, the film's finale was all that was necessary to prove his report to have been a massive deception. For in the last three seconds of the film, al-Dura, showing no signs of injury, raised his hand and peeked at the camera after Enderlin proclaimed him dead and gone.

The French court is in recess until February but the session last month incontrovertibly destroyed the myth of al-Dura. Yet the truth which took seven years to come out cannot erase the consequences of the falsehood.

Enderlin published his report two days after the Palestinians launched their jihad against Israel. The false image of the victimized al-Dura served as a moral indictment of Israel which fueled the murderous campaign against Israel and Jews worldwide which followed. Just as al-Dura's name was invoked by Palestinians as justification of their massacres of Israeli civilians, so it was invoked by Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl's executioners and by Muslim mobs in Europe as they attacked Jews and Jewish institutions.

Enderlin's alleged hoax went beyond journalistic malfeasance. He put blind faith in the reports of a cameraman who was clearly lying to him. And when faced with the facts of the deception, he aggressively dismissed them over the course of seven years. While it is hard to say how events might have unfolded if he hadn't chosen to act as he did, looking forward the murderous consequences of the al-Dura myth speak volumes about the moral imperative for journalists to get their facts straight and to acknowledge mistakes when they are discovered. So too, it underlines the need for policymakers to base their decisions on facts, even when they expose difficult and inconvenient realities.

FACTS OF course, are slippery things. Authoritarian regimes and political movements often engage in the deliberate dissemination of disinformation to advance their interests. The KGB in its day devoted the overwhelming majority of its efforts not to classical espionage activities but to the dissemination of false information to the West in an effort to demoralize Western societies and convince them that there was no moral justification for fighting communism.

Since Israel was established in 1948 the Arabs have devoted the lion's share of their efforts against Israel not to armed attacks against the state but to the dissemination of false information about Israel which is aimed at demonizing it internationally and demoralizing Israelis internally. So too, both the Arab states and the Palestinian Authority indoctrinate their own people to seek

the Israeli delegation at the Annapolis conference to enter the conference hall through a separate entrance from the Arabs. In the diplomat's words, "The Saudis told Washington that they do not want to meet anyone from the Israeli delegation, either by chance or by prior arrangement. Hence it was decided that ... delegations would enter into the meeting room from different doors."

His assertion was made credible by statements from US officials regarding the Saudi demand for segregation between the Arabs and the Israelis at the conference. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said, "As the Saudi foreign minister put it, nobody's interested in these uncomfortable situations where there are theatrics for the sake of photographs. We'll of course be respectful and mindful of that as we'll put together the various events."

It was these twin reports that informed my own decision to begin my Nov. 30 column "Apartheid not peace" with the story of the separation of Israeli representatives from Arab representatives at Annapolis. Happily, after my column was published, both the State Department and Israeli officials denied that the US had enforced the Arab demand for segregated entrances.

YET WHILE the Bush administration did not bow to the Arab demand for segregation at Annapolis, it is moving to advance the Arabs' bigoted demand for apartheid rather than peace in the Middle East. Since the Annapolis conference, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has repeatedly invoked the false Arab view that the physical presence of Israelis beyond the 1949 armistice lines is the source of the Arab-Israeli conflict rather than the Arab world's expressed refusal to accept Israel's existence and Palestinian society's expressed resolve to destroy Israel.

Rice's open and repeated assaults against Israel's plans to build housing in Jewish neighborhoods in its capital city of Jerusalem and her studied silence on the issue of Arab and Palestinian Authority sponsorship of terrorism against Israel make her internalization of the bigoted and false Arab narrative clear. Indeed, in an interview with the BBC last week, Rice placed the blame for the seven-year suspension of peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians not on the Palestinian Authority which directed and sponsored the terror war against Israel which has claimed more than a thousand Israeli victims, but rather on the Israeli government for its support of the presence of Jews in disputed lands. As she put it, "On the Middle East peace process, I don't think in 2001, with the intifada having just been launched and frankly, Ariel Sharon, the father of the settlement movement, having just been elected prime minister of Israel, that there was much prospect for a final-status negotiation."

IT COULD be argued that in adopting her overtly anti-Israel and bigoted view of the Arab world's conflict with Israel that Rice is the victim of disinformation and general ignorance. This view might have some credibility were it not for the fact that the administration itself is actively ignoring evidence which shows its view of the Palestinians and other Arab states to be false.

For instance, in upholding PA Chairman and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas as a man of peace, the administration ignores an overwhelming body of evidence showing his own security forces' involvement in terrorism and his government's rejection of Israel. Rice ignores the fact that Fatah security forces murdered Ido Zoldan last month while she supports the arming and training of those same forces. So too, while she insists that Israel must not build in its capital city and must plan to expel some 250,000 Israelis from their towns in Judea and Samaria, she has been silent on the fact that Fatah's 43rd anniversary posters depict the map of Israel covered by a Palestinian keffiyeh, a rifle, and a portrait of Yasser Arafat.

Regionally, as the US legitimizes Bashar Assad's murderous regime in Syria, the administration is making concerted efforts to prevent Congress from understanding the depth of Syria's involvement in terror and nuclear

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proliferation. According to a publication by the Federation of American Scientists, President George W. Bush is threatening to veto the 2008 Intelligence Authorization bill because the bill requires that the White House fully brief the House and Senate intelligence committees about the nature and target of Israel's September 6 attack on what was reportedly a North Korean-built nuclear installation in Syria.

According to Congressional sources, the administration is withholding information about the Israeli attack for it believes that a revelation of the nature of the attack will cause an outcry in Congress. Such an outcry will force the US to back away from its current engagement of Syria and North Korea and instigate the tightening of sanctions against both countries - and perhaps against Iran.

TYRANNIES require disinformation to maintain and justify their grip on power to their own people and to the outside world. But democracies can only flourish through the open flow of information. When the media of free nations publish lies and distorted accounts of fact, and the governments of free nations base their policies on falsities, their national interests are necessarily harmed.

Mistakes happen. Falsities inevitably find their way into discourse. But with good will and a basic, underlying commitment to facts, these mistakes can be easily corrected.

Unfortunately, between the Western and Arab media's often deliberate dissemination of disinformation and the studied refusal of Western policymakers to acknowledge inconvenient facts in favor of easy lies and deliberate deceptions which enable them to avoid contending with harsh realities, it is no surprise that our public discourse today is increasingly based on equal doses of mendacity and wishful thinking. And tragically, as the al-Dura affair showed so well, the murderous results won't be long in coming.

Turning Abbas's Logic on its Head By Daniel Pipes

Western financial aid to the Palestinians has, I showed last week, the perverse and counterintuitive effect of increasing their rate of homicides, including terrorist ones. This week, I offer two pieces of perhaps even stranger news about the many billions of dollars and record-shattering per-capita donations from the West: First, these have rendered the Palestinians poorer. Second, Palestinian impoverishment is a long-term positive development.

To begin, some basic facts about the Palestinian economy, drawing on a fine survey by Ziv Hellman, "Terminal Situation," in the Dec. 24 issue of Jerusalem Report:

Palestinian per year per-capita income has contracted by about 40 percent since its \$2,000 peak in 1992 (before the Oslo process began) to less than \$1,200 now.

Per-capita Israeli income, 10 times greater than the Palestinians' in 1967 is now 23 times greater.

Deep poverty has increased in Gaza from 22 percent of the population in 1998 to nearly 35 percent in 2006; it would be about 67 percent if not for remittances and food aid.

Direct foreign investment barely exists, while local capital mostly gets sent abroad or is invested in real estate or short-term trading.

The Palestinian Authority economy, Hellman writes, "is largely based on monopolies in various industries granted by PA officials in exchange for kickbacks."

The PA's payroll is so bloated that the cost of wages alone exceeds all revenues.

A dysfunctional judicial system in the PA means armed gangs usually decide commercial disputes.

UNSURPRISINGLY, Hellman characterizes the Palestinian economy as "in shambles." Such shambles should come as no surprise, for as the late Lord Bauer and others have noted, foreign aid does not work. It corrupts and distorts an economy; and the greater the amounts involved, the greater the damage. One telling detail: at times during Yasser Arafat's reign, a third of the Palestinian Authority's budget went for "expenses of the President's office," without further explanation, auditing, or accounting. The World Bank objected, but the Israeli government and the European Union endorsed this corrupt arrangement, so it remained in place.

The Paris conference for the "Palestinian state" raised \$7.4 billion in pledges on Dec. 17, 2007. Indeed, the Palestinian Authority offers a textbook example of how to ruin an economy by smothering it under well-intentioned but misguided donations. The \$7.4 billion recently pledged to it for the 2008-10 period will further exacerbate the damage.

Paradoxically, this error might help resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. To see why, consider the two models, hardship v. exhilaration, that explain Palestinian extremism and violence.

The hardship model, subscribed to by all Western states, attributes Palestinian actions to poverty, isolation, Israeli roadblocks, the lack of a state, etc. Mahmoud Abbas, the PA leader, summed up this viewpoint at the Annapolis conference in November: "the absence of hope and overwhelming

despair ... feed extremism." Eliminate those hardships and Palestinians, supposedly, would turn their attention to such constructive concerns as economic development and democracy. Trouble is, that change never comes.

The exhilaration model turns the Abbas logic on its head: the absence of despair and overwhelming hope, in fact, feed extremism. For Palestinians, hope derives from a perception of Israeli weakness, implying an optimism and excitement that the Jewish state can be eliminated. Conversely, when Palestinians cannot see a way forward against Israel, they devote themselves to the more mundane tasks of earning a living and educating their children. Note that the Palestinian economy peaked in 1992, just as, post-Soviet Union and post-Kuwait war, hopes bottomed out to eliminate Israel.

Exhilaration, not hardship, accounts for bellicose Palestinian behavior. Accordingly, whatever reduces Palestinian confidence is a good thing. A failed economy depresses the Palestinians' mood, not to speak of their military and other capabilities, and so brings resolution closer.

Palestinians must experience the bitter crucible of defeat before they will drop their foul goal of eliminating their Israeli neighbor and begin to build their own economy, polity, society, and culture. No short-cut to this happy outcome exists. Who truly cares for Palestinians must want their despair to come quickly, so that a skilled and dignified people can move beyond its current barbarism and build something decent.

The huge and wasted outpouring of Western financial aid, ironically, brings on that despair in two ways: by encouraging terrorism and by distorting the economy, both of which imply economic decline. Rarely has the law of unintended consequences worked so imaginatively.

The writer is director of the Middle East Forum. (Jerusalem Post Dec 26)

Reaping the Bitter Fruits of Bad Policy By Evelyn Gordon

Even among those few Israeli Arabs who volunteer for national service, Nicole Luka's description of her service would ordinarily be unsurprising: "I'm contributing to my community, but I'm not doing it for the state or for Zionist reasons," she told Haaretz.

But Luka is no ordinary Israeli Arab, raised from birth to view the state as her enemy. Her father joined the South Lebanon Army at age 17, fought alongside the Israel Defense Forces in Lebanon for years, then moved here when the IDF quit Lebanon in May 2000. She grew up viewing Israel as a friend and ally.

She makes no secret of what changed her mind. "The government turned its back on us after we came here seven and a half years ago," she said. "We started with nothing, living in an absorption center in Tiberias. They took no account of what our family had done for Israel."

Luka's charges are shamefully correct. Thus Israel, by its own actions, turned a supporter into an opponent - and Luka is not alone. For 60 years, Israel has mistreated its allies while pandering to its enemies; now, it is starting to reap the bitter fruits.

Israel's treatment of the SLA was a classic example. For 18 years, the SLA served as the front-line defense of Israel's northern border. Yet when the IDF quit Lebanon, it fled overnight, giving its allies no advance warning, no chance to organize their own retreat. SLA families who feared vengeance from Hizbullah if they remained had no time to withdraw money from the bank and pack their belongings; they had to flee as penniless refugees. Israel even made the refugees leave their cars at the border; they were allowed in only with what they could carry. Some Lebanese even had to abandon relatives who were too far away to reach the border that day.

Then, for four and a half years, Israel refused to give them citizenship or even permanent residency, meaning they were unable to work; they had to subsist on government handouts whose continuance was never assured. Nor did the government offer any financial compensation. Thus instead of being able to start anew, they were kept in limbo, with no end in sight. The situation was so debilitating that many opted to return to Lebanon and throw themselves on Hizbullah's mercy.

Three years ago, the Knesset finally granted them citizenship and limited financial compensation, enabling them at last to start rebuilding. That was clearly better than nothing. But for many, like Luka, it was too little, too late: The searing memory of Israel's betrayal will never be wiped away.

Nor was Israel's treatment of the SLA exceptional: It is committing the same betrayal, on a slower scale, against its Druse citizens.

UNLIKE OTHER Israeli Arabs, Druse are drafted into the IDF, generally vote for Zionist parties and support the Jewish state. Yet rather than rewarding their loyalty, Israel systematically discriminates against them - in government funding, land allocations, the job market and more. Consequently, they are at the bottom of Israel's socioeconomic ladder, even below Muslim Arabs by most measures.

Indeed, the Druse have actually been penalized for their loyalty: While powerful interest groups, from leftist parties to the Supreme Court, frequently demand - and sometimes obtain - increased state funding for other Israeli

Arabs in an effort to "ease their disaffection," nobody lobbies for the Druse. Not being "disaffected," they are ignored.

Three years ago, Sheikh Muwafak Tarif, a Druse leader, commented despairingly: "Even the Arabs constantly say, 'the Druse give everything, yet Druse villages are in even worse shape than Arab villages!'"

Under those circumstances, how do you persuade young Druse that loyalty pays? And indeed, there are worrying signs that this loyalty may be fraying - like October's riots in Peki'in.

The same goes for the Beduin. They are not drafted, but for years, hundreds volunteered for the IDF every year, usually serving in front-line combat units. Then they returned home to discover that not only are they discriminated against in the job market, they cannot even legally build a house in order to start a family, because their villages lack zoning plans, making legal construction impossible. Unsurprisingly, Beduin enlistment in the IDF has fallen sharply in recent years.

Even worse, the government is abandoning this community to the most hostile element of Israeli Arab society: the Islamic Movement. In 2002, for instance, the Islamic Movement reportedly raised NIS 120,000 for scholarships for Beduin students. "All the state has to do is put up a similar amount of money for veterans to help change the atmosphere," argued Ibrahim al-Huzeil, a Beduin veteran, at the time. Given that Israel's budget that year topped NIS 250 million, the sum was trivial. But even that proved too much for the government.

THEN THERE is Jordan, which signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994 and has faithfully observed it ever since. Yet for 13 years, Israel consistently refused its pleas to repatriate a few dozen Jordanian criminals imprisoned in Israel - even as it released thousands of terrorists to Hizbullah and the Palestinians, both of which were, and still are, actively killing Israelis. Once again, being Israel's enemy paid better than being its friend.

Sheikh Ali Fella, honorary president of the Druse Zionist Movement (yes, there is such a thing), put the problem succinctly in a 2005 interview. "You have to remember that an oppressed Druse is oxygen for Israel's enemies," he said.

Fella is right - because when Israel mistreats its allies, it does three things: It drives fence-sitters into its enemies' camp; it drives away the allies themselves; and it assures its enemies that they have chosen the wiser course, thereby distancing prospects for peace.

It is probably too late to win back Luka, but it is still not too late to start addressing the Druse community's pressing needs or to invest in helping Beduin veterans. However, the window of opportunity appears to be closing. If Israel does not act swiftly to demonstrate that loyalty to the Jewish state pays, it will soon have no allies left to lose. (Jerusalem Post Dec 26)

Like-Minded Neighbors By Emanuel Feldman

Fresh out of the yeshiva, I spent my first year in the rabbinate in a lovely American small town. My congregants were warm, fine people, but I was the only fully observant Jew. At the time, a veteran rabbi asked me if the experience had strengthened my Jewishness or weakened it. Without hesitation, I replied that it had been strengthened. The very need to explain and to respond to challenges had forced me to become a more alert and more knowledgeable Jew.

I thought of this recently when I saw a Jerusalem real estate advertisement that declared, "A Home for Every Hashkafa/Ideology." It listed various homes in different neighborhoods ranging from Hassidic to haredi to modern Orthodox to secular and beyond. Whatever a person's ideological/theological requirements, this company had a neighborhood to meet those needs.

Unspoken in the ad was this idea: Why live with people who are not exactly like you, who do not exactly replicate your personal way of life? You can choose to live with people who are carbon copies of you, who dress like you, pray (or don't pray) like you, think like you, behave like you. Why suffer even a twinge of discomfort when you can find a niche that fits you perfectly, that never challenges you and that never questions you.

The advert proclaimed that the prices were within the reach of everyone. What they omitted was the long term cost. For if a person lives in a neighborhood where everyone is identical, that means that he never has to engage anyone in a serious discussion about his way of living. And when one never has to think about what they are doing or why, the danger is that a person will soon be acting thoughtlessly and by habit - what the prophet derisively calls *mitzvot anashim melumada* - serving God by rote. And if there is nothing to discuss, the danger is one of atrophy and boredom and complacency and, ultimately, intellectual decay. That is a high price indeed.

ONE CAN understand the natural desire of people to live in a neighborhood that is compatible with their way of life and beliefs. But supposing someone ventured to live in a neighborhood with people who did not share the same hashkafa, what major catastrophe might ensue? If my next door neighbor wore a black hat while I wore a colorful knitted yarmulke, what

might happen? Would my children be ruined religiously by the knowledge that there are others who are different? And if my neighbor observed the Shabbat while I did not, would that leave a black mark on my soul - or on his? Are we so insecure in our theology, so fearful that it will fall apart if challenged, that it needs to be validated by a monolithic neighborhood every time we step outside?

Obviously, we will not soon witness a mass movement of Haredim into secular neighborhoods, or of non-observant Jews into observant areas. This is a pity, because among the many problems we face in Israel is that of the rigid barriers that exist between the various groups.

No one is talking to anyone but like-minded people. Does a *kippa seruga* talk to a *shtreimel*? Does a black hat talk to one who wears no head covering - or to a *kippa seruga*? Does the lady with the sheitel and the woman with the uncovered hair ever communicate with one another? Do Belzer Hassidim talk with Breslov Hassidim? Do Ashkenazim talk with Sephardim? The insularity - even within groups who have identical beliefs - is palpable.

The barriers are even more impermeable than the security barrier being constructed between us and the Arabs. Men are religiously pigeonholed by the length of their jackets, the width of their hat brims, and the color of their shirts, and women by whether they wear a hat, a wig, a snood, or no hair covering at all. And there is little acknowledgment of the existence of anyone who is slightly different.

I WONDER if there is out there an occasional person with the inner fortitude to move into a neighborhood that does not match his precise ideology. Is there a Hassidic Jew who would move into a secular area - and would a secular Jew greet them without fear, or flee the neighborhood? Or is there a secular Jew who would choose to live among haredim - and would haredim treat them decently, or move elsewhere? What might happen in such a mixed neighborhood? Granted, the secular Jew might do things on Shabbat that would disturb the tranquility of the observant Jew. He might, for example, roar off in his car during the recitation of Friday night kiddush. Then again, he might not. He might decide that on Shabbat, though he does not practice it, he would out of deference to his neighbor avoid doing anything that might be offensive religiously.

And they might even learn from one another. The secular Jew might learn that the observant Jew is not a monster, that he is not engaged in religious coercion, and that although he observes Shabbat and attends synagogue daily, he is not a wild-eyed fanatic, but a very decent human being. And the observant Jew might discover that his secular neighbor, though he wears no head covering, is always ready to be a good neighbor, to help him in a thousand ways, and is a real mensch.

No one's core beliefs would be affected. And the ultimate oneness of the Jewish people might even be strengthened.

Well and good, you might say. But what about my children? Will they not be negatively affected by contact with those who are so different from what they are taught at home? Not necessarily. They might even be strengthened in their Jewishness, like the young rabbi in our first paragraph. Jewish children who are secure in their own beliefs and practices can only be invigorated and fortified by meeting other Jewish children of different beliefs. If they ask their parents why this and why that, the theology of the parents could only be strengthened by the need to explain and to help their children - and themselves - understand who they are. In this way, children and adults would also learn how to live in the real world where not everyone is alike. They can be helped to grow by learning that there are differences, and to learn to tolerate and understand those differences.

Ultimately, when we all get to the World-To-Come, we will not be asked about the kinds of jackets we wore, or the colors of our shirts, or the types of head coverings. We will be asked if we were honest, decent people, if we were loyal to our Jewish heritage, if we tried to build a future generation of faithful Jews, if we did not despair about the condition of the Jewish people but kept alive our faith in the ultimate redemption.

We all know why the Messiah has not yet appeared. The chances are that he is actually here, waiting at the gates of Jerusalem. But he cannot enter, because he does not know what kind of garb to wear. If he wears all black, the *kippa seruga* crowd and the secularists will be afraid of him. If he wears a *kippa seruga*, the "black" crowd will shun him. If he wears a black hat but not a *shtreimel*, he will be ostracized by certain Hassidim. If he wears black with a *shtreimel*, it might not be the right kind of *shtreimel*. The possibilities and choices are infinite. So there he stands at the gates ready to enter, but troubled by serious sartorial issues. In his suitcase is a white shirt, black trousers, a colorful sweater, a sport jacket, a long black *kappotte*, a black hat, a multi-colored *kippa seruga*, and several styles of *shtreimel*.

But he prefers to travel light, and he cannot enter with this burdensome wardrobe. And so he waits - for us to decide what he should be wearing, and for us to decide what worldview we will be following. But once he makes it through the gates, he carries in his hands the text of his own real estate ad: "Homes available in the new Messiah Ben David community - regardless of

hashkafa. Come as you are. All are welcome."

The author served as a rabbi for 40 years in Atlanta and is former editor of Tradition magazine. He is presently on the editorial staff of The Encyclopedia of Mitzvot. (Jerusalem Post Dec 25)

Coal in Israel's Stocking By Clifford D. May
'Tis the season for blame-Israel-first stories.

In this holiday season, there are journalistic conventions one comes to expect: stories lamenting the commercialism of Christmas; stories summing up the 12 months gone by and predicting the direction of the New Year; and stories blaming Israelis for the problems afflicting the Holy Land.

Reuters, the BBC, McClatchy, ABC News — in recent days, all have run pieces in the last category. But the one that troubled me most appeared in the Wall Street Journal — my favorite national daily newspaper — on Dec. 24. It was written by Ken Woodward, a religion writer whose work I've long respected. But in this instance his subject was not religion but foreign affairs, and what he produced was the usual anti-Israeli dogma.

His oped was headlined: "The Plight of Bethlehem: Why Christians can't visit the holy shrines in Jerusalem." The first thing to note is that, according to Palestinian tourism officials, 450,000 foreigners will have visited Bethlehem by the end of this year — a 50 percent increase over the 295,000 who came last year. Every hotel room was filled. Among the tourists on Christmas Day were 7,000 Israeli Christian Arabs. Fadel Badarin, the chief of the Palestinian tourism police, declared that in 2007 "the tourism situation in Bethlehem was great."

The low point for tourism to Bethlehem came in 2002. Then-Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat had turned down the peace offers forged by President Clinton during his last days in office. Arafat went on to launch a wave of suicide bombings against Israel, a terrorist assault known as the al-Aqsa Intifadah. At one point in that conflict, Palestinian terrorists took over the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and used the Christians inside — including nuns and priests — as human shields.

Yet Woodward argues that Israel "cannot blame the Christians' dire circumstances" on the Intifadah because "Muslims are suffering just as much as the tiny Christian minority." Does Woodward actually believe militant Islamists spare ordinary Muslims from suffering? Does he not know that the majority of victims of Islamist terrorism — in Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and elsewhere — have been moderate Muslims?

Woodward also seems unaware of the extent to which Bethlehem's Christian population has declined since 1995 — the year Arafat's Palestinian Authority took over the West Bank and Gaza as part of the Oslo Accords. Arafat quickly fired the city's Christian politicians and replaced them with his cronies.

Conceding that "Israel, of course, must protect its security," Woodward nevertheless slams Israel for doing so. He singles out the security barrier separating the Christian village of Beit Jala from the Jerusalem neighbor of Gilo. Woodward fails to mention that Palestinian snipers had used locations in Beit Jala to shoot at Israeli men, women and children in Gilo. On my first trip to Israel, in 2002, I visited Gilo. The residents had indeed erected a concrete barrier to stop the bullets. On it, they had painted a mural of Beit Jala — to remind them of the neighbor it had become to dangerous to look upon.

The Israelis I met in Gilo harbored no resentment against the Christians of Beit Jala. They knew who was — and who was not — doing the shooting. They knew, too, that the militants threatened and in some cases beat those who dared object to the presence of the snipers in their streets, stores and homes.

This leads to the larger issue Woodward neglects: the role of Islamist extremism and violence in causing the exodus of Christians from Bethlehem — and from Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Sudan, and other countries of the Middle East.

Right now, it is from Gaza that Christians are fleeing fastest. Shortly after the Hamas takeover, Christian activist Rami Ayyad, 32, was murdered — shot and stabbed by militants who had demanded he convert. That sent a message. As the International Herald Tribune recently reported, Christians in Gaza this year are too frightened to display Christmas trees and "whole families" are leaving, according to Rev. Manuel Masalleh, head of Gaza's Roman Catholic Church.

About all this, Woodward has not a word to say. Nor does he seem aware that, according to the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Israel's Christian community has grown by 270 percent since the founding of the state in 1948.

Woodward acknowledges that he has not visited Bethlehem for 7 years. For the kind of piece he has written, however, it's not necessary to report on the ground or even look up facts. All one has to do is go up to the attic, drag out the old allegations and plug them in. (National Review Dec 27)

The writer, a former New York Times foreign correspondent, is president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a policy institute focusing on terrorism.

2007 - The Year That Was By Barry Rubin

While 2007 didn't greatly change the Middle East compared to some of its predecessors, here are some of its significant trends which will continue to dominate the year to come.

- Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip. This is the most important single Middle East event of 2007 because it is a clear, probably irreversible, shift in the balance of power. Four decades of a movement dominated by nationalists has come to an end. Given Fatah's continuing weaknesses it is conceivable that Hamas will take over the West Bank within a few years and marginalize its rival.

To Islamists, this is a great victory. In fact, it is a disaster for Palestinians and Arabs. It deepens divisions and destroys any real (as opposed to the silly superficial events that take up governments' time and media space) diplomatic option for them. A negotiated resolution of the Arab-Israeli or Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and with it prospects for a Palestinian state, has been set back for decades. Much Western sympathy has been lost. In years to come, struggles between Arab nationalists and Islamists, as well as between Sunnis and Shias, will dwarf the Arab-Israeli conflict.

During 2008 we will have to assess whether the Palestinian Authority still ruling the West Bank can meet the Hamas challenge. We already know it won't meet the diplomatic challenge but it will take all year for most Western politicians and much of the media to discover that.

- The military success of the US surge in Iraq. US forces showed that pessimistic assessments were wrong and they were able to reduce the power of anti-government insurgents and lower the death toll in Iraq. However, this is a long way from winning the war.

During 2008 the two key questions will be whether US troop withdrawals start in earnest and whether there is any political progress in bringing together Sunni and Shia communities in that country. It is hard to imagine what might change to bring about such an agreement. And even if the insurgents can kill fewer people they are likely to do enough damage to intimidate Sunnis from making peace. Still, the Iraqi government and society could grow strong enough to dispense with US combat troops.

- The Western failure to substantially tighten sanctions against Iran. It was clear in 2007 that negotiations with Teheran would fail to deter Iran from its campaign to obtain nuclear weapons. Certainly, France, Britain and Germany were more willing to take - or at least to talk about taking - action but due to their own hesitations, plus resistance from Russia and China, very little happened.

The reaction to these events in Iran was mixed. On one hand, there was more worry about the pressures facing that country plus its own economic woes. On the other hand, the regime expressed more confidence that the West was chicken and that time and tide was on Iran's side.

In 2008 we will be able to see if Teheran's drive for nuclear weapons continues without serious hindrance. Equally, it will be possible to assess whether President Mahmud Ahmadinejad is being weakened by his factional opponents - especially in the March parliamentary elections - or tightening his hold on power and holding to his reckless course.

- US policy returns to its traditional stance. Whatever innovations, for better or worse, President George Bush introduced into American regional policy have vanished in 2007. He is largely back to the traditional approach as carried out by both his father and predecessor. The administration has given up on reform or backing democracy.

In 2008, a new president will be chosen but real policy shifts will not take place until the following year, of course.

- Israel prospers. Despite outdated talk of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's weakness, he used 2007 to rebuild his authority. Especially interesting, Israel's economic growth has been impressive; unemployment fallen to all-time lows. Revolutionary enthusiasm and paper victories still thrill the Arab world and Iran but material gains continue to be what is important.

- The demoralization of Lebanon. Worried that it is being abandoned by the West, forces supporting the moderate Lebanese government began to wonder if in fact Iran, Syria, and Hizbullah would be able to reestablish their control over the country. A key element is the identity of the country's next president. In 2008, it will be important to watch how power shifts in Beirut and whether the investigation of Syrian involvement in terrorism against Lebanese opposition figures leads to an international tribunal.

- France changes course. President Francois Sarkozy has moved France away from the nationalistic effort to undercut the United States and appease radical regimes. Sarkozy, however, has played footsie with Syria and Libya. The question for 2008: Will he implement pledges to get tougher and will French institutions follow him in changing course? (Jerusalem Post Dec 23)
