

TOM GROSS

The BBC

The BBC has framed the Israeli–Palestinian conflict for decades. Its primacy is ill-deserved



FEW MONTHS before I graduated from Oxford, I was interviewed for the British Broadcasting Corporation’s prestigious two-year journalist trainee course. This was the best way at the time to secure a job at Britain’s most respected news broadcaster. A committee of five interviewed me. The chair asked whether there was anything I would have changed about a recent edition of BBC One’s then-flagship *Nine O’Clock News*.

In a calm and reasoned way, I said that although the BBC could not report on everything in its half-hour bulletin and had to be selective about which international items to cover alongside British ones, it had struck me that Saddam Hussein’s gassing of the Iraqi Kurds at Halabja deserved to be much higher up on BBC News than it had been.

I pointed out that this horrific act was the largest use of chemical weapons against a civilian target since World War II. Between 3,000

and 5,000 Kurdish children and adults had been gassed to death. Yet the BBC had only mentioned it in passing about 20 minutes into its news bulletin, after a light-hearted item about Prince Charles. I added that the BBC's main news competitor in Britain at the time, ITN, had led its evening news bulletin that day with a five-minute report on the gassing of the Kurds.

There was silence in the room. The members of the BBC interviewing panel glanced at one another with expressions of bemusement. The chair then turned and asked me, with a slight scowl, "Are you a Zionist?"

And then, before I could answer, my interview came to an end.



Today, with the worldwide wave of antisemitism that has followed Hamas's latest savagery, it is clearer than ever that a great deal of anti-Zionism—from the illustrious lecture halls of Harvard to the streets of European capitals—is merely a mask for old-fashioned antisemitism.

But even more than three decades ago, it was obvious to me that the attitude of the BBC's interviewing panel perfectly exemplified what Martin Luther King Jr. reportedly told a student in the aftermath of the Six-Day War: "When people criticize Zionists, they mean Jews. You're talking antisemitism."

At no point in my BBC interview or application process had I mentioned Israelis, Palestinians, or Jews. In what was the pre-Google era, my family background is not something that the BBC could easily have discovered.

I'm secular and had barely ever made an issue of being Jewish (although that hadn't prevented me from being on the receiving end of some vicious antisemitic remarks not just from fellow school pupils

in London but from the deputy headmaster). It was the BBC that brought up the subject of Zionism. Needless to say, I wasn't granted a place on the BBC trainee course.

The BBC's misreporting about Israel, along with its selective inattention to other Middle Eastern issues such as the plight of the Kurds, derives from the same warped view of the world and Israel's place in it. The BBC's problem, which persists to this day, is so widespread that many believe it has become institutionalized. It certainly has repercussions for British and Western foreign policy, and for the struggle against antisemitism.

The BBC is not the most anti-Israel news organization in the Western world. Its prejudices are not as jaw-dropping as, for example, those of *The Guardian* (the daily paper of choice for many BBC news staff), which this January blamed Israel's current action against Hamas for worldwide climate change. BBC reporters do not directly encourage terrorism against Israelis, as did, for example, Mohammed Fayq Abu Mostafa, a Gazan photojournalist working for Reuters, who called on ordinary Gazans to cross the border into Israel and join the Hamas rampage on October 7. (Among other things, Abu Mostafa then eagerly shared his footage of Gazans lynching an Israeli soldier.)

Yet, as the biggest and arguably most influential news organization in the world, broadcasting in dozens of languages on multiple TV and radio platforms as well as online, to a combined audience of about half a billion people, the BBC may be Israel's most problematic antagonist among Western media. Its power and prominence are further guaranteed by the lavish funding it enjoys as a public broadcaster, funded by a license fee from every television owner in Britain, whether or not he or she actually watches the BBC. For its audience of hundreds of millions, including world leaders, it retains an unrivaled reputation for accuracy and impartiality—an increasingly rare phenomenon in this era of fake or partisan news.

This reputation is not deserved. And while the BBC is regarded as biased on many issues (Brexit, for instance) in a way that has angered large sections of the British public, when it comes to Israel, its distortions and one-sidedness are in a league of their own.



On at least three occasions since October 7, the BBC has been forced into begrudging acknowledgments of its misreporting. In all three cases, it eagerly repeated lies fed to it by Hamas.

The most notorious of these happened early. On October 17, the BBC reported that an Israeli rocket hit al-Ahli hospital in Gaza, killing 500 Palestinian patients and staff. In another report, the BBC added that “hundreds of people have been killed in an Israeli air strike on Ahli hospital in Gaza.”

The archbishop of Canterbury, head of the worldwide Anglican church, retweeted the report, which had been viewed online 2.8 million times in its first hour. He added his own comment, seen by a further million of the archbishop’s own followers: “This is an appalling and devastating loss of lives at the Ahli hospital.” A further BBC news report was headlined “Indescribable Scenes at Hospital.”

Perhaps the scenes at the hospital were “indescribable” because the hospital hadn’t been hit at all. It was the hospital parking lot that had been hit, producing far fewer casualties. And it had not been hit by an Israeli bomb but by a misfired Palestinian Islamic Jihad rocket, evidently fired from a nearby cemetery. Israel doesn’t bomb hospitals.

But the damage was done. Other media — trusting the BBC — then repeated the lie that Israel had killed hundreds of civilians at a hospital. Hundreds of thousands of angry protesters across Europe and the Middle East took to the streets chanting “from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free,” effectively calling for the eradication of Israel.

In November, the BBC reported that Israeli troops had targeted medical staff during a raid on another hospital, this time the al-Shifa medical complex in Gaza City. A news anchor, turning a Reuters report on its head, said the Israeli military was “targeting people including medical teams as well as Arab speakers.” In fact, what the IDF spokesperson had said was, “Our medical teams and Arabic speakers are on the ground to ensure that these supplies reach those in need.” Another blood libel. The BBC later issued a brief on-air apology.

Then, on December 24, the BBC accused Israeli troops of “carrying out summary executions in the Gaza Strip” of 137 Palestinian civilians and burying them in unmarked graves in northern Gaza. The report itself was based on a thinly sourced story from Agence France-Presse and contained a cursory acknowledgment that the IDF was “currently unaware” of the incident. But it was the BBC that had the reach and power to disseminate the AFP’s shoddy (if relatively obscure) reporting to a global audience. That the libel was broadcast on Christmas Eve also came as no surprise: It perpetuated, if only subconsciously, a centuries-old tradition of inciting hatred against Jews around Christian holidays.

It took more than two weeks, and pressure from Conservative Party politicians, before the broadcaster ran an apology on January 9 for reporting these Hamas fabrications. It admitted that it had failed to “make sufficient effort to seek corroborating evidence to justify reporting the Hamas claim.” The admission consisted of a small item hidden on its website. By contrast, the original defamatory report about “summary executions by Israel” was prominently broadcast on six different occasions on the BBC World Service and on BBC Radio 4.

There have been other cases since October 7 when the BBC has been caught out. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* discovered in February that the BBC had quietly let go of an employee whom presumably even

the BBC couldn't justify keeping. Dawn Queva, a senior BBC scheduling coordinator, was sacked after it was revealed that in Facebook posts published under a pseudonym she had called Jewish people "Nazis" who funded a "holohoax." She also described white people as a "virus" and claimed that Israel was attempting to "forcibly permanently sterilise black women without their knowledge or consent."

There have been one or two other cases in which the BBC has been forced to let go of blatantly antisemitic employees. But in my mind the larger problem is those more senior correspondents and producers whom the BBC has stuck with, who are too clever to say anything so ugly in public but instead lie and deceive in their reports in ways that will almost inevitably stir up antisemitism among many of the BBC audience.

Yet some observers argue that the broadcaster's Arabic-language service, which has an estimated audience of 36 million people, is even worse than its English-language broadcast.

In 2021, an investigation by the *Jewish Chronicle* noted that "the BBC was forced to acknowledge 25 mistakes in its Arabic coverage of Israel in just over two years, issuing on average nearly one correction a month." Among the things the BBC was forced to apologize for was describing the Israeli army as "Israeli Occupation Forces" and Israel itself as "Palestine." At least two journalists recruited by the BBC Arabic Service had previously worked for Al-Manar, a TV station owned by Hezbollah that has been designated as a terrorist entity by the United States. It also published a sycophantic profile of Ahlam al-Tamimi, the Hamas mastermind of a 2001 terrorist attack at a Jerusalem pizzeria, which that day killed 15 Israeli civilians, including 7 young children and a pregnant woman, and wounded 130 more, one of whom died after 22 years in a coma. The bomb was packed with nails, nuts, and bolts to cause maximum pain and severe injuries. (I witnessed the horrific aftermath of that

attack as a reporter.) The BBC later regretted the “lapse in our editorial standards.”



These instances of the BBC’s having been caught out and forced to apologize are merely the tip of a very large iceberg. For decades, the BBC has simultaneously castigated Israel while turning a blind eye to Palestinian terrorism.

That was certainly true of its treatment of Yasser Arafat, the godfather of modern terrorism who later became the kleptocratic dictator of the Palestinian Authority and the mastermind of the second intifada — a wave of Palestinian suicide bombings of Israeli buses, schools, and cafés. As the British litigator Trevor Asserson documented, the BBC routinely described Arafat “with terms such as heroism, selfless devotion to public duty, hardworking, and having natural leadership talents.”

In his final days, a BBC profile of Arafat described him as a man of “personal courage” who “often led the way into action against the Israelis,” though the evidence for this claim is slim and runs aground on Arafat’s well-known penchant for self-mythologizing. When he was on his deathbed in a French hospital in 2004, the BBC’s Jerusalem correspondent, Barbara Plett, admitted on air that she had cried in sadness for him and spoke of her “connection to the man.”

In any serious news organization, she would have been suspended and demoted, if not sacked outright. Instead, after being initially cleared by BBC management, she was given a slap on the wrist by the broadcaster’s Board of Governors. Today, she is the BBC’s senior State Department correspondent in Washington. The only other time I can recall a BBC correspondent being so emotional was when Princess Diana died.

But if the BBC's slanders against Israel—along with its hero-worship of Israel's enemies—aren't new, what is new is the cultural climate in Britain in which the slanders are being made. Attacks on Jews are at a record postwar high, with the Metropolitan Police reporting a 13-fold increase since October 7. That contributes to an atmosphere that was already poisonous for Jews among some segments of British society—and in which the BBC also has played its usual part.

No example better illustrates this than a November 2021 incident in which Jewish passengers on a bus crawling through traffic on London's Oxford Street were harassed and abused by men making Hitler salutes and banging their shoes on the windows. In its report, the BBC alleged that the passengers on the bus had uttered anti-Muslim slurs, a claim for which there was no evidence, but that conveniently served to transform a blatantly antisemitic attack into a nonexistent instance of Islamophobia. An investigation by the U.K. media regulator Ofcom ultimately found "significant editorial failings" in the BBC's report. But as with so many of the BBC's mistakes, the apologies and corrections came long after the initial damage had been done.

Some former staff are speaking out. After the BBC refused to call Hamas "terrorists" during its report on Hamas's beheading of Israeli civilians, Jon Sopel, the BBC's former North America editor, said in a post on X that the corporation's editorial guidelines were "no longer fit for purpose." "If this doesn't describe an act of pure terror by terrorists, what does?" Sopel wrote.

None of this, of course, is to suggest that the BBC shouldn't report unsparingly on every subject it covers, including when it comes to Israeli misdeeds. Nor is it the case that every BBC reporter and editor is biased against Israel, much less antisemitic: There are some correspondents, such as Lyse Doucet and James Reynolds, who make an attempt to be fair. But not nearly enough. Overall, the problem is long-standing, profound, and seemingly ineradicable.

Why? Perhaps it's the reflexive leftism of the people the BBC tends to recruit, which often leads to an inveterate anti-Zionism. Perhaps it's an outgrowth of anti-Americanism and the habit of seeing Israel as an extension of American neo-imperialism. There are probably deep if hidden strains of antisemitism, partly of the old-fashioned British kind that I experienced many years ago, and partly a reflection of the broadcaster's large audience in the Arab world. And some of it is plain old lazy journalism—like cribbing from their friends at *The Guardian*.

In truth, the explanation doesn't really matter. The consequences are the same, and the Jews suffer.



The remedy, however, does matter. The BBC has long been aware that it has a problem. Back in 2015, former BBC Chairman Lord Michael Grade took the unusual step of publicly criticizing the BBC for its “inexcusable” anti-Israel bias. More recently, BBC News CEO Deborah Turness has responded to charges of BBC bias by claiming to put “trust in the corporation's news” at the forefront of her agenda. She has launched “BBC Verify” with the stated aim of “fact-checking, verifying video, countering disinformation, analyzing data and—crucially—explaining complex stories in the pursuit of truth.”

That promise has not been kept, and there is little to suggest it ever will. In broadcast after broadcast, the BBC has been misleading, misreporting, and sometimes libeling Israel in ways that aren't merely wrong and offensive but also dangerous to Jews in Israel and abroad. By charter, the Corporation is bound to be “open minded, fair and show a respect for the truth.” It's a trust the BBC has been violating for decades. Perhaps it should be treated accordingly, starting with the loss of its taxpayer sinecure. *