



Dictionary of Bias

In navigating the complex lexicon of Middle East terminology, journalists may easily run into verbal land mines. The following introductory guide is designed to assist those seeking to avoid partisan language which frequently appears in Western news reports.

ACTIVISTS, PALESTINIAN: This term is often used to describe Palestinian Arabs engaging in violent acts such as shooting, rock-throwing or launching mortars. It is also applied to Palestinian Arabs who are members of groups listed as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department, such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Like “protester” or “demonstrator,” “activist” suggests someone who participates in marches, waving signs and shouting slogans.

More accurate language: Terrorists, rioters, gunmen

AL-AQSA INTIFADA: This terminology echoes the Palestinian contention that violence beginning in September 2000 was a spontaneous response to Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount and that the Muslim shrine was threatened, neither of which was true. Even some Palestinian officials acknowledge that the violence was neither spontaneous nor a response to Sharon’s trip to the Temple Mount.

More accurate language: Palestinian uprising, Palestinian terror war, second intifada

ARAB EAST JERUSALEM: This term is demographically and historically misleading. Demographically, the eastern part of the city is about evenly divided between Arabs and Jews. The entire Old City of Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount (where the Jewish First and Second Temples once stood) and the Western Wall, is within eastern Jerusalem. Statistical data from many sources, only some of them Jewish, confirm that there were many Jewish residents, institutions and holy sites throughout Jerusalem, including the eastern portion, until 1948 when Jordan seized control of that part of the city. Jordan killed or expelled all the Jewish residents there, and, in an effort to erase evidence of centuries of Jewish presence, destroyed all 58 synagogues. Also in eastern Jerusalem are Hebrew University (built in 1925), the Jewish National and University Library (built in 1930), and Hadassah Hospital (built in 1938).

More accurate language: eastern Jerusalem

CYCLE OF VIOLENCE: This blurry euphemism exonerates the perpetrators of violence by not naming them and by equating them with the victims. Blame is cast on an anonymous, non-human force. It should be noted that this language is often reserved for cases in which Israelis are victims of Palestinian violence. In contrast, when Israelis are responsible for the deaths of Palestinians, the language tends to be more direct, such as “Israelis kill Palestinian.”

GUERRILLA, PALESTINIAN: A guerrilla is a member of a group of military irregulars who attacks members of an official army or their supporting facilities. Those who target civilians, including mothers and their children driving home or to school, cannot, by definition, be “guerrillas.” Hamas, whose strategy and tactics rely heavily on attacking noncombatants—a crime under international law—is neither a militant nor a guerilla group. Non-violent but uncompromising environmentalists, for example, may be militants. World War II anti-Nazi resistance fighters were guerrillas. Hamas is a Palestinian terrorist organization.

See also, “Activists, Palestinian.”

HARAM AL-SHARIF: This Arabic term means "the Noble Sanctuary," but the location described is known to much of the world, in particular those countries and cultures predominantly influenced by Judaism and Christianity, as the Temple Mount. Journalists should not use the Arabic name if they do not also refer to the site as Temple Mount, which is how Jews and Christians have referred to the site for millennia. Also, if journalists provide both the Arabic name (Haram al-Sharif) and its translation (Noble Sanctuary), then they should also cite the Hebrew name (Har HaBayit) and its translation (Temple Mount). Furthermore, journalists frequently note that Haram al-Sharif is the third holiest site in Islam. Certainly, then they should not omit mention of the fact that the Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism.

More accurate language: The Temple Mount, known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary

HAWK, HARD-LINER: While these terms were frequently applied to Israeli Prime Ministers Ariel Sharon and Benjamin Netanyahu, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Interior Minister Eli Yishai, they rarely appeared in connection with Palestinian leaders such as Yasir Arafat, who was responsible for the death of thousands of Israelis and Americans over the last several decades; Marwan Barghouti, who guided the rioting and terror attacks of the second intifada in the West Bank; Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority and Ismail Haniya, leader of the Hamas movement. Objective news reports convey information about individuals by reporting their actions and statements, rather than by attaching pejorative labels. Readers can then shape their own informed opinion as to whether the subject is a “hawk,” “hard-liner,” “peace activist,” or “militant.”

ILLEGAL ISRAELI SETTLEMENTS: This language obscures the fact that the sovereignty of the West Bank and Gaza Strip are disputed, and Jewish communities in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) are widely but erroneously deemed illegal. The official American position does not term them illegal. Those who maintain that Jewish settlements are illegal rely on Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which states: “Individual or mass forcible transfers, as well as deportations of protected persons from occupied territory to the territory of the occupying power or to that of any other country . . . are prohibited. The Occupying Power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own civilian population into territory it occupies,” which they interpret to mean that Israel was not allowed to settle Gaza and the West Bank. Those who note that the communities are legal argue that the territory in dispute never belonged to another state, that Jordan’s occupation of the West Bank and that Egypt’s occupation of Gaza were illegal under international law, that the British Mandate, Article 6, recognized the right of the Jewish people to “close settlement” in the whole of the Mandated territory, and that Article 80 of the U.N. Charter did not allow this right to be taken away.

More accurate language: Palestinian Arabs and their supporters often allege Jewish settlements to be illegal; or post-1967 West Bank Jewish communities whose legality based in the League of Nations Palestine Mandate and U.N. Charter frequently is denied.

OCCUPIED TERRITORIES: This is confusing phraseology which journalists sometimes apply to all or part of the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and sometimes eastern Jerusalem. But, because Israel has withdrawn from a significant portion of these lands, nearly 100 percent of Arabs living there are governed by their own Palestinian Authority, not Israel. Thus, it is misleading to refer to these areas as occupied. Nor is the term apt to describe parts of the West Bank under Israeli control. Israel removed all civilians and military personnel from the Gaza Strip in 2005; the area then fell under the control of Hamas. Because Jordan and Egypt illegally occupied the West Bank and Gaza Strip respectively from 1948 to 1967, and because neither territory was ever part of any sovereign country, they are the last unallocated five percent of the British Mandate. Jordan comprises 77.5 percent of the original mandatory lands, Israel 17.5 percent, and the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) and Gaza, the remainder. Hamas rules in the Gaza Strip, the Palestinian Authority administers the Arabs of the West Bank, and Israel conducts anti-terrorism operations in the West Bank.

More accurate language: Disputed territories. If more specific explanation is needed, “Israeli-administered” or “controlled” or “Palestinian-controlled” depending on whether the land in question is governed or patrolled by Israel, the Palestinian Authority, or Hamas. Sovereignty over the territories remains to be negotiated according to U.N. Security Council Resolutions 242, 338 and related Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

PALESTINIAN OR ARAB LAND/TERRITORIES: These terms are often misused, erroneously applied to all of the West Bank and Gaza. The phrases "Palestinian administered" or "Palestinian controlled" should be used to indicate those parts of the West Bank and Gaza which are currently ruled by the Palestinian Authority or Hamas. In contrast, it should not be used to describe portions of the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli control. Subject to final status negotiations, all the West Bank and Gaza Strip remain disputed when it comes to sovereignty. To prejudge their rightful ownership is partisan and violates a news reporter's obligation to be impartial. **See also “Occupied Territories.”**

PRE-1967 BORDERS OR 1967 BORDERS: This fallacious terminology is often used to refer to the "green line" between Israel and the West Bank, and the 1950 Israeli-Egyptian armistice line regarding the Gaza Strip. The "green line" or 1949 Israeli-Jordanian armistice line demarcated Israel and Jordan. Jordan illegally occupied the West Bank from 1948 to 1967. The armistice line was established April 3, 1949 by Article III of the Israel-Jordan Armistice Agreement and was never a “border” between Israel and the West Bank. The word “border” implies a dimension of legality and permanence that doesn't apply in this circumstance.

More accurate language: Green Line, 1967 lines, 1967 boundaries, 1949 Armistice Line

SETTLER WOMAN/BABY/BUS/HOME/BODY: The term “settler” as an adjective to modify a child, woman or school bus that has come under Palestinian attack dehumanizes the victim, usually Israeli and Jewish. In light of the dehumanization of the residents of the settlements by some Arab groups and others, to label an innocent victim as, for example, a

“settler baby” tends to legitimize the attack. Some news media have reported, for example, that a “settler bus” was attacked, not mentioning that the bus—actually a school bus—was carrying nine- and 10-year-old children to or from class.

More accurate language: Israeli, Jew, Israeli civilian, school bus

UPRISING AGAINST ISRAELI OCCUPATION: Nearly 100 percent of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza live under some form of Palestinian administration—the Palestinian Authority or Hamas—and thus cannot accurately be said to be living under Israeli “occupation.” This phrase miscasts entirely the nature of anti-Israeli violence. Obscured in such language, for one, is Palestinian rejection of Israeli offers of a new Arab state on several occasions: the 2000 Camp David on more than 90 percent of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, with eastern Jerusalem as its capital, in Taba in 2001, and again in 2008. In addition, both groups have played a key role in fueling violence through their virulent incitement against Jews and Israel. This incitement is directed primarily against Israel as a Jewish state and Jews as individuals and as a people, not against "occupation" of the West Bank.

More accurate language: Violent uprising, terrorist campaign against Israel and Jewish sovereignty.