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The unseen bias in Middle East reporting

Journalists defy common sense when they call Fatah 'moderate' and Netanyahu's administration 'hardline'.

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In journalism, there are three types of statements: objective facts; obvious opinions; and a third, hazier category that can be called "judgment terms." This last category, which appears often (but not exclusively) in [Middle East](#) coverage, challenges both readers and reporters by testing the boundaries between fact and opinion.

Facts, of course, are the building blocks of news stories. Consider the following example of a factual sentence: "In August, [Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas](#) convened his [Fatah](#) party in [Bethlehem](#) for a major policy conference." This straightforward statement explains who did what, when and where.

Opinions, on the other hand, are kept to their own section of the newspaper. If you read that the Bethlehem conference was "great" or "worthless," it's a sure sign you are reading the opinion pages and not the news section.

Which takes us to judgment terms. These are the assessments that, although found in news stories, can resemble opinion more than fact. What, for instance, is the difference between "security-minded" and "hawkish"? Where are the lines between "left-leaning," "left-wing" and "far left," or between "nationalist" and "ultra-nationalist"? What must a government believe before it is reasonable to dub it "hardline" or "moderate"? There are no universally accepted answers to these questions.

Such language is not only subjective, but also politically loaded. When used in reporting, it allows a journalist's personal views, rather than just the facts, to dramatically influence public understanding of a controversial topic like the Mideast conflict.

One especially prominent – and highly questionable – example of a judgment term is the habitual characterization of Mr. Abbas and his Fatah party as "moderate." Most major Western news organizations have used this description at one time or another. It is time for them to stop.

While there's no doubt that Fatah is, in a number of respects, more moderate than its main rival, the Islamist Hamas party, relative moderation is hardly the same as true moderation. After all, it isn't terribly difficult to be less extreme than [Hamas](#).

At any rate, it was not Hamas that recently declared: "The Palestinian people's right to carry out armed struggle against the armed occupation will remain an inalienable right...." It was Fatah. At its recent Bethlehem conference, statements like this intermingled with contradictory declarations that Fatah has opted for peace, raising serious concerns about what the party sees as a legitimate way to pursue its aims.

And what are those aims? Although Fatah has declared its support of a two-state solution, Abbas and other Fatah leaders continue to insist that they do not, and will not, recognize [Israel](#) as the Jewish state.

This rejection of a state for the Jewish people, even while the same leaders demand a state for the Palestinians, leaves open the troubling possibility that at some future date Fatah leaders might opt to exercise their "inalienable right" to violently assault what they continue to discredit as an illegitimate state. And it put no one's mind at ease when, just after it legitimized armed struggle, Fatah explained that "the method, timing, and place of struggle" will be determined by such factors as the "balance of power" and "the people's ability to carry out revolution."

Add to this the conference's endorsement of the [Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade](#), which killed dozens of Israeli civilians during the wave of Palestinian violence that started in 2000, and its warm salute to the Palestinian terrorists responsible for a brutal 1978 massacre in Israel, and the glaring need to avoid describing Fatah as moderate becomes even more evident.

This is hardly the only instance of misuse of the term. Former Iranian president [Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani](#), for example, is often described in mainstream press accounts as a moderate despite the fact that he is wanted by [Argentina](#) in connection with the devastating bombing of a [Buenos Aires](#) Jewish community center that killed 85 people.

On the other end of the spectrum, terms like "hardline" and "hawkish," which frequently appear in news references to the Israeli government led by [Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#), must also be questioned. Mr. Netanyahu's call for immediate negotiations without preconditions and acceptance of a Palestinian state that would not threaten Israel's security appear more conciliatory than many of Fatah's positions. There is, of course, room to argue about whether Netanyahu should nonetheless be considered hawkish. But news stories should not endorse one side of this debate.

There are ways around using this kind of language. For example, rather than labeling Hamas "extreme," a reporter could simply explain that the group is responsible for suicide bombings against civilians and is designated by the international community as a terrorist organization. Readers will come to the appropriate conclusion.

Still, it's easy to understand why a journalist, faced with deadline pressures and space constraints, would prefer to use quick and easy judgment terms. And sometimes they might be appropriate, unavoidable, or at least harmless. But clearly, they often are not.

Before using any judgment term, then, reporters should stop to consider whether their biases might be unduly influencing their word choice, and search for more objective and accurate descriptions.

Will journalists do this? The thoughtful ones will. And since others will not, judgment terms should be a red flag for readers trying to get the straight story from the Middle East and beyond.

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