

Facts, footnotes and political warfare
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On Jan. 15, the New York Times – which claims to report “all the news that’s fit to print” – belatedly published a front-page article on newly elected Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi’s crude antisemitism. This did not fit the image of Morsi as the main hope of what was once advertised as the “Arab Spring,” but the evidence was clear and incontrovertible. MEMRI (the Middle East Media Research Institute) had Morsi’s words on video – referring to Jews and Zionists as “bloodsuckers,” “descendants of apes and pigs,” and calling for the removal of Jews from “Palestine” – in other words, ethnic cleansing.

In this and other instances, MEMRI’s detailed documentation has had a major impact in bursting the ideological bubbles and wishful thinking that infect much of western discussion and policy on the Middle East. A major part of this upside down world is the portrayal of Arab and Islamic leaders (including Palestinians, beginning with the late Yasser Arafat) in a positive and heroic light, while Israel is presented as the main source of violence, rather than its primary victims. MEMRI presents a much-needed reality check, letting the evidence speak for itself.

Similarly, the indisputable videos and quotes distributed by UN Watch are playing a central role in unmasking the deep immorality of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) and its allies. Based in Geneva, UN Watch holds a mirror up to the UNHRC’s anti-democracy and anti-Israel behaviour.

Like MEMRI, UN Watch avoids inflated rhetoric and screaming slogans – the unembellished reality is devastating enough. As a result, the UNHRC and its officials are laughing stocks and no longer taken seriously, even in Canadian ministries and among politicians that once worshipped the UN. (NGO Monitor, which I founded to provide accountability and independent analysis of the biases and gross distortions of powerful human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty, is modelled on the approach taken by UN Watch.)

Similarly, the hard work of media monitoring groups such as Honest Reporting, CAMERA and Canada’s Media Action is having a steady impact in countering journalists who are quick to propagate the demonizing myths about Israel. CAMERA has been instrumental in exposing false claims and unprofessional reporting in major newspapers, including Ha’aretz and the New York Times, often resulting in the publication of corrections and putting the journalists and editors on notice that their biases and mistakes will be caught. Honest Reporting recently exposed an absurd claim by a Financial Times correspondent alleging that Israel had “paid off” the Bulgarian government in exchange for detailing Hezbollah involvement in a terror attack against Israeli tourists. The embarrassed reporter apologized and his reputation is permanently suspect.

The point highlighted in all of these examples is that solid and consistent research to document false claims, double standards and crude biases (including antisemitism) are central to defeating the demonization campaigns targeting Israel. In contrast, over-the-top emotional outbursts and unsupported allegations, including blog-based rumours and easily refuted urban legends are counterproductive in these difficult battles. Finding, analyzing and exposing the lies about Israel requires detailed and consistent documentation. MEMRI has recorded and published thousands of videos, most of which did not have the explosive impact of Morsi’s antisemitic statements.

The fact that much of the reporting about Israel is wildly inaccurate, emotional and biased does not mean that we are free to do the same. In this asymmetric political war, the two sides are allowed to play by different rules, reflecting the power of the anti-Israel myths that have been propagated in the media, on university campuses and by powerful political groups claiming to promote human rights.

As a result, in order to break through the myths and have a long-term impact, we cannot afford even a single and minor error in our reports and documentation. The successes are based on a well-earned reputation for credibility and accuracy, and the ability to embarrass and professionally damage those who repeat false claims or who blatantly ignore information that does not fit their political agendas. In this long and difficult war, quotes and footnotes are our most effective weapons.