

Email debate: Yigal Carmon and Brian Whitaker

An article on Guardian Unlimited last year by Middle East editor Brian Whitaker questioned the impartiality of Memri, an organisation that translates articles from the Middle Eastern media. We subsequently published a response by Memri's president Yigal Carmon, in which he vigorously defended his organisation. What follows is the text of a debate between the two men conducted subsequently by email. At the end of this exchange you will find links to the original articles that gave rise to the debate.

Tuesday January 28, 2003

Yigal Carmon

How does Memri select items for translation? We aim to reflect main trends of thought and when possible general public opinion. We feature the most topical issues on the Middle Eastern or international agenda. As you might expect, we are now publishing articles from the Iraqi media. We also translate discussions on social issues, such as the status of women in Egypt (Special Dispatches 392, 393, January 2002) and debates on Al-Jazeera TV which reach an estimated 60 million viewers. When controversial matters are aired before such a large audience, Memri does not need to fight shy of translating their contents.

Are the examples chosen extreme? While some of the topics covered do seem extreme to the western reader, they are an accurate representation of what appears in the Arab and Farsi media.

If mainstream papers repeatedly publish the Jewish blood libel; accuse Jews and Americans of deliberately spreading Aids or the US of dropping genetically modified foods with the intention of harming people in Afghanistan (the latter allegation made by no less than the editor in chief of the most important government daily in Egypt) Memri is entitled to translate these articles.

There are even more extreme views - like those expressed by most Islamist organisations - which we rarely translate. Brian Whitaker, however, chooses to relate to Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman of the Council on American Islamic Relations, as referee and includes such organisations on his website.

Does Memri ignore the Israeli media? Memri was founded in 1998 and for the first three years we translated items from the Israel media. However, almost half of Israel's media is now available in English (the main daily Ha'aretz; Jerusalem Post; Globes; Jerusalem Report; as well as many broadcast and private media outlets), so we have cut down our output.

Brian Whitaker appears to feel that holding up a mirror to the Arab world will reflect badly on them. Moderate and courageous elements in the Middle East might disagree.

We would have been happy to discuss these issues with Mr Whitaker had he contacted our Washington or London offices, but now look forward to his response and to dealing with the other issues he raises.

Brian Whitaker

Taking up your point about the Hebrew media, there's an excellent service in Jerusalem called Israel News Today. It provides summaries of the Hebrew-language newspapers and radio bulletins, and translates articles, too. Foreign journalists working in Israel pay to receive

it because it gives them a fair and balanced picture of what the Israeli media are saying on the issues of the day.

If Memri did the same sort of thing in relation to the Arab media, I would have no quarrel. The Guardian and other papers might even pay for the service so that you wouldn't have to rely on your anonymous benefactors for funding.

My problem with Memri is that it poses as a research institute when it's basically a propaganda operation. As with all propaganda, that involves a certain amount of dishonesty and deception. The items you translate are chosen largely to suit your political agenda. They are unrepresentative and give an unfair picture of the Arab media as a whole.

This might not be so bad if you told us what your agenda is. But Memri's website does not mention you or your work for Israeli intelligence. Nor does it mention Memri's co-founder, Meyrav Wurmser, and her extreme brand of Zionism which maintains that Israeli leftists are a "threat" to their own country. Also, you're not averse to a bit of cheating to make Arabs look more anti-semitic than they are.

In your Special Dispatch 151, for instance, you translated an interview given by the mufti of Jerusalem to al-Ahram al-Arabi, shortly after the start of the Palestinian uprising.

One question the interviewer asked was: "How do you deal with the Jews who are besieging al-Aqsa and are scattered around it?" Memri translated this as: "How do you feel about the Jews?" - which is a different question. That left you with a reply in Arabic which didn't fit your newly-concocted question. So you cut out the first part of the mufti's reply and combined what was left with part of his answer to another question.

Maybe you weren't personally responsible for that bit of dishonesty, so let me ask you about a statement you made in your testimony to the US Congress on April 18.

Citing claims in the Arab media that the September 11 attacks "were the work of the United States government itself and/or a Jewish conspiracy", you said: "Recent Gallup polls show a large majority of the Arab world continue to believe it." Please tell us the dates of those Gallup polls, the wording of the relevant questions, and their findings.

Yigal Carmon

I am disappointed to see that your reply continues to question points I have already addressed and that you descend into insulting accusations such as "cheating, deception, dishonest, unfair, concocted". You offer no justifications for your quite serious attacks. This not only fails to enhance the aims of this dialogue but goes against the very condition required by the Guardian that "the tone [of this debate] should be measured and civil".

An example of your superfluous antagonism is the request for details such as "the dates, wording of the relevant questions and their findings", regarding the Gallup polls quoted in my testimony to the US Congress. I was referring to a major project, The 2002 Gallup Poll of the Islamic World, full details of which are available at www.gallup.com. Harold Evans, former editor of the Times, wrote recently, "millions and millions believe this rubbish, as a recent Gallup poll has found". I wonder if you would have questioned him so closely? You also seem to focus mainly on the anti-semitic material we cover as if it were the only topic we translate from Arab media. While it is certainly a notable issue, it constitutes less than 10% of our output.

To address the points made:

1) Memri is not a news agency or a press review service and, as you noted, summaries of the Hebrew-language press are readily available. That is precisely why Memri does not need to duplicate this "excellent service".

2) You are right: we do have an agenda. As an institute of research, we want Memri to present translations to people who wish to be informed on the ideas circulating in the Middle East. We aim to reflect reality. If knowledge of this reality should benefit one side or another, then so be it.

3) On checking Special Dispatch 151 (November 2000) we have to admit an error in translation. The question should indeed have read "How do you deal with the Jews?" rather than "How do you feel about the Jews?" As for the claim that we have "cobbled together" one answer from two questions to make "Arabs look more anti-semitic than they are", the fact is that the following question referred to the same subject. As we have translated several hundred items since then, it is perhaps reassuring that you had to go back so far to find a mistake. I understand that the Guardian is occasionally subject to errors, so perhaps you will be understanding of this one.

4) As for myself, I make no secret of my past. I appear regularly on various media outlets, including Al-Jazeera, and my background is always mentioned. For your part, you omitted the fact that I retired from service over 10 years ago.

5) Dr Meyrav Wurmser is a distinguished academic, who co-founded Memri but who left us two and a half years ago. Our staff include people of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim faiths and they hold a range of political views.

6) You repeat that our representation of the Arab world is unfair. Can you give us examples of articles that reflect widespread and topical trends which we leave out of our translations?

Brian Whitaker

I have no wish to sound uncivil, but Memri has placed itself in a glasshouse by claiming to represent the views of the Arabic media to the English-speaking world. Given your political background, it's legitimate to ask whether Memri is a trustworthy vehicle for such an undertaking. The evidence suggests it is not. You now concede an error of translation in the interview with the mufti, but ignore the more serious charge of dishonest editing. Indeed, you persist in misrepresenting the original Arabic question, in which the mufti was asked how he dealt with the Jews besieging the mosque.

Your translator turned this into a question asking how he felt about the Jews (ie in general). Your "corrected" version, once again, fails to recognise that in the Arabic text it was not a general question. It was about a specific group of Jews who were behaving in a hostile manner.

Having misrepresented the original question, you then had to misrepresent the mufti's answer. There is no excuse for this sort of textual manipulation, and I can only surmise it was done for political reasons - to make his remarks look more anti-semitic than they actually were.

More recently, in Special Dispatch 407, you translated a poem from the Arab-American weekly, al-Watan, likening President Bush to an ape. Anyone reading your introduction could reasonably assume the poet was an Arab-American, when in fact the poet is a Palestinian.

The Arabic version made clear he was writing from the West Bank and included his location - "Ramallah" - immediately after his name. Memri cut the word "Ramallah" from its translation, enhancing the impression that the author was Arab-American.

Annoying, dishonest little tweaks like this seem to crop up quite a lot in Memri's work. Again, the only reason I can see for it is a political one - in this case to further denigrate Arab-Americans in the eyes of their fellow citizens.

This behaviour does Memri's credibility no good, and it means that journalists who make use of your translations without checking the original Arabic also put their own reputations at risk.

Checking the original texts can be difficult because of the way you reference them. Occasionally you provide internet links, but more often you only cite the publication and the date, without page numbers or headlines. The first time I tried to look up one of the articles you had translated, it turned out that you had given the wrong publication date.

Regarding the "Gallup polls", you now admit that there was only one, though I'm sure the plural sounded more impressive in your evidence to Congress. But I am still baffled by your claim that this poll, published last February, found a large majority of Arabs who believed that the September 11 attacks "were the work of the United States government itself and/or a Jewish conspiracy".

Gallup's findings are no longer available on their website except to subscribers, but I have looked at several newspaper reports of the poll and can find nothing to substantiate your claim. Did you make it up? If not, please produce the evidence.

Before we move on to discuss Memri's purpose, you may also wish to reconsider (a) your claim that your background is "always mentioned" when you figure in the media, and (b) your comments about Israel News Today which make little sense in relation to what I wrote earlier.

Yigal Carmon

When I asked for an open debate following your attack on Memri, I had hoped for an exchange of views and facts, rather than a sort of verbal arm-wrestling. Sadly, you seem unwilling or unable to move forward, preferring to go to points already answered, using insults rather than evidence.

Memri has never claimed to "represent the view of the Arabic media", but rather to reflect, through our translations, general trends which are widespread and topical. You accused us of distortion by omission but when asked to provide examples of trends and views we have missed, you have failed to answer. Missing footnotes, use of the plural form, or similar incidentals - aren't these sidelines to the whole issue? You continually refer to my supposed "political background" as if I had something to hide, and I wonder if I am your real target here. As a civil servant and adviser on counter-terrorism to both Yitzhak Shamir and Yitzhak Rabin, prime ministers from opposing camps, my role was not a political appointment.

If your complaint is that I am Israeli, then please say so. Is being an Israeli enough for you to consider me inevitably biased and anti-Arab? I note your website is "Al-Bab", ("The Gateway" in Arabic). Would I be justified in concluding that you are not, in fact, completely neutral about the Middle East, even though you are Middle East editor of a national newspaper? I wonder how you would judge an editor whose website was called "Ha-Sha-ar" ("The Gateway" in Hebrew)? I am the one to be "baffled" by your quibbles over the Gallup polls singular or plural. Gallup interviewed 10,000 people in depth and continues to update its

surveys. If you find it easier to accuse Memri of "making it up" than for your newspaper to fork out \$90 [£55] to access valuable information, then I am sorry you aren't taking this debate more seriously - or courteously.

As one who has been invited to give testimony before the US Congress on a number of occasions, I have no need to "impress" them, and certainly no cause to change or embellish evidence.

I am even more "baffled" that you apparently fail to acknowledge the widespread belief in the Arab world that the US itself and/or the Jews perpetrated the 9/11 attacks. A wealth of evidence of such belief is freely available as this issue has been discussed throughout the world, from the New York Times to Al-Jazeera and from the Hindustani Times to Al Riyadh.

Regarding Special Dispatch 407, we felt the important issue was the fact that Al-Watan, which defines itself as a "national weekly Arab-American newspaper" and appears in four major US cities, chose to publish poems such as " Yes, I am a Terrorist" and "Bush is an Ape". The identity of the poets was not the point. You have accused Memri of altering a text and so "making his (the mufti's) words look more anti-semitic than they actually were".

We have already addressed your comments about the interviewer's questions. However, let's look at the substance. The mufti of Jerusalem enthuses about "martyrs" who kill Israelis. "The younger the martyr - the greater and the more I respect him" he says, adding "I talked to a young man (who) said 'I want to marry the black-eyed (beautiful) women of heaven.' The next day he became a martyr. I am sure his mother was filled with joy." In the same article, this spiritual leader remarks: "I am filled with rage toward the Jews. I have never greeted a Jew when I came near one. I never will. They cannot even dream that I will. The Jews do not dare to bother me, because they are the most cowardly creatures Allah has ever created." (Special Dispatch 151, 9 November 2000)

This same grand mufti, Sheikh Ikrima Sabri, interviewed in La Repubblica (March 24 2000 - "Too many lies about the Holocaust, Wojtyla free us from the Jews"), opined "Six million Jews dead? No way, there were much fewer. Let's stop with this fairytale exploited by Israel to capture international solidarity. It is not my fault if Hitler hated Jews."

As I write, a soap opera based on the hoax "the protocols of the elders of Zion" is about to be screened for Ramadan on Egyptian, Iraqi and Hizbullah television channels, and a book by Mustafa Tlass (Syria's minister of defence), which treats the infamous 1840 Damascus blood libel as history, is selling well. With facts like these, any attempt on our part to exceed our brief as translators is completely unnecessary.

Brian Whitaker

I agree entirely that any attempt to exceed your brief as translators is unnecessary. So why do you do it?

I would readily put it down to incompetence or carelessness - except that the tweaks, cuts and mistranslations always seem to point in the same political direction.

I won't introduce more examples now, since we're at the end of this debate and no closer to a proper explanation of those I've raised already. You still haven't explained why you saw fit to mutilate the mufti's interview instead of just translating it. His views on the Holocaust do not give you a licence to misrepresent what he says.

You appear to think this is a trivial matter, but it goes to the heart of Memri's credibility. On any self-respecting newspaper, a reporter who messed about with other people's words like that would be in serious trouble. Again, with your translation of al-Watan's poem, you offer no explanation as to why the only word omitted, between the title and the last line, was the word that identified the poet as a Palestinian rather than an Arab-American.

You say the poet's identity was not the point, but in the context it was clearly relevant.

Once again, I must return to the deeply troubling question of the Gallup poll - which you shrug off with a facetious suggestion about spending \$90 on the report.

The fact is that you gave evidence to Congress claiming that Gallup had found "a large majority of the Arab world" who believed the September 11 attacks "were the work of the United States government itself and/or a Jewish conspiracy". What you said is untrue, and Gallup has confirmed that. I trust you will now apologise to Congress for your false testimony. Finally, in the light of your most recent remarks about me personally, I will make clear now that your nationality and religion do not bother me in the slightest. What does concern me is your political agenda, and the deceitful way you go about promoting it.

Related articles

12.08.2002: [Brian Whitaker: Selective Memri](#)

21.08.2002: [Memri rebuts accusations of selective](#)