



A Conversation with  
Arthur Neslen  
Covering

# Israel

by Joel Schalit

**T**HE BIGGEST FAILING OF MOST WESTERN writing about Israel is its failure to properly capture the distinctiveness of Israeli politics. Always unfairly compromised by any number of factors—political partisanship, lack of historical knowledge, or the rush to continuously keep up with the exhausting pace of regional events—the details frequently get lost, and so do the people responsible for them. For a country with such a remarkable impact on global politics, this failing is not just a journalistic problem, but an ethical one as well. How best might anyone interested in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict play an effective role in finding peace if they continually have to work with reporting that consistently overlooks the true identities of its

combatants? What such readers need is a kind of reportage that successfully portrays the idiosyncratic ways that Israelis understand themselves and their situation.

Arthur Neslen's *Occupied Minds* (Pluto Press) helps point the way. A 275-page collection of interviews with contemporary Israelis ranging from soldiers, sex workers, and anarchists, to ultra-orthodox rabbis, settlers and recent immigrants, *Occupied Minds* is an ethnographer's dream come true. Each interview subject communicates an essential aspect of Israeli society, giving testimony to the complex nature of the country in the most representative and uncensored of ways. Though the author's own political prejudices always shine through, he somehow manages to use his partisanship as the basis for extremely candid conversations with even the most reactionary of his interviewees. Indeed, Neslen always gets his story, and in doing so manages to capture that of Israel in a delightfully eye-opening and unprecedented manner.

*Occupied Minds* is the product of Neslen's long career in reporting on the Middle East for such diverse outlets as *The Guardian* and *Al-Jazeera.net*, as well as at the BBC. *Tikkun's* Managing Editor Joel Schalit spoke to Neslen, a British Jew now based in Tel Aviv, about his opinions on the state of contemporary Mideast reporting, and where Israel fits into the highly problematic mix.

**TIKKUN:** Middle Eastern affairs have developed a higher profile in the West since 9/11. How well do you think they're being covered?

**ARTHUR NESLEN:** I don't think that Western audiences are getting an accurate picture of events here—or a balanced sense of the range of debate. There's a long tradition of press cheerleading in times of war. When the home team is in trouble, or splits emerge among the sources journalists depend on to tell its story, they can be a bit more critical. They can campaign on one side or the other, debate how to win the war, or even whether to end it. But the parameters for debate are set by official sources. Journalists depend on them, and they know it.

In Iraq, news journalism has been compromised first by the threat to reporters—123 have been killed since 2003, 48 this year alone so far. For self-preservation, journalists tend to stay in Baghdad's Green Zone, venturing out only as embeds with the U.S. military. They report the narrative they're surrounded by: an uphill struggle to bring democracy to a land scarred by ethnic hatred, terror, and fundamentalism. Apart from *The Independent's* Patrick Cockburn, few reporters have really challenged that. Because this war has been spun like no other, even the best have to spend their time chasing the latest PR wheeze from Washington, and bigger questions often fall by the wayside.

**TIKKUN:** What about reporting on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict?

**AN:** Because it's been going on longer than Iraq, journalists can choose between the narratives of terror or occupation to explain the conflict. The BBC used to pay lip service to the Palestinian narrative, albeit without much context. But after 9/11, Palestine effectively became the War on Terror's Mediterranean front. The Occupation disappeared from the radar to the extent that sanctions against the Palestinians have been recast as a prop to fight Hamas terror.

When I was writing BBC national news bulletins in 2001–2002, lobbyists routinely accused our editors of anti-Semitism for not calling Palestinian fighters "terrorists" or whatever. After the assassination of the PFLP leader Abu Ali Mustafa, the Israeli embassy called up to demand that we not run a PFLP statement threatening revenge in case it contained a coded instruction for terrorists. We complied, and as I recall, we didn't report the PFLP's statement two weeks later linking their assassination of the Israeli tourism minister, Rehavam Ze'evi, to Mustafa's death. During Operation Defensive Shield, the Israeli government threatened to close down our Jerusalem offices unless we withdrew Barbara Plett from Ramallah. We caved in again.

I remember scripting a two-way with the BBC Correspondent Caroline Hawley in Jerusalem for Radio Five Live, after one of the first suicide bombings of the Intifada. As

ever, the first question I had to pen was the generic body count one (“What’s the latest?”), and the second, equally generic, “What reaction can we expect from the Israelis?” But the third question was where you had some latitude. So I tried, and asked, “But Caroline, what could drive a Palestinian to kill themselves and others for so little political gain?” The assistant editor drew a red line through the question. “That’s not news,” he said. When I asked him why he thought they did it, he replied, “Because they’re all fanatics.”

The BBC, particularly the World Service (which isn’t available in the U.K.), is miles ahead of other corporate networks, but it’s funded by the state, and highly susceptible to pressure from it. Our editor even used to go to a weekly meeting with the home secretary. The BBC’s roots are in the civil service, not journalism, and it’s highly ideological, despite its public image.

**TIKKUN:** Critics sometimes accuse European reporters of covering Israel like any other “backward” or “violent” Middle East state. Do you think Israel should be editorially set apart from the region or presented as possessing core Middle Eastern traits?

**AN:** It’s ironic that Israel strives to present itself as Western, secular, and enlightened when a lot of British journalists still see it as something close to “the wogs fighting each other again.” I do hear outrageous comments from reporters who’ve just arrived here sometimes. But within the current British news paradigm, Israelis are people like us, a friend with shared values etc. There’s enough cynicism in the business that it could flip over as soon as there’s no perceived British interest involved. Then we’ll be back to age-old hatreds, ethnic factions, and maybe worse.

My own view is that Israel is a part of the Middle East and should be reported that way. That doesn’t necessarily mean focusing on core traits—and I’m not sure which would be most illuminating—but providing background. In 2000, the Glasgow University Media Group did a survey of 300 young people who got their information from BBC and ITN news and 71 percent of them didn’t know that Israel was occupying the occupied territories. Most thought the Palestinians were occupying them! Certainly, editorial interference should be resisted, but context is crucial for an organization like the BBC to meet its public service remit, even if it’s “not news” in the narrowest definition.

**TIKKUN:** What do you think are the most common mistakes that reporters make in covering the Arab world?

**AN:** The Israeli gestalt that “the Arabs” have all these countries and “we” have only one has more sway in U.S. newsrooms. Journalists working in Arab countries for any length of time become sensitive to local nuance or they don’t get stories. But when reporters are parachuted into newsworthy countries, they tend to rely on narratives about “hardliners” and “moderates” or how will the latest diplomatic intrigue play on “the Arab street” because these please the editors back home.

Maybe there’s also a general historical ignorance about the role that foreign powers such as the U.K. and U.S. have played in the region. One of the problems with the Middle East is the totally arbitrary nature of the borders that were drawn up under the Sykes-Picot agreement. Nation-states with stable borders are still seen by Westerners as the apex of civilization, which is ironic because globalization is rendering them obsolete. But in the Middle East, nation-states have always been superficial and few regimes have popular legitimacy.

Robert Fisk excepted, most journalists don’t have the time, knowledge, or editorial tolerance to examine how these states were created or survive. They may not know about the U.S.-backed destruction of the Arab Communist parties in the second half of the last century, the funneling of radical sentiment into Islamic parties, and buttressing of dictators with U.S. aid. So they tend to locate problems from women’s oppression to the democratic deficit in third world political systems, or else Islam. And then we’re back to the War on Terror.

Many journalists at the higher-brow end of the market would be quite happy to hone in on the ethnic differences of the Middle East in pseudo-anthropological studies of

“the natives strange aversion to democracy.” Ethnic differences here are like a chaos theory fractal; you can go into them forever without taking any heat. Meanwhile, the allegiances shift like desert sands, yesterday’s bad guys become today’s good guys, people get confused and the editors say let’s focus on the big picture: What is it about Iraqis that their army won’t stand up so we can stand down?

**TIKKUN:** Most Israeli newspapers now publish online English editions—*Haaretz’s* has become increasingly important to Diaspora audiences—but how well do they report Israeli affairs to the Diaspora and vice versa?

**AN:** I think that *Haaretz* is a brilliant and indispensable news resource. There are limits to the way they report things, and their English edition is very different to the Hebrew one, but it’s essential reading for anyone interested in the region. Even *Yediot Ahronot’s* website, *Ynet*, isn’t bad sometimes. You often get freer and more intelligent commentary in Israel, and a wider and more informed range of sources.

But I still find it shocking that most days in *Haaretz*, there aren’t any international stories. The criteria for reporting foreign news seems to be that 1) it involves Jews or 2) it impacts in some way on Israel. A headline about the Tsunami might read, “20 Jews killed in Thai beach resort” or “Indonesia refuses Israeli military aid.” I know people say that “Jews are news” but it’s incredibly parochial. You don’t tend to notice it though because this is such a news-rich region that you could fill a paper with just what happened yesterday in Gaza.

In some ways, I think the Diaspora is viewed as a national interest issue here. Why? There’s the conflation of ethnicity, religion and nationalism, the demographic issue—which is crucial—and Israel’s continuing need for wealthy immigrants and legitimacy as a Jewish state. The prism for the concern though is anti-Semitism. It gets to the point where it’s like Yeti-watching.

Finding anti-Semites everywhere doesn’t just reinforce Israel’s claim to statehood. It raises morale amongst a demoralized population, 44 percent of whom recently told pollsters they’d immigrate to improve their living standards. A friend who was born here, left thirty years ago, and recently returned said that her family always used to ask why she’d left. Now they ask why she’s come back. Put simply, if Jews can live peacefully and prosperously elsewhere, why are we having constant wars to keep a Jewish state in Palestine?

Regarding American Jewry, there is a major focus in the press here on groups such as AIPAC and the ADL. But it’s typically one of uncritical defense, unless A.B. Yehoshua is visiting the U.S. The community itself is presented in monochromatic terms, either heroically supporting Israel whatever the cost, or a lost tribe assimilating toward extinction. American-Jewish politicians, celebrities and lifestyle trends are endlessly pored over, but you couldn’t call it a balanced picture. The way it’s constructed reveals real insecurities among Israelis about their reasons for living here, their state’s legitimacy, and maybe how far Jews can really be considered to be one people.

**TIKKUN:** Do you feel that the exclusive focus of the Diaspora Left press on the Occupation is detracting from other politically significant issues in Israel?

**AN:** The focus on the Occupation is probably inevitable. Because of its injustice, illegality, and implicit support from America, it’s the obvious campaigning spearhead. And I think that’s right really, but it does mean that other issues get buried. The rise of Israeli neo-liberalism is a good example, because it’s so tied in with the Occupation.

For example, the way that Oslo led to factories in Mizrahi areas being relocated to lower-paid sites in Jordan, the Palestine, and Egypt helped diminish support for it among Israel’s working class. The Zionist Left’s support for Oslo meant they couldn’t relate to that. When continued U.S. aid was made contingent on a neo-liberal economic plan to cut jobs, wages, and taxes in 2002, the Left again didn’t take up the issue because they saw the U.S. as Israel’s guarantor.

The poor in Israel have suffered as a result. Twenty-five percent of Israeli kids live beneath the poverty line. But it’s not the same measure they use in Gaza—which is closer

to countries like Haiti—and how many of those Israelis are Arab citizens? Israel's working class is hurting, but Israeli per capita income is still seventeen times higher than that of the Palestinians and they're not dealing with 40 percent unemployment rates.

The national question in Israel/Palestine can't be ducked. It's like an apple in the barrel that bobs back up whenever you try. But it works a little bit the other way too because when you talk about neo-liberalism, you quickly get on to whether the Israeli working class can be a potential ally of the Palestinians, or just their most diehard enemies. Are they more like Ulster protestant engineers or Afrikaaner miners?

There isn't a conclusive answer at this stage, but the question has implications because the bottom line of most honest one-state arguments is a revolutionary Arab war to destroy Israel. That's not something I'm comfortable with. The best alternative I have is campaigning against the disastrous ways that the Occupation and neo-liberalism have impacted both Palestinians and working class Israelis. It's also important to highlight how Israel has destroyed Jewish religious, cultural, and ethnic traditions. But I don't have any illusions about it. It's difficult to see a material basis for Palestinian-Israeli unity at the moment. ■

# Remembering Najib Mahfouz

BY BEN LYNFIELD

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**W**HEN NOBEL LITERATURE laureate Najib Mahfouz died on August 30, 2006 at age 94, among the tributes that flowed into Cairo from all over the world was one from the state of Israel.

“The people of Israel will remember him always as a man of peace who believed in friendship between the peoples and strove for understanding and dialogue between us.”

Israeli President Moshe Katsav wrote to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Israelis would be right to recall Mahfouz's early and vocal support for Egyptian peace with Israel, together with the remarkable literary achievements of a man whose career spanned seven decades. Mahfouz was a master of allegory, a keen observer of human nature and politics who wrote books that were both popular and profound, distinctly Egyptian and yet universal. But what Katsav did not mention was that over the years, Mahfouz became disappointed by Israeli behavior and the demise of his dream of Egyptian-Israeli cooperation.

When he was awarded the Nobel literature prize in 1988, the Swedish Academy cited his creation of an Arabian narrative art that applies to all of mankind.