

Perils of criticising Israel

The *BMJ's* acting editor received 1000 emails after the journal published an article criticising Israel in 2004. **Karl Sabbagh** examined them and is reminded of what happened when the magazine *World Medicine* criticised Israel 27 years ago

In October 2004, the *BMJ* published a personal view by Derek Summerfield in which he expressed his concern at what he saw as systematic violations of the fourth Geneva Convention by the Israeli army in Gaza.¹ The article claimed that many of the actions deemed necessary to root out and prevent terrorism had had the foreseeable effect of killing or maiming large numbers of Palestinians, including children, who had played no part in attacks on Israelis. (This issue is, of course, at the heart of worldwide criticisms of Israel's actions in Gaza last month.) Summerfield supported his arguments with figures published by reputable international organisations, such as the United Nations

and Amnesty International. Summerfield's article provoked hundreds of responses, about 550 of which the *BMJ* published as rapid responses.² Of these, a small proportion were broadly supportive of Summerfield's article, but most were hostile. Reading them might give the impression of a civilised debate in progress, but the published responses were a skewed sample of what had been received, as abusive and obscene contributions were not posted.

Emails to editor

In addition to responses sent to the website, almost 1000 emails were sent directly to Kamran Abbasi, the *BMJ's* acting editor at

the time. An analysis of all these emails provides a less benign view of what editors face when entering this thorny debate. A general flavour of the feedback can be gathered from a few verbatim quotes (see below).

It seems likely that most of the hostile emails resulted from a request from HonestReporting, a website operated from the United States and Israel (see box, p 510). It claims to be "the largest Israel media advocacy group in the world," and describes its mission thus: "To ensure Israel is represented fairly and accurately HonestReporting monitors the media, exposes cases of bias, promotes balance, and effects change through education and action."

Extracts from emails sent to acting *BMJ* editor Kamran Abbasi in 2004

Denial

"The IDF, unlike the Arabs, has NEVER killed innocent civilians."

"It is known that the Israeli army is one of the most moral armies of the world, and is not allowed to shoot to kill children—unless they are a direct threat to Israeli soldiers."

"The great extent to which Israel goes to avoid unnecessary civilian enemy casualties is truly remarkable . . . a tribute to the Jewish people's long history of serving as a beacon to the world on ethical behavior."

"No non-combatant child who was clearly that has ever, ever been deliberately targeted and killed or maimed by any Israeli soldier . . . As a Chartered Accountant I am by nature and training not given to making sweeping statements without caveat but on this there is no doubt whatsoever."

A far off country

"Remember, prior to 1967 there was no mention of a 'Palestinian State.' The Countries of Egypt and Jordan were where most of these Arabs lived."

"I might also add that the land, including the parts which had to be bought from the Palestinians by the Jews, was nothing but barren and diseased land. It was the Jews who made it flourish, and developed it into a first-world country. It is by no means Israel's fault that the Palestinians couldn't be bothered to do the same."

"If Israel did kill every one of the Arab Muslims there most Americans would not miss a beat. We hate Islam—we hate Arafat and you just don't get it. America hates you evil bastards—you support evil—you live evil and you will die evil."

"The problem is they procreate like rabbits and someday they will come to kill you."

Personal attack

"Your journal, having an editor with your clearly, mid-eastern name, the spewing of such published garbage seems inevitable."

"You miserable animal . . . I'm glad HonestReporting is on to your filthy hate and lies. You can spew your lies and garbage until you breathe your last breath, and then it's the fiery furnace for you, and that will be for all eternity."

"I am a physician in the USA for 30 years. You are a moslem terrorist sympathizer who hates Israel and the Jewish nation. You have hijacked the *BMJ* to publish anti Israeli garbage propoganda. Please don't show your filthy shit covered hands in this country. May you rot in hell you bastard son of a bitch."

"You believe that killing children in self defence is morally wrong? Give me your address, and I will pay a few kids to stone you to death. Believe me, 3-4 kids, 14-15 years old will kill you in a matter of minutes. Please give me your address. They can also kill your daughter for free. If you will not give me your address, then it means that you don't really believe that when Israeli soldiers kill a kid there is anything wrong with it. Waiting for your reply. By the way, if you really piss me off, I will hunt you down myself, and kill you with rock (10-15 times hit you over the head until your brain will show up). Hey, that is ok right? as long as I don't have weapon in my arms."



Summerfield's 2004 article

HonestReporting's call to action

Inserting anti-Israel rhetoric into ostensibly neutral academic literature

The *British Medical Journal* hailed by the *Financial Times* as “one of the world’s top four general medical journals”—included in its Oct 16 issue an article entitled “Palestine: The assault on health and other war crimes.” The author, Dr Derrick Summerfield, compares the IDF’s acts to those of the 9/11 terrorist hijackers:

The Israeli army, with utter impunity, has killed more unarmed Palestinian civilians since September 2000 than the number of people who died on September 11, 2001.

The only actual similarity between the two is the death count—approximately 3000. Summerfield labels *all* Palestinian casualties “unarmed civilians” denying the fact that (1) the clear majority of Palestinians who have died since September 2000 were terrorists and armed combatants (according to the Institute for Counter-Terrorism), and (2) *no* Palestinian civilian has been deliberately killed “with impunity” in stark contrast to 9/11. Summerfield goes on to claim that since some Palestinian minors have died from wounds to the upper body and head:

“Clearly, soldiers are routinely authorised to shoot to kill children in situations of minimal or no threat.”

Beyond falsely branding Israel as guilty of “war crimes,” deliberate child-killing, illegal colonization and apartheid, the article makes absolutely no mention of how Palestinian terror and political corruption have contributed to the unfortunate state of the Palestinian health system. If you agree this article is inappropriate for a respected medical journal, send comments to *British Medical Journal* editor Kamran Abbasi: [click here ...](#)

The influence of HonestReporting and reliance on figures supplied by the Institute for Counter Terrorism are reflected repeatedly in the emails sent to the *BMJ*. Of the 971 emails, 210 (22%) showed direct evidence of being derived from the HonestReporting’s website. Nearly all quoted directly from the site, and in a third of them, the authors added few or none of their own words. Occasionally, there was evidence that authors had not paid attention to what HonestReporting had asked them to do. Several included criticisms of a *Diabetes Voice* article mentioned in the same HonestReporting web page, although the *BMJ* has nothing to do with *Diabetes Voice*. There was no evidence that any of the authors who used text from HonestReporting’s website in their emails had actually read the *BMJ* article they were criticising.

In addition to the 210 emails quoting directly from HonestReporting’s website, a further 219 (23%) merely stated that such a biased or political article should not be in the *BMJ*. There was little evidence of writers’ familiarity with the *BMJ* and the fact that it regularly publishes articles on a wide range of non-scientific themes, including the effects of politics and warfare on health.

The level of argument with the issues raised in Summerfield’s article was low. About a



third of the emails issued blanket denials of all Summerfield’s claims, without offering any contrary evidence (see box, previous page).

Despite other emails suggesting that the *BMJ* should not publish political articles, several suggested that the article should have included other political elements which weren’t relevant to Summerfield’s claims—such as the high standard of care provided for Palestinian patients by Israeli doctors at Hadassah Hospital.

Many of the emails betrayed ignorance about the Middle East in general, and about the Arab-Israeli dispute in particular. Several writers simply vented their anger against Arabs and other critics of Israel.

Finally, many emails abused the *BMJ* or Abbasi personally. These were often sent

anonymously from Hotmail addresses (which can be set up easily and then abandoned), allowing writers the freedom to use obscenities and personal (including racist) insults without worrying about the effect on their reputations. However, some abusive emails came from people apparently unconcerned about signing their names. One third of the

emails were largely or solely abusive. Eighty seven of these made direct accusations of antisemitism against the *BMJ*, Summerfield, or Abbasi. Twenty nine made remarks about Abbasi based on the inference that his name and therefore his ethnic origins must have led him to encourage Summerfield to write the offending article and to publish it.

Suppression the goal?

In the 60 years since the establishment of the state of Israel, attempts to present in print an account of Palestinian history and Palestinian rights have usually been met by swift and highly organised protests. Protesters have written in their hundreds to journals and newspapers, often using arguments supplied by a central publicity machine and phrased in suspiciously similar terms. These campaigns, and similar campaigns launched against publications that print material critical of Israel, seem fundamentally different from the normal discourse between readers and the publications they read. The constant use of denial rather than argument; the demands for an apology or even the editor’s resignation; the enlisting of people who have never read, or even heard, of the publication in question; and the recourse to obscenity and accusations of antisemitism all go far beyond the average heated but civilised debate one expects to find in a scientific or medical journal.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with organising an effective lobby group, but lobbying for Israel seems to be in a different category from, say, lobbies against fluoridation and MMR vaccine. The ultimate goal of some of the groups that lobby for

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Israel or against Palestine is apparently the suppression of views they disagree with. (On its website, HonestReporting boasts of disrupting the normal running of a US tel-

evision station that criticised Israel: “HonestReporting.com readers sent up to 6000 e-mails a day to CNN executives, effectively paralyzing their internal e-mail system.”³³)

For that suppression to take place it has to be directed at people who are unfamiliar with the issues and who might be persuaded that they have somehow got it wrong. Reading

through the emails sent to the *BMJ*, editors, and the people who manage and fund their publications, might well believe that a ghastly editorial mistake had been made. And creating that belief is, of course, the intention. If straying into the Israel-Palestinian conflict provokes such a large and hostile reaction, not to mention strident allegations that important details are wrong, then the temptation is quietly to avoid the topic in future.

On the same day that HonestReporting asked its readers to write to the *BMJ*, it drew attention to an apology from the International Diabetes Federation and the resignation of the editor of *Diabetes Voice*, its quarterly publication. *Diabetes Voice* had previously reported on the difficulties faced by Palestinians with diabetes as a result of Israel's occupation of Gaza.

Flashback: World Medicine

Although the ease with which people can email their comments has led to an increase in the volume of such lobbying, it is not new in medical journalism. Many editors have stories to tell of the pressure they faced when reporting on this issue. Attacks on the *BMJ* and *Diabetes Voice* bear a strong similarity to an experience I had 27 years ago, when the response came in the form of letters to the editor and was followed by the demise of one of Britain's most popular medical magazines.

At that time, I contributed a regular column to *World Medicine*, a popular fortnightly magazine for doctors. In 1981, the Israeli authorities announced a tourism promotion called medical Olympics, which aimed at encouraging British doctors who might never have visited Israel to find out more about the country. I wanted to tell doctors contemplating such a visit some facts about the country and its then prime minister, Menahem Begin, so I wrote about the massacre of innocent Palestinian villagers in 1948 at the village of Deir Yassin that had taken place under his command.⁴

Although Begin and other Israelis denied it at the time of my article, the facts about this and other examples of ethnic cleansing in 1948 have now been validated by several Israeli historians from military archives opened in the past decade or so.



After the article was published, the British branch of the Israel Medical Association organised a protest campaign. The secretary of the association, Lionel Balfour-Lynn, wrote a letter to members which

included the following call to arms:

“In order to emphasise their [Jewish doctors] feeling of revulsion it is suggested that all future copies of *World Medicine* are returned unopened with a letter of protest attached, to the

editor Michael O'Donnell, until categorical assurances are forthcoming that this magazine will never again publish blatant PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation] propaganda. Moreover, all drug companies advertising in *World Medicine* will be requested to withdraw their support to this magazine until this undertaking has been given.”

The letters received at *World Medicine* after my article displayed a similar tone to that of the emails sent to the editor of the *BMJ* a quarter of a century later. Several correspondents writing to protest “in the strongest terms” asked if they could be sent a copy of the article, admitting that they had not read it. Subsequently, a series of decisions by the publisher of *World Medicine* as a result of this article and the complaints of Jewish doctors led to the resignation of Michael O'Donnell as editor and the closure of the magazine (see Commentary, p 512).

Standing firm

I hope that the tide can be turned by editors refusing to respond to the kinds of pressure

described here. Indeed, the abuse hurled at the *BMJ* and its staff, and the egregious misuse of “facts,” could well be a justification for a return to the subject matter of the original contribution and a fuller account of why it was justified. A recent article in the *London Review of Books* about the activities of the pro-Israel lobby in the United States⁵ was greeted with a similar deluge of denial and abuse to that unleashed on the *BMJ*. But in this case, far from suppressing discussion of the issue, these attacks led to a vigorous defence of the right of the authors to write their article and the veracity of the facts they cited.

Such campaigns cannot be allowed to succeed—not so much because they are wrong about the issues, but because their ultimate aim is censorship and suppression by means of intimidation, something which conflicts with the values of the civilised world. After my tussles with the Israel lobby in 1981, Michael O'Donnell, then still editor of *World Medicine*, wrote the following in an editorial in the magazine, words which are as relevant today as they were then:

“I can understand the anger stoked by Karl Sabbagh's article and clearly we will never appease the anger of some of our more venomous correspondents. But I would remind the others, as their anger cools, of the now rather hackneyed, though nonetheless true, proposition that free speech is really only worth defending when you disagree with or disapprove of what is being said.”⁶

Karl Sabbagh

I thank Iain Chalmers for drawing this topic to my attention and facilitating the process of analysis; Kamran Abbasi for supplying the emails and reading and commenting on a draft of the article; Harvey Marcovitch for advice and support; and Bella Sabbagh for processing the texts of the emails and identifying the large proportion of emails that were derived from the HonestReporting website.

Competing interests: KS is the British son of a Palestinian father and has been the target of pressure from supporters of Israel's policies against the Palestinians.

Provenance and peer review: Not commissioned, externally peer reviewed.

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COMMENTARY

Stand up for free speech

The best way to blunt the effectiveness of the kind of bullying that Karl Sabbagh describes is to expose it to public scrutiny, writes **Michael O'Donnell**

Critics of the *BMJ*, and of other medical journals, sometimes complain that editorial decisions are influenced by sinister outsiders. The usual suspects are advertisers, political agencies, and academic oligarchies. Less often named as villains are lobbyists who try to suppress or distort data that might damage their cause and who seek to “silence” editors who publish those data.¹

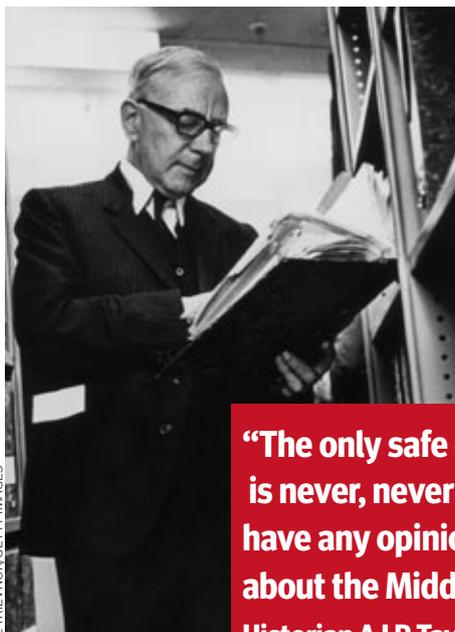
Karl Sabbagh describes a style of lobbying more familiar to journalists working in the national media than to editors and readers of medical journals—the orchestrated harassment of individuals who write or publish articles criticising the Israeli government. The technique has endured for decades because it is effective. Richard Ingrams, editor and columnist, wrote of the historian A J P Taylor, who died in 1990:

“Although [he] was courageously outspoken on many matters, he admitted that in one field he was guilty of journalistic timidity, if not cowardice. ‘Years of experience,’ he wrote, ‘have taught me that one should never venture an opinion on events concerned in any way with Israel or the Jews. Any attempt at a detached view opens the way for letters, telegrams, personal expostulations and above all telephone calls. The only safe course is never, never, to have any opinion about the Middle East.’”

By publishing Karl Sabbagh’s paper the *BMJ* risks yet another bout of hassle. Yet not to have published it would have confirmed that the surest way to silence debate in a medical journal is to organise personal attacks on authors, publishers, and editors.

The bullying tactic was effective in 1981 when I was editing *World Medicine*. In October of that year, in his regular column *Mere words*,² Karl Sabbagh suggested that if doctors attending the medical Olympics in Israel were invited to visit the government hospital for mental diseases at Kfar Sha’ul they should ask their hosts what had happened there in 1948 when the village had the Arab name Deir Yassin.

It was a characteristic *World Medicine* “personal view”: lively, well written, and contentious. It also echoed the theme of an editorial and article which eight years before



L. TREVINO/GETTY IMAGES

“The only safe course is never, never to have any opinion about the Middle East”
Historian A J P Taylor

had urged psychiatrists attending a World Psychiatric Association meeting in Moscow to ask questions of the Soviet psychiatrists who diagnosed Jewish dissidents as “schizophrenic” to enable their incarceration in prison-like hospitals.^{3,4} Jewish activists requested, and we were happy to supply, copies of the article for distribution at a vigil outside the Soviet embassy in London.

One of the ironies of the campaign later directed against us was that some of the letters accusing *World Medicine* and me of antisemitism came from people who had previously congratulated us for our support of the anti-Soviet campaign. A batch of similarly worded letters from people who eight years before had congratulated us on “ventilating a subject of vital interest” now complained of our “unwarranted intrusion” into politics.⁵

When, like Karl, I was targeted by the 1981 campaign the internet had yet to blossom and the cascade of near identical letters—to which the writers were invited to add their customised insults—had to be organised by telephone and post. That was a mixed blessing. We got fewer messages than the *BMJ* in 2004 but had a bigger problem

getting rid of them. Emails can be deleted by the thousand. Not so sacks of letters.

The bombardment was not confined to the editorial office. Well over a hundred anonymous letters arrived at my home, many of them airmailed from the United States. Each had to be opened to confirm the diagnosis of anonymity, and my wife and I took to opening them together. Once we opened a letter we felt compelled to read it. Reading them together allowed us to use humour as an antidote to venom. Some particularly nasty letters were addressed

to our children. We managed to intercept these thanks to a friendly postman who agreed to hand the post only to us.

All letters ended up adding flare to garden bonfires. It was the season of Guy Fawkes and the ritual of the evening bonfire acquired ceremonial overtones. The act of watching the flames

consume the envelopes helped flush away the nasty residue the contents had left in our minds. On a couple of especially joyful evenings we celebrated the feeling of relief by letting off a firework or two.

I had considered handing the letters to the police, particularly those sent to the children, but bowed to what was probably sensible legal advice. The campaign put my family under great stress, and our lawyer suggested there was little point in prolonging the stress when there was little hope of a satisfactory outcome. My family was also targeted by anonymous phone callers. For weeks we had to ban our children from answering the telephone because the anonymous calls were often more vicious and pornographic than the letters.

The 1981 campaign was directed not just at author, editor, and publisher but at *World Medicine*’s advertisers. In the event only one minor advertiser withdrew advertising, but the campaigners also put pressure on one of our major shareholders, a large American publishing house. This shareholder sold its holding in the company and our new management offered me a contract I was unable to accept. In my view, and in that of

my advisers, it would have prevented me from pursuing the policies that had made the magazine editorially and commercially successful. When I refused to sign I was ordered to clear my desk by 4 o'clock that afternoon and not to return to the office I'd inhabited for 15 years. Today the publisher's tactics would be called "constructive dismissal."

My dismissal provoked every one of *World Medicine's* senior editorial staff to resign in sympathy—an act of loyalty that demanded personal and financial sacrifices I still find staggering. Unsurprisingly, the sudden exodus of those who had created the magazine killed it off. It staggered along for a time before, as the president of the Royal College of Physicians put it, "passing away peacefully in its sleep."⁶ I was not alone in thinking the campaigners had destroyed something valuable.⁷

When the *BMJ* first invited me to comment on Sabbagh's paper, the invitation suggested it dealt with a "sensitive issue." At the time, the real world offered a host of sensitive issues: the invasion of Iraq, Guantanamo Bay, allegations of British involvement in CIA "rendition" and torture, to name but three. Yet these issues were freely discussed not just in national media but in medical journals. In the slightly unreal world of publishing, the sensitivity of editorial decisions about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is created by the orchestrated response—partly rational but, as Sabbagh shows, often malicious and personal—that writers, editors, and publishers fear they will provoke.

The best way to blunt the effectiveness of this type of bullying is to expose it to public scrutiny. That's why I applaud the *BMJ's* decision to publish Karl Sabbagh's paper. I had to make a similar decision 27 years ago. Although it put me and my family under great stress, led to the destruction of a publication I was proud to have created, and cost me the best job I ever had, I would make the same decision again.

Michael O'Donnell is a writer and broadcaster, Loxhill GU8 4BD mod@doctors.org.uk

Competing interests: MO'D's family is linked harmoniously by marriage to an Israeli Jewish family that has contributed to the political and cultural development of Israel.

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COMMENTARY

Toughen up

Karl Sabbagh's experience contains no shocks for columnist **Jonathan Freedland**, who offers some tips on criticising Israel

Most readers of the *BMJ* will, I'm sure, be stunned by the revelations in Karl Sabbagh's article. A deluge of nearly 1000 hostile emails will strike most as the stuff of nightmares. The language of some of those missives—abusive and bigoted—will have seemed truly shocking.

But for journalists, especially those in the opinion business, there were few shocks in Sabbagh's essay. They have come to learn that in today's wired world, wading into any topic of controversy—not just Israel-Palestine—can bring an instant email bombardment. It simply comes with the territory.

So when I wrote in the *Guardian* during the US election campaign that the world's verdict would be harsh if Americans were to reject Barack Obama in favour of John McCain, I received what I estimate were between 3000 and 4000 emails. At one point, they were arriving at the rate of 10 a minute.

Many of these were just as vicious and ugly as those received by the *BMJ* in 2004.

A random dip into the inbox produces this treasure from Middlesex, North Carolina: "As a proud American I can't think of a nicer way to say this to you: Go Fuck Yourself." Equally reflective, this from bioguy777: "I love it! A pansy-ass limey Brit begs the US to do his bidding while his own country slips further towards total Islamic rule. We're electing McCain, and the rest of the world can piss up a rope if they don't like it. 1776, BITCH!"

These messages were coordinated. It turns out that several rightwing US websites had linked to my column, urging their readers to tell this British "tosser" what they thought of him. They did as they were told.

David Attenborough can tell a similar story: he receives hate mail from creationists, angry that he does not credit the Almighty for the wonder of nature in his TV documentaries. "They tell me to burn in hell and good riddance," he told the *Guardian*.¹

And let's not forget the BBC. The obscene phone calls by comedians Russell



David Attenborough receives hate mail from creationists, angry that he does not credit the Almighty for the wonder of nature

ANDY RAINWATER/CORBIS

It is, then, perfectly possible to offer the harshest criticism of Israeli conduct in print. The *Independent*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, and the *New Statesman* do so regularly, suggesting that if the “sinister outsiders” of the Israel lobby are at work, they are not that effective

Brand and Jonathan Ross brought in 30 000 complaints in late 2008. In 2005, *Jerry Springer: the Opera* triggered 55 000, organised by Christian activists. In both cases there were demands that those responsible be sacked.

The harsh reality is that what Sabbagh described as a rare, exceptional event is increasingly common—and clearly not confined to the Israel-Palestine conflict. “These campaigns,” Sabbagh writes, “seem fundamentally different from the normal discourse between readers and the publications they read.” Would that that were so. Sadly, they have become commonplace. Many a battle hardened editor would have a simple word of advice to Sabbagh and the *BMJ*: grow a thicker skin.

There is a strong desire to see the pressure from pro-Israel activists as somehow unique. But each of the elements Sabbagh cites—demands for resignations, the enlisting of non-readers of the publication involved—have been present in these other cases. True, Israel-Palestine probably generates more venom than most topics, but that is hardly one-way traffic. In January 2009, anti-Israel activists forced their way into the offices of the pro-Israel lobby group, British Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM), damaging computer equipment, cutting phone lines, and throwing documents out of the window.² True, BICOM is a partisan lobbying organisation, not an independent medical journal like the *BMJ*. But that episode surely represents a rather more direct attempt at silencing a point of view than sending nasty emails.

Let me be clear. Those who know my work know that I am no knee-jerk defender of Israel. As it happens, I spent January 2009 denouncing Israel’s military assault on Gaza in both the *Guardian* and *Jewish Chronicle*. Moreover, I have little time for HonestReporting, the outfit apparently behind the cyber-fusillade directed against the *BMJ*: the *Guardian* has been the target of that organisation too many times for me to

find it anything other than an irritant. (Half a dozen real letters from real readers tend to have a greater effect on editors than a mass emailing, no matter how large.)

Avoiding the flak

With that experience

in mind, perhaps I can offer some tips for those who would like to criticise Israel without generating a wave of complaints. To start with, it is wise to aim for total accuracy. Derek Summerfield’s mistake was to open his piece with a clear error, one that inevitably made his essay appear tendentious. Writing in 2004, he declared that, “The Israeli army, with utter impunity, has killed more unarmed Palestinian civilians since September 2000 than the number of people who died on September 11, 2001.”³ The civilian death toll on 11 September was 3000. When Summerfield was writing, 1508 Palestinian civilians had lost their lives, according to B’tselem, the Israeli human rights group.⁴ Of course that number is unacceptably high, but it renders wholly false the claim that the Israeli army had “killed more unarmed civilians” than had died on September 11. By defining all slain Palestinians as unarmed civilians, Summerfield had not only defied the facts—compromising the credibility of a scientific journal from which people would expect the highest rigour—but taken from the Palestinians something they see as central to their dignity as a people—namely, their armed resistance to occupation.

It also helps, when writing in this area, at least to acknowledge that suffering is not the exclusive domain of one side. It would not have weakened Summerfield’s case if he had noted that, in the same period, 641 unarmed Israeli civilians had also died: in 2002, a suicide bomber struck inside Israel—on buses or in restaurants—every fortnight. Yes, the figure is lower than the Palestinian civilian death toll, but Summerfield wrote as if it didn’t exist, as if there were no second intifada raging, as if the Israel army had simply started killing Palestinians randomly and unprovoked.

Lastly, if you want to avoid a torrent

of protest, it is wise to avoid lapsing into language or imagery loaded with historically ugly associations. Michael O’Donnell clearly endured a bruising experience as editor of *World Medicine* (doi:10/1136/bmj.a2094). (I’ve avoided comment on that episode here, not least because the events in question took place some 27 years ago and we have only the testimony of one side to go on.) But he does not help his case by referring to “sinister outsiders” in his very first sentence. He clearly has pro-Israel lobbyists in mind, but Jews have been described as “sinister outsiders” rather too often in recent centuries to let such a phrase pass easily. The suggestion that runs through both Sabbagh’s and O’Donnell’s papers—that Israel’s supporters, mainly Jews, have organised a stealthy, but powerful plot to pull the strings of the media—has an equally unhappy history. That O’Donnell then calls as a witness Richard Ingrams, a journalist who once boasted in print that he no longer reads letters supporting Israel from anyone with a “Jewish name,” does not improve matters.⁵

It is, then, perfectly possible to offer the harshest criticism of Israeli conduct in print. The *Independent*, the *Guardian*, the *Observer*, and the *New Statesman* do so regularly, suggesting that if the “sinister outsiders” of the Israel lobby are at work, they are not that effective. But if you want to avoid a brimming inbox, it pays to be accurate and to avoid falling prey to hoary ethnic prejudice. You might still get hammered, just as I was over McCain and David Attenborough was over butterflies. But you’ll soon get over it.

Jonathan Freedland is a columnist on the *Guardian* and the *Jewish Chronicle*
freedland@guardian.co.uk

Competing interests: JF is a director and trustee of Index on Censorship, which campaigns for freedom of expression. His mother was born in Palestine in 1936.

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See EDITORIAL, p 491, and PERSONAL VIEW, p 546