

Correctives: Journalistic kudos

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [August 7, 2007](#) issue

Journalistic kudos to *New York Times* public editor Clark Hoyt, who in a July 8 column headed “Seeing Al Qaeda Around Every Corner” criticized his own newspaper’s coverage of President Bush’s jingoistic speech on June 28 to the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, as well as the newspaper’s carelessness in reporting on the president’s July 4 address to a military audience in West Virginia.

In the latter speech, Hoyt notes, the president declared, “We must defeat Al Qaeda in Iraq.” He failed to distinguish between al-Qaeda, the group that attacked the United States on September 11, and al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia, an Iraqi group that didn’t even exist until after the American invasion.

As Hoyt points out, the *New York Times* reported this statement by the president without making any suggestion that he was wrong. Nor did the *Times* object to the obvious error in the president’s Naval War College speech: “Remember, when I mention al-Qaeda, they’re the ones who attacked the United States of America and killed nearly 3,000 people on September the 11th, 2001.”

The Associated Press has reported that while as many as 30 groups have claimed credit for attacks on U.S. and Iraqi government targets, military press releases “focus overwhelmingly on al-Qaeda,” and then, as these releases become the accepted version of truth, they are underlined by the president.

Hoyt says that his paper routinely quotes the president and the military “uncritically” about al-Qaeda’s role in Iraq, and he accuses the paper of sometimes reporting, “without attribution,” that al-Qaeda is responsible for specific attacks.

In his column Hoyt quotes Anthony H. Cordesman of the bipartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies: “Nobody knows how many different Islamist extremist groups make up the insurgency [in Iraq].” And: “Even when you talk about Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, the idea [that] somehow it is the center of the insurgency is almost absurd.”

Another development that has evoked no skeptical media response is the recent announcement from Israel that it will not finish building its “security wall” until 2010 (*Haaretz*, July 10). Israel has always claimed that the wall has only one purpose: to keep suicide bombers from entering Israel. Now it admits that only 56.6 percent of the projected 448-mile wall has been completed. This leaves 150 miles of border open between the West Bank and Israel—hardly a guarantee of protection from intruders.

According to a report from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the part of the wall that has been completed separates East Jerusalem from the West Bank. This wall does not block a pathway a suicide bomber might take into Israel; it is a barrier that divides families and communities.

On July 9, 2004, the International Court of Justice, the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, ruled that any encroachment on a neighbor’s territory violates international law. Both Israel and the U.S. have ignored this violation in spite of the fact that 80 percent of the projected route of the wall runs within the West Bank.

In other words, Israel’s security wall is being constructed under false pretenses: it has little to do with security and everything to do with the expropriation of large tracts of land for Israel.

Kudos also go to the *Los Angeles Times* for its guest column (July 10) by Palestinian leader Mousa Abu Marzook, deputy of the political bureau of Hamas. With sound logic and erudition, Marzook refutes the mainstream media’s explanation of how and why Hamas rescued British BBC journalist Alan Johnston from a militant Gaza family. Marzook explains that Hamas did not rescue Johnston “as some obsequious boon to Western powers” (the conventional wisdom in the West), but took the action to rescue Johnston “as part of our effort to secure Gaza from the lawlessness of militias and violence, no matter what the source.”

Fatah could not rescue Johnston when it governed Gaza; Hamas could and did, bringing in a Muslim cleric to remind kidnappers that they were in violation of Qur’anic principles. Despite its isolation, Hamas has persisted in its role as a responsible government. After Hamas assumed control in Gaza, the West pressed the Egyptian diplomatic delegation to withdraw from Gaza and isolate the new leadership. Now, after some adroit political conversations between neighbors, the Egyptians are back in Gaza.

Eran Shayson, an analyst for Jerusalem's Reut Institute for policy planning, deserves kudos as well—for having the courage to write a column in the *Jerusalem Post* (July 12) reminding his government that Hamas has won back popular support by “preventing the hermetic closure of the Israel-Gaza border and in conducting a dialogue with Arab and international actors. . . . If Israel wishes to stay relevant, it will have to recognize Hamas as the true address in Gaza.”