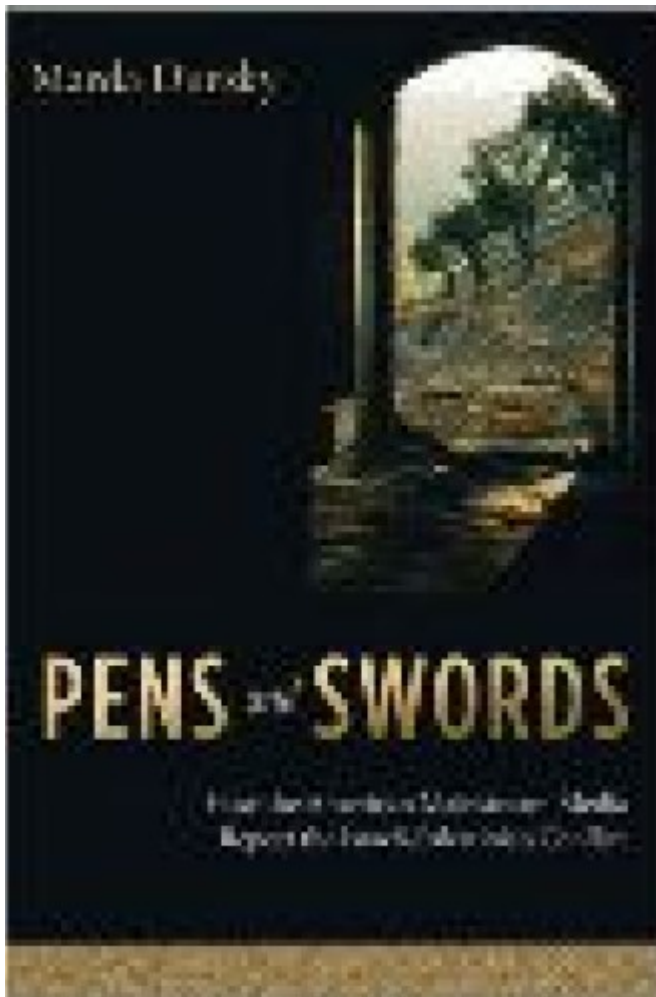


Pens and Swords: How the American Mainstream Media Report the Israel-Palestinian Conflict

reviewed by [Walter Rodgers](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

In Review



Pens and Swords: How the American Mainstream Media Report the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Marda Dunsky

Columbia University Press

At the height of the second Palestinian intifada, Richard Griffiths, the editorial director of CNN, admonished me: “You have to remember, Walt, there are two standards of reporting at CNN, one for Israel and the other for the rest of the world.” Like many in U.S. news organizations responsible for Middle East coverage at that time, Griffiths had just taken a terrible beating from Jewish-American pressure groups as well as from his own avowedly pro-Israel management.

In *Pens and Swords*, Marda Dunsky comprehensively documents the shortcomings of the mainstream U.S. news media in their coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the turn of the millennium until 2006. As the former Arab affairs editor of the *Jerusalem Post*, Dunsky knows well the blatant social and economic inequities that exist between the Palestinians and the prosperous and well-subsidized Israelis—who, she points out, would not be living in a viable state were it not for the \$100 billion in U.S. assistance they have received over the years. Nor is she insensitive to the fact that the Palestinians on the West Bank and in Gaza live encircled by the Israeli Defense Forces and have only marginal control over their own lives.

The book is thoroughly researched and documents the central issues at the core of the conflict: the Palestinian refugee question and the legal right of return under international law; contention over Jewish settlements that have been illegally expanded in occupied Arab lands for decades; the violent second Palestinian intifada in the spring of 2002; and U.S. policies that, Dunsky claims, drive the dispute rather than helping to resolve it.

Dunsky is at her best when she reminds us how little reporting out of Israel deals with the historical and legal context of the expansion of Jewish settlements by Israeli prime ministers, whose continuing land confiscations daily fuel a seething Palestinian sense of injustice and victimization. She begins her chapter on the settlements by cryptically addressing the doctrine of media spin: “There is international law, there is interpretation, and there is public opinion.”

Her greatest contribution beyond statistical research is the raw reminder that these settlements on land captured in the 1967 Six-Day War are patently illegal under international law and United Nations resolutions. But, Dunsky observes, U.S. news companies have become tone deaf to this and now generally acquiesce to the Israeli interpretation of what is legal and what is not. Even the media outlets that enjoy the

highest reputations rarely seek a second opinion.

Dunsky accurately makes the case that Israeli journalists tend to be more competitive, hard-hitting and objective than their U.S. counterparts because the Israeli media tend to be more skeptical of their government's version of events. She fails, however, to note that skeptical Israeli journalists are less likely to be accused of being anti-Semites than are gentile journalists from the United States.

U.S. media outlets would be better served if they employed Israeli journalists as analysts, Dunsky suggests. But this is not as easy as it seems. When I was Jerusalem bureau chief for CNN from 1995 to 2000, we used several Israeli newspaper columnists of various political stripes to add perspective. One of the more brilliant Israeli journalists, Chemi Shalev of the Tel Aviv newspaper *Yedioth Aharonot*, was so incisive in his political commentary that right-wing Jews in the United States successfully prevailed on CNN management to keep Shalev off the air, even though he was an extremely respected and popular writer for Israel's largest-circulation daily.

Dunsky's aim was not to review the power of Jewish interest groups that do much to shape or misshape American news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it should have been. To indict U.S. media coverage of Israel without calculating the influence of Israeli pressure groups on news organizations is myopic.

After the hawkish Benjamin Netanyahu was first elected prime minister in 1996, his news secretary, David Bar-Ilan, privately informed a member of his staff that his goal was to "bring CNN to heel." When CNN's reporting did not conform to the Netanyahu government's ultra-right-wing view of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Netanyahu's office commenced a campaign of character assassination with charges that I was anti-Semitic. According to former CNN president Tom Johnson, the accusations so stirred American Jews that 500 or more letters and e-mails per day were sent to CNN headquarters in Atlanta demanding that I be removed or fired. Johnson refused their demands.

Dunsky's tale becomes most threadbare when she contends that what creates a pro-Israel bias in news reporting is the blatantly and sometimes blindly pro-Israel trajectory of U.S. foreign policy. There is no question that U.S. policy is lopsided in favor of Israel or that U.S. news media are biased, but these facts are only part of the story. Dunsky closes her eyes to the fact that the American Israel Public Affairs

Committee and other Jewish special-interest groups are driving U.S. policy in the region by threatening U.S. lawmakers with retribution at election time.

I enjoyed this book, which is to say that I found it upsetting at times, but I am wary of Dunsky's methodology. Journalism is as much a narrative art as it is a matter of statistically balancing sources, especially amid gunfire. Symmetrical sourcing is not necessarily flawless and can become a trap.