

Interview with Professor Richard Landes

The "Pallywood" Phenomenon and Media Manipulation in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Question: Professor Landes, you are a medievalist and have studied how people in the 'dark ages' believed in great changes or apocalyptic events. How do you use these ideas to understand the misleading narratives about what you call "Pallywood"?

Answer: As a medievalist, I am aware not only of how forgers work, but also of how people who have been deceived by forgers are reluctant they are to admit they have been deceived. I worked on one of the [most amazing dossiers of forged documents](#) from the early eleventh century, discovered in the 1920s and ignored by historians for the next 60 years, so I was less surprised by the response than others in the trenches around the Al Durah fake.

Also, as a medievalist, I work on societies in which [gaining honor, saving face and avoiding shame](#) are so important that it's not just allowed and expected that you violently pursue those ends, but even *must* engage in violence (considered just vengeance) to save honor and avoid shame. Israel is surrounded by such societies, some with such intensity that they kill their own daughters and sisters to maintain family honor.

As for [Jew-hatred](#), the continuity between the pre-modern (medieval) kinds and (post-)modern (early 21st century manifestations of Jew hatred are disturbing: in both cases "the whole world" comes to the conclusion that the Jews deliberately murder innocent gentile children as part of a plot to rule the world. This paranoid apocalyptic delirium first emerged in the Middle Ages, it reached a paroxysm in the early 20th century, and despite two generations of abeyance, returns today. Once again "the whole world" believes that Jews deliberately target gentile children, even though the people making the accusation deliberately target Jewish children, that the Jews are committing genocide when the people making the accusation are committed in word and deed to genocide. We find in both cases the projection of malice and the wide adoption of that terrible projection by "the whole world."

Question: The term "Pallywood" originated from your work on the Muhammad al-Durrah case. Can you briefly recall how it all started?

Answer: On September 30, 2000, which was the first day of the Jewish New Year, footage arrived on the desk of Charles Enderlin, an Israeli-French journalist working for France2. According to the cameraman who delivered it, it showed a boy, Muhammad al Durah, next to his father hit and killed by Israeli fire. Charles edited it to make that narrative as credible as possible and announced the boy and his father were the "target of fire coming from the Israeli position." The images triggered enormous reactions both in the Muslim world and the West; it became the 21st century's [Icon of Hatred](#).

When I read James Fallows' article about Nachum Shahaf's investigation of this case in 2003, it was clear to me (Fallows avoided dotting the i's) that [the scene had been staged](#). I went to investigate

personally - first in France, then in Israel, where I viewed two hours of footage from the Reuters cameraman from that day. It contained only staged scenes, one after another.

When I finally managed to see the raw footage taken by Charles Enderlin's cameraman, it was also clearly full of faked scenes. At one point Enderlin's Israeli cameraman laughed because it was so obviously staged. When we confronted Enderlin, he replied: "Oh yes, they always do that. It's a cultural thing."

It was at that moment, leaving his office, that I realized: "This isn't just Palestinians faking it; they have willing accomplices in the Western press who run their best work as news. This is an industry similar to the Indian "Bollywood" (Bombai Hollywood) – hence the term "Pallywood" (Palestinian Hollywood) was born. I made a movie about [Pallywood](#) before tackling the al Durah fake because most westerners could not even imagine that Palestinians would fake such things. (They still can't.)

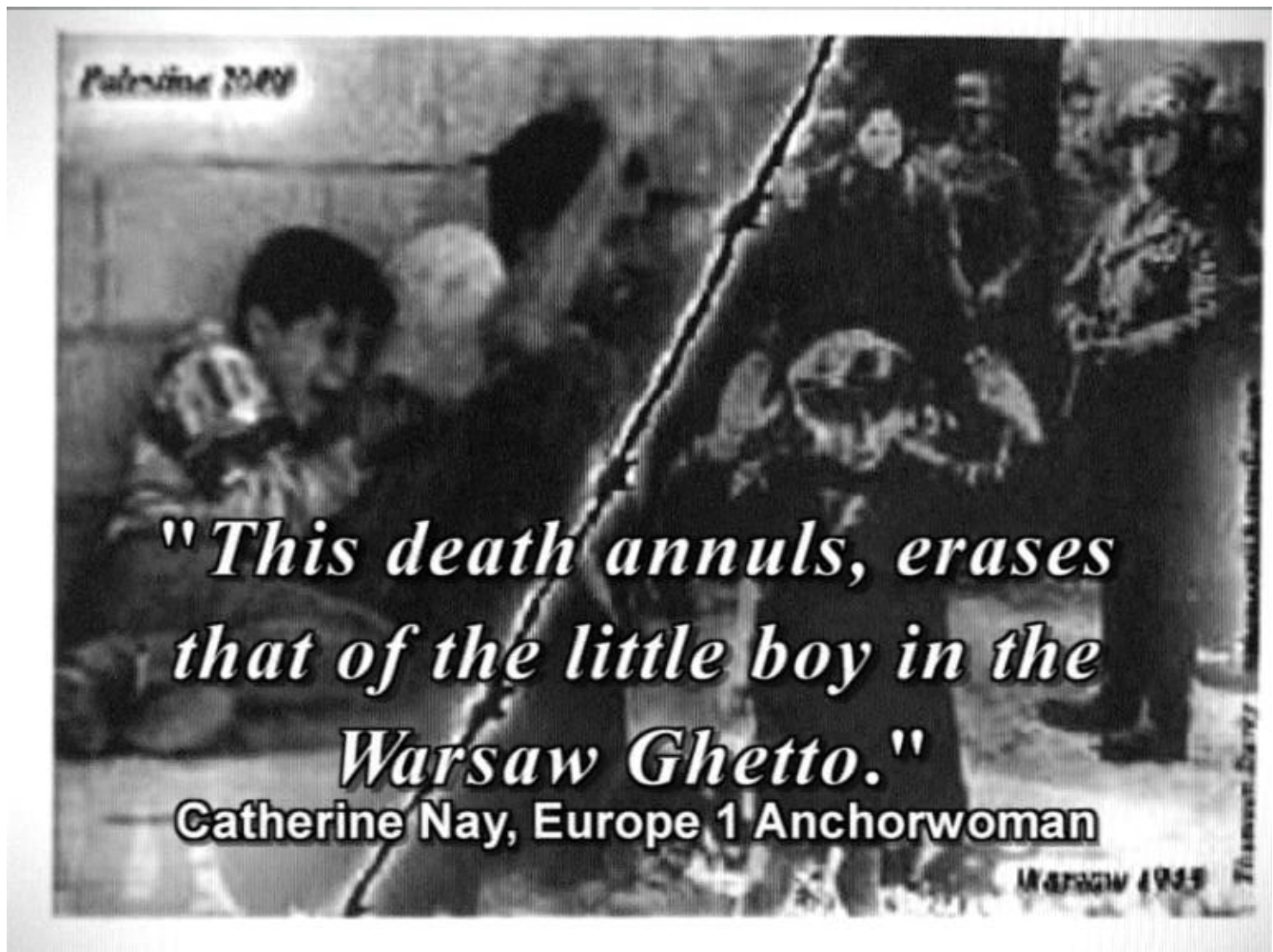
Question: In your book "[Can 'The Whole World' Be Wrong?](#)", you talk about how the media sometimes portray Israel as the "bad guy," the cause of all the problems, and you see this is a dangerous response to serious challenge. What kind of mechanism do you see in this, referring to periods of great change? Is there a script that repeats itself?

Answer: The most obvious repeating honor-shame driven scripts are 1) the triumphalist Muslim hysteria at an autonomous infidel state in what should be Dar al Islam (i.e. Israel), and 2) the ["supersessionist" need for people](#) who think themselves the moral global avant-garde (in this case the global Progressives, previously the Muslims and the Christians) to view the Jews with contempt as a part of their identity formation. All these movements, including postmodernity, say: "Okay, we're done with the past and its Jewish superstitions, we're opening a completely new and better future" - when in reality they a) take most of their (best) ideas from the Jews, and b) repeat the past without learning by insisting they got it on their own and they're superior to the Jews and all the successor movements.

Progressives have a messianic vocation: they consider themselves *the* global moral leaders who will save the planet; and yet, in their competitive envy they have a particular dislike for the Jews who remain global leaders in so many progressive fields including being the natural leader of the autonomous "Fourth World" (i.e. those ethnic groups oppressed by the "Third World"). So they buy into the lethal narratives of Hamas, believe the accusation of people who openly want and try to commit genocide that it's *Israel* who targets children, starves civilians, is committing genocide.

They refuse to look back, to see how their ancestors did this repeatedly to Jews. For centuries and millennia, these moral "giants" replicated the same simplistic and lethal narratives in which the Jews are the bad guys. And now, even as the western post-modern and post-colonial scholars reject their own "evil" past, the replicate one of the ugliest aspects.

Take the symbolic image of Muhammad al Durah: the boy behind the barrel "in his father's arms" (which he wasn't). In the minds of the "progressive" intelligentsia, this iconography of Israel's malignity "replaced and erased the image of the boy in the Warsaw Ghetto."



It's literally a postmodern descendant of the millennium-old blood libel of Jews killing Gentile children. And like the blood libel in the 1890s, when Jews claim they didn't bake gentile blood in their matza, when Israel claims they did not massacre Palestinians (Jenin 2002), commit genocide (Gaza 2023-25) – the response is, again and again, “Can the whole world be wrong and the Jews be right?”

Question: Living in Jerusalem how have you seen social media like TikTok or X change the way people talk about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict compared to traditional TV news?

Answer: Tik-Tok only indirectly effects life in Jerusalem. We're aware of its role in demonizing us around the world, but it's not a direct player in daily life. From here looking at the West, it pretty clear that social media intensify and amplify the negative messages, but there's a direct continuum with what's on legacy media. On Tik-Tok it's standard to accuse Israel of committing genocide. CNN won't say that, but they platform and sympathetically interview people who do. *All* CNN's discussions of genocide are about Israel; they do not show their audiences the [constant calls to genocide from mosques](#) not only in Palestine, but around the world. Social media hyper-simplify and make the narrative decided by traditional media more accessible.

Take the example of the alleged famine in Gaza: the New York Times devotes more space to a fake picture of the famine [without verifying](#) whether it's really a photo of a child affected by famine or rather the victim of a congenital disease. With images like that on the front page, even left-wing Jews in

America are saying: "Oh my God, it's like the Warsaw Ghetto." Social media then offers millions of variants of that message. But the problem is upstream at the poisoned source. Our media are getting information (which they adopt uncritically) from a totalitarian movement in which propaganda is a weapon of war. Why would our news media side with the totalitarian enemy and serve us their propaganda as news?

Question: On your blog [The Augean Stables](#), you expose media stories you consider false. What's a simple trick the public can use to spot if a video or news story about Israel is manipulated, like in "Pallywood"?

Answer: Whenever you hear accusations that "the Israelis are deliberately killing civilians, targeting children," and you're told a precise and immediate story of a victim, ask: where does this detailed information come from. Look for people [smiling when they don't think they're on camera](#). Check for signs of blood. Look for anomalous evidence of staging (some people ducking, others standing around), look for make-up. Visit the [Gazawood site](#) with thousands of examples. You might not agree with all their calls, but the supply of evidence is unending.

Question: What about the speed with which the information about casualties arrives. For example, recently there was a building collapse in Rome due to a gas explosion - it took about three hours to figure out who was under the rubble. But in Gaza, after two minutes they already know there were "five women, five children" and the press reports these numbers without verification.

Answer: Yes. The reality is that most news about how many people die in Gaza comes directly from the Hamas Health Ministry, and the press - not just here but also the New York Times - reports these numbers as verified facts. So when Israel strikes a location and kills a key Hamas commander, the headline reads "[90+ Dead](#)," with no more evidence than the Health Ministry's claim.

We're conducting a study on CNN right now and we're finding an 85 to 95% alignment between what Hamas wants the media to say and what CNN actually says. This isn't professional journalism, it's own-goal war journalism (reporting the enemy's propaganda as news to the targeted population). As with Troy taking in the Greek Horse, it's suicidal.

Question: Let's talk about the reactions you've encountered after your work: have the "traditional media" responded harshly to your accusations and has this damaged you in any way?

Answer: Yes, I think the criticism has damaged my reputation. People accuse me of "conspiracy theories" and being "insensitive" to Palestinian suffering. A kind of quiet cancelation. And it's not just the woke left wing. When "Pallywood" first came out, a colleague at USC Annenberg Center wanted to invite me to speak and the (Jewish) head of the department asked the Israeli embassy about me and they said, "No, don't invite him, he's against peace." I think that the accusation that Palestinians stage news footage is so beyond the ken of most "liberals" that they prefer to think me a racist than allow the possibility that they're being duped.

But it's also strange: in the past, in the West, the left distinguished itself by often thinking in terms of 'conspiracies' especially government spawned ones: it meant asking hard questions, no matter how wild. Remember most of the western 9-11 conspiracy theories were from the anti-American Left. Suddenly it's a negative thing and unthinkable that Palestinians would agree to promote lies? "No," the

progressives reply, “you can’t say that, it’s Islamophobia.” When I read the rebuttals of my arguments, I felt like I’m not reading journalists, but people who are telling their audience what to think. They never refer to the original evidence, just negative characterizations.

Question: Looking to the future, what problems in today's media - like fake news or viral videos - do you consider most urgent to address to help people see the truth about Israel and the conflict?

Answer: Certainly we must recognize and hold our media to account for their intimidation by Hamas. [Matti Friedman](#) describes the open intimidation that plays a role in censoring anything negative about Hamas: if you don't do what Hamas wants, you're in trouble, your Palestinian handlers are in trouble, their families are in trouble. And you certainly won't return to Gaza to report in the future. But it worse. Many journalists really get their backs into adopting the jihadi narrative, especially when it comes to demonizing Israel. Their work goes way beyond mere compliance with intimidation. These are willing participants in a campaign of vilification.

What to do about this? On one level it’s relatively simple. Just do your job as a journalist: investigate your sources rather than assuming the evidence is real. When you get a picture that’s supposed to be of newborn twins, ask if it’s two-day old twins before presenting it as such; when a father collapses in mourning while waving laminated copies of his twins’ birth certificates, look for signs of staging his grief. When your source tells you more than 90 are dead shortly after an Israeli air strike, ask how they got those numbers so quickly. If the news media weren’t almost dogmatically credulous to Palestinian claims, much of this wouldn’t happen.

Then again, there’s the obverse – the material that journalists for some reason refuse to cover, like the [genocidal hatreds](#) preached from Palestinian pulpits (including PA preachers) and run on Palestinian TV, the open admissions – in Arabic – that the “peace process” is [just another way to wage war](#), the blatant racism of Palestinian society, the [savagely crushing of dissent](#) whether it’s journalists or public demonstrations. For reasons we can only guess at, most Western journalists do their best to shield Palestinians from criticism. That includes not inviting analysts who track Palestinian statements in Arabic (Itamar Marcus, Yigal Carmon), who are critical of Palestinians and the institutions that align with their war on Israel ([Gerald Steinberg](#), [Hillel Newmann](#), [Phyllis Chesler](#)), who can see the war in its larger context ([Andrew Fox](#), [Richard Kemp](#)); feminists and gays who can show these communities’ support of the Palestinians for [the ludicrous inanity they are](#).

On a different level, people seem consumed by virtue signaling, they’re eager to *show* how “good” they are, how they’re on the “right side” of history. As a result, they cling to a moral narrative and avoid looking at contradictory facts and evidence. It’s more important for them to look good in the eyes of their fellow progressives than to face some hard and unpleasant truths about the cause they inexplicably find so compelling – Palestinianism, from its genocidal hatreds and political irredentism to its systematic lying and the sacrifice of its own people. Only then can the “pro-Palestinian” crowd begin to understand [the harm they do](#) not only to fellow progressives in the Middle East (Israeli and Arab), but to their own cause their own societies.

My father’s favorite passage in the Bible was about choosing life. I grew up thinking that was obviously the choice to make. But I look at the West and see people who seem to love life adopting the cause of those who love death. It turns out, I guess, that choosing life is not so easy.