

## Jodi Rudoren, Another Member of the Family: Meet the New York Times' New Israel-Palestine News Chief

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Past and Present NY Times Jerusalem Bureau Chiefs: Jodi Rudoren, Ethan Bronner, Steven Erlanger, Thomas Friedman

**M**ichael Lerner, the editor of *Tikkun Magazine*, is known for his frequent condemnations of Israeli violence against Palestinians. He is labeled “pro-Palestinian” for such statements and is regularly attacked by pro-Israel zealots who charge that he is disloyal to the Jewish state.

Yet, in reality, Lerner frequently speaks of his devotion to Israel and states that his actions are taken in considerable part to protect it.

A while ago Lerner explained the difference in his feelings about Israelis compared to his feelings about Palestinians. “[T]here is a difference in my emotional and spiritual connection to these two sides,” Lerner said.

“On the one side is my family; on the other side are decent human beings. I want to support human beings all over the planet but I have a special connection to my family.”

This statement comes to mind when one considers the New York Times bureau chiefs who cover Israel-Palestine.

The most recent person to be chosen for this power-

ful post at arguably the most influential newspaper in the United States is Jodi Rudoren. She takes the place of Ethan Bronner, who was preceded by Steven Erlanger, who was preceded by James Bennet, who was preceded by Deborah Sontag. All, according to an Israeli report, are Jewish.

Most Americans — particularly those who would object to only white reporters covering racial issues or only male reporters covering gender issues — are reluctant to discuss the potential bias in such a profoundly un-diverse system, having been conditioned to fear that such discussion would be “anti-Semitic” or would open the commentator to this extremely damaging accusation.

In Israel, however, it is considered appropriate to discuss the Jewish roots of American politicians and journalists since Israel was created specifically to be “the Jewish state,” Jews have elevated status in it, and the vast majority of Israeli land is officially owned by “world Jewry” (although some individuals have publicly opted out).

An article on the Jerusalem Post website, a major Israeli newspaper, focuses on this aspect. The article,



“Judaism at the New York Times”, reports that “all New York Times’ bureau chiefs for at least the last fifteen years have been Jewish.”

The article’s author, Ashley Rindsberg, notes that “the Times doesn’t consistently send Russian Americans to its Moscow bureau... or Mexican Americans to lead its Mexico City bureau...” and asks, “Why does the New York Times consistently send Jewish journalists to head their central office in the Jewish State?”

Rindsberg, who like many conservative Israelis considers the Times’ reporting anti-Israel, provides a somewhat convoluted answer. The Times’ Jewish owners, Rindsberg posits, are uncomfortable with their Jewish identity. Therefore, he claims, they “would just as soon as not have reporters who could be identified for their Jewishness. And to prove it, they send Jews to the Jewish State to report in a most un-Jewish way.”

### **The Times’ history of pro-Israel coverage**

Despite Rindsberg’s view of the Times, analysis shows its coverage to be consistently pro-Israel. A 2005 study found that the Times reported on Israeli deaths at rates up to seven times greater than its reports on Palestinian deaths, even though Palestinian deaths occurred first and in far greater numbers.

A 2007 study of the Times’ coverage of various international reports on human rights violations by Israelis and by Palestinians found that the Times covered reports condemning Israeli human rights violations at a rate only one-twentieth the rate that it covered reports condemning Palestinian human rights violations. The investigation found that during the study period there had been 76 reports by humanitarian agencies condemning Israel for abuses and four condemning Palestinians for abuses. The Times carried two stories on each side.

In its early years the Times specifically avoided assigning Jewish reporters to cover Israel out of concern that such journalists would have an inherent conflict of interest. This policy was reversed in 1979 after Abe Rosenthal became the paper’s executive editor and explicitly decided to choose Jewish journalists for the position.

While his first attempt failed (he had thought his choice, David Shipler, was Jewish), the Columbia Journalism review reports that most of the journalists

who succeeded Shipler, beginning with Thomas Friedman, have been of Jewish ethnicity. The article notes that “for a century [the Times] has served, in effect, as the hometown paper of American Jewry.”

Former NY Times executive editor Max Frankel, who was an editor at the Times from 1972 through 2000, admitted in his memoirs: “I was much more deeply devoted to Israel than I dared to assert ... Fortified by my knowledge of Israel and my friendships there, I myself wrote most of our Middle East commentaries. As more Arab than Jewish readers recognized, I wrote them from a pro-Israel perspective.”

An article by star reporter and author Grace Halsell describes her firsthand experience with pro-Israel bias at the Times in the early 1980s.

Halsell had written books about the plight of Native Americans, African Americans, and undocumented Mexican workers. She was a great favorite of New York Times matriarch Iphigene Ochs Sulzberger, whose father had acquired the Times in 1896, whose husband and then son had run it next, and whose grandson is now in charge.

When Halsell next wrote a powerful book describing the Palestinian plight, she incurred Mrs. Suzberger’s displeasure and was quickly dropped by the Times. Halsell writes: “I had little concept that from being buoyed so high I could be dropped so suddenly when I discovered—from her point of view—the ‘wrong’ underdog.”

In her article Halsell quotes a revealing statement by an Israeli journalist following Israel’s 1996 shelling of a U.N. base in Lebanon that killed more than 100 civilians sheltering in it: “We believe with absolute certitude that right now, with the White House in our hands, the Senate in our hands and The New York Times in our hands, the lives of others do not count the same way as our own.”

Since 1984 New York Times bureau chiefs have lived in a house that was acquired for the Times by then Jerusalem Bureau Chief Thomas Friedman (now the Times’ lead foreign policy columnist). The building originally belonged to a Palestinian family forced out in Israel’s 1947-49 founding war. Israel afterward prevented the family from returning and reclaiming their home. Therefore, Times’ bureau chiefs are in the strange position of living in a home that was stolen from Palestinians (acquiring property by violent conquest is illegal in today’s world).

**Recent Situation:  
Bronner, Kershner, & Khader Adnan**

Rudoren's predecessor as Jerusalem bureau chief, Ethan Bronner, has a son who enlisted in the Israeli military. When this conflict with impartiality was exposed, even the Times' own ombudsman suggested that journalistic ethics required that Bronner be moved to a different beat. Yet, Times then-editor Bill Keller insisted that this gave Bronner "special sophistication" and kept him in his position.

Bronner's colleague at the bureau has been Isabel Kershner, who will apparently be staying on. J.J. Goldberg, editor of the Forward, writes: "Isabel Kershner immigrated to Israel from her native England as a young woman and spent a couple of decades in Israeli journalism and Jewish education before joining the Times a few years ago. By now she's thoroughly Israeli (and, for full disclosure, a friend)."

While pro-Israel Zealots vehemently attack Bronner and Kershner when they cover Palestinian victimization, the truth is that they overlook a great many instances. For example, a 33-year-old Palestinian father of two young girls (another child is on the way) was on a hunger strike that lasted for 66 days. He was near death when he reportedly decided to end it on Feb 21.

The young man, Khader Adnan, was protesting his imprisonment by Israel – he was never charged with a crime – and the beatings and humiliations he endured from Israeli interrogators. There was an extended international campaign about him that grew even more urgent when doctors began warning after 45 days that he was at risk of death. Eventually, there was so much pressure world wide (including by UN Special Rapporteur Richard Falk and EU Foreign Policy Chief Catherine Ashton) that Israel announced it would release Adnan at the end of his "sentence."

Yet, Bronner and Kershner – and Times columnists who frequently bemoan the alleged lack of a Palestinian Gandhi – did not publish a single story on Adnan until the 66th (and last) day of his hunger strike – after the Washington Post had finally carried a report two days before. The Times' headline was the very bland, "Hearing for Palestinian on Hunger Strike Is Set."

While Adnan's is the longest Palestinian hunger strike on record, through the years there have been hundreds of hunger strikes by multitudes of Palestinians in

Israeli prisons; the Times almost never reports on them. It's revealing to compare their numerous stories on the Israeli tank gunner captured by Palestinians, Gilad Shalit, to the sparsity of their reporting on Adnan and others.

Overall, the thousands of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel seem largely to have been invisible to Times' reporters. While there have been gruesome reports of their torture for decades, there is little indication that Bronner or Kershner have investigated this or made much, if any, effort to visit Palestinians in Israeli prisons.

**Who is Jodi Rudoren?**

Now that Bronner's four-year term has come to an end (he says he initiated the transfer himself and was not pushed out over conflict of interest), it is not clear what went into new editor Jill Abramson's decision to choose Rudoren for this powerful position.

A cum laude graduate from Yale, Rudoren's journalistic experience appears to be limited to domestic subjects. Most recently she had been head of the Times' Education bureau. She speaks what she calls "functional Hebrew" but no Arabic. It's unknown how much time, if any, she has spent in Israel, whether she has family there, or whether she has family members in the Israeli military.

When Rudoren received a tweet by Palestinian-American author Ali Abunimah, who noted that she would be moving into stolen Palestinian property, she responded: "Hey there. Would love to chat sometime. About things other than the house. My friend Kareem Fahim [a New York Times associate] says good things."

This friendly but somewhat flip response to a serious subject has caused Israel zealots to attack her. The Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg somewhat hysterically equated Abunimah, an author known for his intellectual analysis, with Israeli Jewish supremacists known for their violence.

Goldberg suggested that Rudoren should have "twinned" her tweet to Abunimah by reaching out to Kahanists — a group listed by both Israel and the U.S. as terrorists. Goldberg should be pleased to learn that Rudoren said she had done just that, telling the Jerusalem Post, "One of the people I followed before reaching out to Abunimah was David Ha'ivri."

Ha'ivri is an extremist settler rabbi who was

involved with Jewish Defense League founder Meir Kahane's Kach terror group, celebrated the assassination of former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin when he had begun to make peace with Palestinians, and was convicted some years ago for desecrating a mosque.

Abunimah, on the other hand, has written a book called "One Country: A Bold Proposal to End the Israeli-Palestinian Impasse," in which he describes how Israelis and Palestinians can live together in peace.

Rudoren's knowledge of Hebrew may have been bolstered by her summertime attendance at Camp Yavneh, a Jewish camp in New Hampshire that has an Israeli flag at the top of its website and boasts of its "strong Israeli programming." It features a six-weeks "summer in Israel" program, though it's unknown whether Rudoren attended this.

The camp website states that the current boys' head counselor "grew up in Gush Etzion, Israel, and has served as a Lieutenant Commander in the Israeli Army in charge of 150 soldiers in the Givatti Brigade." Another counselor is a resident of the Israeli settlement of Efrat, which, like all Israeli settlements, is built on confiscated Palestinian land and is illegal under international law.

Despite an upbringing that appears to have included considerable immersion in Zionist mythology, indications are that Rudoren may be working to widen her view. She raves about a book by Peter Beinart called "The Crisis of Zionism" and retweeted a message by blogger Sami Kishawi. It's interesting to note that the Times' only other female Jerusalem bureau chief, Deborah Sontag, often provided exemplary coverage; her term seems to have ended early.

### **Tweeting like a J-Street official?**

Jeffrey Goldberg – who moved to Israel, became an Israeli citizen, joined the Israeli army, and worked as a prison guard at one of Israel's most brutal prisons – assures readers that Rudoren is still within the pro-Israel fold, commenting, "I don't know Rudoren... I do know her sister, from synagogue, mainly, and I don't think Jodi is some sort of anti-Israel activist..."

Goldberg is concerned, however, that she is tweeting

"as if she's a J Street official." For Goldberg this veers dangerously toward anti-Israelism.

In reality, however, J Street is a pro-Israel organization whose positions are dictated by what is good for Israel. Its founder has just published a book entitled "A New Voice for Israel." If Goldberg's assessment of Rudoren is accurate, then it appears that once again the Times has a person at the helm of its reporting on Israelis and Palestinians for whom Israelis are "family." Quite possibly, literally.

Rudoren may be intending to cover the region accurately and with fairness. To do so, however, it appears that she will need to overcome enormous ingrained bias, relentless and vitriolic objections of the organized pro-Israel community (quite likely including friends and family), and pressure by many powerful Times advertisers and colleagues.

On top of this, unless she chooses a different lifestyle than her predecessors', she will be living in Israel, her children will go to Israeli schools, and her home will be one of the thousands confiscated from Palestinians who are now living and suffering largely out of sight, their daily humiliations and victimization for the most part invisible.

These winds may be so strong that even when Rudoren believes she has stood upright against them, an outside view may show her tilted far over in the Israeli direction, her reporting on Israel-Palestine, to paraphrase Dorothy Parker, covering the gamut from A to C.

Let us hope that this doesn't occur.

Let us hope Rudoren understands that good reporting does not equate a false narrative with a factual one; that she will not be, in Abunimah's words, yet "another New York Times reporter for whom Palestinians are just bit players in someone else's drama."

Let us hope she understands that living in stolen property is not a good base from which to report honestly; that "balance" achieved by under-reporting Palestinian suffering while exaggerating that of Israelis is not balance, it is distortion. Let us hope, most of all, that she does not view some human beings as more important than others, but instead views all, regardless of their religion or ethnicity, as family.

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