

U.S. Media and Israeli Military All in the Family

By **Alison Weir**, Executive Director of If Americans Knew, February 25, 2010

Recent exposés revealing that Ethan Bronner, the New York Times Israel-Palestine bureau chief, has a son in the Israeli military have caused a storm of controversy that continues to swirl and generate further revelations.

Many people find such a sign of family partisanship in an editor covering a foreign conflict troubling – especially given the Times’ record of Israel-centric journalism.

Times management at first refused to confirm Bronner’s situation, then refused to comment on it. Finally, public outcry forced Times Public Editor Clark Hoyt to confront the problem in a February 7th column.

After bending over backwards to praise the institution that employs him, Hoyt ultimately opined that Bronner should be re-assigned to a different sphere of reporting to avoid the “appearance” of bias. Times Editor Bill Keller declined to do so, however, instead writing a column calling Bronner’s connections to Israel valuable because they “supply a measure of sophistication about Israel and its adversaries that someone with no connections would lack.”

If such “sophistication” is valuable, the Times’ espoused commitment to the “impartiality and neutrality of the company’s newsrooms” would seem to require it to have a balancing editor equally sophisticated about Palestine and its adversary, but Keller did not address that.

Bronner is far from alone

As it turns out, Bronner’s ties to the Israeli military are not the rarity one might expect.

- A previous Times bureau chief, Joel Greenberg, before he was bureau chief but after he was already publishing in the Times from Israel, actually served in the Israeli army.
- Media pundit and Atlantic staffer Jeffrey Goldberg also served in the Israeli military; it’s unclear when, how, or even if his military service ended.

- Richard Chesnoff, who has been covering Mideast events for more than 40 years, had a son serving in the Israeli military while Chesnoff covered Israel as US News & World Report’s senior foreign correspondent.
- NPR’s Linda Gradstein’s husband was an Israeli sniper and may still be in the Israeli reserves. NPR refuses to disclose whether Gradstein herself is also an Israeli citizen, as are her children and husband.
- Mitch Weinstock, national editor for the San Diego Union-Tribune, served in the Israeli military.
- The New York Times’ other correspondent from the region, Isabel Kershner, is an Israeli citizen. Israel has universal compulsory military service, which suggests that Kershner herself and/or family members may have military connections. The Times refuses to answer questions about whether she and/or family members have served or are currently serving in the Israeli military. Is it possible that Times Foreign Editor Susan Chira herself has such connections? The Times refuses to answer.
- Many Associated Press writers and editors are Israeli citizens or have Israeli families. AP will not reveal how many of the journalists in its control bureau for the region currently serve in the Israeli military, how many have served in the past, and how many have family members with this connection.
- Similarly, many TV correspondents such as Martin Fletcher have been Israeli citizens and/or have Israeli families. Do they have family connections to the Israeli military?
- Time Magazine’s bureau chief several years ago became an Israeli citizen after he had assumed his post. Does he have relatives in the military?
- CNN’s Wolf Blitzer, while not an Israeli citizen, was based in Israel for many years, wrote a book whitewashing Israeli spying on the US, and used to work for the Israel lobby in the US. None of this is divulged to CNN viewers.



- Tikkun's editor Michael Lerner has a son who served in the Israeli military. While Lerner has been a strong critic of many Israeli policies, in an interview with Jewish Week, Lerner explains:

"Having a son in the Israeli army was a manifestation of my love for Israel, and I assume that having a son in the Israeli army is a manifestation of Bronner's love of Israel."

Lerner goes on to make a fundamental point:

"...there is a difference in my emotional and spiritual connection to these two sides [Israelis and Palestinians]. 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. I don't deny it."

For a great many of the reporters and editors determining what Americans learn about Israel-Palestine, Israel is family.

Jonathan Cook, a British journalist based in Nazareth, writes of a recent meeting with a Jerusalem based bureau chief, who explained: "... Bronner's situation is 'the rule, not the exception. I can think of a dozen foreign bureau chiefs, responsible for covering both Israel and the Palestinians, who have served in the Israeli army, and another dozen who like Bronner have kids in the Israeli army."

Cook writes that the bureau chief explained: "It is common to hear Western reporters boasting to one another about their Zionist credentials, their service in the Israeli army or the loyal service of their children."

Apparently, intimate ties to Israel are among the many open secrets in the region that are hidden from the American public. If, as the news media insist, these ties present no problem or even, as the Times' Keller insists, enhance the journalists' work, why do the news agencies consistently refuse to admit them?

The reason for media obfuscation

The answer is not complicated.

While Israel may be family for these journalists and editors, for the vast majority of Americans, Israel is a foreign country. In survey after survey, Americans say they don't wish to "take sides" on this conflict. In other words, the American public wants full, unfiltered, unslanted coverage.

Quite likely the news media refuse to answer questions about their journalists' affiliations because they suspect, accurately, that the public would be displeased to learn that the reporters and editors charged with supplying news on a foreign nation and conflict are, in fact, partisans.

While Keller claims that the New York Times is covering this conflict "even-handedly," studies indicate otherwise:

- The Times covers international reports documenting Israeli human rights abuses at a rate 19 times lower than it reports on the far smaller number of international reports documenting Palestinian human rights abuses.
- The Times covers Israeli children's deaths at rates seven times greater than they cover Palestinian children's deaths, even though there are vastly more of the latter and they occurred first.
- The Times fails to inform its readers that Israel's Jewish-only colonies on confiscated Palestinian Christian and Muslim land are illegal; that its collective punishment of 1.5 million men, women, and children in Gaza is not only cruel and ruthless, it is also illegal; and that its use of American weaponry is routinely in violation of American laws.
- The Times covers the one Israeli (a soldier) held by Palestinians at a rate incalculably higher than it reports on the Palestinian men, women, and children – the vast majority civilians – imprisoned by Israel (currently over 7,000).
- The Times neglects to report that hundreds of Israel's captives have never even been charged with a crime and that those who have were tried in Israeli military courts under an array of bizarre military statutes that make even the planting of onions without a permit a criminal offense – a legal system, if one can call it that, that changes at the whim of the current military governor ruling over a subject population; a system in which parents are without power to protect their children.
- The Times fails to inform its readers that 40 percent of Palestinian males have been imprisoned by Israel, a statistic that normally would be considered highly newsworthy, but that Bronner, Kershner, and Chira apparently feel is unimportant to report.

Americans, whose elected representatives give Israel uniquely gargantuan sums of our tax money (a situation also not covered by the media), want and need all the facts, not just those that Israel's family members decree reportable.

We're not getting them.