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Israel can't muzzle the world's media - not even CNN

Israel's security establishment and its servile defense reporters need a few lessons in quality journalism and the rights of a free media beyond its borders.

By Barbara Opall-Rome | Nov. 7, 2013 | 6:48 PM |  4

Anger and conspiracy-fuelled conjecture filled the air in Israel over last week's report on CNN of another Israeli strike in Syria, in which - unusually - a senior U.S. administration official confirmed Israel's role and the target of the action. For me, it recalled Hosni Mubarak's absurdly misplaced outrage over a decade ago over

Israeli TV comedian Eli Yatzpan's impersonations of him.

Just as Yatzpan's often biting portrayals of the Egyptian leader could not in any way be said to have been an expression of government policy under then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the U.S. official cited in the CNN report hardly reflects a concerted White House campaign to undermine the Netanyahu-led government.

In Yatzpan's case, it was great comedy, pure and simple. Blaming PM Sharon for Yatzpan's perceived offenses merely underscored Mubarak's own insecurities and his third-world control of Egyptian airwaves.

In the case of CNN's Barbara Starr (with whom I worked in the late 1980s), her October 31 report on yet another Israeli attack on "missiles

and related equipment” near Latakia was the product of first-rate journalism. Period.

The fact that this veteran Pentagon correspondent broke a similar story in July is testament to sources meticulously cultivated over decades, and not – as asserted by Israel's Channel 2 – the result of manipulation “coming directly from the White House.”

The vitriol unleashed here in Israel over ostensibly orchestrated leaks reveals woeful ignorance of how journalism is practiced in the American capital. At the same time, it highlights the Israeli security establishment's unchallenged chokehold over defense reporting. Blaming the U.S. administration for “scandalous” leaks - according to irate Israeli officials cited by Israel's Channel 10 - and for “selling us

out”, according to major daily Yediot Aharonot, is as preposterous as Mubarak’s rants over Sharon-sanctioned satire.

Have there been recent cases of authorized leaks as a vehicle for advancing U.S. security policy? Yes, but rarely, especially since lessons learned by U.S. media organizations and Washington officials over the outing of a CIA agent by the office of former Vice President Dick Cheney.

But U.S. reports of Israeli military operations that have already taken place neither advance nor obstruct American policy goals. Had reports aired prior to or during an attack, the very limited number of U.S. officials with access to such compartmentalized, privileged information could justifiably be accused of egregious

betrayal.

But after the fact – with piecemeal reports already coming in from the region - Israeli operations are fair game for a free media.

With all due respect to doubters in Jerusalem and Israel's Defense Ministry, there's nothing nefarious about periodic post-op reporting on the Israeli military. They're merely the result of experienced journalists asking the right questions of trusted sources and pulling the pieces together.

Authorities here in Israel may have good reason not to acknowledge attacks in Syria, Sudan or anywhere else where plausible deniability reduces the risk of retaliation and regional escalation.

Here, authorities can count on military censorship and a servile security press to enforce short-lived

news blackouts.

But just as Mubarak's muscle proved no match for Yatzpan's mimicry, Israel cannot muzzle the media beyond its borders.

Impugning the integrity of good friends in Washington is no way to fight a losing battle.

And that's no laughing matter.

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