

Transcript for:

The Middle East and the Media

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The conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis continues to dominate the airwaves and the headlines. Are we getting the story straight? Are we getting the straight story? Our guest this week has unique qualifications to explore these questions. He is Marvin Kalb, chief diplomatic correspondent for CBS News and NBC News, former moderator of "Meet the Press," former Harvard professor, now executive director of the Washington office of Harvard's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy and author of, his 10th book, "One Scandalous Story: Clinton, Lewinsky, and 13th Days that Tarnished American Journalism."

The Middle East and the Media

Ben Wattenberg: Hello, I'm Ben Wattenberg. The conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis continues to dominate the airwaves and the headlines. Are we getting the straight story? Are we getting the story straight? Our guest today has unique qualifications to explore these questions. He is Marvin Kalb, former chief diplomatic correspondent for CBS News and NBC News, former moderator of Meet the Press, former Harvard professor, now executive director of the Washington office of Harvard's Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics, and Public Policy and author of his tenth book, One Scandalous Story, Clinton, Lewinsky and Thirteen Days that Tarnished American Journalism. The topic before the house, "The Mideast and the Media," this week on Think Tank.

(musical break)

Ben Wattenberg: Welcome, Marvin Kalb.

Marvin Kalb: Pleasure to be with you, Ben.

Ben Wattenberg: Sometimes we have guests who are nervous at the idea of appearing on television. I don't think that's going to be your problem.

Marvin Kalb: No, my problem will be trying to figure out what to say.

Ben Wattenberg: Well, we'll see how that works. Tell me first something of your background if you would, a little thumbnail sketch.

Marvin Kalb: Thumbnail sketch: I was a journalist at two networks, as you pointed out, for thirty years.

Ben Wattenberg: Where were you born?

Marvin Kalb: New York City. And educated in New York at City College, then went on to Harvard for graduate work. I was teaching Russian history for a time and then went with the State Department to be an interpreter and translator at the American Embassy in Moscow. Came back, continued for my Ph.D., was hired by Murrow for CBS and then spent thirty years with the

networks.

Ben Wattenberg: The great Ed Murrow, a legend.

Marvin Kalb: By the great Ed Murrow himself.

Ben Wattenberg: The legendary Ed Murrow, right.

Marvin Kalb: Absolutely. And then for the last fifteen years, I've been associated with the Kennedy School at Harvard as a teacher and as the founding director of the Shorenstein Center.

Ben Wattenberg: All right. You have spent a lot of time in the Middle East.

Marvin Kalb: Yes.

Ben Wattenberg: And that's obviously our topic before the house today. Is there some hope in what is going on? How do you read the whole situation?

Marvin Kalb: My gut feeling overall is that we in this country now face probably one of the most delicate, difficult moments in the foreign policy that I have tried to cover over the last fifty years.

Ben Wattenberg: What does a foreign correspondent working out of the Arab capitals, working out of Israel, what do you pick up that doesn't get on the air? Some of the background that isn't a news lead. You had mentioned, I heard you talk at some small dinner the other night, about what the Palestinians are like, what the Arab leaders think of the Palestinians, and I wondered if you could S.

Marvin Kalb: Well, Ben, you're right, I have spent a lot of time in the Middle East and I have been in and out of both Israel and many Arab countries. And one of the first things that I take with me from each of these trips is a quite large respect, not only for the state of Israel and a functioning democracy in a rather hostile environment. I assume that, and I assume that's going to be for a long, long time. But when you look at that hostile environment, what you find a couple of things. One, the Palestinians are, in my view, probably the brightest of all of the Arabs, the most hardworking, the most dedicated, the most deserving of a break, which they have not got as yet from their political leadership. But they are most deserving as a people of a break. Then there is the relationship between the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world. And what Americans don't realize often is that there is an acute hostility between the Palestinians, I think because they're so energetic and hardworking and smart, and so many other groups in the Arab world. Do we have time for a story?

Ben Wattenberg: We do have time for a story. I mean, one of the reasons I'm doing this this way is that, and we're going to get to it when we talk about the media, is that we don't have a point A and point Z. So you say something and some ŠI want to hear your views on this so please, continue.

Marvin Kalb: Okay. Well, let me tell you a story. When I was in Saudi Arabia on an assignment many years ago, there were two people who were very important to me. One of them was a Saudi prince who was my minder. He was a Princeton graduate, very handsome, very tall, wearing the white gown. And then there was a young Palestinian who was the key person for me on helping me with equipment, on making sure that I got a line between Riyadh and London. A terribly important person, I liked him very much, respected him a great deal. And when I knew that I would be leaving the following night, I said to my minder, I said, "You know, I want to take"Š.

Ben Wattenberg: Your minder, the prince.

Marvin Kalb: The prince. "I want to take you and Muhammad out for dinner tomorrow night." And I saw a look across his face. And he said, "Let me check." And he came back in about an hour and he said, "I don't think that's possible, Marvin." I said, "Why not?" He said, "Well, it's just not possible." I said, "That's not good enough. You have to tell me why it isn't possible." And I said, "You go back to your minder and you tell him that I'm unhappy with that arrangement and let's find out if I can do this. It's only a dinner. Come on." He came back a couple of hours later and he said, "I'm terribly sorry, it's not going to work." I said, "You owe me an explanation on that." And he did that night provide it. And it was I can't give you the exact words but I'm awfully close to the rhythm of what he said he said that "we Saudis have in mind that one day the Israelis and the Palestinians are going to get together. And if they get together, they're going to dominate this part of the world and we will never, never allow that to happen." All over the Middle East, the Arabs don't like the Palestinians. You arrive in Damascus at the airport and there's a straight shot into town, takes about a half-hour to get there. As you're approaching Damascus, on the right there is a large camp, refugee camp, filled with Palestinians. It has been filled with Palestinians now for fifty years. The Palestinians in Syrian society have no opportunity to advance in educational opportunity, in economic opportunity, to set up a business, to travel. They're stuck in those camps. And so we have to ask ourselves, ifŠyou ask about reporters in this area, I think a good reporter has to have in the back of his mind when you're talking about the Arab world now in flames in support of the Palestinians, to what degree, I mean how is one to explain, on the one hand, antipathy, dislike, hostility, jealousy toward the Palestinians and, on the other hand, this sort of collective embrace of the Palestinian cause? It seems to me that the Arabs are incredibly hypocritical. If you love the Palestinians so much, Mister Saudi Arabia, open your borders to them. You got an awful lot of land. Syria, all of the other state, Egypt open it up. But they don't. They keep them in camps. That is outrageous. They keep them in these camps as a political tool, as a way somehow of using it as a certain point in the ultimate negotiation with Israel.

Ben Wattenberg: The Bush doctrine indicates that the United States is going to pursue terrorism all over the world, wherever it may be for as long as it takes. Is this current Palestinian-Israeli conflagration a part of that?

Marvin Kalb: That, of course, is the most difficult question to answer.

And I think that the President really has two doctrines. He's got the large doctrine that is post-Nine Eleven that you just mentioned, a global struggle against terrorism, and they added the phrase, 'with a global reach.'

Ben Wattenberg: Right.

Marvin Kalb: And then there's Bush doctrine two, with a small two. And that is the doctrine enunciated by the President just within the last week or so in which he articulated what is the American view and attitude toward the Israeli/Palestinian crisis. And that second doctrine is, at this point, in potential collision with the first doctrine, because if you read the first doctrine, clearly, I think what it says is that any state harboring terrorism, any leader of a state harboring terrorists or terrorism, the whole operation is somehow or another a terrorist as well and is going to feel the full anger and might of the United States at a certain point. Now where does Arafat fit into all of this?

Ben Wattenberg: That's a good question. What's the answer?

Marvin Kalb: Well where does he fit into this if in fact doctrine one is the full doctrine of Bush and not Bush one and two. If it's one, then Arafat fits into that category and the United States ought to join forces with Israel against the terrorists.

Ben Wattenberg: Right.

Marvin Kalb: But the two are in conflict because the Palestinian issue, for some of the reasons we've talked about, is something different and distinct within the Arab world. And right now it is so powerful a force, an emotional force, that the Arab streets, so-called, are in a state of some rebellion at this point. And the State Department and now the Administration are afraid that the street rebellions - and they're really demonstrations and of angry people, no doubt about that that that will end up toppling Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and strategically the U.S. cannot have that. And that is, I think, the reason to explain the tactical energy behind the Bush Administration's effort now to lean on the Israelis, to get them to pull back and to get them to engage in a negotiation with the Palestinians.

Ben Wattenberg: Okay. Your new book, um, *One Scandalous Story*, which I read over the weekend, and it is a great read.

Marvin Kalb: Thank you.

Ben Wattenberg: It is really interesting. It is about what I guess has come to be called 'a journalistic firestorm,' where one story just knocks over all the pins.

Marvin Kalb: A stampede.

Ben Wattenberg: A stampede, right. Now, we have one now going on but it's not a domestic one, it's not a salacious one, it's not a gossip one, but yet it pushes out everything in its way. When we're in the middle of one of

those journalistic firestorm stories, is the American consumer of news, in its current format--being well served?

Marvin Kalb: I don't think so, Ben. I think that the American public is getting an enormous amount of information from cable news to the regular network news to newspapers, magazines, radio, the Internet. They're being, the American people are being bombarded with shells and fragments of information. But all of that doesn't make terribly much sense unless the journalist uses his or her editorial skills to order that information into something that makes sense. That's called 'the process of editing.' That's what a journalist does. There is a passion component in the Middle East coverage that doesn't exist in scandal coverage. The passion here is that people who think that the press is being too pro-Palestinian believe it to the bottom of their hearts and they're prepared to say that the press is pro-Palestinian. Likewise, many pro-Palestinian people feel that the press is automatically pro-Israel. That kind of collision has been there from the beginning of the coverage of the Middle East.

Ben Wattenberg: What do you think, on balance, of the coverage we're getting, just on that particular aspect of it? Which way is it tilting?

Marvin Kalb: In my judgment, my personal judgment, is that it is tilting pro-Palestinian. And let me give you the evidence for that. When several days ago, week or so ago, the President and the Secretary of State began to ask Prime Minister Sharon to pull Israeli forces out of the West Bank, the Bush doctrine stated not only Israel pull out of the West Bank, but Palestinians and Arab world, you have to do something to proclaim your opposition to terrorism. He balanced his ticket, but the coverage was not balanced; it was strictly - or strictly is too strong - it was largely on the Israeli side, 'Get out of the West Bank.' And you would find verbs like 'Israel defies President Bush.' And it set up a collision between Israel and the United States that's there are elements of collision, but deep down there is not a collision. There is a greater collision, in my opinion, between the United States and the Arab world, than there is between the United States and Israel, but the press covered it as if it was a collision strictly between two democracies.

Ben Wattenberg: What happens, you turn on one of the all-news channels particularly and you, I've sort of stopped watching them. I.S.I.S.

Marvin Kalb: I was about to say, don't do it, Ben.

Ben Wattenberg: No, no. I mean you get two pictures. You get a picture and I don't want to sound dismissive of this because these are great tragedies. But you get a picture of an Israeli café being bombed and then the ambulance coming and people crying. And then you get another picture, the Israelis retaliate and now in some strength moving tanks into Jenin and Nablus and Bethlehem and whatever. But as you say, not in context, it's the same picture. They are, quote, "covering" the news but they are not giving you a context, they are not giving you an interpretation. And when they do, they would pair Mister A with Mister Z and Mister A would say, "Well it goes back to what the Palestinians are doing." And Mister Z says, "No, it goes back to what the Israelis are doing." How do you get around that issue of,

first of all, of the news A, B, C, D-- and then balance?

Marvin Kalb: Very, very hard. And particularly hard for reason I mentioned before when covering the Middle East, very, very difficult, an awful lot of emotion tied up in this. There's been so much violence, so much hate that it's difficult to get a straight story. But in terms of journalistic technique, the way journalism functions today, journalists require sources. Journalists like to function with access. Journalists like to have a free run of things and God bless them and let it happen.

Ben Wattenberg: Right.

Marvin Kalb: Journalists find it easier to function at a democracy than in an autocracy or in a dictatorship because things are governmentally contained, they can't just move and do things, whereas in a democracy they're more likely to be able to move and do things. So they live and work and eat and sleep in Israel. They don't sleep in the Palestinian-controlled areas; they very rarely eat there. Their whole lives are in Israel and they expect Israel to function exactly like the United States. They expect Israel to be in the forefront of democratic procedures. And that is wonderful and it certainly should be and it is a democracy. But when you're in the midst of a war, it's very difficult even for a democracy to function. I mean, for example, the word "occupy" Ben, let me just finish because I'll forget otherwise.

Ben Wattenberg: No, I'll forget.

Marvin Kalb: The word, "occupy" is used a great deal. The Israeli forces "occupy" the West Bank. The word occupy was not used when the Americans moved into Afghanistan. We didn't "occupy" Afghanistan. But now the word is being used, for example, on the Israeli side, partly because the Israelis have been in occupation of an area since Nineteen Sixty-seven so it sort of slips in easily. But I think good journalists ought to think about what they're saying. They speak today, Barbara Walters did not too long ago on a documentary from Saudi Arabia. She referred to "Palestine." Well so far as I know, there is not yet a state of Palestine. There may well be at the end of this diplomatic and military effort, but there isn't now. And I think journalists have to deal with current reality. There is no Palestine, so don't say "Palestine." Occupation is a tricky term that the Palestinians use all the time and it evokes strong negative feelings and images. But you have to ask yourself what is, in fact, happening.

Ben Wattenberg: Well, what kind of a role does, particularly, television now play in one of these foreign policy crises? They're called 'CNN wars,' where it's kind of like an American political campaign, you get your sound bite, you get his sound bite. How has that changed journalism from the way you used to cover it?

Marvin Kalb: Profoundly, profoundly. The way I used to cover it in the eighth century.

Ben Wattenberg: Yeah, right.

Marvin Kalb: In those times we did have time to think about what it is that we were saying. Very little was live. You would sit down after being somewhere and write your story and think about it and talk to somebody, rewrite it, then put it out. Today, almost everything is live. Now some people are very good in live speech and some people are brilliant, but most people aren't. Most people are just people. And so when you're

Ben Wattenberg: That's why we tape our shows. (laughter)

Marvin Kalb: When you do a live program, you'd better be right. You carry a huge responsibility on you as a reporter. Also, live coverage means not only that the reporter has no time to think but the government official has no time to think. You rely so much on faulty sourcing. If somebody says something to you and you have a requirement to go on the air live, you are apt to say what that person just said to you before you've had a chance to check on what the person said. All of these things now create a rushed tumult, which is very noisy and which sort of goes for news today, but in my judgment, isn't news, it's noise.

Ben Wattenberg: How does the whole global situation shake out now? You've been around for a long time, what do you sense?

Marvin Kalb: I've never been as shaky about the times in which I live as I am right now. I think that we are facing, as a nation, and I don't mean to over-dramatize this, but really as a civilization, based on a certain set of values. I think that we are facing what Condoleeza Rice often calls "a tipping moment," "a tipping point," where everything seems up to that point to be more or less in alignment. And then just on the other side of that point, things seem to be falling out of control, splintering in a hundred different directions. The United States of America right now is the only country in the world, I hope we'll have allies in this, but the only country in the world that can somehow or another resolve, settle, put a lid on, manage, the Israeli-Palestinian problem. It is not going to be solved unless, in an area of the world that was once known for miracles, it can produce yet another miracle and actually bring the Israelis and the Palestinians together. Because that kind of a togetherness, even if antsy in its relationship, but that kind of togetherness could not only produce wonders for both people but be an economic stimulus for the whole region. And that's what the Saudis many years ago were frightened of; they don't want to lose their control. These are political institutions, Ben, and you have studied them even more than I have. These are political institutions that, more than anything else, want to hold onto power. But they are not in sync with the modern times. Saudi Arabia is, I hope, trying but it's not in sync. Jordan is trying but it's not in sync. And Egypt isn't even trying that much and it's way out of sync.

Ben Wattenberg: And they see also this incredible sole super power, United States of America, making pronouncements.

Marvin Kalb: The President last week was trying to make a point. I understand why he was trying to make it. He was trying to be consistent with his new doctrine. He was trying to help the Arab world, what we call our "Arab friends," the Egyptians, the Jordanians and the Saudis. I

understand what he was trying to do; that's fine. But there are certain words, "I expect progress," he said. "I expect leadership," he said. "I expect them to heed my advice." Come on. There's a pomposity in that language that is unbecoming for the sole super power.

Ben Wattenberg: But it is a pomposity, if indeed it is a pomposity, that could only come from one man in the world today.

Marvin Kalb: That is true. There is one President of the United States and one United States. In a sense, Ben, so that I don't get misunderstood, if any country is to be a super power today, thank God it is the United States because we still have an important set of values, such as democracy and such as individual freedom and such as a free press, that if other countries in the world began to emulate, they'd be better off and we'd be better off, too.

Ben Wattenberg: Marvin Kalb, thank you very much for joining us on Think Tank. And thank you. Please, don't forget to send us your comments via e-mail. For Think Tank, I'm Ben Wattenberg.