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Editorial

Balancing Coverage of the Middle East

Michael **Getler** ["The Language of **Terror**," ombudsman, Sept. 21] says that readers who complain that your paper's coverage "is biased against Israel" frequently cite the paper's "description of people or organizations that carry out or sponsor suicide bombings as 'militants' rather than 'terrorists.'" **Getler** says your use of "terrorist" and "militant" follows your paper's internal stylebook. Well, your stylebook needs an overhaul. According to **Getler**, good journalism as outlined in the stylebook avoids "**labels**" such as "**terrorism**" and "terrorist" in favor of "more informative and precise" language. But camouflaging terrorists as militants and avoiding information about why the United States identifies Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad and others as terrorist organizations amounts to subjective **labeling** and imprecise generalization.

The ombudsman quotes Post Foreign Editor David Hoffman as saying that "if the Israelis say they have assassinated a terrorist, we should not embrace their **labeling** automatically. We may say he was a suspected terrorist, or someone the Israelis considered a terrorist. . . . [W]e should always look independently at whether the person has committed an act of **terrorism**."

Yet your Sept. 21 news story "State Department Transfers List of Suspects" contained repeated references to "suspected terrorists," "known or suspected terrorist associates" and "foreign terrorist organizations." The word militant was absent.

The ombudsman tries to rebut readers who "attempt to equate the U.S. battle against al Qaeda with the Israeli battle against Hamas." Instead, he exposes the conceptual flaw underlying your paper's usage: "Hamas conducts terrorism but also has territorial ambitions, is a nationalist movement and conducts some social work. As far as we know, al Qaeda exists only as a [multinational] terrorist network. . . . The Palestinian resistance is indigenous." Discounted are Hamas's territorial ambitions including not only the West Bank and Gaza but all of Israel; its status as an Islamic movement funded partly by Iran; and the recruitment aspect of its "social work."

Discounted also are al Qaeda's pan-Islamic ambitions in Europe and North America, as well as its social work, including clinics and roads in Afghanistan and Africa. Ignored is the reality that Arabs have been massacring Jews, an indigenous and

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returning people, at least since the 1920s. If humiliating occupation was the issue, why didn't Palestinian Arabs accept virtually all those territories in exchange for peace at Camp David in 2000?

-- Eric Rozenman

Fairfax

The author, a former newspaper reporter and editor, is Washington director of CAMERA, the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America.

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Michael **Getler** did a good job defending your paper against criticism that it is biased against Israel. But he said that the Palestinian resistance, unlike al Qaeda, is indigenous, rather than composed of radicals from several Islamic countries.

In fact, the Palestinian terrorist organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad are organized and financed in Syria and Iran.

Also, **Getler** said the contexts of the struggle against al Qaeda and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are different. **Getler** has promised to present differing viewpoints when an idea is clearly disputed, but he failed to do so in that instance.

Finally, despite **Getler's** claim that the struggles are different because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is based on a national struggle that stems from occupation, the Palestine Liberation Organization charter, which states that its mission is to destroy Israel by armed struggle, was created in 1964, three years before Israel "occupied Palestinian territory" in a defensive war.

-- Brett Freeman

Washington

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Thanks to Michael **Getler** for "The Language of **Terrorism**." I agree that your paper and other media outlets should strive to cover the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a balanced manner that does not favor -- or seem to favor -- either side.

When reporting on such a delicate and controversial issue it is hard if not impossible to use language that won't offend or raise hackles in one camp or the other. But I think the strategy **Getler** outlined is the best one can hope for in order to present as accurate and impartial a view of the situation as is humanly possible.

-- Meg Zupancic

Greenbelt

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