

Australian Broadcasting Corporation attacked for “biased” program on Israel’s aggression

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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) has come under fire from Zionist organisations and other media outlets for its broadcast last month of a children’s current affairs program which included a brief and, one might have thought, unobjectionable historical account of the Israeli state’s dispossession and invasion of Arab lands. The subsequent uproar, and the ABC’s craven capitulation, demonstrate the climate of censorship and intimidation which surrounds every aspect of the Australian media’s coverage of Israel’s criminal war on Lebanon.

From the outset, the media has unanimously echoed Israel’s official justifications for its aggression. Ignoring all the evidence that this was a pre-planned operation driven by US and Israeli strategic interests in the Middle East, the media has endlessly repeated the Israeli government’s claim that the hostilities were caused by Hezbollah’s capture of two Israeli soldiers.

Deliberately obscuring and suppressing the real history of the past 60 years, the present crisis has invariably been portrayed as a struggle between a besieged Israel defending itself against murderous Arab “terrorists” and “extremists”. No objective historical examination of the causes of Lebanese, Palestinian, and other Arab hostility towards the state of Israel has been permitted. Rather, the “extremism” of organisations such as Hezbollah and Hamas is explained by entirely irrational and subjective factors—Islamic fundamentalism, anti-Semitism, “evil”, etc.

In this atmosphere, the ABC’s “Behind the News”—a current affairs program for children and adolescents, shown in many schools across the country—broadcast a story on July 25 dealing with the background to Israel’s offensive in Lebanon. After describing the destruction of Lebanon’s main airport, electricity supplies, and road network, the program informed viewers of some of the historical issues behind the conflict.

“When Israel was created in 1948 many Palestinians were forced from their land and some came to southern Lebanon,”

the report explained. “Hezbollah fought Israel to reclaim lost land and to remove foreign troops from Lebanon.... The recent attacks started when Hezbollah soldiers from Lebanon kidnapped two Israeli soldiers and killed eight. Hezbollah wanted to swap the kidnapped Israeli soldiers for Arab prisoners being held in Israel.”

The program also featured a brief timeline of events since Israel’s founding. “1948: Israel was proclaimed as a country for Jewish people, taking much of the land from Palestinian Muslims; 1964: The Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) was established for Arabs in their fight against Israel for taking their land; 1967: Israel took over Gaza and the West Bank and 500,000 Palestinians fled the country.”

This account prompted immediate condemnation. Grahame Leonard, president of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (ECAJ), issued a formal complaint to the broadcaster. In a clear sign that the letter was intended to intimidate the ABC, Leonard sent copies to several senior government ministers, Labor Party parliamentarians, and right-wing commentators in the media, such as the *Australian’s* Janet Albrechtsen.

The Zionist leader declared that the “Behind the News” broadcast “can only have the effect of poisoning young minds”.

On August 2, the Murdoch-owned *Australian* published an editorial castigating the ABC, titled “Hezbollah for kids”. The “Behind the News” program, it declared, “delivered a potted history of the last half-century of Lebanese life that sounded almost as if it had been scripted in Tehran”.

The editorial complained that the ABC said “that in 1948 ‘Israel was proclaimed as a country for Jewish people, taking much of the land from Palestinian Muslims’; and that in 1967 for no apparent reason Israel ‘took over’ Gaza and the West Bank. These were only a few of the many howlers delivered without regard to context, balance or fact to an audience lacking the historical knowledge to spot the many errors.”

But there were no “howlers”. The ABC program simply told the truth—however limited. What the *Australian’s* denunciations actually revealed is that the Big Lie of Israel as a “David”, defending itself against an Arab terrorist “Goliath” can only be upheld by suppressing any public discussion of the real history of the Middle East in the twentieth century.

This is especially so under conditions where Israel’s war crimes are producing shock and revulsion among ordinary people, and the development of widespread antiwar sentiment—none of which find any expression in the official political establishment. Both the government and the opposition Labor Party have extended unconditional support for Israel’s offensive and for the Bush administration’s blocking of an immediate ceasefire.

It is a matter of historical record that Israel’s formal establishment in 1948 was immediately followed by the theft of Arab land and the expulsion of more than three-quarters of a million Palestinians through terrorist intimidation. This land grab, known to the Palestinians as the *nabka* (“catastrophe”), was a conscious strategy of Israel’s founding leaders to expand the Jewish state’s borders, dominate the region and establish an ethnically homogenous country. The Palestinian people were forced to live in squalid refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza, and neighbouring Arab countries.

In 1967, the reactionary logic of Jewish nationalism was further demonstrated when Israel launched a devastating attack against its Arab enemies and seized East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza, as well as the Golan Heights from Syria and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt. With the exception of the Sinai, the Zionist state has maintained its occupation of these territories ever since, in defiance of international law and numerous United Nations resolutions. Since 1967, Israel has continued to expel Palestinians from their land in Jerusalem and the West Bank, with 450,000 Jewish settlers now illegally occupying Palestinian territory.

The *Australian* provides no alternative view—it simply evades all the historical issues. Its August 2 editorial went on to declare: “The ABC’s wilful ignorance of the deeper issues involved in the “Behind the News” segment should be seen as part of a progressive campaign to recast terrorist groups such as Hezbollah as nothing more than social service agencies with attitude. At our public broadcaster, it seems, Hezbollah are the freedom fighters [and] the Israelis are the aggressors.”

The reality is that Hezbollah was formed in the mid-1980s, amid the 18-year Israeli occupation of Lebanon. It won wide support throughout the country and the region for its anti-occupation guerrilla campaign, which eventually, in 2000, drove Israel out. Hezbollah is a mass social and political

movement, with representatives in the cabinet of the Lebanese national government. Its members and supporters are again courageously resisting the far better armed and equipped Israeli army.

Israel seized upon Hezbollah’s capture of the two Israeli soldiers as a pretext for its long-planned war, designed to remove the Shiite population from the south and reduce Lebanon to the status of an Israeli client state. The Bush administration, for its part, sees Israel’s actions as a means of consolidating US domination of the oil-rich Middle East.

The ABC immediately capitulated to the right-wing condemnations of “Behind the News”. On August 1, Denise Musto, the broadcaster’s audience liaison manager, issued a grovelling retraction to the Executive Council of Australian Jewry. “[T]he ABC acknowledges that the content failed to meet the requirements of balance and impartiality,” she wrote. “Regretfully, in its attempt to be simple and concise, this story did not represent key relevant viewpoints effectively. Some of the descriptions were over-simplistic and inappropriate.”

The ABC removed the program’s transcript from its web site and refused to challenge any of the criticisms levelled against it. The one minor factual error contained in the “Behind the News” report—that Hezbollah is composed of Palestinian refugees, although its members and supporters are, in fact, mostly Lebanese Shiites—could easily have been dealt with through a brief published correction.

In the past decade, the public broadcaster has come under repeated attack from the government and right-wing ideologues for its alleged left-wing bias. Its budget has been slashed and pro-government figures installed on its board. All these measures appear to have had the desired effect: to intimidate journalists and editors and ensure that the Australian people are denied any honest and objective examination of critical world events.



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