

The New York Times has to correct itself again, this time on Iran

David Walsh
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On Monday, June 25 the *New York Times* published an “Editor’s Note” correcting an article in its Sunday edition. The note hardly answers the questions raised by the “corrected” article.

Sunday’s front-page story, “Iran Cracks Down on Dissent, Parading Examples in the Streets,” is accompanied on page 9, where the story continues, by a large, rather sensational photograph taking up five columns. The *Times*’ caption reads, “A police officer forced a young man whose clothes were deemed un-Islamic to suck on a plastic container Iranians use to wash their bottoms.”

The ninth paragraph of the piece, by Neil MacFarquhar, asserts, “Young men wearing T-shirts deemed too tight or haircuts seen as too Western have been paraded through Tehran’s streets by uniformed police officers who forced them to suck on plastic jerrycans, a toilet item Iranians use to wash their bottoms. In case anyone misses the point, it is the official news agency Fars distributing the pictures of what it calls ‘riffraff.’ Far bloodier photographs are circulating on blogs and on the Internet.” The image on page 9 is presumably one of the Fars photographs in question.

The modest correction Monday explains that “the man in the photograph, according to widespread Iranian news reports, was one of more than 100 people arrested recently on charges of being part of a gang that had committed rapes, robberies, forgeries and other crimes. The caption published on the web site of the news agency, Fars, had said only that the man was being punished as part of a roundup of ‘thugs’ in a Tehran neighborhood.”

On the *Times*’ web site, the article’s headline has been amended simply to “Iran Cracks Down on Dissent,” and the paragraph about the youth guilty of wearing “too tight” T-shirts and Western haircuts being paraded through the streets of Tehran has been eliminated.

In its defense, the newspaper’s editors complain that the “current repression has made reporting in Iran difficult. In this case, the *Times* relied on an interview with a researcher for a nongovernment agency that no longer operates within Iran, who said the photograph was evidence of a more visible police role in public crackdowns on what the authorities consider immoral behavior. The reporter then wrongly interpreted what the

researcher said as applying to a crackdown on dress, and incorporated the erroneous interpretation into the body of the article, without giving any indication of the source for it.

“These errors could have been avoided with more rigorous editing. The article should not have said that young men had been paraded through the streets for wearing un-Islamic dress, and the headline over it should not have said that dissenters were being paraded as part of the crackdown.”

A strange business, especially as this involved a leading story in the Sunday edition of the newspaper, its most widely and carefully read edition. (The *Times*’ circulation on Sundays is 1.6 million, as opposed to its daily total of 1.1 million, nearly a 50 percent difference).

Who, precisely, was MacFarquhar speaking to? “A researcher for a nongovernment agency that no longer operates in Iran.” Have we not heard from this type of individual before?

In advance of the US invasion of Iraq, a variety of stories appeared in the American media, a number of the most important in the *New York Times* (more on that below), detailing Iraq’s alleged stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction and links to terrorism. The sources were often “unnamed” Iraqi exiles. All of the claims proved to be fiction.

MacFarquhar’s June 24 article describes a “ferocious” campaign of repression in Iran, “with the government focusing on labor leaders, universities, the press, women’s rights advocates, a former nuclear negotiator and Iranian-Americans, three of whom have been in prison for more than six weeks.”

The lengthy piece is written in an incendiary tone and intended to push a number of “hot buttons” with the *Times*’ US readers. MacFarquhar cites the comments of (also unnamed) analysts who suggest that a “cultural revolution” might be taking place in Iran, “an attempt to roll back the clock to the time of the 1979 revolution, when the newly formed Islamic Republic combined religious zeal and anti-imperialist rhetoric to try to assert itself as a regional leader.”

The period in question witnessed the sharpest confrontation between Iran and the US. Nine months after the overthrow of Washington-backed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi in early 1979, university students in Tehran took over the American embassy and held 63 US diplomats hostage for some 14 months. In April 1980, the American military attempted a

rescue, which resulted in the deaths of five US Air Force airmen and three Marines.

The *Times* piece goes on to note the controversy surrounding former president Mohammad Khatami, “the lost hope of Iran’s reform movement,” over his alleged violation of Islamic morals by shaking hands with an unfamiliar woman in Rome. It points to the arrest of 30 women’s rights advocates “charged with endangering national security for organizing an Internet campaign to collect more than a million signatures supporting the removal of all laws that discriminate against women.”

MacFarquhar refers several times to US-Iranian relations. He observes that Iran’s National Security Council sent a three-page letter to newspaper editors recently outlining banned topics, including negotiations with Washington “over the future of Iraq.” The article suggests that thousands of Iran’s nongovernmental organizations are in legal jeopardy, “basically because the government suspects all of them of being potential conduits for some \$75 million the United States has earmarked to promote a change in government.”

Abbas Milani, the director of the Iranian studies program at Stanford University, comments, “The regime has created an atmosphere of absolute terror.”

MacFarquhar’s piece is one of those items planted in the media that are intended to inflame public opinion and strengthen the case, ultimately, for US military action against Iran. It is not necessary to lend the bourgeois nationalist Ahmadinejad regime one ounce of political support to see through the sordid role now performed by the *Times*, the liberal newspaper of record. It is functioning here, directly or indirectly, as the propaganda arm of the Bush administration.

As noted above, the *Times*’ record in this regard is reprehensible. During the buildup to the invasion of Iraq and its immediate aftermath, its reporter Judith Miller served as a conduit for misinformation and lies about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction.” These articles, in one of the country’s leading newspapers, served to legitimize the Bush administration’s “pre-emptive” war of aggression. They helped make possible the current catastrophe in Iraq.

It turned out that Miller’s “exclusives” were based on information provided by Ahmed Chalabi, a convicted embezzler and Iraqi exile leader with close ties to the offices of Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney.

After the invasion of Iraq, Miller got herself embedded with a US military unit charged with the futile task of turning up the phantom WMD. Military officials accused Miller of “hijacking” the unit for her own purposes and intimidating officers in the field. Further stories emerged about “mobile weapons laboratories,” which also had no basis in fact.

Miller’s role as a conduit for the Bush administration was further exposed in the course of the investigation by Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald into the administration’s leak of the CIA identity of Valerie Plame Wilson, the wife of former ambassador and Iraq war critic Joseph Wilson. It emerged that

Miller was one of the reporters chosen by I. Lewis Libby, then the chief of staff of Vice President Dick Cheney, to expose Plame Wilson’s CIA position in order to punish her husband and intimidate opponents of the administration’s war policy.

Miller, in the event, did not publish a story on the matter, but she sought to cover for Libby’s role in the government witch-hunt of a war critic by refusing to divulge the identity of her source when questioned by Fitzgerald’s investigators, citing the confidentiality of journalists’ sources.

The author of Sunday’s article on Iran, Neil MacFarquhar, is not a novice, lacking experience in the complicated political affairs of the Middle East or knowledge of journalistic standards. He was formerly the *Times*’ Cairo bureau chief.

This makes all the more remarkable the sloppiness, or worse, involved in the misidentified photograph. As the newspaper’s own “Editor’s note” acknowledges, the correct identification of the individual in the photo was “widespread” in Iran.

There was clearly no conscientious checking of the facts—something that would seem all the more obligatory in a front-page article that could only serve to inflame public opinion both in the US and internationally against a country that has been denounced by Washington as part of the “Axis of Evil” and targeted for subversion or military attack. Is this fact-checking failure not connected to the political purpose of the piece? Journalists and editors can make mistakes, but some are more revealing than others.

Despite its misgivings about the Iraq disaster, the *Times* supports the American ruling elite’s drive for world hegemony, including its belligerent and threatening policy toward Iran. At the very least, this renders the newspaper predisposed, in its eagerness to make a case against Tehran, to committing this type of blunder.

The *Times* eventually sacked Judith Miller and published explanatory columns casting her reporting as an aberrant black mark on the newspaper’s otherwise scrupulously objective and conscientious approach to the news. The MacFarquhar article demonstrates, however, that the *Times* continues to lend its prestige to the promotion of the reactionary and militaristic aims of the US government, publishing in the guise of news articles pieces of dubious veracity which promote a definite but unspoken agenda.



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