

# CNN fires senior Mideast editor over comments on cleric

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CNN's firing of Octavia Nasr, its senior editor for Middle Eastern affairs, is a right-wing and cowardly act. It demonstrates once again that any expression of sympathy in the US media for the Arab nationalist cause or criticism of Israel is an offense punishable by immediate dismissal and exclusion.

Nasr, born and educated in Beirut, began her career at the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, before joining CNN in 1990. As part of her work, she covered the 2006 Israeli invasion and bombing of Lebanon.

She lost her job this week after she published a Twitter message indicating her respect for a Lebanese cleric who died Sunday. Her note read: "Sad to hear of the passing of [the Grand Ayatollah] Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah.... One of Hezbollah's giants I respect a lot."

Fadlallah, born in Iraq in 1935 to a Lebanese family, helped inspire the Dawa Party—to which Iraq's current prime minister, Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, belongs—as well as the founders of Hezbollah, although he kept his distance from the latter organization in recent years. Fadlallah was known as an opponent of "honor killings," and recognized the right of women to protect themselves against domestic violence. According to the *New York Times*, "On Sunday, women wept openly on the streets of Shiite south Beirut as word of his death spread."

Fadlallah defended suicide bombings, noted the *Times*, "and other tactics of asymmetrical warfare by arguing that if Israel and its allies used advanced weaponry, Islam permitted the use of any weapons in retaliation."

In a 2002 interview, he told the *Daily Telegraph* in Britain, speaking of the Palestinian people: "They have had their land stolen, their families killed, their homes destroyed, and the Israelis are using weapons, such as

the F16 aircraft, which are meant only for major wars. There is no other way for the Palestinians to push back those mountains, apart from martyrdom operations."

An assassination attempt against Fadlallah in Beirut in 1985, which killed 80 people, was generally attributed to the CIA, working through Lebanese agents. The Israelis bombed his house in 2006, but he was not home at the time.

Nasr's Twitter comment on Sunday about Fadlallah set the ultra-right and pro-Israeli lobbies into motion. An organized campaign against her was launched, accusing the CNN employee of being a "cheerleader for Hezbollah" and a "terrorist sympathizer" and demanding her firing.

Nasr qualified her comments in a follow-up blog on Tuesday, expressing regret about her initial message "because it conveyed that I supported Fadlallah's life's work. That's not the case at all." She had used the words "respect" and "sad," she explained, because, "to me, as a Middle Eastern woman, Fadlallah took a contrarian and pioneering stand among Shia clerics on woman's rights. He called for the abolition of the tribal system of 'honor killing.' He called the practice primitive and nonproductive. He warned Muslim men that abuse of women was against Islam.... This does not mean I respected him for what else he did or said. Far from it."

This was not good enough for CNN officials, who promptly brought her in and fired her. An internal memo from a CNN official reveals what happened: "I had a conversation with Octavia this morning and I want to share with you that we have decided that she will be leaving the company. As you know, her tweet over the weekend created a wide reaction. As she has stated in her blog on CNN.com, she fully accepts that

she should not have made such a simplistic comment without any context whatsoever. However, at this point, we believe that her credibility in her position as senior editor for Middle Eastern affairs has been compromised going forward.”

Nasr’s credibility with whom? The Netanyahu regime in Israel? The US State Department?

The double standard is obscene: vehement defense of Israel and its actions is the default setting in the US media. Every atrocity, whether the massive bombing of southern Lebanon in 2006 or the cold-blooded murder of activists on board the recent humanitarian flotilla bound for Gaza, receives approving treatment as an “act of self-defense.”

Coincidentally, CNN reporter Wolf Blitzer has also worked for CNN since 1990. His fate, however, has been slightly different than Nasr’s, although his partisanship has never been in question.

After attending the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, D.C., Blitzer went to work for Reuters in Tel Aviv, although he had no college experience or apparent previous interest in journalism. He then “caught the eye” of a *Jerusalem Post* editor, who hired him as the newspaper’s Washington editor. He stayed with the pro-Zionist publication until 1990.

Even earlier, during the mid-1970s, Blitzer worked for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the notorious lobbying group, as the editor of their monthly in-house publication, the *Near East Report*.

Blitzer, a prominent figure at CNN, regularly interviews Israeli officials on his program “The Situation Room,” providing them a platform for their propaganda efforts and attempts to pressure the US political establishment, such as this interview with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on September 22, 2009.

As the WSWS noted in July 2006, in the aftermath of the Israeli massacre of dozens of civilians in the Lebanese village of Qana, Blitzer’s “Late Edition” program on CNN “was little more than an unpaid advertisement for the Israeli state and its operations. Speaking to one correspondent on the ground in Lebanon, Blitzer made his position in regard to Qana—the culpability of the civilians themselves—quite clear: ‘The Israelis say they gave plenty of warning to

all the individuals living there, dropping leaflets’ ” (see “US media alibis for Qana massacre”).

But this is a man with “credibility.” Would Blitzer be fired for expressing his “respect” for Netanyahu, guilty of war crimes in Gaza, or Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman, an infamous racist?

The firing of Nasr is part of the steady march to the right by the American media, and CNN in particular. The cable news network has distinguished itself in recent years by its efforts not to be outflanked on the right by Fox News Channel. The two channels are indistinguishable in many respects, save for certain secondary features.

Among CNN’s capitulations to the ultra-right:

- In February 2005, CNN got rid of Executive Vice President Eason Jordan after he suggested, in passing, that the US military was deliberately targeting journalists in Iraq. Defenders of the Bush administration organized another right-wing campaign and made certain that Jordan resigned.

- The Pentagon, backed by prominent political figures and veterans’ organizations, successfully campaigned for the firing of veteran CNN reporter Peter Arnett in 1999 after he narrated a program, “Valley of Death,” exposing the use of sarin gas by US forces in an operation in Laos in 1970. The program’s producers, Jack Smith and April Oliver, were also forced out by CNN.

The firing of Octavia Nasr follows by less than a month the ouster of veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas, as the result of anti-Zionist comments. It is difficult to find words to capture the socially retrograde and spineless character of the American media.



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