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LRB blog

A Bookseller and Many Journalists

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I was shelving some books when the American journalist walked in. Many international reporters have come to Jerusalem since 7 October, staying in the hotels near our Educational Bookshop on Salahadin Street in East Jerusalem. The book in my hand was Avi Shlaim's autobiography, *Three Worlds: Memoirs of an Arab Jew*. It has been doing well for us; it traces the historian's life from his childhood in Iraq, through his immigration to the newly founded state of Israel in the early 1950s, to his work as an academic in the UK, where he still lives.

The journalist asked me for the best book I had on the Middle East. I generally try not to judge people who ask such questions: it often comes from a tourist, on a one-off, long-planned trip or pilgrimage to the Holy Land. But coming from a journalist, it was unsettling.

I wearily suggested he try T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He earnestly replied that he was looking for a book about the current situation. I was struck by the word 'current' – after all, we've been going through this for 75 years – but I proposed either *Hamas Contained* by Tareq Baconi or *The Palestine Laboratory* by Antony Loewenstein.

It isn't new for me or other Palestinians to see waves of journalists make their way here when there is a 'major development'. They visit my bookshop because they're hoping for a sense of the 'word on the street' or the 'Palestinian mood'. It has been noted before that the spread of unmanned vehicles in the Middle East makes it harder for journalists to rely on the opinions of local taxi drivers. They'll be really stuck if our bookshop goes out of business too.

All the major wire agencies and news networks have doubled if not tripled their staff, and although some of the famous heavyweights are back, most of the journalists I've seen are young, white, male, early-career reporters.

The American journalist who came in that day didn't buy a book. Because the coffee at his hotel was terrible, however, he did buy a drink to take away. I tried to persuade him to try the Arabic coffee, but he liked his cappuccino.

Later in the afternoon, a European journalist dropped by: a friend had recommended that he visit the shop. He asked for my 'opinion' on what is happening, and I told him what I assumed he wanted to hear. I asked him in return what he had done that day. He said that, like his colleagues stationed in Jerusalem, he had been trying to cover the story from his hotel room.

According to recent Israeli data, 2050 foreign journalists have arrived since the beginning of the war, including 358 from the United States, 281 from Great Britain, 221 from France and 102 from Germany. Many of them are based in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, some are in the north, and a few venture out to Ashkelon, the closest they can get to the Gaza Strip. Only a very few agencies, such as al-Jazeera, have reporters actually in Gaza.

The Israeli Government Press Office (GPO) has members of the foreign press on a WhatsApp list, and they are 'kept informed' of the situation. Their names have also been added to other Israeli 'independent resource groups' lists, which send them contact details of experts they can interview. Unable to enter the destroyed Strip, they are covering the story using three main resources: the GPO and its affiliated sources for 'updates', taxi drivers for opinions, and the bookseller for all other business. Some of them will also check X (formerly Twitter), and maybe even 'share' some of their 'reflections from the ground'.

After a brief chat with another foreign journalist who came into the shop, I learned that she was being rotated out after a couple of weeks 'on the ground' (i.e. stuck in a hotel). I asked about her assessment of the situation and she said things were really awful. I agreed. She asked me for a book to help her understand the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. I recommended *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* by Rashid Khalidi (three hundred pages) or *Enemies and Neighbours* by Ian Black (six hundred). She said they sounded a little long. I suggested *Understanding the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict: A Primer* by Phyllis Bennis. 'It's a great book,' I said, 'makes things really simple and short, and it's only two hundred pages.' That was a successful sale for a proud bookseller on a quiet day.

The next day an old friend greeted me, a veteran journalist. I was happy to see him. He told me he was planning to visit the northern parts of the West Bank, where settler violence was on the rise. He was also planning to interview policy-makers and political insiders who might shed some light on what could happen when this terrible war – call it the 'current' situation – comes to an end.

I went home early that night and tried to keep the TV off. I chatted with my daughters, got them ready for bed, kissed them goodnight. I thought about the immense privilege I have just being able to do what any dad could be doing on a normal night. I retreated to the living-room and picked up the novel I was reading, *The Last White Man* by Mohsin Hamid, in which a white man wakes up one morning to find that his skin has turned brown. It's a timely book about love, loss, change and identity. Your bookseller in Jerusalem strongly recommends it to you.