

ISRAEL STORIES IN THE *NEW ZEALAND HERALD* – 2016

This is KBRM's seventh annual analysis of the New Zealand Herald's print coverage of events and issues in Israel and the disputed Palestinian territories. As noted previously, it is impractical to analyse online content, to which items are added and deleted rapidly and without notice.

1 Summary and Conclusions

Welcome developments in 2016 were:

- a significant reduction in the number of Israel-related news items published
- the relatively-milder tone of most of these.

Opinion in the Herald remained negative in tone, with some attempt to provide balance by publishing refutations of the more egregious attacks on Israel.

2 Analysis

2.1. *By source and rating*

	News	Negative	% Neg.	Opinion	Negative	Positive	Net Neg.	%
AFP	9	0	0.0%	0	-	-	-	
AP	1	0	0.0%	1	0	0	0.0%	
Bloomberg	1	0	0.0%	0	-	-	-	
Herald	4	0	0.0%	10	5	2	30.0%	
Reuters	4	0	0.0%	0	-	-	-	
Telegraph (UK)	3	0	0.0%	0	-	-	-	
Washington Post	9	0	0.0%	0	-	-	-	
Unknown	47	0	0.0%	0	-	-	-	
Total	78	0	0.0%	11	5	2	27.3%	

Both news and opinion can be positive, neutral or negative. Negative news items are those which are biased, misleading, opinionated or inaccurate, to the detriment of Israel (there have never been any news items biased in favour of Israel since monitoring started in 2009).

The absence of negative news should not be taken as an indicator that all is well: there was continued use of anti-Israel cliché, and a number of items were noted as 'tending to the negative' while not appearing to breach NZ print media standards. However, the picture is undoubtedly better than in previous years. Even the year's biggest story – UNSC Resolution 2334 – was covered reasonably-fairly in terms of news, though not in terms of opinion.

The net negative percentage for opinion is obtained by subtracting positive from negative items. This is broadly fair, since if an equal number of positive and negative items appeared, the result would be 0% i.e. balanced.

The two positive opinion items can be directly paired with negative items: one printed side-by-side, one an explicit response to the negative article.

The recording of one item was problematic: a neutral article from Reuters was illustrated by a hostile cartoon by a *Herald* cartoonist, three times the size of the article. The item has therefore been counted as two, since the cartoon did not fairly represent the content of the article, but was apparently a gratuitous comment.

2.2. Year on Year Comparison - Total

	News	Negative	% Neg.	Opinion	Negative	Positive	Net % Neg.
2016	78	0	0.0%	11	5	2	27.3%
2015	124	5	4.0%	19	8	0	42.1%
2014	209	10	4.8%	33	9	4	27.3%
2013	170	9	5.3%	15	5	2	20.0%
2012	167	13	7.8%	25	8	3	20.0%
2011	175	23	13.1%	39	14	4	25.6%
2010	252	38	15.1%	40	25	1	60.0%

The total number of items published continued to fall (excluding 2014's blip for the Gaza conflict), in spite of the so-called "third Intifada" of random stabbing and car-ramming attacks by Palestinians on Jews, and the brouhaha about UNSC Resolution 2334.

2.3. Use of Sources

Again, the majority of items were unattributed small pieces which typically appear in sidebars or the regional round-up section.

Bloomberg was a new source for 2016 (shown as Other in the table), and Reuters reappeared after an absence of four years. The UK *Independent* ceased to publish a print edition in 2016, a positive development given its unwavering anti-Israel line.

It is possible that the decline in apparent use of AP is compensated for by the high numbers of agency messages counted as Unknown. However, the use of AFP rose markedly.

Nearly all comment was derived from the Herald's own sources, i.e. its columnists or commentators offering their opinions; the sole exception was a background piece from AP. Certainly none of the global media 'experts' on Israel, such as Robert Fisk or Gwynne Dyer, were invited to contribute. Nor did the Herald's normally-hostile commentators weigh in; a piece from Fran O'Sullivan – no friend of Israel, judging by earlier columns – published on the last day of the year, was surprisingly balanced.

	News						
	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
AFP	11.5%	5.6%	8.6%	4.7%	2.4%	2.9%	1.6%
AP	1.3%	8.9%	15.8%	10.6%	14.4%	13.7%	25.8%
Herald	5.1%	3.2%	3.3%	8.8%	6.0%	14.9%	6.0%
Independent	0.0%	4.0%	8.1%	5.9%	15.0%	12.6%	11.5%
Reuters	5.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	2.9%	4.8%
Telegraph	3.8%	9.7%	20.6%	15.3%	25.7%	26.3%	17.1%
Washington Post	11.5%	6.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Other	1.3%	0.0%	2.4%	3.5%	2.7%	6.8%	7.4%
Unknown	60.3%	62.1%	41.1%	51.2%	33.5%	22.9%	31.0%

	Opinion						
	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012	2011	2010
AFP	0.0%	5.2%	9.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
AP	9.1%	31.6%	12.1%	6.7%	0.0%	2.6%	2.5%

Herald	90.9%	42.1%	54.5%	66.7%	44.0%	51.3%	47.5%
Independent	0.0%	0.0%	12.1%	6.7%	16.0%	17.9%	30.0%
Telegraph	0.0%	10.5%	9.1%	20.0%	28.0%	17.9%	10.0%
Other	0.0%	10.5%	3.0%	0.0%	12.0%	2.6%	7.5%

2.4. By subject

In spite of the decline in numbers of items, the range of subjects continued wide. Only subjects featuring in three or more items in either category were analysed.

	News	Negative	% Neg.	Opinion	Negative	Positive	Net Neg.	%
"Intifada" stabbing/ car-ramming attacks	16	0	0.0%	-	-	-	-	
Relations with West including US	8	0	0.0%	2	0	0	0.0%	
UNSC Resolution 2334	8	0	0.0%	6	4	1	50.0%	
Human Interest	5	0	0.0%	-	-	-	-	
Relations with Hamas & Fatah	4	0	0.0%	-	-	-	-	
Unclassified	4	0	0.0%	-	-	-	-	
Gaza blockade	4	0	0.0%	-	-	-	-	
Housing and Settlements	4	0	0.0%	-	-	-	-	
Other	25	0	0.0%	3	1	1	0.0%	

The Unclassified category includes stories which did not fall into any of the 30-40 topics into which the large majority of stories can be placed. The Other category includes subjects on which only one or two stories appeared.

The dominant story in terms of numbers of items was again the random stabbing and other attacks on Israelis by individual Palestinian Arabs, but most items were small and factual. In terms of space, it was UNSC 2334.

2.5. Negative Items

As noted above, no news items could be graded wholly negative, though several were unsympathetic or tending to the negative, and the use of anti-Israel cliché continued. Of the opinion items:

- On 16 June, ex-Labour pol David Shearer (whose earlier inflammatory statements about Israel have appeared in the Herald) sought to rewrite history so as to argue that, in the 1930s, provision should have been made for a Palestinian state. The fact that Palestinians didn't identify themselves as such until 1967 clearly didn't absolve diplomats of thirty years before from predicting that event. In an unusual but welcome step, several days later the *Herald* printed a reasoned rebuttal.
- Two anti-Israel cartoons of PM Netanyahu appeared on the same day, 27 December (memo to cartoonist Emmerson: you forgot the *kippa*).
- The next day, an academic claimed to be clarifying the issues of international law involved in the dispute – while putting forward his personal, and controversial, interpretation. The Herald has not yet seen fit to provide the contrary view, held by numerous legal experts with better credentials than the Herald's man. But perhaps it's all irrelevant – if and when a peace settlement is negotiated, it will nullify all the pseudo-legal 'precedents' which allow activist scholars to 'prove' that Israel's actions are illegal.

2.6. Herald on Sunday

No items were seen in 2016.

3 General

3.1. Predictions for 2017

No, not the usual punditry. As 2016 has developed, the Herald has copied much of the worldwide media – including the Washington Post, its new favourite source – in increasingly-intemperate attacks on the US Presidency of Donald Trump. It seems certain that Trump will reverse Obama's hostility to Israel, which may therefore come in for more bashing by the media.

However, we may be moving into uncertain times, with belated US recognition that other global players are not necessarily on the side of liberal democracy, and widespread disillusion with the current model of global trade. And with resolution 2334, the UN has possibly set back the cause of peace in the Middle East by several years. So the media might find more important things to do than to obsess about a minor dispute in a chronically-unstable part of the world.

The fact that Israel is one of the strongest defences against Iranian hegemony in the Middle East is not lost on Sunni Arab states. With the end of Barack Obama's inexplicable support for the theocrats of Tehran – to the extent of reversing decades of US policy of support for democratic movements worldwide – the risks of Iranian domination of this part of the globe might now be mentionable, even in the Western media.

3.2. Antisemitism

We're fortunate not to live in Sweden, where the mainstream media are happy to publish what is, under EU definitions, antisemitic material (Sweden is of course an EU member, but that doesn't worry the Swedes). Even so, an egregious April item in the online edition deserves notice. The author was Rachel Smalley, a columnist who admits to prejudice against Israel but writes about it anyway.

Readers might remember that early in 2016, British Labour MP Naz Shah was suspended by her party for advocating the forcible deportation of Israel's six million or so Jews to the United States. Labour, under attack following revelations of widespread antisemitism in its ranks, commendably acted swiftly against Ms Shah – and thereby incurred the scorn of Ms Smalley, who argued that Ms Shah's 'punishment' was unwarranted and by extension, that her suggestion was reasonable.

At one stroke, she put herself at odds with every reputable commentator. A fellow-MP of Ms Shah asked very appositely, 'What if it were suggested that all Palestinians be deported?' Others noted parallels with Adolf Hitler's proposal to deport European Jewry to Madagascar. Even Ms Shah had the grace to apologise when her gaffe was pointed out to her.

But not Ms Smalley. Perhaps she was emboldened by senior editor John Roughan's expression of the same opinion not that long ago. Authorities in other Western nations have noted that the proposal is an expression of classical antisemitism, illegal in most of the West. The fact that Ms Smalley and her ilk can get away with it in New Zealand doesn't reflect great lustre on our moral standards.

In a second instance, misogyny was added to the toxic brew. The Herald, apparently alone among NZ media, failed to note the condemnation by political and community leaders of prominent local Muslim cleric Sheikh Dr Mohammad Anwar Sahib for his misogynistic and antisemitic comments. Did some sympathiser at the Herald spike the story?

3.3. Double Standards?

In November, the Herald ran four articles totalling 285 col-cm on the issue of the unauthorised Amona settlement in the disputed West Bank, citing opinion that all West Bank settlements are illegal. Needless to say, nothing had actually happened other than a lot of talk, and the current *Israeli* position was and is that Amona is illegal and should be demolished.

On the same day as the fourth article, the story of 'more than 1000' houses belonging to the Muslim minority in Myanmar being 'razed' was covered in 7 col-cm. In this case, Muslims were actually, rather than putatively, victimised.

Is this staggering disproportion because the Herald regards the Burmese as savages who are expected to behave in a barbarous fashion, because it regards any suggestion of a Palestinian being disadvantaged as something of critical importance to Kiwis, or because any opportunity to snipe at Israel is just irresistible? You be the judge.

4 The End of the Affair

We've decided to cease detailed analysis of the Herald's Israel-related content from 2017, though we shall continue to monitor it for fairness, balance, accuracy and the other criteria by which New Zealand newspapers are judged. A little of the background follows.

4.1. Does the Press Matter?

All agree that the print media no longer have their former influence. Newspapers are closing and merging, and of course increasing their online presence. A few are starting to charge for online access, but they're up against a culture of free internet information. The future isn't encouraging.

There are many other sources from which the interested can get news. Most people probably rely on TV, and increasingly the internet; in which case, they're likely to read only what their online friends 'like', or what's 'trending', i.e. what everyone else is reading. But it's a lot easier, and often more interesting, than searching out and navigating newspapers' websites.

Another issue is trustworthiness, which came to the fore in the brouhaha about 'fake news' published during the 2016 US Presidential election. There are undoubtedly disinformation sites out there – AWD News and Press TV are two targeting Israel – but in their sustained anti-Trump campaigns, mainstream titles showed the world that they, too, are anything but impartial. So why rely on them? Recent US research shows that trust in the established media is at an all-time low, and Democrats are little happier than Republicans, in spite of all the pro-Clinton ra-ra. It might have been a tipping point.

If the reliability of the media on the subject of Israel is now to be questioned, it's long overdue. And if consumers turn off, they'll see what their friends like, which will probably be a more balanced view: the general public is certainly less hostile to Israel than the mainstream media.

4.2. Where Is the Herald Going?

The terminal decline of print newspapers means that they have to re-invent themselves as something else: in the Herald's case, as a magazine with a focus on property speculation. One casualty has been foreign news, down to two tabloid pages most days. To the extent that that squeezes out anti-Israel material, it's welcome, but it's not serving the purpose of informing the reader about the world outside New Zealand.

The Herald might establish a market for a lifestyle daily, or it might perish. Either way, there seems no point in monitoring it closely any more.

4.3. Where's the Action?

The propaganda battleground on Israel has arguably moved on; to the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement, and to exploitation of the UN's systemic anti-Israel bias (noted and deplored by its last two Secretaries-General). It seems fair to say that the media campaign against Israel failed, at least in the world outside the anti-Israel echo-chamber. Israel's enemies have no doubt identified that, and like good soldiers, stopped reinforcing failure.