

Review: Arabs, Jews and the News/Marda Dunsky

There are few matters of international affairs that engage the American public in passionate discourse like the Israeli-Arab conflict does. **Arabs, Jews and the News** provides a brief but evocative documentary overview of how the conflict plays out in Arab, Jewish and media communities in the Detroit area, which is home to the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the United States.

Early on, the camera is trained on the debate over local media coverage of the conflict – opinion writing in particular. Members of the local Arab community point to the dehumanizing effects of a *Detroit News* column which stated that “the Palestinians’ lust for Jewish blood is stronger than their desires to lead peaceful, secure lives ... to lift themselves out of their misery.”

Then the author of the column, who is an editorial writer at the paper, explains why the *News* runs a monthly commentary by a local Muslim leader under headlines such as “Israel’s disregard for life destabilizes the Middle East.” The imam’s viewpoint is shared by many people in the community, the editorial writer says, “and it ought to have an opportunity to be expressed.”

In this juxtaposition, the documentary succeeds in succinctly presenting both the anguish of the conflict as well as the irony of how it plays out in one American community.

The documentary then moves to the war between Israel and Hezbollah in 2006. Intercut with clips of CNN reports from the region, the focus shifts to a demonstration attended by 10,000 in the Detroit suburb of Dearborn, one-third of whose majority Arab-American residents are of Lebanese origin. A reporter from the local *Jewish News* expresses dismay over what was seen and heard at the protest: swastikas painted on placards next to Israeli flags; chants and cries of support for Hezbollah.

Gregg Krupa, religion and Arab-American relations reporter for the *Detroit News*, observes: “When Hezbollah is the only provider of social and health services in South Lebanon to the oppressed Shia majority of South Lebanon, then they hold a special place in the local [Dearborn] Arab community. When they defend Arab land against invaders, they hold a special place.”

Krupa’s commentary provides important context. It would have been even more enlightening, however, if the filmmakers had documented whether Krupa and other local journalists had provided such contextualization in their actual news reporting of the demonstration.

The final segment of the documentary gives viewers food for thought on the question of why media coverage of the conflict often falls short (and, implicitly, what can be done to improve it). Will Youmans, a writer, activist and hip-hop artist, cuts to the crux: Many journalists, he says, think objectivity is served by superficially balancing “he said, she said” versions of events in the conflict while at the same time disregarding the factual background of what leads up to these events. “Journalists,” Youmans reminds viewers, “have to discover what the facts are.” Bingo.

Other observers offer further keen perspectives: Reporting of the Israeli-Arab conflict often lacks historical perspective. Arab communities at home and abroad are often covered as monolithic entities devoid of ethnic, religious and political diversity. The complexity of the conflict is often simplified for the sake of easily digestible journalistic narrative. Humanity gets overlooked. “Don’t go to Fox, don’t go to CNN,” one on-camera subject implores viewers. “Talk to an Arab.”

The documentary ends on an upbeat note with the observations of Michigan State University Jewish studies professor Ken Walzer, who cites traits that American Jews and Arabs share. As members of present and/or former immigrant communities confronting the challenges of blending ethnic and American identities, they have a basis for dialogue and recognizing each other's humanity, Walzer says.

Having successfully defined the parameters of this compelling issue, perhaps the filmmakers will take on an even more challenging sequel: documenting why American journalists all but omit from their reporting the impact of U.S. policy on the conflict and how international law and consensus address it – and how these omissions shape the very same American perceptions and passions about the conflict that are so aptly depicted in **Arabs, Jews and the News**.

*Marda Dunsky is the author of **Pens and Swords: How the American Mainstream Media Report the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict** (Columbia University Press, 2008).*