



**Committee for Accuracy in
Middle East Reporting in America**

October 15, 2009

by Andrea Levin

Sweden's Aftonbladet Spreads Libels, Bigotry

No recent media infraction captures the dangers of abandoning journalistic standards as vividly as the August 17, 2009 [Aftonbladet story](#) alleging Israel plunders and trafficks Palestinian organs. Appearing in its Culture section, the account was a concoction of baseless innuendo, false charges and guilt-by-association conspiracy theory, weaving disconnected events from past and present. Within weeks, the claims metastasized in Middle East media into lurid variations on the old blood libel of Jews plundering organs and drinking the blood of non-Jews. Incendiary cartoons and fantastic stories of Jewish child-snatching appeared.

CAMERA had Fedexed and emailed a formal letter (reproduced below) to editor Jan Helin detailing ten of the major errors and omissions in reporter Donald Bostrom's article and urging corrections to set the record straight and halt the spread of the libelous charges.

Helin, however, failed to respond to the letter and to calls inquiring about the status of the communication.

On October 15, the *Wall Street Journal* in its European edition published an [account of the Aftonbladet](#) affair and its aftermath.

The question is will Jan Helin and fellow editor Asa Linderborg, in whose Culture section the story appeared, take the essential steps now to begin redressing the lies they've unleashed. First among the measures is to issue a full, forthright series of corrections of the blatant errors of fact printed. News consumers should be aware that if *Aftonbladet* does not set the record straight and demonstrate its adherence to the norms of journalism — even at this late hour — there is probably little else on any topic in the publication that can be trusted.

September 11, 2009

Jan Helin, Editor
Aftonbladet
Arenavägen 63
105 18 Stockholm,
Sweden

Dear Mr. Helin,

Like many Americans, we at CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America) are deeply troubled by Donald Bostrom's incendiary, distorted story of August 17, 2009 ("Our Sons Are Plundered of Their Organs") which contains multiple factual errors.

You have said in response to the widespread criticism of your newspaper: "I'm a responsible editor who gave the green light to the publication of an article because it asks a number of relevant questions." Asa Linderborg is quoted in *Ha'aretz* as saying she "had many discussions on whether to publish the article or not, and to the best of my knowledge there are no facts there that are incorrect." (Aug 20, 2009)

We assume both you as a responsible editor and Ms. Linderborg with an interest in correct information adhere to accepted journalistic standards requiring factual accuracy, and that when your newspaper prints demonstrably false distorted statements you publish forthright, prominent and complete corrections.

Indeed, there are, as enumerated below, numerous material errors and distortions to be found in Donald Bostrom's account which require correction. The errors concern three general aspects of the article:

- The presentation of events related to Bilal Ahmed Ghanem
- The characterization of Israeli medical policy with regard to organ donation/transplants
- False linkages and conspiracy-mongering

Bostrom makes numerous specific assertions that are false and he presents other broader charges that are equally baseless and unsupported by evidence. He misrepresents sources cited, uses anachronistic, irrelevant information central to his (unsubstantiated) thesis and strings together disconnected events to insinuate connections across time and geography in the classic mode of conspiracy theorists. Other than one line by an un-named Israeli military spokesman, he fails to include rebuttal from those accused of serious misconduct. Any one of these violations of journalistic norms and basic fair-play would be grounds for reader concern; taken together they explain the global outcry against your newspaper.

We know that, as in America, Swedish media operate under ethical guidelines. Sweden's "Code of Ethics for the Press, Radio and Television" (<http://www.mediator.online.bt/eng/echics/sweden.htm>) calls for "accurate and objective news" and requires reporters to "check facts as carefully as possible." The Code states that "factual errors are to be corrected." Likewise, those being criticized in a report are to be given the opportunity to "reply to the criticism."

We assume you subscribe to all such journalistic fundamentals and hope you will consider the concerns here in light of these norms. We'd ask that you review the information below and act promptly to correct the errors and distortions identified:

A. Bilal Ahmed Ghanem and the organ-theft charges

1) Bilal Ghanem erroneously characterized as a "stone-thrower"

Regarding Bilal Ghanem, the reporter states that he was "wanted" by Israel because he was a "stone-thrower." Bostrom writes:

"One example that I encountered on this eerie trip was the young stone-thrower Bilal Achmed Ghanem."

....

"Bilal Ahmed Ghanem, one of the most active Palestinian stone-throwing youths who

made life difficult for the Israeli occupiers."

...

"As one of the leading stone-throwers, Bilal Ghanem had been wanted by the military for a couple of years. Together with other stone-throwing boys he hid in the Nablus mountains, with no roof over his head. Getting caught meant torture and death for these boys..."

The same erroneous depiction of Ghanem is included in *Aftonbladet's* follow-up story by Oisín Cantwell and Urban Andersson on August 23, 2009. They state:

"Put another way: Bilal Ahmed Ghanem was wanted on suspicion of having been one of the leading stone throwers of the West Bank during the first intifada in the late 1980's."

Contrary to Bostrom and his colleagues, news reports from May 1992 as well as a recent account by *Jerusalem Post* Arab affairs correspondent Khaled Abu Toameh ("Palestinian family; We didn't say organs taken," August 24, 2009), Ghanem was not a mere "stone-throwing" boy, but was sought by Israel for involvement in serious, violent activity – against other Palestinians.

A *Jerusalem Post* story from May 14, 1992 states:

"Soldiers yesterday shot and killed Bilal Ghanem, 20, a fugitive since July 1991, after cornering him in the village of Imatin, near Nablus. Ghanem had been suspected of kidnapping and violently interrogating alleged informers, the IDF announcement said."

"The IDF said that Ghanem was shot and seriously wounded after he tried to flee, and died later of his wounds. Villagers were quoted as saying that Ghanem had been working near his home when he passed an abandoned house and was shot at by undercover soldiers hiding inside."

An Agence France Presse report from May 13, 1992 says :

"Plainclothes members of an Israeli military 'special unit' shot and killed a 20-year-old Palestinian in his village on the West Bank Wednesday..."

Palestinian sources later reported that Bilal Ramin [sic], who had been sought by Israeli police for the past 18 months, was killed when the special unit opened fire from an abandoned house in the village of Umm al-Tineh [Imatin]."

"He was wanted in connection with kidnappings and harassment of other Palestinians from the Israeli-occupied territories."

Journalist Khaled Abu Toameh in a recent article states of Ghanem (August 24, 2009):

"He was a Fatah activist who was wanted for involvement in violence."

Bostrom gives no hint that Ghanem was being tracked in the context of Israel seeking to halt a deadly upsurge in killing of Palestinians by Palestinian gangs, such as Fatah's Black Panthers and others. In May of 1992, an epidemic of so-called collaborator killings was underway in the West Bank and Gaza. As the *Christian Science Monitor* (May 20, 1992) reported, "In the first four months of this year 93 alleged collaborators died, a 30 percent increase over the same

period in 1991."

The killings were notably brutal; victims were often kidnapped, then murdered with axes, knives and guns, or by hanging – often after extreme torture. Most victims were not informants at all; they were nurses, doctors, civil servants or others who had ordinary contact with Israelis. Often victims were killed to settle personal scores.

Nablus, near Bilal Ghanem's village of Imatin, had been a hub of such activity. A May 17, 1992 report in *Newsday* told of the Israeli army launching manhunts for gang members and saying the defense forces faced "a more dangerous foe these days." The Israeli commander in the area, Maj. Gen. Danny Yatom, referred to a "hard core" of Palestinian gang members who were on the loose and engaged in attacks on other Palestinians and said: "It is against them that we are acting."

Mr. Bostrom's characterization of Bilal Achmed Ghanem as a stone-throwing youngster is inaccurate and highly deceptive, and needs to be corrected. Israel was not pursuing a mere "stone-thrower." Ghanem was wanted for violence against other Palestinians at a time when such activity had reached brutal levels and was endemic in the area.

It should be noted that Ms. Linderborg repeats Bostrom's error in her column of August 21, 2009. ("Examine Israel")

The *Aftonbladet* correction should reflect that Donald Bostrom, Asa Linderborg, Oisín Cantwell and Urban Andersson wrongly characterized Bilal Ghanem's activity.

2) Palestinian casualty statistics for 1992 falsely reported

Related to the error about Bostrom's activity is the erroneous statistic regarding Palestinian fatalities in 1992. Bostrom writes:

"Bilal Ghanem was one of 133 Palestinians killed in various ways that year."

This is incorrect. There were at least another 223 Palestinians killed – by other Palestinians – as of December 8, 1992, according to the *New York Times* of that date. Again, this was a time of extreme Palestinian-on-Palestinian violence. The number 223 must be added to the 133 killed by Israel for a minimum total of 356 Palestinians killed.

The "various ways that year" Palestinians died cannot obviously omit the greatest cause of death for that community – killing inflicted by fellow Palestinians.

This needs to be corrected for the record. Ms. Linderborg included the error as well in her August 21, 2009 column and this needs correction.

3) Unsubstantiated linkage drawn between 1992 Israeli organ donor campaign and alleged abductions of Palestinians

Please provide evidence for Bostrom's unsubstantiated claim that concurrent with and – by clear implication – related to a campaign in Israel aimed at enlisting citizens to sign up as future organ-donors, Palestinians started disappearing. This appears to be an entirely speculative and unfounded allegation.

Bostrom writes that in 1992 Ehud Olmert launched the donor campaign and that it was a success, but that the demand exceeded supply. He then reports:

"While the campaign was running, young Palestinian men started to disappear from villages in the West Bank and Gaza" and then "after five days Israeli soldiers would bring them back dead, with their bodies ripped open."

He writes elsewhere:

"On assignment for a television network, I then traveled around interviewing a great number of Palestinian families in the West Bank and Gaza – meeting parents who said their sons had been robbed of organs before being killed."

What is Bostrom's proof for the elements of the sweeping allegations of nefarious linkage and macabre killing? Who are the men who "started to disappear" and who were returned "after five days" in the condition described? What are their full names and addresses? What are the circumstances of their alleged disappearances that demonstrate the connection to the organ campaign in Israel?

Regarding the Israeli medical role in this alleged scheme, who participated, where and when in removing and using the stolen organs as suggested? What is the proof of the implied linkage to the Israeli organ donation campaign among Israelis? What are the names, places and other essential details showing the alleged ties?

If the reporter's insinuation of a sinister connection between a normal civic campaign in Israel aimed at improving a health need for the public – and Palestinian deaths in the West Bank and Gaza – cannot be directly, specifically, concretely and unambiguously proven, this needs to be corrected for the record as an uncorroborated, highly inflammatory charge that should never have been printed.

4) Statements by Bilal Ghanem's family falsely characterized

Bostrom indicates the family of Bilal Ghanem, supposedly like those of other families, believed in 1992 that their son had been killed for his organs. The reporter states:

"Bilal was not, by far, the first young Palestinian to be buried with a slit from his abdomen up to his chin. The families in the West Bank and Gaza *felt that they knew* exactly what had happened: 'Our sons are used as involuntary organ donors...'" [emphasis added]

Yet, according to Khaled Abu Toameh, in an August 24, 2009 report, Bilal's mother and another relative state they never made any such allegation at the time, and the brother says they have no evidence any such action was taken. Abu Toameh reports that;

"The mother [Sadeeka Ghanem] denied that she had told any foreign journalist that her son's organs had been stolen."

"Ibrahim Ghanem, a relative of Bilal, said that the family never told the Swedish photographer that Israel had stolen organs from the dead man's body."

"Ghanem's younger brother, Jalal, said he could not confirm the allegations made by the

Swedish newspaper that his brother's organs had been stolen."

Bostrom's apparent invention of contemporaneous accusations by the Ghanem's against Israel is among the many serious misrepresentations in the article. The record needs to show that Donald Bostrom erroneously reported that Bilal Ghanem's family claimed in 1992 that Bilal had been subjected to organ theft. This is inaccurate according to current statements by the family members involved.

The Ghanem family's recent calls for an investigation do not have any bearing on the misreporting of their views at the time of the events Bostrom describes.

5) Inaccurate photo caption alleges Ghanem "cut up" in hospital

Bostrom's photo accompanying the first page of his story includes a caption stating:

"Young Palestinian men throwing stones and bottles at Israeli soldiers in the northern West Bank. In this area, Bilal Achmed Ghanem was shot to death and cut up in a hospital. 'Our sons are being used as organ reserves,' claim the Palestinians."

But elsewhere, Bostrom reports Ghanem being taken to Abu Kabir for autopsy:

"A villager recognized Captain Yahya, the leader of the military column who had transported Bilal from the autopsy center Abu Kabir, outside of Tel Aviv, to his final resting place."

There has been no claim that we see of Ghanem being "cut up in a hospital." This too needs to be corrected formally on the record.

B. Israeli medical policy regarding organ donation and transplantation

Key Israeli legislation ("The Organ Transplant Law" 2008) omitted

Related to the various serious errors and distortions in Bostrom's characterizing of Israeli medical policies is his omission of a sweeping and stringent new Israeli law governing organ transplantation passed eighteen months ago (March 2008). The legislation had been under discussion and development for six years and had been reported on extensively in the media.

It prohibits anyone from paying or receiving compensation for organs. It bans a person's selling his/her own organs. It bans the sale of organs from the dead as well as the living. It minutely defines what is meant by "compensation" to prevent any loopholes. Thus, not only direct cash payment is illegal, but material gifts, burial costs, payment to a third party, and more.

No longer does Israeli insurance cover the cost of transplants and post-operative care if the organs are not from relatives, altruistic donors or dead donors. That is, there is no coverage for people purchasing organs for transplant. In this last respect, the law is tougher than that in the US, which allows for insurance coverage of post-op treatment.

Harvard Doctor deplores *Aftonbladet* reporting

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Dr. Frances Delmonico of Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School who is quoted by Bostrom told me on August 27, 2009 that he was aware of having been mentioned in the *Aftonbladet* story and that the claims made there are contrary to all his experience in working with Israeli doctors whom he termed "noble and caring physicians." He said the allegations by Bostrom were not in "keeping with the character of the doctors" he knows and that he "rejects the charges." He said, moreover, that "Bostrom has a responsibility to validate his assertions or withdraw them."

Regrettably, *Aftonbladet* neglected to contact Dr. Delmonico, an international expert on organ transplantation, about the lurid claims being made by their reporter.

1) Israeli transplant law grossly misrepresented

Bostrom made various statements completely at odds with current facts about Israeli policy and law, including:

Half the kidneys transplanted to Israelis since the beginning of the 2000s have been bought illegally from Turkey, Eastern Europe or Latin America. Israeli health authorities have full knowledge of this business but do nothing to stop it. At a conference in 2003 it was shown that Israel is the only western country with a medical profession that doesn't condemn the illegal organ trade. The country takes no legal measures against doctors participating in the illegal business – on the contrary chief medical officers of Israel's big hospitals are involved in most of the illegal transplants, according to *Dagens Nyheter* (December 5, 2003).

He similarly charges:

"We know that Israel has a great need for organs, that there is a vast and illegal trade of organs which has been running for many years now, that the authorities are aware of it and that doctors in managing positions at the big hospitals participate, as well as civil servants at various levels."

• A detailed correction is required, spelling out that Bostrom has totally misrepresented current Israeli legal policy regarding the sale of organs and that the nation has one of the most stringent, if not the most stringent, laws in the world regarding this issue.

• The charge that Israel "has a great need for organs" and is engaged in "a vast and illegal trade of organs" is also grossly distorted. Israel had, before the enactment of its new law, typically accounted for 75 purchased kidneys for transplant per year in a global market involving 5,000-6,000 such yearly procedures, as Delmonico is quoted saying. That is, Israel was barely over 1% of the global phenomenon. How do 75 organ transplants, just over 1% of the total, constitute either a "great need for organs" or being engaged in "a vast" trade in such organs. Such distortions betray again the prejudice inherent in Bostrom's account. This too needs clear and forthright correction.

2) Israeli medical practice and physician conduct grossly distorted

A *Dagens Nyheter* story cited by Bostrom was taken almost verbatim from the English version of a *Ha'aretz* story of the same date (December 5, 2003) by Ran Reznick. That English account was, in turn, shortened from the original Hebrew version which offers substantially more detail on the subject at hand, underscoring a reality wholly absent from Bostrom's tale. What is clear in the Hebrew original is not that Israel's senior medical officials are a ruthless gang exploiting

others for financial gain, but rather professionals grappling with a problem candidly and seeking to redress shortcomings in their field.

The gross misrepresentation of Israeli doctors is at odds with not only Dr. Delmonico's observations but with the well-known and widely-documented contributions of Israeli physicians to the curing of disease and the delivery of medical treatment to people in need throughout the world.

Sweden's journalistic code explicitly requires that reporters "be critical of news sources. Check facts as carefully as possible..." Yet Bostrom's charges drawn from *Dagens Nyheter* had gone from Hebrew to English to Swedish – and were, of course, six years old and obsolete in addition. Aftonbladet's unwarranted and reckless smearing of Israeli physicians as a group is one more distortion that requires correction.

4) False characterization of French policy towards Israel and *Jerusalem Post* story

Another related and apparently willful error concerns Bostrom's misrepresentation of a *Jerusalem Post* story. He states:

"Israel has repeatedly been under fire for its unethical ways of dealing with organs and transplants. France was among the countries that ceased organ collaboration with Israel in the nineties. The *Jerusalem Post* wrote that 'the rest of the European countries are expected to follow France's example shortly.'"

This is false both as to the characterization of the *Jerusalem Post* story and the actual events that transpired. The *Post* did not report that France "ceased organ collaboration with Israel" due to "its unethical ways" as indicated here. The report by Judy Siegel in the June 29, 1992 *Post* states that France would have to bar organ transplants for Israelis because of Israel's "organ deficit" in the Eurotransplant organ coordinating center.

That is, Israel had not been able to donate a sufficient number of organs from Israelis to a general European pool to offset the number of Israelis receiving transplants in France and drawing from the pool. Bostrom neglects to mention the *Post* also noting: "Israel joins Italy, whose citizens also have been deprived of the opportunity to undergo organ transplants in France for the same reason."

France's suspension of organ collaboration with Israel – and Italy – had nothing to do with ethical impropriety, nor was there any such suggestion in the *Post* story.

Bostrom fails to tell readers about another piece of crucial information presented in the same story that would have served to undermine his tale of Israeli cruelty against Palestinians. In passing, the reporter writes: "Meanwhile, a 25-year-old woman from Khan Yunis [Gaza] who underwent a liver transplant at [Israel's] Beilinson Hospital on Saturday was still in critical but stable condition." Before a change in Palestinian Authority policy regarding health coverage, Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza received organ transplants in Israeli hospitals. The offhand reference by Siegel to the Khan Yunis patient is suggestive of this routine process – one hardly consistent with the diabolical depictions of Israel by the *Aftonbladet* reporter.

Further indication of Bostrom's deception on the matter of supposed French shunning of Israel is a December 1, 1994 *Jerusalem Post* news story by Judy Siegel telling of Israelis being accepted for liver transplants in France under a new agreement. It speaks as well of the agreement making possible the exchange of related information and expertise. The story notes

Israelis were not being accepted in some European countries for transplants "because organs are set aside for their own nationals." Again, there was not a word about unethical medical practice.

Why did *Aftonbladet* convey the impression Israel had been ostracized by France and Europe in the organ transplant realm when this was not the case?

Why in any case did *Aftonbladet* rely on a long outdated, superseded and irrelevant 1992 story for a report in August 2009?

The blatant misrepresentation of the *Post* article and the false charges of unethical conduct by Israel require correction.

C) False linkages and conspiracy-mongering

Finally, beyond the errors cited as well as the omission of an Israeli law directly relevant to the incendiary charges leveled, there is also Bostrom's insinuation of nefarious connection between the arrest in New Jersey of a Jewish businessman involved in organ trafficking, the allegedly "unethical" practices of the Israeli medical establishment and the 17-year-old incident in the West Bank involving alleged "plundering" of organs from Bilal Ghanem. Such ugly innuendo, as many critics of the Bostrom article have noted, echoes historic blood libels against the Jews.

Most responsible newspapers avoid demonizing Jews (or any other group) and inciting negative sentiment about them. Our American constituents would be interested in knowing whether you feel *Aftonbladet* has a responsibility to address the broader impact of your journalistic assault on Israel and Jews in general, especially given your striking admission that you have no evidence for the inflammatory and gruesome charges of "illegal handling of the bodies" and "organ theft," (*Aftonbladet*, "These were weeks when the world went crazy" August 23, 2009).

We very much appreciate your reviewing this lengthy letter and look forward to your prompt attention to the urgent matters raised and to correction of the numerous material errors. To summarize these include:

- 1) Falsely identifying Bilal Ahmed Ghanem as wanted by Israel for being a mere "stone-thrower" when he was, in fact, a participant in the epidemic of so-called collaborator violence.
- 2) Falsely stating the casualty statistics of Palestinians for 1992 were "133 Palestinians killed in various ways that year" when there were a minimum of 356, most of whom were Palestinians killed by other Palestinians.
- 3) Falsely linking a 1992 organ-donor campaign in Israel with the alleged disappearance of Palestinians in the West Bank.
- 4) Falsely characterizing Bilal Ghanem's family members as having accused Israel in 1992 of stealing Bilal's organs.
- 5) Falsely stating that Bilal Ghanem was "cut up in a hospital."
- 6) Falsely characterizing Israel as having no prohibition against organ sales and that doctors openly engage in illegal activity, when the country has a stringent law against this practice.
- 7) Falsely characterizing Israel as having a huge demand for organs and as being engaged in a "vast" trade in organs, when Israel in recent years – before enactment of the organ transplant

law – accounted for just over 1% of the trade in organs.

8) Falsely characterizing Israel's entire medical establishment as condoning illegal organ trading, when Israeli doctors were themselves working to expose problems and introduce legal reforms, which came to pass.

9) Falsely characterizing a *Jerusalem Post* story as having reported France broke off organ exchanges with Israel due to the alleged lack of ethics by the latter when nothing of the kind was reported or occurred.

10) Falsely by innuendo linking a 2009 arrest of organ traffickers in New Jersey, including Jews, and events in Israel from 1992, including alleged organ theft.

Please contact us if any of this is unclear and we look forward to redress of the material errors identified.

Yours truly,

Andrea Nelson Levin
Executive Director and President
CAMERA (Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America)

