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## Australia: Wars Between Worlds - The article you were never meant to read

Media Watch  
ABC Television  
Tue, 20 May 2008 04:56 EDT

For more than five years Ed O'Loughlin was Fairfax's Middle East Correspondent, filing for both The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald. His farewell piece appeared in The Age but was missing from the pages of the Sydney Morning Herald. Why?



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**The article you were never meant to read.**

## Middle East Madness

Hillary's 'Dr. Strangelove' shtick

Indirect "peace" talks: Syria must cut ties with "terror" and Iran, says Israel

Orthodox Jews burn piles of New Testaments in Or Yehuda, Israel

Police to question Olmert in Talansky bribe case Friday

Gaza's Gas in Israel's Hands

Last pieces to move into position: Israel proposes naval blockade of Iran

And now to the strange case of the article that Sydneysiders didn't get to read.

### Wars between Worlds

As Ed O'Loughlin's five years as Middle East correspondent comes to an end, he reflects on his time covering one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

- *The Age, Wars between Worlds, 10th May, 2008*

That full page article appeared in The Age on Saturday May 10. For more than five years, Ed O'Loughlin was Fairfax's correspondent in the Middle East. He's an Irishman, who recently decided it was time to go home. He reported for The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald, and filed his farewell piece to both papers. Yet not a word of the story was printed in the SMH.

We tracked O'Loughlin down in Dublin, and asked if he was surprised.

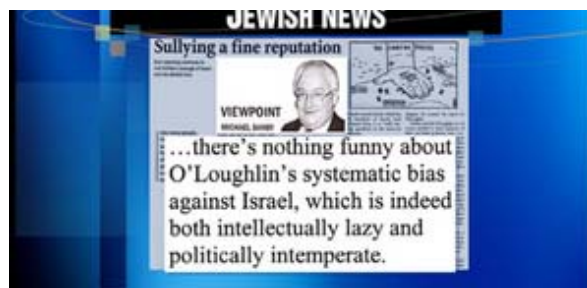
Yes I was very surprised. It was filed several days in advance and cleared through all the usual channels. It was pulled at the last minute, I understand, by the editor Alan Oakley. It's the first time in five and a half years that I've had a piece spiked.

- *Statement from Ed O'Loughlin (Journalist) to Media Watch*

A bit of background. The Middle East - and particularly, the sixty-year-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians - is arguably the toughest assignment a reporter can get. Passions run high; events, present and past, are interpreted utterly differently by each side. And every word you file will be scrutinised for perceived bias and error by your readers.

Ed O'Loughlin's reporting has copped a lot of criticism - from one quarter in particular.





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### Jewish News responds

Viewpoint  
Michael Danby

...there's nothing funny about O'Loughlin's systematic bias against Israel, which is indeed both intellectually lazy and politically intemperate.

- *The Australian Jewish News, Sullyng a fine reputation, 14th September, 2007*

[Read Michael Danby's article "Sullyng a fine reputation".](#)



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### Jewish News has more responses for Ed O'Loughlin

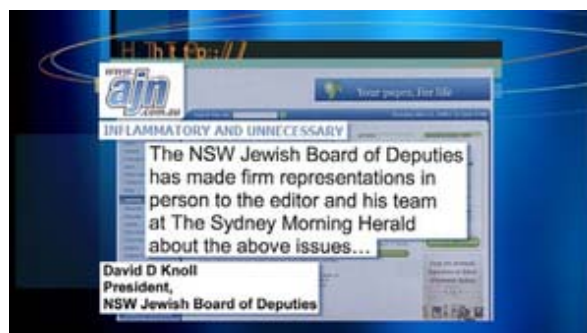
Media Matters  
Tzvi Fleischer

Fairfax Middle East correspondent Ed O'Loughlin is obviously a talented journalist who brilliantly distorts facts and substitutes opinions for news.

- *The Australian Jewish News, A brilliant example - of bad journalism, 4th May, 2007*

[Read Tzvi Fleischer's article "A brilliant example - of bad journalism".](#)

And much, much more, going back years. And the criticism wasn't confined to print. There have been direct meetings with Fairfax management, too. For example, a letter about O'Loughlin's reporting in the Australian Jewish News in February tells us:



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### The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies dislikes Ed as well

The NSW Jewish Board of Deputies has made firm representations in person to the editor and his

team at the Sydney Morning Herald about the above issues...

David D Knoll  
President  
NSW Jewish Board of Deputies

- *Letter from David Knoll to the Australian Jewish News, 29th February, 2008*

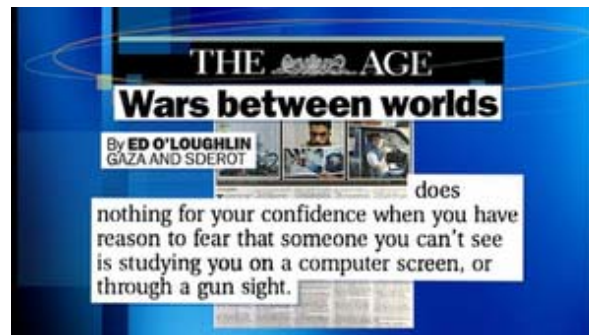
[Read David Knoll's letter to the Australian Jewish News.](#)

This kind of pressure can wear journalists - and editors - down. But as Ed O'Loughlin told me:

There has been an intensive lobbying effort to skew the Herald and The Age to a pro-Israeli position and I've had nothing but support until now. That's why I'm surprised that they pulled my final piece.

- *Statement from Ed O'Loughlin (Journalist) to Media Watch*

There's no doubt that Ed O'Loughlin spent a lot of time reporting sympathetically on the plight of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. He called the story as he saw it - and he seldom saw the Israeli Defence Force in a favourable light. His farewell feature, though more personal than his normal news reports, was no different.



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**Ed O'Loughlin's farewell piece appeared in The Age but not the Sydney Morning Herald.**

**Why?**

...the Israeli Defence Force's culture of denial and impunity, repeatedly condemned by Israeli and foreign rights groups, does nothing for your confidence when you have reason to fear that someone you can't see is studying you on a computer screen, or through a gun sight.

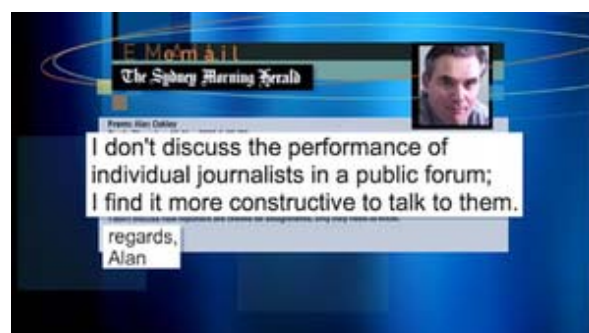
- *The Age, Wars between worlds, 10th May, 2008*

So, does Ed O'Loughlin know why Herald editor Alan Oakley decided at the 11th hour to pull that piece?

I was told informally that there were concerns about how the pro-Israel lobby would react to it.

- *Statement from Ed O'Loughlin (Journalist) to Media Watch*

Other sources at the Herald have told Media Watch the same thing. The editor, naturally enough, has not. He said:



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**The Sydney Morning Herald turns its back on the Truth**

I never discuss why something is or isn't published, suffice to say it's called editing and it happens daily.

I don't discuss the performance of individual journalists in a public forum; I find it more constructive to talk to them.

- *Email from Alan Oakley (Editor, Sydney Morning Herald) to Media Watch*

[Read Alan Oakley's response to Media Watch's questions.](#)

But Alan Oakley hasn't talked to Ed O'Loughlin:

I've had no communication from Alan explaining his decision.

- *Statement from Ed O'Loughlin (Journalist) to Media Watch*

Of course, editors have a right to edit. But it seems a poor reward for five years of full time service in a dangerous and taxing patch for a correspondent to have his final feature spiked, without explanation.

**And arguably it sends an unfortunate message, both to his critics - and to his successor,** The Age's respected Jason Koutsoukis.

**Comment:** And now, without further ado, we bring you the article that has caused so much controversy in the Australian media circles.

Telling it like it is seems a radical proposition nowadays...

## **Wars between worlds**

Ed O'Loughlin

The Age

May 10, 2008

As Ed O'Loughlin's five years as Middle East correspondent comes to an end, he reflects on his time covering one of the world's most intractable conflicts.

THE car was still burning when we came upon the scene. A bullet-proof plate from a flak jacket lay near the wreckage, its plastic layers peeled open like the pages of a book. My "fixer" recognised the silver Pajero at once, and he hurried over to a colleague to find out what had happened. When he came back he looked almost puzzled. "It's Fadel," he said. "He's dead!" And he started to weep for his friend.

In fact four were already dead, men and boys, and two more were to die of their wounds a few days later. But 23-year-old Reuters cameraman Fadel Shana was the one who made headlines.

Hundreds of innocent people die in Gaza every year - far more than we bother writing about in the West. But footage from Shana's camera revealed that he had actually filmed an Israeli tank firing the shell that killed him, as he stood in his clearly marked press flak jacket, by his clearly marked press vehicle.

A second tank shell, fired several minutes after the first, sprayed would-be rescuers with a second cloud of three-centimetre "flechette" steel darts, killing 19-year-old Khalil Dogmouh and injuring several others, including freelance photographer Ashraf Abu Amra.

We didn't know all of this at the time, as we stood by the wreckage of Shana's vehicle. All we knew was that a press vehicle had been targeted minutes earlier, that we were standing beside that vehicle, fully exposed to a hillside where Israeli tanks were operating, and that an Israeli drone was whining overhead.

And we knew from long experience that, whatever had happened, the Israeli Defence Force would deny responsibility. This it duly did, claiming that its troops had fired only at armed militants who had attacked them at close range.

I have covered quite a few stories like this over the past 51/2 years, in Gaza and elsewhere. Since the present uprising began in 2000, close to 5000 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli action, according to figures from the Israeli rights group B'tselem. Slightly more than 1000 Israelis were killed by Palestinians. In the first three months of this year, 11 Palestinians died for every Israeli civilian.

Eman al-Hams was a 13-year-old schoolgirl who was machine-gunned to death at point blank range by an Israeli officer, who admitted the act on army radio. The officer was subsequently acquitted, promoted and decorated.

Asma al-Mughair, 16, and her brother Ahmed, 13, were both shot in the head on the roof of their home in Rafah, which was in the sights of an Israeli sniper's nest, only 100 metres away. Seven members of the Ghaliya family were blown to bits while picnicking on a Gaza beach which Israeli artillery was shelling.

But if you Google any of the above names you will quickly learn - from armchair bloggers and Israeli Government spokespeople - that all of these stories are false, elaborate hoaxes concocted by anti-Semitic journalists to smear the state of Israel. Little wonder, then, that Israeli talkback was generally of the opinion that Fadel Shana got what he deserved.

And you can't help asking yourself, as you stand exposed on a roadway stained with blood and gristle and carbonised rubber, with a killer robot circling overhead, what would they say if it was you who'd been hit? For the average Middle East correspondent this is not a difficult question to answer.

As a character remarked in the BBC political satire *The Thick of It*, looking up your own name on the internet is like opening the door to "a room full of people who are trying to throw shit at you". Fortunately, the job gives one a thick skin. But the Israeli Defence Force's culture of denial and impunity, repeatedly condemned by Israeli and foreign rights groups, does nothing for your confidence when you have reason to fear that someone you can't see is studying you on a computer screen, or through a gun sight.

The story that had brought Fadel Shana to central Gaza that day, April 16, was the killing of three militants and six civilians in Israeli air strikes against the border hamlet of Johara A'diq, close to where three Israeli soldiers had died in a militant ambush earlier that morning.

Twelve people dead - six civilians and six combatants including, unusually, Israeli soldiers. A story worth taking a look at, even in Gaza. But locals warned us that the road to Johara a'diq was exposed to fire from Israeli forces. So we got out of our taxi and walked for a few hundred metres more, bickering over our single helmet and press flak jacket: my fixer refused to wear either of them. "What difference would it make?" he asked bitterly. "You saw what happened to Fadel."

Several hundred metres short of the village, a group of agitated onlookers told us that the road beyond that point was swept by tank and sniper fire. So we stood around for a while, watching the smoke and hearing the odd thud, and then we turned and trudged back again. This part of the story was not worth taking any more risks for.

And the truth was, I hadn't even come to Gaza that day to write about the conflict. I had come to prepare an article looking back on my own five years plus in Jerusalem - this article - to be published the day after I left. It was supposed to be a personal piece, elegiac rather than angry, a touch of melancholy instead of the usual journalistic attrition.

So instead of writing more about the thousands of people who'd been killed since I first went to the Gaza Strip, the blockaded economy, the human misery, I had decided to write about an aspect of its social and political deterioration that had touched me personally: the fact that you can no longer get a drink there. I had gone to Gaza that day to look up an old acquaintance, Hafez Daoud, the last barman in Gaza.

Hafez Daoud is a 49-year-old member of Gaza's ancient Orthodox Christian congregation, a carpenter who spent most of his life happily working on building sites in Israel. But when the second intifada broke out almost eight years ago Israel revoked his work permit and he found himself, along with 1.5 million other Palestinians, locked away from the world in a fenced-off ghetto.

Luckily for Daoud, he was offered a job as barman in a United Nations-run social club beside Gaza's fishing harbour. After years of creeping Islamisation, it was the last place in Gaza where alcohol was openly served - albeit only to foreigners.

"I liked working there," he remembers fondly. "It was like a different atmosphere to anything else in Gaza. There was always music, people having a good time."

Then in the early hours of New Year's Day 2006 unknown gunmen broke into the closed building and blew it up. The Beach Club never reopened and Daoud lost his job.

Apart from all its other problems, Gaza City is a town with no cheer. Following Hamas' military takeover last year Israel tightened its already severe blockade on ordinary goods entering or leaving the strip. While restricted goods - pretty much everything apart from basic food and medicine - are still available at a hefty mark-up, smuggled through tunnels from Egypt, Hamas' watchful agents tolerate no alcohol.

For Gaza's dwindling population of 2000-odd Christians the highlights of the year are the brief periods, at Christmas and Easter, when Israel permits some of them to leave the strip for a few days, to visit holy sites and relatives in the West Bank and Israel. "The last time I got out was last Christmas," said Daoud. "We went to Tiberias and Nazareth and Jerusalem and we went for a few drinks there - great. After this place it was like going to paradise."

Before I was sent to the Middle East in October 2002, I had spent the best part of eight years reporting on Africa, for this newspaper and for others. When people asked me which beat I preferred, I always said Africa, because it was bigger, and more romantic, and because you got to fly around in helicopters and light aircraft for free quite a lot, which I enjoyed.

In my entire time in the Middle East I never once got to go in a helicopter or private aircraft - mainly because it's a region where you pay for your flights, and where in any case it's usually safe to go by road. I was already preparing to leave Jerusalem when a colleague told me that The Israel Project, a leading pro-Israel advocacy group, offered regular free helicopter tours for foreign journalists. Bingo, I thought.

Our helicopter took off from Netanya, north of Tel Aviv, and flew south along the "Green Line" between Israel and the West Bank, to demonstrate the strategic vulnerability of "Israel's narrow waist" to Arab attack. Then it turned south towards the town of Sderot.

Our guide, Avi Melamed, was a former intelligence agent. On the ground in Sderot, he escorted us through sunny streets studded with reinforced bus stops and bomb shelters, some gaily painted by children. Behind Sderot's main police station Melamed demonstrated racks full of crumpled "Qassam" rockets, some of the 7000-odd home-made missiles fired into Israel from the Gaza Strip in the past seven years, killing 12 civilians and terrorising thousands.

"The lunatic result is that everyday life, everyday decisions - should I take the kids to school? Should I go to the mall or the coffee shop? - become emotionally very difficult," he explained. As he was talking loudspeakers placed all around the town began to crackle the warning "code red, code red". Radar had just detected the launch of four rockets in Sderot's direction. Fortunately the only casualty, on this occasion, was a dog who required veterinary attention.

As it happened, this particular salvo of rockets came a couple of hours after the deaths of housewife Miyasar Abu Muatak and her four children, aged 18 months to six years, during Israeli air-strikes in the town of Beit Hanoun, just across the border in Gaza. The Israeli Defence Force denied responsibility for their deaths. And Melamed did not believe that there was a causal relationship between Israeli policies and IDF operations and the bombardment of Sderot. "We had Qassam rockets coming yesterday, and the day before that, and nobody was killed in the Gaza Strip," he said.

The pilot, a veteran IDF aviator, could have been speaking for many ordinary Israelis when he complained that "we have to start fighting back: the problem is that our response wasn't fiercer and more disproportionate seven years ago".

But were not the people of Gaza already paying a terrible price for the militants' rockets, I asked him. Instead of escalating the violence, why not explore the Palestinians' latest offer of a ceasefire?

He smiled indulgently: most of the stories of suffering and death from Gaza were fake, he said. "All the reporters there are Palestinians. You give them cameras but what they do is not reporting, it's propaganda. If you wanted to go to the other side and be a free reporter in the Gaza Strip you'd be kidnapped. You can only say what Hamas will tell you to say."

I TOLD him that I'd been going to Gaza for more than five years and that no one there had ever tried to tell me what to write. The pilot just smiled and shook his head. He knew better.

It is customary, in articles such as this, for the writer to tie things up at the end with some heavy-handed symbolism. Which brings us to the Erez border crossing. Symbols don't come much heavier than that.

Israel's massive new border terminal at Erez is the sole legal crossing point for human beings trying to enter or leave the Gaza Strip. Only a trickle of foreign journalists, aid workers and seriously ill Palestinians are now allowed to negotiate its sci-fi nightmare of concrete passages, steel cages, sliding blast doors, turnstiles, metal detectors, inaudible loudspeakers, sniffer machines and - for the unlucky - a bare concrete strip-search room with a metal-grille floor yawning over a three-metre drop to the basement below.

Five years ago Erez consisted of little more than a couple of well-fortified checkpoints, with a small entry-exit office for aid workers, diplomats and hacks and a parallel complex of cages and turnstiles for the thousands of Gaza workers who were then permitted to enter Israel each day.

But following repeated Palestinian terrorist attacks, the new terminal was designed to eliminate even the tiniest risk of injury to Israeli personnel. Passing through, you no longer see IDF soldiers, just the border police at the final hurdle, passport control, and the private security guards provided by a firm with close links to former prime minister Ariel Sharon.

In the West Bank, meanwhile, the roadblocks, checkpoints and anti-terrorism barriers have steadily increased down the years. These include a new generation of "mini-Erezes" that control access to the mini-Gazas that the Israeli army is quietly fashioning around the major towns and cities.

Sometimes a wall is a symbol, and sometimes it's also a wall.

[Read Ed O'Loughlin's article "Wars between worlds" \(pdf\).](#)

**Comment:** Little surprise that Ed O'Loughlin was not allowed to fire his final farewell salvos at the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

A tremendous amount of effort was invested in bringing the truth about the Middle East to the Australian people. A tremendous amount of effort was invested in silencing this lone voice just the same.

Keep this in mind. Observe the machinations of the Man Behind the Curtain. Refuse to believe the lies.



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