



August 16, 2008

OPINION

Why Al Jazeera Owes an Apology

By JUDEA PEARL

August 16, 2008; Page A11

I have often wondered why some of the best thinkers of our time refuse to believe in human progress. After all, there was a time when tens of thousands of ordinary citizens flocked to the gates of the Roman Coliseum to enjoy the sight of wild beasts tearing human beings to pieces. Today, such a sight would evoke revulsion and disbelief.

Of course, inhumanity still exists, but it is no longer laudable or fashionable in the public sphere. With the exception of exhibition killings by jihadist recruiters, cruelty is no longer a catalyst of mass arousal. Even the Nazis tried to hide their deeds from the eyes of history. Be it for fear or shame, the trend is clear: The norms of civilized society are moving forward, and it is those norms, not their exceptions, that shape the minds of our youngsters and justify our hopes for a better world.


All this was true until about three weeks ago, when the royal procession of Samir Kuntar brought barbarism back to the public square. Samir Kuntar is the killer who smashed the head of a 4-year-old girl with his rifle in 1979 after killing her father before her eyes. He was convicted, sentenced to 542 years in prison, and never expressed any remorse. He was released by Israel on July 26 in exchange for the bodies of two Israeli soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, who were kidnapped by Hezbollah in 2006.

As anticipated, Hezbollah's mass celebration in Beirut, in the presence of its leader Hassan Nasrallah, evoked a chivalrous scene from a fairy tale gone awry. One by one, the whole Lebanese leadership stepped up to "brother Kuntar" to shake the hand and kiss the cheeks of that arch-symbol of barbarity.

The focus of my attention naturally turned to Al Jazeera because, with its outreach of 50 million to 100 million viewers from Morocco to the Persian Gulf, this pan-Arab satellite channel is considered the conscience and future of the Arab world.

A chill went down my spine when British-accented announcers, who introduced Al Jazeera's English channel correspondent Rula Amin, translated the wisdom of Kuntar's words from the original Arabic. Imagine a voice cast in a perfect Oxford accent articulating in unmistakable empathy: "He has returned to a hero's welcome . . . After 29 years in [an] Israeli prison, Samir

DOW JONES REPRINTS

 This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit: www.djreprints.com.

- [See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)
- [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Kuntar spent his first day of freedom vowing to continue to fight against Israel. He says he hopes to see the enemy again very soon."

Then came Kuntar's birthday party, initiated by Al Jazeera's bureau in Beirut and aired on Al Jazeera TV July 19 (translation by the Middle East Media Research Institute). There was orchestral music, a huge birthday cake and infinite admiration by the Al Jazeera bureau chief announcing: "Brother Samir, we would like to celebrate your birthday with you. You deserve even more than this . . . Happy birthday, brother Samir."

How amateurish was the Coliseum in Rome compared with modern-day satellite rituals of death and brutality. Imagine millions of living rooms watching their new role model, child-killer Kuntar, lowering a huge butcher knife onto his birthday cake to the sound of fireworks and male chorus: "This is the sword of the Arabs, Samir."

Imagine millions of school children and educators receiving a lesson in moral philosophy from their new master: "To be honest," says Kuntar, "our operation had both civilian and military targets . . . There are no civilian targets, it's 'civilian' in quotation marks. The Zionists themselves define the Israeli as a soldier who is on leave for 11 months every year."

Imagine millions of democracy-hungry Arabs watching their most trusted TV station presenting a lesson in practical democracy, while the orchestra in the background is waiting for the next tune. Kuntar says, "[The assassination of Sadat] was a most wonderful operation . . . It was a wonderful historical moment, which I hope will recur in similar cases."

In a letter to Israel's Press Office, the station admitted on Aug. 6 that "elements of the program violated Al Jazeera's Code of Ethics," according to the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz. I believe Al Jazeera owes a more definitive public apology, not only to Israel, but primarily to its viewers, for attempting to turn their children into the likes of Kuntar; to the journalism community, for robbing the profession of its nobleness; and, most urgently, to us, citizens of this planet, for attempting to relegitimize barbarity in the public square.

Mr. Pearl is a professor at UCLA and president of the Daniel Pearl Foundation (www.danielpearl.org¹), named after his son, which promotes dialogue, understanding and shared humanity.

See all of today's editorials and op-eds, plus video commentary, on [Opinion Journal](#)².

And add your comments to the [Opinion Journal forum](#)³.

URL for this article:

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121884481129346039.html>

Hyperlinks in this Article:

(1) <http://www.danielpearl.org>

(2) <http://online.wsj.com/opinion>

(3) <http://forums.wsj.com/viewtopic.php?t=3721>

Copyright 2008 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com.

RELATED ARTICLES FROM ACROSS THE WEB

Related Content may require a subscription | [Subscribe Now -- Get 2 Weeks FREE](#)

[More related content](#) Powered by *Sphere* 