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“Israel Threatens to Defend Itself”: The Depiction of Israel in the Media

In 2003, an opinion poll conducted on behalf of the EU Commission yielded one very remarkable result: 59 percent of Europeans saw Israel as the greatest threat to world peace. Not North Korea, not Iran, not Russia, but Israel. The number in Germany was even higher: Here 65 percent, almost two thirds of those questioned, singled out Israel as the greatest threat to the world.¹

In 2008, 40 percent of Germans approved of the statement: “What Israel today does to the Palestinians is not substantially different from what the Nazis during the Third Reich did to the Jews.” In an opinion poll two years later, 57 percent of Germans approved of the claim “Israel is conducting a war of extermination against the Palestinians.”² And according to another opinion poll, conducted in 2016, 40 percent of Germans agreed with the statement: “Given how Israel treats the Palestinians, I can easily understand why one is against the Jews.”³

All these statements have one thing in common: They are grotesque distortions of what Israel is and what Israel does.

If we want to understand how distorted opinions like these are formed, we have to take a close look at the way the media reports on Israel and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Since most Europeans get all their information about the Jewish State from the media, the way Israel is depicted in the media’s reporting exerts a tremendous influence on Europeans’ attitude toward Israel.

The analysis of Austrian media that *Mena Watch* has conducted since 2011 clearly shows that in their coverage of Israel, journalists time and again do not adhere to basic journalistic standards. They often draw a picture of Israel that is based on imbalanced and misleading reporting; the selective omission of facts; the application of double standards when judging Israeli behavior com-

1 Flash Eurobarometer, “Iraq and Peace in the World,” issued November 2003, http://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/flash/fl151_iraq_full_report.pdf, 81.

2 Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, “Bericht des unabhängigen Expertenkreises Antisemitismus. Antisemitismus in Deutschland—Erscheinungsformen, Bedingungen, Präventionsansätze,” issued November 10, 2011, <http://dipbt.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/17/077/1707700.pdf>, 53.

3 Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Antisemitismus, “Bericht des Unabhängigen Expertenkreises Antisemitismus,” issued April 7, 2017, <https://dip21.bundestag.de/dip21/btd/18/119/1811970.pdf>, 65.

pared to that of other countries; and the presentation of their own biased attitudes toward Israel as if they were plain facts.

Classic Traditional Antisemitism

Sometimes the reporting crosses every line and is plainly antisemitic. Take for example a caricature that was published as an illustration for a review of two books about Zionism in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in 2013. Here, Israel was portrayed as an ugly monster with horns, with the caption saying the Jewish State was a “greedy juggernaut.”⁴ Note that the caricaturist did not have Israel in mind at all when he drew the monster—that connection was made by the editors of the newspaper.⁵

Another German newspaper, the *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, in yet another caricature used the antisemitic motif of the well-poisoning Jew, in this case showing Israel’s prime minister Benyamin Netanyahu poisoning a piece of bread with a deadly substance called “settlement policy” in order to feed it to a pigeon named “Peace Process.”⁶ Of course, you will never find a similar caricature about Mahmoud Abbas’ incitement to violence and terror: Only Israelis and Israel’s political leaders are fair game.

It was also classic antisemitism when the chief foreign affairs editor of Austria’s biggest daily newspaper, the *Kronen Zeitung*, referred to Israelis living in communities beyond the so-called Green Line as “venomous snake brood” (“giftiges Natterngezücht”).⁷ Needless to say that that the journalist who wrote the article, Kurt Seinitz, never uses similarly derogatory language when referring to other groups of people.

⁴ “Deutschland serviert,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 2, 2013.

⁵ M. Wuliger, “Gefräßiges Monster Israel: Wie die Süddeutsche Zeitung antisemitischen Spin produziert,” *Jüdische Allgemeine*, July 3, 2013, <http://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/article/view/id/16410>.

⁶ “Geh’n mer Tauben vergiften im Park...,” *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, August 5, 2013.

⁷ K. Seinitz, “Jüdischer Extremismus ist auch nicht neu,” *Kronen Zeitung*, June 9, 2014.

Comparison with National Socialism

According to most definitions, including the one brought forward by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in May 2016,⁸ and since then adopted by numerous governments and other entities, it is also antisemitic to equate Israel with Nazi Germany or portray Israeli actions as similar to what the Nazis did. In a caricature published by *profil*, the Austrian equivalent to the German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel*, during the Lebanon war in 1982, we saw Heinrich Himmler and other Nazis sitting side by side with Hitler in hell, who expresses his admiration for Israel’s prime minister Menachem Begin. A more recent example comes from 2004, when the *Kleine Zeitung* published a caricature entitled “Then and Now” showing two scenes. On the left-hand side, a grim-faced soldier wearing a swastika armband and standing in front of a ruined house looks at a young boy wearing a Yellow Star. On the opposing right-hand side, we see the exactly same scene with only two minor changes: The swastika on the soldier’s armband has been replaced by a Star of David, and the boy wears a kaffiyeh, the checkered Palestinian headdress.⁹ The message is simple and clear: The Israelis nowadays are doing exactly the same to the Palestinians that the Nazis once did to the Jews.

De-Realization

These are clear-cut examples for the anti-Israeli variance of antisemitism. But more often the media contributes to the widespread, one-sided, false, and unfair picture of Israel in more subtle ways. A de-realizing reporting about the Jewish state and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict forms the foundation on which the demonization of Israel, its de-legitimization, and the application of double standards can flourish—the “three Ds” that the former Jewish-Russian dissident Natan Sharansky famously identified as key markers for Israel-related antisemitism.¹⁰

What is meant with the term de-realization? In the words of scholars Monika Schwarz-Friesel and Jehuda Reinharz, de-realization is

⁸ International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, “Working Definition of Antisemitism,” issued May 26, 2016, https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/press_release_document_antisemitism.pdf.

⁹ P. Pismestrovic, “Einst und jetzt,” *Kleine Zeitung*, May 19, 2004.

¹⁰ N. Sharansky, “3D Test of Anti-Semitism: Demonization, Double Standards, Delegitimization,” *Jewish Political Studies Review* 16 (2003): 3–4.

a phenomenon that results when a mental interpretive schema applied to a specific extra-linguistic situation, in the case of anti-Israelism to a country, results in a distorted, narrowed, or completely false perception and assessment of the situation. The criterion of falsity or distortion emerges from the incongruence between the subjective perspective of the observer and the objective or intersubjective situation.¹¹

In this sense de-realization is a distorted view of reality. The three Ds thus

reveal themselves as a direct consequence of the derealized position, and to a great extent build on each other or mutually support each other in pseudo-rational “argumentation.”¹²

By constant repetition, in our case by the media’s biased, inadequate, and faulty reporting about Israel, de-realizing claims gain the appearance of objectivity. A picture of Israel is thus set that obscures substantial parts of reality, does not acknowledge them, or presents them only in a highly distorted form. The result is a picture in which the Jewish State is presented almost exclusively as the aggressor, whereas the Palestinian side of the conflict is barely ever mentioned—unless, of course, it can be portrayed as the victim of Israeli aggression.

“Israel Threatens Hamas”: The Depiction of Israel as the Aggressor

Let’s look at some examples to illustrate how this works. The first one features the Austrian daily newspaper *Kurier*. On June 18, 2012, Palestinian terrorists coming from the Sinai Peninsula infiltrated Israel and attacked a group of construction workers, one of whom, an Israeli Arab, was killed.¹³ In the following days, hundreds of rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip into Israel.

For almost a week, *Kurier* did not write a single word about the escalation in Israel’s south. Only when the Israeli Air Force reacted to the ongoing Palestinian attacks by bombarding Hamas facilities in the Gaza Strip did *Kurier* wake up. “Near East. New Attacks on Gaza,” was the headline of the first short report to be found in the newspaper.¹⁴ The rockets raining down on Israel were still

11 M. Schwarz-Friesel and J. Reinharz, *Inside the Antisemitic Mind: The Language of Jew-Hatred in Contemporary Germany* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 158.

12 *Ibid.*, 157.

13 “South border clash leaves civilian, terrorists dead,” *Ynet News*, June 18, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4243734,00.html>.

14 “Nahost. Neue Angriffe auf Gaza,” *Kurier*, June 24, 2012.

not mentioned at all. When *Kurier* finally reported on the hundreds of rocket attacks, it did so under the headline: “After the cease-fire announcement, Israel threatens Hamas.”¹⁵

By ignoring both the initial Palestinian terrorist attack as well as the subsequent barrages of rockets fired from the Gaza Strip, Israel was presented as the aggressor who threatens Palestinians with death and destruction. This kind of misrepresentation has become a regular feature especially when it comes to rocket attacks from Gaza. As long as Israel doesn’t respond, Palestinian rocket fire is of no interest whatsoever. When Israel reacts, the headlines will more often than not be something like: “Israel attacks Gaza.”

The very same mechanism was at play at the beginning of the 2014 Gaza War: Three Israelis—often referred to as “settlers,” although two of them did not live in the disputed Jewish communities in the West Bank—were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas terrorists. A huge search operation by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) was met with rockets fired from the Gaza Strip: three on June 24, four on June 25, six on June 27, six again on June 28, four on June 29, twelve on June 30, and so on and so forth.¹⁶ On July 8, Israel started “Operation Protective Edge” in order to stop the incoming rocket barrage from Gaza.

For weeks, the Palestinian rocket fire was completely ignored by the Austrian media, and when Israel finally acted to suppress the rocket launches, it quickly morphed into the aggressor. The *ORF* evening news reported: “After Israeli attacks [sic!] on Hamas facilities in the Gaza Strip, Hamas today again responded with counter-attacks [sic!] on Israeli localities.”¹⁷ The headline and the subsequent report, representative of numerous other during the course of the war, completely reversed the factual timeline of events. And of course, phrases were extensively used that tried to explain what was happening by alluding to ancient Jewish principles from the Old Testament and alleged Jewish character traits, which ostensibly were still motivating Israel’s behavior. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” said one *ORF* report;¹⁸ the daily newspaper *Die Presse* wrote about an “archaic cycle of revenge and vengeance” being reenacted in the

15 “Israel droht Hamas nach Verkündigung der Waffenruhe,” *Kurier*, June 25, 2012.

16 “News of Terrorism and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict (June 25 – July 1, 2014),” The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, issued July 1, 2014, accessed November 23, 2018, <http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20663>.

17 “Raketenangriffe auf Israel,” *ZiB* 2, July 7, 2014.

18 E. Gollackner, “Eskalation der Gewalt in Nahost,” *ZiB* 24, July 9, 2014.

war;¹⁹ and according to the *Kronen Zeitung*, Austria's best-selling daily newspaper, Israel's attempts to stop the rocket fire from Gaza were "revenge attacks."²⁰ The depiction of Jews as revengeful has for centuries been a frequent component of antisemitic propaganda.

On June 15, about a week into the war, Israel accepted an Egyptian cease-fire proposal and stopped its military operations. Hamas rejected the proposal and kept firing rockets at Israel. After a couple of hours, Israel resumed its fight against Hamas. If you followed the development on that day on Austrian media websites, you would have received a totally different impression of what had happened. "Israel again bombards targets in the Gaza Strip," wrote the *Kronen Zeitung*, which at least mentioned the fact that Hamas never ceased firing at all—other media simply left out this not unimportant piece of information. "Again Israeli air attack on the Gaza Strip," said the *Kurier's* website; "New Israelis Attack on Gaza Strip," headlined the *Salzburger Nachrichten*, with a smaller headline above saying: "Israel attacks again"; "The cease-fire is over," *Kleine Zeitung's* website reported about a cease-fire, that one side of the conflict never had adhered to in the first place;²¹ and "For now no cease-fire: Israel again flies air attacks," wrote the *ORF*.²² The *ORF* evening news reported about a possible escalation of the war due to Israeli threats—and did not say a single word about Hamas' refusal to stop firing rockets at Israel. The bottom line of all these misleading headlines and reports is this: Even when Israel temporarily suspended its military operations, it was still the Jewish State which was depicted as being the attacker and aggressor.

When Pictures Omit One Part of the Story

The ways in which Palestinian violence was blurred out can be shown by looking at the photos that the *Kurier* chose to publish during the Gaza War. Between July 9 and September 3, the daily newspaper published a total of 134 articles about the war which included 54 photographs. Almost completely missing in these pic-

19 T. Vieregge, "Der Friede liegt fern, die Visionäre haben ausgeträumt," *Die Presse*, July 10, 2014, <https://www.diepresse.com/3835589/der-friede-liegt-fern-die-visionare-haben-ausgetraumt>.

20 "Racheangriffe auf Gaza," *Kronen Zeitung*, June 30, 2014.

21 F. Markl, "Der ewige Aggressor Israel," *Mena Watch*, July 15, 2014, <https://www.mena-watch.com/der-ewige-aggressor-israel/>.

22 F. Markl, "Der ewige Aggressor Israel—Fortsetzung," *Mena Watch*, July 15, 2014, <https://www.mena-watch.com/der-ewige-aggressor-israel-fortsetzung/>.

tures of more than seven weeks—of at times intense fighting—were Palestinian attacks on Israel or Palestinian fighters. Only one photo showed two masked men on a motorcycle who were described as Hamas fighters, but they were not shown as doing actual violence.²³ And while more than 4,000 rockets were launched from Gaza during the course of the war, there was not a single picture showing a Palestinian rocket attack. Only one very small picture showed a cloud of smoke in the sky: That was all that remained of a Palestinian rocket after it was intercepted and destroyed by the Israeli Iron Dome defense system.²⁴ Not showing a single Palestinian rocket attack, to be sure, also meant that *Kurier* did not show the location from where all these rockets were fired: often times from densely populated residential areas in the Gaza Strip. Hamas basically took the civilian population hostage and used it as a kind of human shield in its war against Israel. Indiscriminately firing rockets at Israeli villages and cities was a war crime, according to the international law; doing so from civilian residential areas was a war crime as well. Although photos showing such Palestinian attacks were available, *Kurier* decided to completely omit them in its coverage of the war, thus literally showing only one side of the conflict.

There were, to be sure, photos of Palestinians—but mostly of Palestinian civilians, often children or injured people, many times contrasted with pictures showing Israel’s mighty military power. On July 19, *Kurier* published a collage of five photos. One big picture, providing the background for the other ones, showed a huge cloud of dust rising, apparently the result of an Israeli missile hitting a target somewhere in the Gaza Strip. In the four corners of this photo there were four smaller ones. The picture in the upper left corner showed two small Palestinian children, their faces dirty and one of them apparently injured. In the upper right corner, two Palestinian males carried away a third, an obviously injured one. On the bottom left side, the viewer caught a glimpse of a Palestinian street through a hole in a wall, presumably damage caused by an Israeli attack. And the photo on the bottom right-hand side showed a tank with an Israeli flag, swirling up dust as it rapidly moved forward in the direction of the photographer. All in all, four of the five pictures showed results of Israeli military action or injured Palestinians, most notably the close-up of a very small boy, while the Israeli side was only represented by an impersonal, dangerous-looking

²³ N. Jessen, “Geldflüsse der Hamas drohen zu versiegen,” *Kurier*, July 29, 2014, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/israel-geldfluesse-der-hamas-drohen-zu-versiegen/77.237.516>.

²⁴ N. Jessen, “Ein Krieg mit geänderten Allianzen,” *Kurier*, August 9, 2014, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/israel-gaza-nahost-krieg-mit-geaenderten-allianzen/79.270.569>.

and relatively high-tech military weapon system.²⁵ A very similar kind of contrasting juxtaposition was published by the *Kronen Zeitung*: Two Palestinian doctors handling an injured Palestinian toddler on one side of the picture, and again an Israeli tank swirling up dust as it speeds toward the camera.²⁶ Palestinians were presented as victims with human faces, just like during an earlier round of fighting between Israel and Hamas, when a close-up photo showed a veiled and crying Palestinian woman (headline of the article: “Suffering and Dying in Gaza”²⁷), thus evoking compassion with Palestinians. On the other hand, rarely were photographs to be seen of Israeli victims and the hundreds of thousands of Israelis who had to run for cover in bomb shelters within seconds of the alarm bells sounding.

An analysis of the headlines used in the coverage of the Gaza War 2014 shows results similar to the analysis of the pictures: Israel was presented as an aggressive power, Palestinians were barely mentioned and were not presented as active players but only as reacting to Israeli attacks. The analysis undertaken by *Mena Watch* was confirmed by Anatol Stefanowitsch, a linguist from Berlin, who came to the conclusion that the headlines in German media showed a “systematic asymmetry in their depiction of the players,” with Israel disproportionately often being depicted as a war-mongering protagonist.²⁸

Even in the rare cases of reporting about Palestinian violence, the danger emanating from Palestinian attacks was regularly downplayed. The thousands of rockets fired at Israel were often called “home made” in order to deny their deadly potential, and the terrorists were being belittled. For example, in a commentary published during the short Gaza War in 2012 the editor of an Austrian newspaper wrote about the “snotty-brat terrorists from Hamas” who “provoke” Israel, and said: “These Mini-Bin-Ladens shoot scrappy rockets at Tel Aviv and other localities.”²⁹

25 “Gaza. Die Offensive rollt,” *Kurier*, July 19, 2014, <https://kurier.at/politik/ausland/nahost-konflikt-gaza-die-offensive-rollt/75.571.134>.

26 “Israel zerstört in Gaza Tunnelsysteme,” *Kronen Zeitung*, July 19, 2014.

27 M. Giorgio, “Leiden und Sterben in Gaza,” *Kleine Zeitung*, November 17, 2012.

28 Quoted in G. M. Hafner and E. Schapira, *Israel ist an allem schuld: Warum der Judenstaat so gehasst wird* (Köln: Eichborn, 2015), 108.

29 W. Fellner, “Israel muss den Palästinenser-Staat zulassen,” *Österreich*, November 21, 2012.

De-realization at its Best

A prime example for the de-realizing reporting about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict was an article published in *Die Presse* which claimed to discuss the reasons for the breakdown of the so-called Oslo peace process. Therein, a Palestinian propagandist was quoted at length, and Israel was blamed for the absence of peace. What was completely missing was the mention of Palestinian terror—it was as if all the suicide bombings and the terror war that was launched by Yasser Arafat in 2000 and that cost the lives of more than 1,000 Israelis had never happened.³⁰

The de-realizing view on the conflict, in which Palestinian incitement and violence is being ignored while Israel is being portrayed as a ruthless aggressor, can lead to pieces of reporting and commentary that are just absurd. During the Gaza War in 2014, the daily newspaper *Die Presse* published an op-ed by the well-known public intellectual Ian Buruma, in which the author claimed that Israel had reduced half of the Gaza Strip into rubble, and went on asking what reasons, “apart from pure bloodlust” or “a lust for violence and a thirst for revenge” there might be for “Israel’s bombs raining down on civilians.” While Israel’s military in fact undertook numerous measures in order to avoid civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, for Buruma Israel’s actions stood in line with the German bombardment of Coventry in World War II and the American nuclear attack on Hiroshima.³¹

Sometimes the coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict is so distorted, that it gets barely anything right at all. The most infamous example was a photo published by *The New York Times* on September 29, 2000. The caption read: “An Israeli policeman and a Palestinian on the Temple Mount.”³² A closer look at the photo led to initial doubts: In the background, one could clearly see a gas station. Even someone who doesn’t know much about Jerusalem might know that there certainly is no gas station on the Temple Mount. Wherever the photo was shot, it could not have been taken where the caption claimed it was.

But that was not the only problem. As it turned out, the injured man was not a Palestinian, but Tuvia Grossman, a twenty-year-old Jew from Chicago. He had

30 S. Knaul, “Der gescheiterte Friede von Oslo,” *Die Presse*, September 13, 2013, <https://www.diepresse.com/1452118/nahost-der-gescheiterte-friede-von-oslo>.

31 I. Buruma, “Warum der Bombenregen auf Zivilisten?” *Die Presse*, August 8, 2014, <https://www.diepresse.com/3851563/warum-der-bombenregen-auf-zivilisten>.

32 “An Israeli policeman and a Palestinian on the Temple Mount,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2000.

been on his way to the Wailing Wall, when his taxi had been attacked by an Arab mob. He had been dragged out of the car, brutally beaten and attacked with clubs; stones were smashed on his head. He somehow managed to get up and flee to a close-by gas station—the one that can be seen in the background of the photo. A group of police officers stationed there were able to disperse the violent Arab mob, thus in all likelihood saving Grossman's life.³³ Instead of showing Israeli aggression against a Palestinian, what the photo really showed was the Jewish victim of a brutal attack committed by Arabs. That is de-realizing reporting almost at its best.

Only almost, because sometimes the reporting gets even worse and simply loses any contact with reality whatsoever. As for example in the case of an article published on the website of the German weekly magazine *Focus* that had the headline: "Syria doesn't react to Israel's poison gas attack."³⁴ Of course, there never was an Israeli poison gas attack on Syria; the headline was pure fiction.

It is important to notice that all these are not simple mistakes or examples of sloppy journalism. If that were the case, then these mistakes would have to occur referring to all sides of the conflict. But in all the years of our media analysis at *Mena Watch*, we have not found a single case in which the distortions related to Palestinians. The "mistakes" all fed only one narrative: here the Israeli aggressors, there the Palestinian or Arab victims.

When a waiter makes a lot of mistakes calculating the customers' bills because he is just bad at calculating, the mistakes have to go either way; if they only occur to the detriment of the customers, this suggests something beyond mere and innocuous mistakes. The same is true when dealing with "mistakes" in the media's coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Conclusion

As mentioned before, the de-realizing media coverage of Israel is the foundation for the demonization and de-legitimization of Israel. Why? Because it presents reality in such a biased and highly distorted form, that Israeli actions cannot

³³ S. Simmons, *David & Goliath: The Explosive Inside Story of Media Bias in the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (New York/Jerusalem: Emesphere Productions, 2012), 11–14.

³⁴ "Syrien reagiert nicht auf Israels Giftgasangriff," *Focus Online*, May 5, 2013. The headline was changed after a protest storm broke out on the internet. A screenshot can be seen at U. W. Sahn, "Journalismus vom Feinsten," *Israelnetz*, July 5, 2013, <https://www.israelnetz.com/index.php?id=45270>.

anymore be explained by rational reasons or motivations—and other, irrational motives for Israel’s behavior have to be found.

When the firing of thousands of rockets from Gaza is simply ignored, whatever measures of self-defense Israel takes must appear as illegitimate and ruthless aggression. When Palestinian terror attacks are ignored, the purely defensive security fence alongside the so-called Green Line separating the Westbank from Israel morphs into an “apartheid wall,” allegedly erected to racially oppress the Palestinians. Since every threat to Israel’s security is either ignored or not taken seriously, there must be something in the Israeli or Jewish “nature” that makes Israelis and Jews so aggressive, violent, and a danger for the whole world.

Sometimes the distorted reporting about Israel becomes unintendedly funny, as for example with the headline I chose as the title for my contribution: The line, “Israel threatens to defend itself” or “Israel threatens with self-defense” needs no further comment.³⁵

But the de-realizing thinking I described results in articles and magazine covers that are not funny at all. Like the cover page the German weekly magazine *stern* published in 2006: A collage of photos shows an Israeli flag, the Dome of the Rock on the Temple Mount, a black-and-white capture of uniformed female Israeli pioneers, and an artillery firing a shot, all overlapped by a picture of a soldier wearing a prayer shawl performing a prayer. The headline reads: “Israel. What makes the country so aggressive.”³⁶

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35 “Israel droht mit Selbstverteidigung,” *Focus online*, January 22, 2006, https://www.focus.de/politik/ausland/atomstreit_aid_103917.html.

36 “Israel. Was das Land so aggressiv macht. Die Geschichte des Judenstaates,” *stern*, August 3, 2006.

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