

Insidious Propaganda



Karen Armstrong

by Phyllis Chesler

I have been reading the *New York Times* all my life—it is my hometown newspaper. Sometimes, I enjoy or agree with their opinions (and there are nothing but opinions there now); sometimes I cannot bear their biased and wildly unbalanced coverage of Israel and the Jews.

How does propaganda work? Sometimes, it consists of Big Brazen Lies, no apology, no context, no facts—it is all narrative-driven and has a malevolent purpose. More often, it is a steady, low-key diet of info-bits that are meant to normalize the larger lies. *The New York Times* does this brilliantly.

For example, in the *Times*' September 11th Book Review, Karen Armstrong, who has been the go-to person on Saudi Arabia, is featured. An ex-nun, she cites a 14th century "mystical text by an English monk and a "great Muslim scholar and mystic, Ibn Al-Arabi (1165-1240)" who "sadly, is little known in the

West.” She often quotes from him. Armstrong is emphasizing that people who are ignorant of other faiths will not understand that God cannot be “confined to one creed”—and to prove it, she quotes Al-Arabi who wrote: “Wheresoever ye turn, there is the face of Allah” (Quran 2:115). Her audiences in Pakistan are always “relieved to hear it.” Al-Arabi wrote “Allah” not “God,” but I quibble.

When Armstrong is asked “If she was organizing a literary dinner party, which three writers, dead or alive, do you invite? She answers: “My guests would be Confucius, Jesus, Buddha, and Muhammed because I would like them to tell me...what they had in common and what was most needed in our world today.”

Hmm...but there is no Moses, no Jewish ethics or laws, no desire to invite Moses for dinner.

Such a small thing, and something said by an interviewee, not by the interviewer—and yet, so many small things eventually add up to the disappearance of Judaism and Israel on the map of memory.

In the *Times*’ magazine issue, also on September 11th, Yotam Ottolenghi shares a recipe titled: “*Journey to the Plate: The back story of this spicy dish of shrimp and greens traces a line of authenticity and discovery.*” This is a Philippine dish in which taro leaves are cooked down with coconut milk. The leaves and other ingredients are not easy to find in The New World—but Elaine Goad, who grew up in Hong Kong, the Philippines and Britain, came to work in the Ottolenghi kitchen in West London. Elaine’s “comfort zone” are the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, and Korea.

Get ready for it.

“So to pair the laing (leaves) of her childhood with cod, she flicked through “Falastin,” the Palestinian cookbook written by my colleagues Sami Tamimi and Tara Wigley, and there she

found a spice mix for fish. The mild sweetness of the mix, which has cardamon, cumin, paprika, and turmeric worked perfectly...”

Another very small thing but one that normalizes the narrative that there always was a “Falastin” and that the recipes of the indigenous Arab world, which consisted of Christians and Jews as well as Muslims, and a host of other religions, were somehow specific to “Falastin.”

By the way: Otollenghi wrote the introduction to the Falastin cookbook. There’s more from the Paper of Record.

On February 12, 2020, Ligaya Mishan, the *Times*’ food critic, reviewed the various and increasing number of cookbooks of Palestinian/Falastinian food. Rarely does one read food reviews that politicize recipes so extremely and so persistently. Mishan weaves one lie after another into her food narrative. She writes:

“How to speak of the cuisine, given the political context? Alongside recipes, must there be testimony to the daily tolls of life under Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and its blockade of Gaza, the bulldozing of Palestinian homes and the uprooting of hundreds of thousands of local olive trees over the past half century? “

Mishan does ask whether the rockets lobbed into Israeli territory, the rise of antisemitism in the Islamic world, etc. “can make a case for suffering on both sides?” Still, she continues to refer to certain dishes as Gazan or Ramallah specific—which they may be—but this does not mean that they are Palestinian as opposed to regional Arab and Mediterranean dishes. Also, she pegs the alleged loss of a Palestinian food identity to an Israeli occupation in which land has been seized and “85 percent of Gaza’s fishing waters placed off-limits. Palestinian farmers have been separated from their fields by barrier walls; the flow of water is restricted and

Palestinians are currently forbidden to dig or restore wells without a permit.”

Mishan also writes that “It’s worth noting that the term ‘Israeli cuisine’ is of fairly recent vintage...and appears to have more currency outside Israel...The Israeli journalist [Ronit Vered](#), who writes for the newspaper Ha’aretz, suggested that because the country is so young, “we don’t know yet what is Israeli and what is just part of the region’s diet” – but there is a willful refusal by some Israelis, she said, to acknowledge Arab influences.”

Along the way, Mishan denigrates Jewish dishes in Israel that have European origins. But why? Finally, Mishan cites some demographics:

“Around 1.9 million Palestinians live within the borders of Israel, 2.8 million in the West Bank and 1.8 million in the breathlessly crowded 140 square miles of the Gaza Strip. Six million, nearly half the total population, make up the diaspora. They are a people who have no country to call their own, like the Basques in Spain, the Rohingya in Myanmar, the Roma in Eastern Europe and, for millennia, the Jews.”

What is such propaganda doing in a piece written by a food critic? Is this now typical of all food writing—or is it specific to attempts to bolster a narrative that a country that has never existed—is really first among nations and has always existed?

On March of 2022, Mishan continued her politicized food column vis a vis Palestine in the *NYT*. She features the very creative food artist, Mirna Bamieh, who “stages dinner performances.” Bamieh accuses Israel of stealing or “appropriating” Palestinian cuisine: hummus, falafel, couscous, etc. We are not allowed to collect wild herbs....”

Enough. Mishan and Bamieh are writing about a lentil dish. I noted [previously](#) that lentils were “one of the first farmed

crops in the entire Middle East region.”

My God! Lentils are used in recipes by Lebanese, Egyptians, Syrians, Iraqis, Jordanians, Saudis, etc. and by Jews in Israel and in the diaspora of all these countries.

But, more important, a reader does not have her guard up when she is reading a food column or a recipe. This means that dropping propaganda, drip by drip, like honey into a recipe, is more likely to enter one's bloodstream. This is what makes the small info-bits quite insidious.