

Reduced to a trouble spot

The media image of Israel in U.S and German TV coverage and opinion polls, 01-10/2003

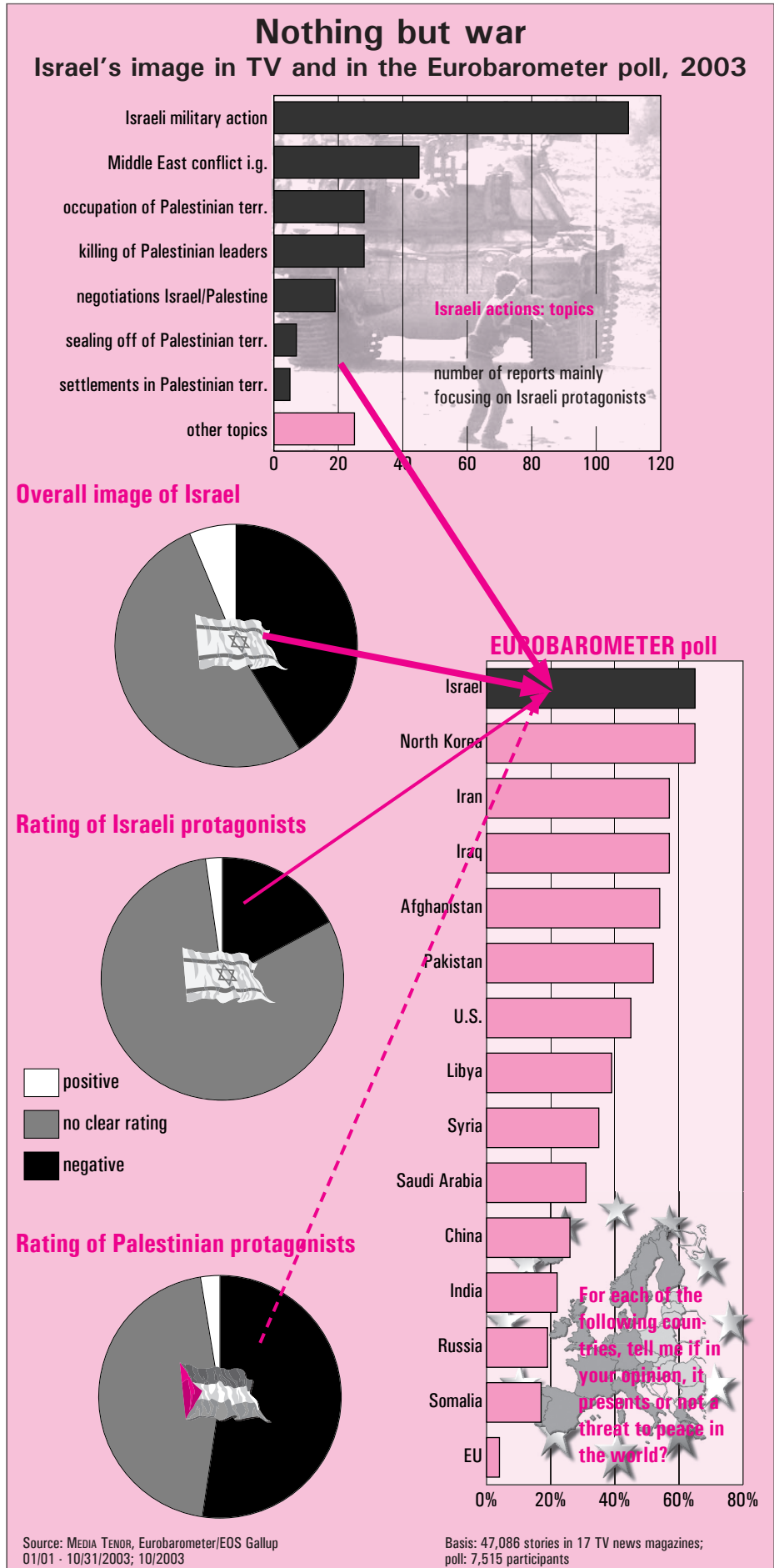
We are not only sad, but also revolted," declared the Israeli EU mission at Brussels in their reaction to the Eurobarometer survey that was published at the beginning of November, which criticized the "one-sided and emotional coverage" of Israel in the media. MEDIA TENOR has analyzed German TV news and magazines with regard to the question whether or not the coverage of the Middle East conflict in 2003 was truly one-sided and whether it justifies the assumption that the media has influenced public opinion to Israel's disadvantage.

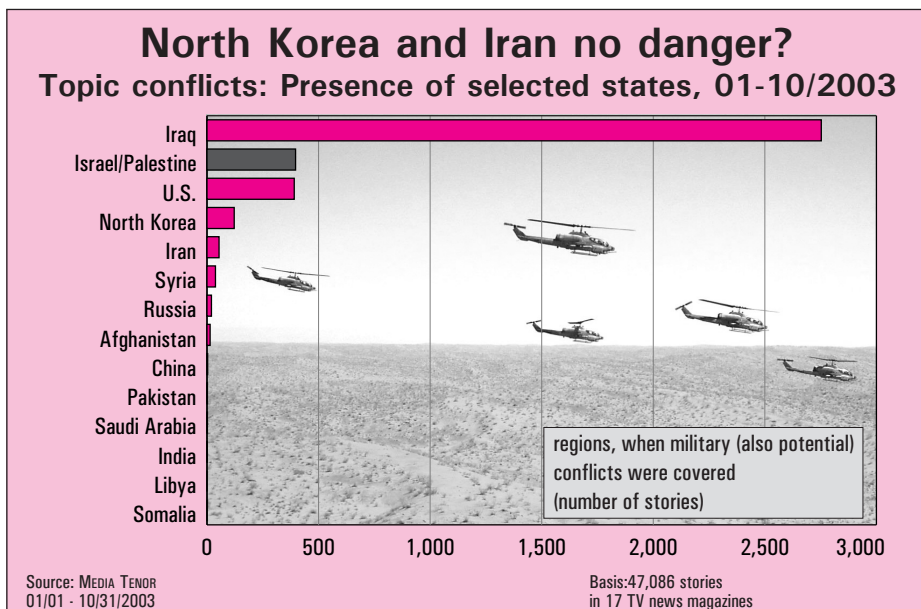
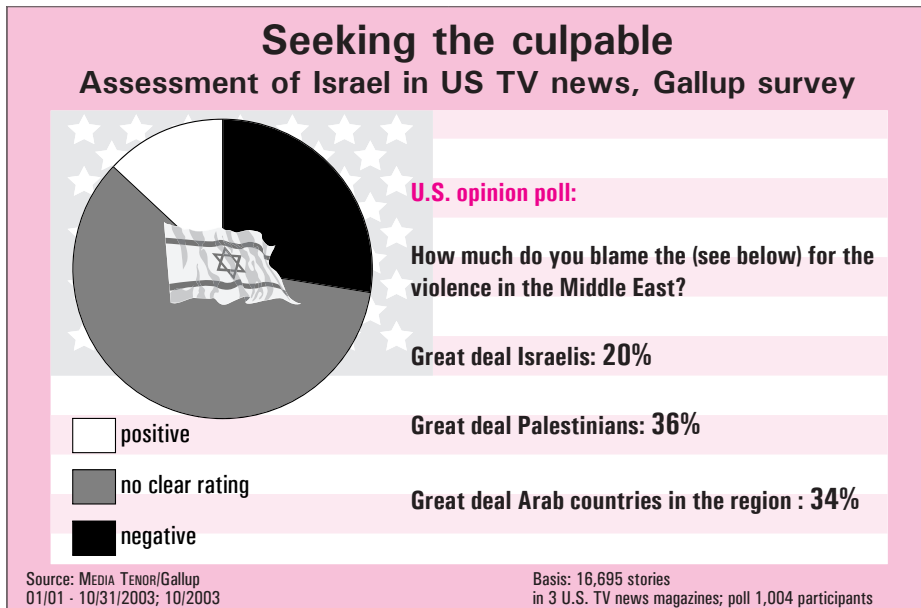
The harsh tone of the declaration does not come as a surprise: Of 7,515 EU citizens who were interviewed for the Eurobarometer survey, 59% stated that Israel presented a threat to world peace. In Germany it was even 65%. Even states like North Korea and Iran were considered to be less dangerous.

No room for normality in media coverage

The charts on this page demonstrate that in 2003, German television reduced Israel almost entirely to being a trouble spot. Whenever journalists covered actions by Israeli institutions or individuals, they almost invariably focused on military operations. But even when reporting on domestic policy issues, on Israeli parties or state visits, they hardly ever went beyond the context of the Middle East Conflict.

It seems that the Israeli EU mission referred to an unjustifiably negative assessment of Israeli actions. But the real dilemma of Israel's media image is the extent to which it is one-sided in its range of topics. Israeli protagonists mostly appear as culprits in the news. Even when covering stories where Israelis suffer from the acts of their opponents, they are not simply presented as victims. Editors often frame suicide attacks as a reaction to injustices committed against Palestinians. Alternatively, they finish their reports by saying: Israel will strike back. Normality and the daily life of civilians have no room in this scenario. Thus comes into being the (media) image of a nation in a permanent state of war, which is always at the brink of blowing up the proverbial "powder keg." The





kind of one-sided questioning. This is more than just a methodological lapse. It is particularly perplexing, because it was conceived by Gallup employees, who should have known better: In a US survey conducted by the institute in October 2003, the opinion researchers asked interviewees explicitly who they considered to be responsible for the Middle East conflict. As a result, only 20% put the main blame on the Israelis, while 79% were of the opinion that the Palestinians or the neighboring Arab states were primarily responsible for it. Considering the strong Israeli lobby in the US as well as a less critical coverage (see opposite chart), there are reasons to doubt that the results would have been similar in Europe. The main point, however, is that the question was not phrased in a manner to provide a comparable answer.

At the same time an opinion poll by the European Center for Monitoring Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC) on the subject of anti-Semitism among Muslims was filed away never to be seen again. Both cases are examples of what the FDP politician Mehmet Daimagüler, referring to the unpublished EUMC study, called a "promotion of anti-Semitism by virtue of omission."

"Axis of Evil" is not on the agenda

Even if the media's portrayal of the Middle East scenario is prone to raising fears, the question remains, why interviewees did not consider states like North Korea or Iran to be greater threats. The danger is real, but it is not perceived as such by the TV programs MEDIA TENOR analyzed. Combined coverage of the remaining members of the "Axis of Evil," Iran and North Korea, in the context of potential threats or current armed conflicts, was less than half of that of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. sm

question of whether this image is justified or not is of minor importance when considering the enormous fears that such a scenario provokes. In any event, the evaluation of the different sides in the conflict by the analyzed TV news does not quite suggest the type of simple conclusions which the Eurobarometer survey and the statements by the Israeli mission might imply. It is true that the majority of Israeli protagonists were portrayed negatively. But this applies to an even greater extent to the Palestinians (see chart on the previous page), because the largest part of coverage of them dealt with suicide attacks. Meanwhile, many important facts are ignored, including coverage and analyses

of Palestinian media calling on their children to commit suicide via video-clips or history books sponsored by the EU in which the Jewish state is not even mentioned at all.

Questionable polling techniques

Fears about a looming war, which the Middle East conflict in itself provokes, may have been critical for the polling results. What is remarkable, however, is that the Eurobarometer survey, without a comment, entirely avoids making a distinction between the participants of the conflict. The question whether or not the Palestinians were a threat to world peace was not even asked. The Israeli EU mission in Brussels is right in criticizing this

Basis

Media: ABC, NBC, CBS; ARD TAGESschau and TAGESTHEMEN/BERICHT AUS BERLIN, ZDF HEUTE and HEUTE JOURNAL, BERLIN DIREKT, RTL AKTUELL, SAT. 1 18:30, PROSIEBEN Nachrichten, FAKT, KONTRASTE, MONITOR, PANORAMA, PLUSMINUS, REPORT (BR und SWR), FRONTAL 21, WiSo;

Time: 01/01 - 10/31/2003

Analysis: all stories mainly focusing on Israel, Palestine

Opinion poll: Gallup