

'At a time when reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is under unprecedented scrutiny, James Rodgers provides an essential and insightful historical perspective on the long "war of words" behind a major conflict of our time. Rodgers' book is essential reading for those seeking a greater understanding of the difficult dynamics behind reporting – and resolving conflicts.'

Lyse Doucet, Chief International Correspondent, BBC News

'*Headlines from the Holy Land* is an impressively, innovative form of history as media history, looking at one of the most complex stories of our age through the imperfect, shifting but revelatory perspectives of the many journalists who covered this often compelling tale as it unfolded, from its 1946 roots through the various wars and propaganda battles fought in the streets of Gaza or the networks of social media. James Rodgers offers an insightful, empathetic, and rigorous guide to how journalism struggled – often heroically – to tell one of the most brutal and difficult of international stories.'

Charlie Beckett, Director, Polis, Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics, UK

'James Rodgers is honestly direct about the challenges and pressures that make reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict unique among the myriad of crises faced by international journalists, something he was uniquely placed to do as the only Western correspondent based in the Gaza Strip in the tumultuous years immediately after 9/11. But what makes this book so refreshing and incisive is that this account of reporting on this most intractable yet consequential conflict is the work of someone with the benefit of having been an experienced foreign correspondent but who now writes with the rigour of an academic's eye on how our world is reported. In doing so, Rodgers leaves very few stones unturned, from the war over terminology and language to the increasing role of religion in a crisis centred on a small area brimful of contested holy sites, and he has framed it in a way that has context, careful analysis and is accessible to all those who either want to understand how this war which continues to have a major international impact is reported or to those who want to report it themselves.'

Rageh Omaar, International Affairs Editor, ITV News

'Reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict often generates as much controversy as the issue itself. James Rodgers' book is rare for approaching the subject of how the story has been told by Western journalists over the decades with an open mind and academic rigour. It combines detailed research and candid insights from many of the region's seasoned correspondents with an accessible style that keeps the pages turning. With so many thoroughly biased self-appointed media watchdogs out there, it is refreshing to read something that genuinely attempts to tackle the job of reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with intelligent thoughtfulness.'

Paul Danahar, Author of *The New Middle East: The World after the Arab Spring*

'The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians has been more intensively covered by the media, and for a longer period, than any other in recent times. In this fascinating book, James Rodgers tells us the story of the story. He shows how, as the struggle came to be as much about meaning, language, and perception as about bullets, bombs, or negotiations, reporters were under constant pressure from the

two sides seeking to control the narrative to their own advantage. He shows, too, how they brought their own prejudices and national viewpoints to the story and how, nevertheless, good reporting did emerge and was, as it remains, vital in sustaining what informed public opinion there is on the dire state of affairs in the Holy Land of the title.'

Martin Woollacott, commentator on international affairs and  
former foreign editor, *The Guardian*

'An important and necessary book.'

Patrick Cockburn, *The Independent*

# Headlines from the Holy Land

**Reporting the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

James Rodgers

*City University London, UK*

palgrave  
macmillan



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*Dedicated to the memory of my father,  
Ian MacDonald Rodgers, 1938–2013.  
Our last conversation was about my plans for this book.*



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# Foreword

This exploration of the challenges facing journalists whose task it has been to report on developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is refreshingly direct and engaging. Tackling his subject from the perspective of the men and women appointed by various media organizations to report the news first hand from 'the Holy Land', James Rodgers draws both on his own experiences as the only foreign correspondent based inside the Gaza Strip between 2002 and 2004 and on the insights and accounts of many other fellow journalists who have covered the conflict over the years.

His approach is that of the professional correspondent turned academic, forensically seeking out evidence to substantiate his every point. As a result, he passes no judgement on the rights and wrongs of the protagonists, simply reporting the lengths to which they are prepared to go to try to shape how events are covered in the international media. In so doing, Rodgers identifies the structures and methods used by the contending parties to facilitate or deny access to different locations and people 'on the ground'.

In the course of the book Rodgers reveals the relative advantages of foreign correspondents, compared with diplomats, in terms of their freedom of movement around the West Bank and Gaza Strip, occupied by Israel since the Six-Day War of 1967. Indeed, the restrictions placed on foreign diplomats by the Israeli authorities to prevent them roaming at will around these areas and seeing for themselves what life is like for ordinary Palestinians under occupation in the West Bank or under the blockade in Gaza have increased in recent years.

An example is recounted by Dan Kurtzer, former US ambassador to Israel, in an interview with Rodgers. Whereas Kurtzer was able to explore by himself the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in the 1980s, when he was serving on the staff at the US Embassy in Tel Aviv, by the time he returned as ambassador such access was impossible, even for more junior officials. Security concerns are cited as the justification for the constraints, yet intrepid reporters can still report from around the occupied territories, if they are so minded.

What distinguishes different journalists in terms of whether they take the risks entailed in going 'to see for themselves' has to do with their own sense of responsibility. On this Rodgers is forthright: the real

professionals know that they owe it to their audiences to rise to the challenge. After all, if even the foreign diplomats are increasingly obliged to rely on journalists for their information – a point which Rodgers makes compellingly – then those journalists must take their fact-finding mission seriously. The prospects of conflict resolution depend on it.

Interestingly, Rodgers reveals, every ambitious journalist, himself included, sees the challenge of covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a potentially career enhancing test of their skills – and one to be embraced. Similarly, he says, senior diplomats regard trying their hand at conflict mediation in the Israeli-Palestinian context as a way to prove themselves, literally *because* so many before them have tried and failed to achieve a breakthrough.

It is in this respect, among others, that Rodgers deems the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as unique. The stakes are especially high because the land and sites in contention are holy to each of the three great monotheistic faiths and thence of concern to Jews, Muslims, and Christians around the world. On which note, Rodgers documents the increasing role of religion in defining the positions of the protagonists and concludes that this is rendering the parties even less amenable to accepting a compromise solution than seemingly they were in earlier decades.

Another respect in which covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict poses a uniquely testing challenge for journalists has to do with terminology. Both the Israelis and the Palestinians are deeply invested in influencing, if not controlling, the way their conflict is depicted in the media. Various examples of how this plays out are discussed in this work, including whether or not a journalist describes the West Bank and Gaza as ‘disputed’ or ‘occupied’ territories; if they include the actual names of individuals killed in conflict or not; and whether or not the word ‘settlement’ adequately conveys the presence of some of the large conurbations in the West Bank inhabited by Jewish Israelis.

Particularly vexed is use of the term ‘terrorist’ as a descriptor. In which connection, one of the distinguishing features of this book is the inclusion of a detailed discussion of how journalists reported events which occurred in the last days of British Mandate in Palestine, in particular the bombing of the King David Hotel, headquarters of the British authorities, in 1947. Rodgers’ research on newspaper coverage of that episode makes fascinating reading and reveals that reporters on the scene at the time were so much less constrained in their use of terminology than their contemporary counterparts.

At the time, press coverage was monitored by officials in the Zionist movement and supporters of their cause overseas, and remonstrations –

letters to the editor – were made in many cases. However, as Rodgers discusses, there was nothing akin to the sophisticated and comprehensive monitoring operation that currently exists and which both journalists and diplomats keep constantly in mind as they frame their despatches. Diplomats also have to be aware of the likelihood of leaks and misrepresentations.

To compound the difficulties faced by journalists, meanwhile, the advent of social media poses new challenges. On the surface, it would appear that the role of the professional correspondents has been overtaken by citizen journalists, and the former must be tweeting responses to social media posts 24/7, even before they have had a chance to ‘see for themselves’, interview witnesses and report ‘the facts’.

In concluding, however, James Rodgers succeeds in making the case for on-the-spot correspondents, trained and practised in compiling first-hand accounts backed up by evidence, for whom there is still no replacement. By tackling his subject in that same vein, Rodgers provides his readers with a particularly engaging account of what it is like to file the headlines from the Holy Land.

*Rosemary Hollis, Professor of Middle East Policy Studies,  
City University London*

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My mother's house was the perfect place to finish the manuscript – my thanks to her now, and always. My thanks also go to my wife, Mette Jørgensen Rodgers, and our daughters, Freya and Sophia, for their love, support, and interest in my work.