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Any Journalist Worth Their Salt

However you approach Jerusalem, you ascend. The commonest way for new arrivals is from Ben Gurion airport near Tel Aviv. Even in winter, the coastal plain is warm in the middle of the day – pleasantly so if you have come off a flight from Europe. The journey to Jerusalem begins through flat agricultural land, then takes the traveller through rising, rockier, ground until you arrive on the outskirts of the city. The landscape here has been transformed over the last half-century. Modern blocks of flats stand on hillsides which look as if for hundreds of years they have been home to villages and fields for subsistence farmers. The Old City, which contains almost all that makes Jerusalem sacred to so many people around the world, is seen only at last: still walled like a medieval citadel, and even higher than the surrounding hills upon which the modern town stands. Coming from the east, the ascent is even more dramatic, passing as it does areas of the desert which are below sea level, crossing landscapes which are even rockier and more barren. Here you might still see camels tethered at the edge of Bedouin camps – a scene which for Europeans like me might more readily come from a children’s Bible than real life. Jericho, Bethlehem, Hebron: the names of West Bank towns and cities fire the imaginations of those travelling towards Jerusalem, a place which in recent decades has drawn journalists in large numbers, ‘It’s one of those places that any journalist worth their salt wanted to come and try their time in,’ says Crispian Balmer, Bureau Chief for Reuters from 2010 to 2014. Balmer believes this is a place which fascinates the wider world, too:

A lot of countries, a lot of peoples, feel that they have got a stake in this story and it’s a story that they engage in, and are committed to over and above any other conflict for religious reasons, for historical
reasons – you know, so many European, American countries deeply involved here over a long period of time.

For some who come to report from Jerusalem, those national ties are combined with religious ones. Jodi Rudoren, Bureau Chief of the New York Times, describes her first visit to the region as ‘one of these Jewish-American teen tour type things’. Even as a 17-year-old, she remembers, ‘a place that everybody thought was particularly special and important and that people were fighting over struck me as a perfect kind of Petrie dish for journalism. And I think I held that with me throughout my career.’ Finally coming to Jerusalem in 2012, after 15 years with the New York Times, she says that she ‘felt it would be a challenge that would really push me journalistically,’ before adding, ‘I underestimated how hard it would be.’ That does not seem to put journalists off coming to cover the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their personal reasons for being drawn to Jerusalem, along with some of the challenges which led Rudoren to conclude that she had underestimated the difficulties she would face, will be considered later. First, though, this chapter will consider their views on why the conflict has received such a huge concentration of media attention.

‘If it bleeds, it leads,’ goes an old saying in British journalism. In other words, violence can be sure to find its way into the headlines. On that basis, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has frequently been able to grab the attention of editors. Violence will often succeed in securing air-time where drier, but still important, events cannot. In the spring of 2014, the United States’ latest attempt at seeking a diplomatic solution to the conflict – a series of negotiations sponsored by the Secretary of State, John Kerry, collapsed. There was simply not enough common ground for the talks to proceed. Conflicting demands became impossible obstacles. Despite the scepticism which surrounded the talks from the outset, and the lack, at least until the talks fell apart, of any major development, this was an important story. At a time when the Middle East was altering in an unprecedented and unpredictable way, the Israelis and Palestinians remained stuck in their long and firmly held views – while the neighbouring region changed around them. By the summer, the deaths first of three Israeli teenagers – Naftali Frenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrach – and then of a Palestinian teenager, Mohammad Abu Khdair – apparently to avenge that of the three Israelis – took the conflict back to the front pages. Abduction and killing had crossed editorial thresholds which diplomacy could not reach, especially as the three Israelis had disappeared while hitch-hiking back from their place