

French TV Sticks By Story That Fueled Palestinian Intifada

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A French journalist and an independent film producer who saw raw, unedited video of the shooting of a Palestinian boy in 2000 said it's not possible for the boy to have been shot by Israeli soldiers, as a French TV report claimed.

French state television is standing by its claim that the broadcast is authentic. The broadcast purportedly showed 12-year-old Mohammed al-Durra being shot by Israeli soldiers, an event that led to the current Palestinian intifada.

But Denis Jeambar, editor-in-chief of the French news weekly *l'Express*, and filmmaker Daniel Leconte, a producer and owner of the film company Doc en Stock, say the videocassette is full of staged scenes of faked injuries.

Jeambar and Leconte were allowed by the *France 2* network to view an unedited master video cassette of the incident, which took place in September 2000 at Netzarim Junction in the Gaza Strip. Leconte said he is satisfied that the shooting really happened, but he does not believe the bullets that struck the child could have been fired by Israeli troops.

"The only ones who could hit the child were the Palestinians from their position," Leconte told *Cybercast News Service*. "If they had been Israeli bullets, they would be very strange bullets because they would have needed to go around the corner."

France 2 earlier tried to explain the situation by claiming that the gunshots that struck al-Durra were bullets that ricocheted off the ground, but Leconte dismissed the argument.

"It could happen once, but that there should be eight or nine of them, which go around a corner? They're just saying anything," Leconte said.

A newspaper article in the *International Herald Tribune* recently quoted the station's news director as saying that "four years later, no one can say for certain who killed him (al-Durra), Palestinians or Israelis."

Questions surrounding the death of al-Durra generated global publicity, which in turn helped trigger the Palestinian intifada (uprising). Thousands of people - Palestinians and Israelis - have lost their lives in the four years since the violence began.

France 2 made small, edited portions of its exclusive video clip freely available around the world, saying it did not want to make money out of the tragedy. The broadcast prompted Palestinians to use it as proof of Israeli brutality. When Islamist kidnappers in Pakistan murdered *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002, visible in a videoclip of the killing was a poster depicting al-Durra.

Lingering questions of authenticity

Controversy over the event has simmered for years. It re-emerged late last month when Jeambar and Leconte wrote that the cassette contained scenes of Palestinians playacting at being wounded before the shooting incident, that nothing in the footage proved that the child was really dead, or if killed, that he had been shot by Israeli soldiers. On the contrary, they said, the footage incriminated Palestinian shooters.

Their testimony added a major element to the debate because Jeambar and Leconte were two of a handful of independent people who were allowed to view the unedited raw footage. Jeambar and Leconte had gained access to the video after asking *France 2* to provide proof that its report about al-Durra's death was genuine.

The Sept. 30, 2000 video clip showed a boy identified as al-Durra, cowering behind a man. *France 2* TV reporter Charles Enderlin said in a voiceover the boy was killed by Israeli gunfire after he and his father were caught in the midst of a gun battle between Israeli security forces and Palestinian gunmen.

Enderlin was not present during the actual shooting but claimed in interviews that the cassette, recorded by his Palestinian cameraman Talal Abu Rahma, also contained the death "agony" of the child, images so unbearable he had cut them out to spare his viewers.

In a January 2005 article in *Le Figaro*, Jeambar and Leconte said that when *France 2* news director Arlette Chabot showed them the cassette, they were surprised that it did not contain any footage of the child's "agony."

They also found that the first 20 minutes or so of the cassette showed scenes of young Palestinians "playing at war" in front of the camera, falling as if wounded and then getting up and walking away.

Jeambar and Leconte told radio station RCJ that a *France 2* official also present at the meeting had said in reference to the playacting, "You know it's always like that."

In an interview with *Cybercast News Service*, Leconte said he was not surprised that Palestinians were using television cameras for propaganda purposes, but added that he found *France 2*'s statement disturbing at a time when the incident was creating so much controversy and was under investigation.

"I think that if there is a part of this event that was staged, they have to say it, that there was a part that was staged, that it can happen often in that region for a thousand reasons," he said.

France 2 communications director Christine

Delavennat told *Cybercast News Service* in an interview that none of the scenes on the cassette was staged and the cameraman and the station stood by that claim.

Delavennat has invited the "accusers to bring the proof," calling the debate "indecent" and warning that the station has already filed eight lawsuits against its accusers, most of them for defamation.

Who shot Mohammed?

The theory that the footage was staged was advanced by the Israel-based Metula News Agency, whose editor-in-chief Stephane Juffa, concluded following an investigation that the boy's shooting was faked by actors and that the child subsequently identified as Mohammed al-Durra had been dead and in the morgue hours before the gun battle.

Leconte said that after seeing further evidence presented by *France 2*, he believes the shooting scene itself was real. "At the moment of the shooting, it's no longer acting, there's really shooting, there's no doubt about that," Leconte told *Cybercast News Service*.

Unless there was an "incredible manipulation" by *France 2*, Leconte said he believes that both father and son were shot. He cited recent footage in which the father, Jamal al-Durra, showed his scars from bullet wounds.

Leconte said that if Juffa believes the whole incident was staged, he would have to provide concrete proof.

Ever since the footage was first aired, the Israeli army has been unable to confirm or deny that it was responsible for the child's death. But in 2002, a German television documentary concluded that Palestinian and not Israeli gunfire killed the boy. When they viewed the footage, Leconte and Jeambar came to the same conclusion.

According to Leconte, the man and child were taking shelter behind a concrete barrel that separated them from the Israeli position to their side. Two Palestinian positions were directly in front of them, leading Leconte and Jeambar to conclude that the fatal wounds were fired not by Israelis, but by Palestinians.

The credibility of Talal Abu Rahma, the Palestinian cameraman, may be the weakest of all individuals involved in the controversy. He issued a deposition immediately after the incident, swearing that the Israeli army had killed the boy. But according to Juffa as well as Leconte, he later retracted it.

Delavennat said the cameraman never retracted his claim. Rahma merely denied making a statement - falsely attributed to him by a human

rights group - to the effect that the Israeli army fired at the boy in cold blood, Delavennat explained.

France 2 reporter Enderlin, in a response in *Le Figaro* to the question posed by Leconte and Jeambar about why he accused the Israelis of the shooting, said "the image corresponded to the reality of the situation, not only in Gaza but also in the West Bank."

"I find this, from a journalistic point of view, hallucinating," said Leconte, himself a former journalist. "That a journalist like him (Enderlin) can be driven to say such things is very revealing of the state of the press in France today," he added.

Leconte said the French media display a strong anti-Israel and anti-American bias. The public is also unlikely to question the report's claim that the Israeli army shot the child, he said.

France 2 reluctant to retract

Independent investigators have said that the French press is reluctant to criticize the public television channel because, as the prime employer of journalists in the country, it can exert a great deal of pressure.

Leconte said that because the pictures had such "devastating" consequences - including the public lynching of two Israeli soldiers and subsequent anti-Semitic statements by French Muslims - *France 2* or Enderlin need to admit that they gave out wrong information in the report.

"Who will say it, I don't know, but it is important that Enderlin or *France 2* should say, that on these pictures, they were wrong - they said things that were not reality," Leconte said.

In his reply, Enderlin did not provide an explanation to Leconte and Jeambar's revelations in *Le Figaro*, which in itself was a message, according to Leconte, indicative that his and Jeambar's points were indisputable. "Enderlin would be better off recognizing it. That would resolve at least one part of the debate," Leconte said.

As for the "agony" that Enderlin said he edited out of the report, Leconte and Jeambar said it did not exist on the master cassette. Enderlin told *Telerama* magazine late last year that there had been a "misunderstanding," that he had meant to use the word "agony" to describe the scene of the shooting of Mohammed al-Durra.

However, in an online discussion forum for *Le*

Nouvel Observateur news magazine on Feb. 10, Enderlin was asked how he would describe the same video images today. He replied that he would say the same things, but that in the editing process he would include footage of the "child's agony," raising a question once again about his previous claims. During the first edit, Enderlin said, the video in question was "cut considerably at the time because it made the report too hard."

Despite the fact that Enderlin and *France 2* have not admitted any errors, the Conseil superieur de l'audiovisuel (CSA) - the French government's media regulatory council - issued a statement in December asking French television to identify sources and exercise more caution when reporting on international conflicts.

Pope John Paul II issued a similar call in January, warning that "a bad use of communications can cause an unspeakable evil, giving rise to misunderstandings, prejudices and even conflicts."

The accusations against the state television station have also gained attention because the French government is developing plans to create an international French-language news channel. ▲