

## NPR Middle East Coverage January - March 2008

For the second quarter in a row, the main story coming out of the Israeli-Arab conflict involved diplomacy, or at least the Bush administration's attempt to keep alive the diplomatic process launched at the Annapolis conference in November 2007. President Bush in January visited Israel and the West Bank for the first time during his seven years in office, and he promised to return in mid-May for Israel's sixtieth anniversary celebrations. NPR's coverage of the Bush and Rice trips gave listeners a decidedly pessimistic assessment of the chances for any kind of a peace agreement before Bush leaves office.

NPR also gave extensive coverage to two of the other major stories in the region during this period: the breaching on January 23 of the border wall separating southern Gaza from Egypt, and the sharp escalation of violence in late February-early March when Palestinian groups in Gaza stepped up rocket attacks against southern Israel and Israel responded with bombings and other attacks that killed at least 120 Palestinians, about half of them civilians. Another significant story was the deadliest Palestinian attack in Jerusalem in four years, this one by a gunman who killed eight Yeshiva students.

NPR covered these and other developments in 85 reporter pieces, two-ways, and interviews. All 85 items have been posted on the Middle East pages of NPR's Web site.

### **Accuracy**

NPR has not posted any corrections of items reviewed for this report.

There were no significant factual errors, but there were some minor quibbles in several items:

-- The intro to Michele Kelemen's two-way with *All Things Considered* on **January 15** about Bush's visit to Saudi Arabia said that "the president and his policies are unpopular in the Middle East." This statement certainly is true in terms of Arab countries (plus

Iran), but other NPR reporting during this period showed that Bush is very popular among Israelis. The statement should have been qualified.

-- The intro for Linda Gradstein's **January 21** piece for *Morning Edition* on Israel's suspension of fuel supplies to the sole power plant in Gaza was a bit too categorical in stating that the plant shut down because it "does not have enough fuel to run because Israel blocked fuel supplies..." The piece itself quoted Israeli officials as saying the plant did have fuel reserves but was shut down by Hamas to get international sympathy. The intro should have reflected these competing claims or at least attributed the statement.

-- All statements about the number of attacks and deaths on each side of the conflict are subject to dispute and should be treated carefully and attributed. An example is Gradstein's statement, in a **January 23** piece for *All Things Considered* on the trauma suffered by Israelis in the town of Sderot, that "more than 2,000 rockets" were fired at the town and surrounding areas in 2007. This figure was not sourced, but a January 1 report by Shin Bet, the Israeli intelligence agency, said 1,200 Qassam rockets were fired into Israel in 2007.

-- In his Week in Review with Dan Schorr on **March 8**, Scott Simon said a car bomb in Iraq earlier in the week was "the deadliest single insurgent attack of the [Iraq] war," killing more than 100 Iraqis. This statement is not true. The deadliest single attack so far was on July 7, 2007, when 156 Iraqi Turkmen were killed in the village of Amurli in northern Iraq. The single bloodiest day so far in Iraq was on August 14, 2007, when simultaneous suicide truck bombings killed 430 people in two villages near the Syrian border.

-- Several NPR reports in early March mentioned that more than 120 Palestinians were killed during the Israeli offensive in Gaza that started in late February. Most of these reports failed to qualify that total, leaving listeners to wonder how many were civilians and how many were militants. Gradstein was the only NPR reporter to give any kind of breakdown, mentioning in two reports (first in a **March 6** piece for *All Things Considered* then in **March 7** two-way with *Morning Edition*) that about one-half of the victims (according to medical officials in Gaza) were civilians; to the best of this reviewer's knowledge, Israel has not disputed this general breakdown. It is not always

possible to give even rough breakdowns for these types of casualties, but listeners should be given this information when it is available and can be considered reliable.

-- *Times* of London reporter Sheera Frankel, in a **March 12** interview with *Bryant Park Project*, gave a somewhat misleading characterization of international law defining who is a refugee. The interview dealt with Israel's problems in controlling the flow across its borders of several thousand people from Africa, including Eritrea, Kenya, and Sudan. Frankel said Israel has no law defining refugees as opposed to economic migrants, and she implied that the UN and refugee groups do not have a standard definition, either. In fact, the 1967 Protocol to the UN's Convention on the Status of Refugees clearly defines refugees.

## Voices

Overall, 36 Israelis and 48 Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese) appeared on tape; some of these were multiple appearances by individuals. Of the Arabs, 41 were Palestinians and 2 were Lebanese; the rest were of other nationalities.

In addition, 52 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis, and 50 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese); some of these were multiple appearances by individuals.

Following is a summary of Israeli and Palestinian officials and opinion leaders with multiple appearances during this quarter:

### **Israelis:**

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert: On tape in 3 items; quoted in 9 items

Olmert spokesman Marl Regev: On tape in 5 items; quoted in 5 items

Defense Minister Ehud Barak: Quoted in 2 items

Foreign Ministry spokesman Arye Mekel: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item

Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon: Quoted in 2 items

Political scientist Reuven Hazan: On tape in 2 items

Other Israelis on tape: 27

### **Palestinians**

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 4 items; quoted in 13 items

Prime Minister Salaam Fayyad: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item

Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 4 items

Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item

Abbas aide Rafiq Hussein: On tape in 2 items

Other Palestinians on tape: 29

**Range of voices.** NPR listeners had only rare opportunities to hear from hard-liners on either side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Government officials and moderates in both camps again were the dominant voices on NPR air, thus limiting the ability of listeners to understand the motivations of the extremists who drive much of the action on the ground.

**Identification of voices.** NPR reporters and shows sometimes failed to give listeners enough background information about the people appearing on air:

-- *Bryant Park Project* on **January 9** interviewed Tamara Wittes and identified her only as a senior fellow with the Saban Institute of Middle East Policy at Brookings. Listeners should be told a bit more about lesser-known experts, such as Wittes, and why they are qualified to discuss this subject.

-- *Morning Edition* on **February 13** interviewed a reporter in Lebanon, Leena Saidi, about the bombing of Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh but told listeners nothing about this reporter. Is she a freelancer or a staff reporter for a news organization? Why is she a credible source, beyond the fact that *Morning Edition* chose to interview her?

-- Peter Kenyon's otherwise fine piece about the Arab summit in Damascus, for *Weekend Edition Saturday* on **March 29**, included tape from Sami Moubayed, identified only as a "Syrian analyst."

## **Fairness and Balance**

Of the 85 total items in this survey, 11 had a dominant focus on Israel; 12 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians; 22 focused about equally on those two sides (the "Israel-Palestinian" category, formerly listed as "neither"); 21 focused on the "US-Region" aspect of U.S. diplomacy (such as the trips to the region by Bush and Rice); 3 focused primarily on Lebanon; and the rest focused on other regional matters.

Following are comments on other matters related to fairness and balance:

Twice during this quarter *All Things Considered* offered its listeners back-to-back interviews with senior spokesmen for the two sides. The first was on **January 9**, when Robert Siegel interviewed Mark Regev, the spokesman for Prime Minister Olmert, and

Rafiq Hussein, the chief of staff for Abbas. In the second pairing, on **March 3**, Siegel interviewed Regev and Riad Malki, who currently holds both the foreign affairs and information ministry posts for the Palestinian Authority. The two sets of interviews gave listeners a rare opportunity to hear two of the four sides in the current phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.