

NPR Middle East Coverage April - June 2008

The second quarter of 2008 saw an extraordinary series of potentially significant developments in the Middle East, including the opening of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria; Israel's celebration of its 60th anniversary; a controversial diplomatic intervention by former President Jimmy Carter; the first direct cease-fire between Israel and Hamas; agreement on a prisoner exchange between Israel and Hezbollah; and an outbreak of sectarian violence in Lebanon that, ironically, led to a negotiated agreement intended to break the long political deadlock that had paralyzed the government. On top of these events, the region was rife with rumors that Israel would attack Iranian nuclear facilities sometime soon.

NPR covered these and other events in the region in 96 reporter pieces, 2-ways, and show interviews during the April-June quarter. The number of reports fall within the average range for periods that have not involved major wars or upheavals.

Accuracy

The "Corrections" page on NPR's web site shows no corrections for Middle East stories during this period.

NPR's Middle East reporting continues to be remarkably accurate. There were no substantial errors or fact, but just a few quibbles:

--The intro to an Ivan Watson piece for *All Things Considered* on **April 7** incorrectly referred to Ehud Barak as prime minister of Israel. Barak was prime minister eight years ago but he does not hold that position now. The transcript has been corrected.

-- The intro to *Bryant Park Project's* **May 22** interview with journalist Rami Khouri overstated the duration and degree of recent violence in Lebanon. The opening sentence of the intro said: "Lebanon has been without a president since November, and for the past year and a half, the country has been mired in some of the worst violence it's seen since the civil war that ended in 1990." It is true that Lebanon has seen violent

incidents in the past 18 months and experienced significant violence during the first half of May. However, that political violence paled when compared to the full-scale war with Israel in 2006. What the intro should have said was that Lebanon for the past year and a half has experienced its greatest political crisis since the civil war ended in 1990, and that crisis led to periodic violence, including an outbreak of sectarian conflict early in May.

-- In pieces on **June 2** and **June 4**, Eric Westervelt and Michele Kelemen, respectively, gave different figures for how many years Long Island businessman Morris Talansky said he had given cash to Prime Minister Olmert. Eric said it was 12 years and Michele said it was 15 years. The difference is understandable because Talansky himself referred to his 15-year relationship with Olmert but his vague accounting of donations covered only the period between 1993 and 2003; he also insisted that he's had no contact with Olmert since the latter became prime minister in 2006.

Voices

Overall, 46 Israelis and 53 Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese) appeared on tape; some of these were multiple appearances by individuals. Of the Arabs, 39 were Palestinians (including two Israeli Bedouins) and 11 were Lebanese; the rest were other nationalities. The number of Israeli voices in this period was skewed by a single item: a collection of 9 Israeli voices (assembled by Linda Gradstein) aired on *All Things Considered* on **May 8**, the first day of the Israeli anniversary celebration.

In addition, 28 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis, and 35 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese); some of these were multiple appearances by individuals.

The appearances on tape, or in quotes, of individual Israeli, Palestinian, and Lebanese officials and opinion leaders were also counted.

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 2 items; quoted in 7 items

President Shimon Peres: On tape in 2 items

Olmert spokesman Marl Regev: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item
Political scientist Gerald Steinberg: On tape in 2 items
Other Israelis on tape: 39

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 1 item
 Hamas leader Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 2 items; quoted in 1 item
Businessman Mohammed al-Masri: On tape in 2 items
Other Palestinians on tape: 34

Lebanese

Journalist Rami Khouri: On tape in 3 items
President Michael Suleiman: Quoted on 3 items
Druze leader Walid Jumblatt: Quoted in 2 items
Other Lebanese on tape: 8

All these figures suggest a rough balance during the quarter between Israeli and Arab voices. As noted below, Israeli voices were predominant in NPR's coverage of Israel's 60th anniversary.

Range of voices.

NPR listeners heard a pretty good sampling of public opinion in Israel, Gaza, and Lebanon during the quarter.

Identification of voices.

-- A *Tell Me More* interview on **May 9**, dealing with a decision by Israel's top rabbinical court to invalidate many recent conversions, failed to give adequate identification of the principal interviewee: Rabbi Shaul Farber. He was identified only as director of the Jewish Life Information Center, an organization that was not described.

-- *Morning Edition* on **May 13** identified Israeli writer/historian Michael Oren as being a "senior fellow at the Shalem Center, a research group in Jerusalem," and did not further describe who he is or where he falls within Israel's broad ideological spectrum.

-- A *Weekend Edition Saturday* interview on **May 24** of Gidi Greenstein identified him only as founder and president of the Reut Institute in Tel Aviv, an organization that can be familiar only to a small number of listeners. Listeners should have been given more information about both the institute and Greenstein, who is a

former Labor Party official, particularly because this interview dealt with the political aspects of the investigations into alleged wrongdoing by Olmert.

Fairness and Balance

Of the 96 total items in this survey, 16 had a dominant focus on Israel; 11 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians; 8 focused about equally on those two sides (the "Israel-Palestinian" category, formerly listed as "neither"); 12 focused on the "US-Region" aspect of U.S. diplomacy (such as the trips to the region by Bush and Rice); 13 focused primarily on Lebanon; and the rest focused on other regional matters.

These figures suggest the coverage was well balanced and was fairly representative of news events in the region during the quarter.

In terms of balance within individual pieces or interviews, the most glaring example of a problem during this quarter was with the *Tell Me More* item on **May 9**, mentioned above in the "Voices" section. This was a joint interview with an Israeli rabbi and a convert to Judaism, both of whom denounced a decision by Israel's chief rabbinical court overturning many conversions to Judaism since 1999. This was a fine interview that raised many important questions about the role of religion in Israeli civic as well as private life. However, the show did not offer any kind of defense of the court's decision, not even in a pro-forma explanation of why the court said it did what it did. In effect, the show allowed opponents of the decision to be the only ones characterizing it.

Pairings.

On several occasions, NPR shows paired pieces or interviews from opposing sides. These pairings work best when they are done on the same day (ideally back-to-back).

Following are several pairings that clearly were set up as part of NPR's coverage of Israel's 60th anniversary:

-- *Morning Edition* on **May 13** and **May 14** ran contrasting interviews with, respectively, Israeli historian Michael Oren and Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttab. Each is an articulate spokesman for the middle ground in the respective societies.

-- *Day to Day* on **May 14** paired an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, author of an *Atlantic* magazine profile of Israel, and an interview with Diana Buttu, a Canadian-born Palestinian lawyer.

-- *All Things Considered* on **May 14** paired a Jackie Northam piece, about Bush's visit to Israel, with a Gradstein piece about Palestinians who still dream of returning to their old homes in what is now Israel.

-- *Tell Me More* had interviews on **May 14** with Ethiopian and Argentinean Jews who had emigrated to Israel, and on **May 16** with a Palestinian-American whose family had fled what is now Israel just before the founding of the Jewish state.