

NPR Middle East Coverage

April - June 2009

The inauguration of a new government in Israel, the Obama administration's stepped up diplomacy, and Pope Benedict's and President Obama's visits to the Middle East were the major regional news events of the second quarter of 2009. NPR shows covered these and related matters in 95 reporter pieces, two-ways, and interviews. The number was much smaller than the 161 items aired during the first quarter of the year (which included the final weeks of the war in Gaza) but was about average for a three-month period that did not include a major war involving Israel and one of its neighbors.

During this quarter, NPR mounted one of its most ambitious multi-media projects to date: A four-part series of radio pieces and accompanying features on the NPR website dealing with Israel's security barrier surrounding much of the West Bank. This project enabled the NPR audience to hear *and* see first-person reports from both the Israeli and Palestinian sides of the barrier.

NPR's coverage of the region generally met high journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness, and balance. Extensive coverage of two of the major news events during the period – the Pope's visit and Obama's speech – demonstrated once again that NPR can give its listeners (and now its web readers) journalism of the highest quality. Even so, NPR reporters and shows need to tell listeners more about the identity of voices appearing on air, provide them with a broader range of viewpoints from all sides, and should be more careful to balance opposing views on one of the world's most-disputed stories.

ACCURACY

NPR has posted one correction of a story covered by this quarter's review. The correction, posted on July 10, dealt with the web version of a June 12 piece for **All Things Considered** (ATC) by freelance reporter Sheera Frenkel (dealing with support by American evangelical Christians for Israeli settlers on the West Bank). The web version (but not the radio version) stated: "An estimated 250,000 Jewish settlers are living on territory captured by Israel in 1967." The figure of 250,000 would have been nearly correct for just the West Bank, but because the statement mentioned all the lands captured by Israel during the 1967 war, it was incorrect. The posted correction noted that more than 270,000 Jewish settlers lived in the West Bank (as of Israel's 2007 census) and some 460,000 to 480,000 settlers lived in all the lands captured by Israel in 1967 (including East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights as well as the West Bank).

[Note: On April 17 and April 28, NPR posted corrections for Middle East-related stories that aired in January and were dealt with in the report for the first quarter of 2009.]

A careful review of the items covered by this review found the following concerns about factual matters:

– Eric Westervelt's piece for Morning Edition (ME) on **April 1**, reporting on the formation of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's new government, said the new coalition was "the largest in Israeli history after Netanyahu added ministerial portfolios to appease members of his own Likud Party." Because of the reference to ministerial portfolios, the piece should have said that Netanyahu's *cabinet* was the largest in Israeli history.

– A **May 18** posting on NPR's blog, The Two-Way, mischaracterized a key provision of the so-called Wye River Memorandum, negotiated under the auspices of President Clinton in October 1998. In its report previewing Prime Minister Netanyahu's meeting with President Obama at the White House, The Two-Way said:

The last time Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the Oval Office as leader of his nation in 1998, President Bill Clinton was in the White House pressing Netanyahu to negotiate with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. Netanyahu did, negotiating the Wye

Memorandum with Arafat, an understanding for Israel to turn over 40 percent of West Bank territory to the Palestinians.

In fact, the central provision of the Wye River Memorandum dealt with only 13 percent of the West Bank, which Netanyahu agreed to transfer to the Palestinians (the agreement also shifted the status of another 14 percent). The 40 percent figure cited by The Two-Way apparently referred to the total amount of the West Bank that Netanyahu had been willing to cede to partial control by the Palestinians, including the portion covered by the Wye agreement. The essential points of the Wye River Memorandum were that it represented the first time a right-of-center Israeli government agreed to give up control over a substantial portion of the land that many Israelis consider part of "Greater Israel," and that many provisions of the agreement were never implemented.

– In his commentary for ATC on **May 20**, Daniel Schorr gave a somewhat misleading characterization of one of Prime Minister Netanyahu's positions. Schorr said Netanyahu was demanding "that the Palestinians recognize the Jewish state." In fact, Netanyahu's demand was more subtle and complex: not only that Palestinians recognize Israel but that they recognize Israel *as* a Jewish state – in other words, that they accept the Jewish character of Israel, despite the fact that 20 percent of Israel's citizens are Arabs. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), speaking on behalf of Palestinians, and two Arab countries (Egypt and Jordan) have recognized Israel as a state but not as a Jewish one. There is a crucial difference, one that the wording of Schorr's commentary failed to make.

– A **May 22** posting by The Two-Way blog, reporting on Vice President Joe Biden's visit that day to Lebanon, contained confusing and misleading references to "pro-democracy" forces in Lebanon:

While his predecessor is making headlines for attacking the Obama Administration's approach towards Guantanamo and terrorist suspects, Vice President Joe Biden is in Beirut, Lebanon today where his job is to demonstrate the Obama team's support for the weak Lebanese government in the run-up to the June 7 elections.

There's a very real fear in Washington that Hezbollah, the militant Islamic group, could make larger electoral inroads in the election. Pro-democracy forces within

Lebanon are also worried that outreach by the U.S. to Iran and Syria might result in the U.S. weakening its support for the democracy movement there.

Syria has long viewed Lebanon as one of its provinces and has used Hezbollah as a proxy to exert control in the country.

So Biden's public comments today in Lebanon were all about reassuring officials in the weak government and Lebanon's pro-democracy movement that the U.S. was their stalwart ally.

This posting offers no information about the identity of the "pro-democracy forces" and "pro-democracy movement" in Lebanon. In recent years, two major factions have contended for dominance of Lebanese politics: the so-called "March 14" coalition that often is labeled as being "pro-Western" and the so-called "March 8" coalition that often is labeled as being dominated by the Shiite group Hezbollah. Both coalitions participated actively in the electoral process in 2005 and 2009 and therefore could legitimately claim to be "pro-democracy." It is true that Hezbollah has used street protests and its military power to exert pressure on the government outside democratic channels, but Hezbollah certainly is not the only group to use such tactics in Lebanon's recent history.

From the context of the blog, it would appear that The Two-Way was referring to the March 14 coalition as being the "pro-democracy forces." If so, this would be an inaccurate, and indeed inappropriate, characterization of one side in an election that was duly contested by two sides.

VOICES

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese) appeared in the 95 radio items reviewed, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, 49 Israelis and 61 Arabs (including Palestinians) appeared on tape; some of these were multiple appearances by individuals. Of the Arabs, 41 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities; again, some of these were multiple appearances by individuals.

In addition, 43 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 41 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians); some of these were multiple appearances by individuals. ("Quotes" means all statements, not on tape, attributed either to named individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Palestinians.")

Overall, one can conclude from these figures that NPR's presentation of Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints was reasonably balanced during the period. It should be noted that eleven of the 65 Arab voices were in just two pieces: A **June 3** preview, by Deborah Amos for ATC, of President Obama's speech in Cairo the next day (with 5 Egyptian voices); and a **June 23** piece by Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, for Morning Edition, on internal strife in the West Bank (with 6 Palestinian voices). The largest number of Israeli voices appearing in any single piece (four voices) was in Garcia-Navarro's feature for Morning Edition on **May 20** about Israeli settlements in the West Bank.

I also counted the appearances on tape or in quotes of individual Israelis and Palestinians, including officials and opinion leaders. Following is a summary of individual Israelis and Palestinians with multiple appearances during this quarter:

Israelis:

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu: On tape in 6 items; quoted in 10 items

President Shimon Peres: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 2 items

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: Quoted in 2 items

Spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 2 items

Spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 2 items

Historian Tom Segev: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item

Other Israelis on tape: 35

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 2 items

Cleric Tayseer Tamimi: Quoted in 2 items

Other Palestinians on tape: 40

The obvious conclusion from this list is that NPR listeners heard very little from Israeli or Palestinian leaders (except for Israel's new prime minister) during this period. In fact, listeners heard nothing directly from the main leaders of Hamas, who have rarely appeared on NPR's air, even since taking control of the Gaza strip in June 2007. NPR should work harder to get more voices of Israelis and Palestinians on the air -- including those of Hamas officials and representatives. Hamas officials were in hiding and thus unavailable during the recent war, but in "normal" times they can be available if a reporter really tries to get to them -- or at least quotes from their widely available public statements. Also noteworthy was the relative absence from NPR's air of Israel's new foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman, who generated significant controversy in the Middle East and globally during his first weeks in office. NPR listeners heard that Lieberman was controversial but no specifics on why (for example, his past proposal to relocate Israeli Arab citizens to neighboring Arab countries or his statements casting doubt on the validity of the so-called "peace process" with the Palestinians).

In addition, it should be noted that during the quarter, All Things Considered interviewed a half-dozen senior officials and other representatives of Arab countries but only one high-level Israeli: President Shimon Peres. NPR's other news programs carried only a few interviews with representatives of either side.

Range of Voices.

Over the years, these reviews have discussed NPR reporters and shows' tendency to present only a narrow range of voices from the Middle East: moderates who advocate peace and reconciliation. NPR listeners rarely hear the voices of Israelis and Palestinians with extreme views who are not at all interested in reconciliation with the other side; such people often are the driving forces in both communities.

This tendency generally held true for the April-June period, but there were a few exceptions, notably reporting from the Israeli settlements on the West Bank. NPR listeners had four opportunities during the quarter to hear the voices of Israeli settlers who are determined to hold onto the West Bank, which they call part of the historic land of Israel.

- Lourdes Garcia-Navarro did three pieces (for ATC on **May 20 and June 29**, for ME on **May 22**,) reporting on West Bank settlers and their plans to stay put, no matter what the Israeli government might do if peace talks ever revive.
- Freelance reporter Sheera Frenkel reported, for ATC on **June 12**, from the Israeli settlement in Hebron, one of several settlements that receive substantial financial support from evangelical Christians in the U.S.

Identification of Voices.

In recent months NPR reporters and shows generally have improved the identification of individuals appearing on air. Even so, the following cases showed that listeners are not always given adequate information about the voices they hear:

– In Eric Westervelt's piece for Morning Edition on **April 1** reporting on the formation of Netanyahu's new government, he used tape from Tel Aviv University professor Gideon Doron commenting on the new government. Doron was identified only as an "Israeli political analyst." Listeners deserved more information about Doron, his affiliations, and political views – in particular that he was a founding member of the centrist Kadima Party, which refused to join Netanyahu's new government and went into opposition.

– Michele Kelemen's piece for ATC on **April 23**, reviewing the Obama administration's planned "outreach" to Iran, included tape from Trita Parsi, identified only as the author of "Traacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Iran, Israel and the United States." Kelemen should also have noted that Parsi is founder and president of the National Iranian American Council, which lobbies in Washington on behalf of the Iranian-

American community and, among other positions, has advocated the kind of diplomacy Obama appeared to be embracing.

– Kelemen's **May 14** piece for ATC reporting on Obama's plans for Mideast diplomacy, used tape from Stephen Cohen, identified only as "of the Israel Policy Forum." Most listeners wouldn't know that group so it needs to be more fully described.

– In two pieces, Garcia-Navarro gave inadequate descriptions for the Israeli group Peace Now. First, a piece for ATC on **May 20**, reporting on the determination of Israeli settlers to keep building in the West Bank, included tape of Hagit Ofran, identified as director of "the Israeli activist group Peace Now." It's true that Peace Now is an "activist" group, but in the context of this piece it would have been better to describe the group as "anti-settlement." A second piece, for Morning Edition on **May 22**, on the Israeli government's demolition of a settlement "outpost" in the West Bank, described Peace Now as "the Israeli anti-occupation group." The meaning of this short-hand description might have escaped some listeners; a clearer description, in the context of the piece, might have been something like: "Peace Now, which opposes Israel's occupation of the West Bank."

– Kelemen's piece for Morning Edition on **May 28**, previewing Obama's trip to Egypt, included tape from Radwan Masmoudi. He was described only as head of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy. A more complete description would have told listeners that the center is a U.S.-based organization that promotes democracy in Islamic societies.

– On **June 2**, Morning Edition interviewed Khaled al-Maeena, who was identified only as the editor of *Arab News*. Listeners should have been told more about this news service, which, in addition to being one of the largest English-language news sources in the Arab world, is closely affiliated with the Saudi government.

Fairness and Balance

Using the same standard of previous reports, I made a subjective assessment of the "dominant focus" of each piece, interview, or 2-way covered by this review. The

dominant focus of a piece does not mean that the piece takes sides; it's merely an indication of the primary subject matter.

Of the 95 radio reporter pieces, interviews, and two-ways reviewed:

- 11 focused on Israel (including 4 focusing on Israeli settlements in the West Bank);
- 8 on the Palestinians;
- 5 about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 9 on Pope Benedict's visit to the region;
- 6 on Lebanon; 16 focused on U.S. policy toward the Middle East (primarily Obama's speech in Cairo);
- 6 on U.S.-Israel relations;
- 6 on other U.S. concerns in the region;
- 4 on U.S. internal matters that had some connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute;
- 4 on regional issues; 2 focused on Egypt;
- 1 on Egyptian-Palestinian issues;
- 1 on Iran;
- 1 on Israel-Iran tensions;
- the remaining 14 items focused on a range of other matters that had some connection to the Middle East.

Taking into consideration the news events of the period, these totals appear to demonstrate reasonably balanced overall coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute and related matters in the region. One might have wished for more coverage of several

important events or trends, but it is not apparent that NPR focused on one side at the expense of other sides.

I did have concerns about specific elements of fairness in the following items:

– The intro to Eric Westervelt's **April 6** piece for ATC (the first of a four-part series on the impact of Israel's barrier around the West Bank) started with this statement: "In Israel, the formation of a new right-wing coalition has diminished prospects for peace with the Palestinians." It certainly is true that many people viewed the formation of Israel's new government in such a way. But this unqualified and unattributed statement was not fair and balanced. At the very least, the statement should have been qualified, for example, by saying formation of the new government had raised questions about prospects for renewed peace talks.

– In Lourdes Garcia-Navarro's **May 8** piece for Morning Edition, previewing Pope Benedict's impending visit to the Middle East, she noted that Bethlehem (where the pope planned to stop) "has a sizable Christian community, but it is dwindling." This statement was followed immediately with the observation that: "The barrier that Israel is building in and around the West Bank has made life more difficult for the residents of Bethlehem," followed by a quote from a Palestinian priest about Christian families leaving the area to look for opportunities elsewhere. A listener could reasonably conclude that Garcia-Navarro was implying that Christian Palestinians are leaving the area because of Israel's barrier. This probably was not her intention, however, and such an implication would not be entirely accurate in any case. Christian Palestinians began fleeing the West Bank years before Israel started construction of the barrier, a process that has accelerated in recent years, largely because of deep problems within Palestinian society (problems that have been exacerbated by, but were not entirely caused by, Israeli policies).

– Garcia-Navarro's **May 18** piece for Morning Edition, previewing Prime Minister Netanyahu's meeting that day with President Obama, allowed two of Netanyahu's political allies to present an extremely one-sided rendition of recent diplomatic history without a direct counter from other participants. The piece quoted Danny Ayalon (the

deputy foreign minister) and Dore Gold (a leading intellectual on the Israeli right) as implying that Israel generally was blameless for the failures of the peace process over the past two decades. Palestinian officials and American diplomats have presented sharply different accounts of the negotiating record, however. Because differing views of history are at the heart of Middle East conflicts, listeners should have been given at least a hint that the version of history presented by Ayalon and Gold is not universally accepted. Although the piece included tape from two Palestinian representatives discussing other matters, neither was afforded a chance to respond to the historical assertions by the two Israelis.

– Morning Edition listeners had an unusual opportunity, on **May 28**, to hear news from a Palestinian community in the West Bank, and some of it was even relatively good news. Garcia-Navarro focused on the economic boom in Ramallah, the de facto capital of the West Bank. However, the piece failed to put developments in Ramallah into a broader context. It should have explained why the rest of the West Bank is suffering from extreme economic hardship. The reasons are numerous, but listeners were given no information on which they could draw their own conclusions.

– NPR shows offered extensive coverage, both before and immediately after, of President Obama's **June 4** speech in Cairo addressed to the "Muslim world." Nearly all reaction on NPR's air came from Muslims (and specifically, Muslims in or from the Middle East). This was appropriate because that was the audience Obama sought to reach. On the day of the speech ATC also aired one piece, by Garcia-Navarro, presenting reactions from Israelis and Palestinians. However, a story was needed to give listeners broader coverage of the growing unease within Israel about Obama and his emerging policies.

– Garcia-Navarro's **June 15** report, for Morning Edition, on Prime Minister Netanyahu's long-awaited speech on June 14 (announcing his conditions for Mideast peace talks) included some reaction from Palestinians and Israeli newspapers. This piece lacked reaction from a vital constituency: the right-wing members of Netanyahu's coalition, who were upset by what they perceived as his policy reversal and who could determine how long the new prime minister remains in office.

"Israel's Barrier" Series

Early in April, NPR mounted one of its most ambitious efforts, to date, to marry its radio journalism to the web. Eric Westervelt's four-part series of radio reports appeared on ATC from April 6 through 9, and NPR's website expanded on the series with text versions of Westervelt's reports along with photographs and video by NPR's David Gilkey. Together, the radio pieces and the web reports afforded listeners and viewers an excellent opportunity to understand one of the most contentious issues dividing Israelis and Palestinians: Israel's planned 450-mile barrier that is intended to separate Israel (and the main Israeli settlements in the West Bank) from most of the Palestinians who live in the West Bank.

The first piece on **April 6**, served as an overview. It described the daily ritual of Palestinian workers who navigate Israeli check-points to reach their jobs in Israel proper or the so-called "seam zone" that lies between Israel and the barrier. This piece also included a vivid description of why the barrier is popular among Israelis, as a deterrent to suicide bombings and other terrorist attacks carried out by extremist Palestinian groups. The website featured a 5-minute video that focused on Palestinian workers and an Israeli doctor in the city of Netanya, the scene of a deadly suicide bombing in 2002.

The second piece, on **April 7**, focused mainly on the hardships faced by Palestinians who live near the barrier; the piece also included tape from an Israeli police commander who seemed to minimize the hardships. The web page version included a 4-minute video that focused on the Palestinian viewpoint but also included a statement by an Israeli official about how the barrier had stopped "92 percent" of planned terrorist attacks against Israel.

The third piece, which aired **April 8**, focused on Ariel, one of the largest Jewish settlements in the West Bank. Ariel is surrounded by its own fence but lies outside the perimeter of the larger West Bank barrier. The focal point was Ariel's outspoken mayor, Ron Nachman, but the piece also included tape from an Israeli attorney representing an Israeli group that opposes Israel's occupation of the West Bank. No Palestinians were

quoted. The accompanying web page included several photographs of Ariel and Nachman, but no video.

The fourth piece, which aired on **April 9**, focused on a Palestinian family in Bethlehem but also included tape from a retired Israeli Army colonel who helped design the route of the West Bank barrier. The website version featured photographs of the Palestinian family and the retired colonel. The web page also included a separate section (which did not appear on the radio) describing weekly protests against the barrier in the neighboring villages of Bil'in and Nil'in in the northern part of the West Bank. The piece quoted a Palestinian, an Israeli army commander, and the mother and a lawyer for an American peace activist who was injured in a protest.

This four-part series generated a large number of phone calls, e-mails, and comments on NPR's website. Some of the reaction praised the series but the majority attacked it as being either pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel. Many of those who commented clearly had read or listened to only one part of the series and therefore objected that the entire series was unbalanced because that one part had not dealt with an important aspect of the broader story. It is obvious that many others heard or read only what they wanted to hear or read: Some, for example, insisted the series failed to explain why Israel built the barrier (when in fact each piece gave Israel's explanation), while others objected to what they said was an uncritical examination of Israel's actions, and others said the series did not explain enough about the many failures of Palestinian society.

Some commenters also complained that the series lacked historical context, particularly because it concerned only events since the second Palestinian "intifada" of 2000-2002. This is a common complaint about reporting from the Middle East. Advocates on all sides believe fervently that what happened 10, 60, 100, or even 2,000 years ago explains or justifies their own positions today. And these advocates are angry when news reports fail to explain today's events in just the right context – from their own viewpoints, of course. However, no single news report, or even a four-part series, can possibly give all the relevant background information. Despite the criticisms, NPR's series about the West Bank barrier provided adequate information for a curious listener or

reader to understand the essential elements of the story. A guide to further reading would have been a useful addition to the web presentation.

Each piece in the series included some variation of the statement that the barrier separated Israel from the West Bank. Some listeners criticized this statement because it appeared to minimize the fact that much of the barrier drives deep into the West Bank, and thus does not really separate Israel proper from the West Bank. On narrow technical grounds, this criticism is correct: The barrier does not divide Israel (as defined by the borders prior to the 1967 war) from the West Bank. Even so, it is broadly correct to say that the barrier's purpose is to put a physical separation between Israel and majority of Palestinians in the West Bank. In addition, Westervelt's series made clear that the barrier not only intrudes into the West Bank but also imposes severe hardships on many West Bank Palestinians whose homes and businesses are (or were) located along the barrier's route.

Overall, this reviewer believes the series was excellent and gave NPR's audience (both on the radio and online) a fair and balanced, in-depth look into an important issue that, in many ways, symbolizes the broader conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The photographs and videos on the website afforded readers a chance to see the Palestinians and Israelis featured in the radio pieces, as well as the barrier itself and the communities near it.