

NPR Middle East Coverage

July - September 2008

NPR gave its listeners minimal coverage of the Middle East during the third quarter of 2008, largely because of the press of news elsewhere, notably the U.S. presidential campaign, the global financial crisis, and the brief conflict between Georgia and Russia.

NPR aired 36 items dealing with Middle East matters during the quarter, about one-third of the average number since 2003. Nine of the items dealt primarily with the U.S. presidential campaign — in particular Barack Obama's trip to the region in July and the local perceptions of him. These items generally met NPR's high journalistic standards, except for completeness and "balance" because the coverage was so scaled back.

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 are no substantial factual errors, just a couple of quibbles:

— In Eric Westervelt's on-deadline account of the **July 2** attack in Jerusalem by a Palestinian bulldozer operator, Eric quoted a police spokesman as saying the attacker was killed by an off-duty Israeli soldier who climbed onto the bulldozer and shot the driver at close range. Other reports on the same day said two police officers also shot the driver, one of whom might actually have delivered the fatal blow.

— Linda Gradstein's **July 16** piece for *Day to Day* on an Israel-Lebanon prisoner exchange had two somewhat misleading pieces of information in its opening paragraph. First, Linda said that until Israel received two black coffins from Lebanon, "there had been no information about the fate of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, the two soldiers captured on the Lebanese border just over two years ago." Linda was correct in that Israel might not have had absolutely hard information about the fate of the soldiers,

but in the weeks before the prisoner swap, Israeli officials began telling the public that the soldiers likely were dead. In fact, when the cabinet approved the prisoner-exchange deal on June 30 Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said he believed the soldiers were dead.

Second, Linda said the most controversial prisoner released by Israel, Samir Kantar, was "the longest-serving Arab prisoner in an Israeli jail," having been imprisoned since 1979. Kantar might have been the longest-serving non-Palestinian Arab, but according to some sources he served slightly less time in Israeli prison than did Said al-Atba, a Palestinian who was imprisoned in 1977 for masterminding the bombing of a market near Tel Aviv and was released by Israel on August 25.

Voices

Overall, 29 Israelis and 26 Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese) appeared on tape; some of these were multiple appearances by individuals. Of the Arabs, 11 were Palestinians and 13 were Lebanese; the rest were other nationalities.

In addition, 17 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 13 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 2 items; quoted in 6 items
Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 2 items
Historian Michael Oren: On tape in 2 items
President Shimon Peres: On tape 1 item
Other Israelis on tape: 23

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: Quoted in 1 item
Other Palestinians on tape: 11

Lebanese

Political scientist Paul Salem: On tape in 3 items
Journalist Rami Khouri: On tape in 2 items
Academic Amal Saad-Ghorayeb: On tape in 2 items
President Michael Suleiman: On tape in 1 item
Other Lebanese on tape: 4

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this list is the near-total absence of voices from either side of the Palestinian leadership. Mahmoud Abbas was quoted only once, and that was an indirect quote in a *Weekend All Things Considered* segment on **August 9** noting he had declared three days of mourning following the death of poet Mahmoud Darwish. No other top officials for Abbas's government or the rival Hamas government in Hamas appeared on NPR's air.

Range of voices.

As could be expected because of the limited coverage during the quarter, the range of voices NPR listeners heard from the Middle East was very narrow.

Identification of voices.

Westervelt's otherwise fine piece for *Morning Edition* on **July 10** used two cuts of tape from Ziad al-Hamouri, of the Jerusalem Center for Social and Economic Rights. Hamouri was not, but should have been, identified as a Palestinian; a very careful listener might have figured this out, but many others probably did not.

Fairness and Balance

Of the 36 total items in this survey, 7 had a dominant focus on Israel; 2 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians; 3 focused about equally on those two sides (the "Israel-Palestinian" category, formerly listed as "neither"); 9 focused on aspects of the U.S. presidential campaign (shown in the "US-Region" and "US" categories); 2 focused primarily on Lebanon; 3 focused on "regional" matters; 3 focused on Iran, and the rest focused on other regional matters.

There are concerns about the lack of balance in two reporter pieces:

— Gradstein's piece for *All Things Considered* on **July 10**, reporting Palestinian reaction to Israel's closing of charities and businesses in Nablus because of their alleged connections to Hamas, should have given an Israeli response to the Palestinian criticisms. Linda quoted several Nablus residents as saying the places closed by Israel were not related to Hamas, and these residents warned that the action would boost Hamas's

popularity in the West Bank. The intro to the piece gave a brief explanation of Israel's action but did not afford the government any opportunity to respond to the specific complaints against it.

— Westervelt's piece for *Morning Edition* on **July 31**, focusing on Israel's demolition of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem, needed more of an official Israeli response to accusations of unfairness made by Palestinians and reinforced by an Israeli political scientist.

Pairings. Shows used the technique of pairing reports from different perspectives on only one occasion during this period: the Israel-Hezbollah prisoner exchange on **July 16**. As the swap was under way, *Morning Edition* did a joint interview with Westervelt in Israel and Watson in Lebanon. Later in the day, *All Things Considered* carried separate pieces by them on domestic reactions to the event.