

NPR Middle East Coverage October - December 2008

Along with most other U.S. news organizations, NPR in this quarter offered very little coverage of the Middle East until Israel began a major bombing campaign in the Gaza Strip on December 27. From October 1 through December 26, NPR aired 26 items dealing with the Middle East, an average of just about two items per week. Over the following five days, however, NPR's shows covered the Gaza war as the major story, devoting a total of 37 reporter pieces and interviews to it.

Accuracy

The "Corrections" page on NPR's web site shows no corrections for Middle East stories during this period. Overall, NPR's Middle East reporting continues to be remarkably accurate. In this quarter, the following were of concern:

– Several items during this quarter mentioned the Israeli blockade of Gaza in such a way as to create the impression that Israel was not allowing any goods into the strip. In her piece for *Morning Edition* on **November 19**, exploring the Middle East policy challenges to be faced by the Obama administration, Michele Kelemen said Israel had "sealed" off the Gaza strip. This was followed with a piece of tape from the head of the UN's Palestinian refugee agency calling for open borders. Similarly, the intro to Westervelt's otherwise fine piece for *Morning Edition* on **December 8**, which described the tunnels from Gaza into Egypt, said Israel "has imposed an economic blockade" of Gaza.

While it is true that Israel often blocked the border crossings and refused to allow even humanitarian supplies into Gaza, Israel did allow some shipments of aid to continue even during the bombing campaign.

In another example, the intro to Peter Kenyon's piece for *All Things Considered* on **December 29** (reporting on the view from the Sinai near the Gaza border) emphasized Israel's isolation of Gaza and said that "several truck loads of medical supplies" had been

allowed into Gaza. According to Israeli figures, 23 trucks with food and other supplies were allowed into Gaza on December 28 and 63 trucks were allowed on December 29 – substantially more than "several," even if the total amount of aid fell far short of what Gazans needed for daily life. These figures were available during the day when this intro was written and should have been checked in Washington.

– The intro to Westervelt's 2-way with *Weekend Edition Saturday* on **December 27**, reporting on the initial Israeli airstrikes in Gaza, was a bit too categorical in describing Israel's complaint about Hamas. The intro said Israel accused Hamas "of doing nothing to halt the rocket assaults." Israel did, indeed, accuse Hamas of not doing enough to stop the rocket attacks, but the government did acknowledge that Hamas sharply curtailed the number of attacks during the six-month cease-fire.

Voices

Overall, 30 Israelis and 47 Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese) appeared on tape; some of these were multiple appearances by individuals. Of the Arabs, 33 were Palestinians and 4 were Lebanese; the rest were other nationalities (many of them Egyptian); again, some of these were multiple appearances by individuals.

In addition, 33 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 38 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese); some of these were multiple appearances by individuals.

Following is a summary of those with multiple appearances during this quarter:

Israelis:

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 4 items
Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 5 items
Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni: On tape in 2 items; quoted in 1 item
Spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 3 items; quoted in 1 item
Peace activist Zeev Sternhell: On tape in 2 items
Politician Yosi Beilin: On tape in 2 items
Other Israelis on tape: 21

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 4 items
Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh: On tape in 1 item

Politician Mustafa Barghouti: On tape in 4 items
Hamis leader Khalid Meshal: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item
Journalist Ahmed Hamda: On tape in 2 items
Dr. Hassan Khalif: On tape in 2 items
Gaza resident Hossam Madhoun: On tape in 2 items
Other Palestinians on tape: 19

Lebanese

Journalist Rami Khouri: On tape in 3 items
Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item
Other Lebanese on tape: 0

Range of voices.

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

Listeners did have three opportunities to hear the voices of right-wing Jewish settlers in the West Bank. The first came on **October 23** when *All Things Considered* carried a Westervelt piece exploring the escalating violence by some settlers against both Palestinians and Israeli security forces. In that piece, settler Daniela Weiss explained the goal of preventing a "two-state solution" by placing outposts around the West Bank; this was one of the few occasions in memory that NPR listeners heard the agenda of settlers to block a peace settlement. This piece also included tape from the controversial left-wing Israeli professor Zeev Sternhell, who was attacked at his home in September, reportedly by Jewish extremists.

In a piece for *Morning Edition* on **October 30**, Westervelt profiled the Federman clan, which had built an outpost near Hebron that was removed by Israeli security forces. Also, a Westervelt piece for *Morning Edition* on **December 4**, reporting on clashes between Israeli security forces and far-right settlers in Hebron, included tape from one of the settlers demanding to know if Westervelt was an "anti-Semite." This was a rare opportunity for listeners to hear the depth of emotion and convictions of a settler.

Listeners did hear a somewhat broader range of voices during the final week of December because of the Gaza fighting. Among those outside the mainstream were a spokesman for Hamas (on *All Things Considered* on **December 29**) and a resident of the

border town of Sderot, who described in vivid detail the stress of dealing with rockets fired from Gaza (on *Day to Day* on **December 31**).

Fairness and Balance

Of the 63 total items in this survey, 8 had a dominant focus on Israel; 10 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians; 21 focused about equally on those two sides (the "Israel-Palestinian" category, formerly listed as "neither"); 10 focused on U.S. diplomatic or political considerations in the region ("U.S.-Region"); 7 focused on Arab nations; 2 focused on Egypt (separate from the "Arab" category); and the rest focused on other regional matters.

For the first 11 weeks of the quarter, so few items aired that it is not possible to reach an overall judgment about the fairness and balance of coverage. One could argue that Israel received more attention than did the Palestinian territories or even Lebanon, but the difference was only a matter of degree because NPR paid so little attention to any stories in the region.

Once the Gaza war got under way NPR tried to cover all sides of the story and was more successful in some respects than in others. Taken as a whole, however, it's clear that during the first five days listeners heard more from the Palestinian and Egyptian sides of the story than from the Israeli side. The breakdown for the 37 items aired during December 27-31 is as follows: Israel focus, 3 items; Palestinian focus, 7 items; Israel-Palestinian focus, 16 items; Arab focus, 6 items; Egypt focus, 2 items; and U.S.-Region focus, 3 items. In other words, items focusing on the Arab side (including Palestinians, Egypt, and the broader Arab world) outnumbered items focusing on Israel by 15 to 3.

Two important Israel-centered elements of the story received inadequate attention during this period: Except for a few brief mentions in reporter pieces, there was no reporting on Israeli public reaction to the fighting, and listeners heard little directly from residents of Sderot and other communities that experienced the brunt of Palestinian rockets.

One of the few references to Israeli public reaction was in a Westervelt piece for *All Things Considered* on **December 30**, in which Eric said "most Israelis solidly back their government's campaign." In that same piece, Westervelt used tape from one Sderot

resident (as he had for a piece for *All Things Considered* on **December 29**). However, it was not until **December 31** (five days into the conflict) that NPR listeners heard the first full report on Sderot; this came when *Day to Day* interviewed a resident who said enduring a large number of rockets each day had become a "regular routine" since the cease-fire ended, just as it had been before the cease-fire began.

Also, in some cases shows weighted all the coverage during an entire hour on one side, thus giving listeners who heard only that hour the impression that NPR was ignoring or under-reporting the other side.

One example was the first hour of *Morning Edition* on **December 31**, which coupled a piece by Peter Kenyon, reporting from an Egyptian hospital that was treating wounded Palestinians, with an interview with Mustafa Barghouti, the centrist Palestinian politician who ran against Abbas for the presidency in 2005. Each of these items was appropriate in and of itself, but as the only pieces dealing with the Gaza controversy during that hour, a listener could have gotten the impression that *Morning Edition* was focusing only on the Palestinian viewpoint. (Israel's ambassador to the United States appeared in the other hour).