

NPR Mideast Coverage October - December 2009

For the second quarter in a row, NPR's news shows devoted relatively little attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (and related events) in late 2009. From October through December, shows aired 39 reporter pieces and interviews on these topics. This was well below the average of nearly 100 items for most quarters in recent years. In addition to its radio reports, NPR posted 24 related items on its website; most of these were news stories from the Associated Press, and the rest were blogs by NPR staffers and other items. It would appear that NPR is shifting some of its daily news coverage of the Middle East from the radio to the website.

Over the course of 2009, NPR shows aired a total of 345 pieces and interviews on topics related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was similar to the totals for 2004 (358 items) and 2007 (361 items); greater than for 2008 (280 items); but below the totals for 2003 (514 items) and 2006 (827 items), the latter being the year of the Israeli-Lebanon war.

More than one-fourth of the 345 items aired in 2009 came during the first three weeks of January, when Israel was wrapping up its military offensive in the Gaza strip. In other words, once the Gaza war ended, NPR listeners heard relatively little (compared to previous years) about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and related issues. On a positive note, Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro offered listeners more than one dozen feature pieces, most of which highlighted the daily lives of Israelis and Palestinians, thus helping listeners understand important aspects of the conflict.

The items reviewed for this report generally met NPR's high journalistic standards, notably for accuracy and fairness. However, in some instances, the quality fell below NPR's standards when reporters and shows:

- failed to attribute information,
- or failed to give listeners adequate information about opposing views.

Accuracy

NPR has aired and posted no corrections of stories subject to this review.

As in the past, I carefully reviewed all items for factual accuracy, with special attention to the radio stories, two-ways, and blogs by NPR staffers. This review turned up no serious factual errors, although I do have concerns about one blog item (see Website section, below). Despite tight deadlines and other constraints, NPR's coverage of the region has consistently been remarkably accurate over the years.

Fairness and Balance

Using the same method as for previous reports, I determined the "dominant focus" of each radio piece, interview, or two-way covered for the period. The term "dominant focus" describes the overall subject matter and does not necessarily mean that the piece or interview takes sides. Of the 39 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 9 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 6 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 6 focused about equally on those two sides;
- 10 focused on various aspects of U.S. policy toward the Middle East (including relations with Israel, the Palestinians, and Iran);
- and the others focused on other specific matters, for example Israeli concerns about Iran's reported efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

Given the relatively small number of items under review, the above figures represent reasonably balanced coverage of the region. One might have wished for more coverage of some events and trends. But there is no evidence that NPR focused on one side at the expense of others.

For the full year of 2009, Israel was the primary subject of 52 items. The Palestinians were the primary subject of 50 items. And 56 items focused about equally on both sides. U.S. policy toward the region was the single most common topic of NPR coverage, with 98 items. The remaining items aired during the year focused on a range of topics, notably Iran's nuclear ambitions.

This balance of coverage – a roughly equal number of stories focusing on Israel and the Palestinians – has prevailed since these reviews began in 2003. Over the seven-year period, NPR has aired:

- 626 pieces and interviews with a dominant focus on Israel;
- 589 items with a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- and 508 focused about equally between the two sides.

Thus, based on this one criterion, NPR's coverage over the long-term can be said to be fair and balanced.

I do have concerns about balance in the following items aired during the fourth quarter:

– Freelance reporter Sheera Frenkel's feature piece for *Morning Edition*, aired on **October 12**, told the story of Jewish "vigilantes" in Israel who seek to prevent Jewish women from dating Arab men. This is an interesting story, but the piece should have been set within the broader context of the Arab-Israeli conflict and should have made an attempt to offer listeners the viewpoints of Jewish girls who dated Arab men and the men they dated. Other than two so-called vigilantes, the only voice in the piece was an Israeli girl who described Arab boys as "wild" and "bad boys." Maybe it was impossible for the reporter to get the other side of the story; if so, she should have said so.

The piece also gave listeners the impression that dating between young Arab men and Israeli women is widespread, and that the Jewish vigilante groups also are common. (The intro said: "The vigilante groups are walking the streets and towns across Israel.") It is probably difficult to quantify such a thing, but a clearer explanation of the scale of this activity would have been helpful. [NPR Ombudsman on Jewish Vigilante story](#)

– On **November 5**, Michele Kelemen did a piece for *Morning Edition* that reviewed the stalled Middle East peace process. Some listeners might have heard the host intro as placing all the blame on Israel. The intro said the Obama administration had put a high priority on Middle East peace but had not been able to persuade Israel to stop building settlements on the West Bank, and, as a result, the Palestinians were not ready to talk.

Kelemen's piece itself presented a more balanced view. Issues as complex as the Middle East peace process are notoriously difficult to summarize adequately in three or four sentences; even so, the intro could have been worded in a more neutral fashion to emphasize that *both* the Israelis and Palestinians have taken actions that appear to thwart Obama's hopes for the peace process.

– Lourdes Garcia-Navarro's piece for *Morning Edition* on **November 13**, described the frustrations of Gazans who had been unable to cross the borders into either Israel or Egypt. The piece offered listeners a vivid insight into daily conditions in Gaza. However, it failed to explain why Israel has kept the border closed. It also offered only a highly nuanced explanation (via a comment by a Gazan political analyst) for why Egypt also has closed its border with Gaza for nearly two years.

Because the border closings have had such an impact on Gazans, listeners needed to have more background to fully understand the story: The Israeli government wants to isolate Hamas and it fears that opening the border would allow terrorists to cross into Israel; while the Cairo government keeps the borders closed, in large part, because it is deathly afraid of the Hamas movement, which has ties to the anti-government Muslim Brotherhood inside Egypt.

– Garcia-Navarro's piece for *All Things Considered* on **November 26**, tackled one of the most complex and sensitive issues in the Middle East dispute: housing in East Jerusalem. For this, she is to be commended. The piece told the story of one of several dozen Palestinian families whose homes recently were demolished by the Jerusalem city government. The Israelis said they were demolished because the owners allegedly had built or expanded them without proper permits. The Palestinians alleged that the demolitions were part of a campaign to force them from East Jerusalem and make way for Jewish settlers.

The piece quoted the city government as saying the Palestinians had failed to get permission, and it included tape from Israel's Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor, who dismissed the Palestinian complaints. What was missing was a direct Israeli response to

the specific Palestinian allegations, including that authorities had made it nearly impossible for the Palestinians to appeal a demolition order and had given the Palestinians only 15 minutes to gather their belongings before their houses were destroyed. These were serious allegations and deserved a precise Israeli response.

Moreover, the piece also did not give an Israeli government response to the broader allegation that Palestinians were being forced from East Jerusalem to make way for Jewish settlers. In addition, this piece aired just about one week after Israel announced plans to build an additional 900 housing units in an East Jerusalem neighborhood known as Gilo. That announcement brought sharp complaints from the Obama administration and the European Union, as well as from Palestinian officials. A mention of the dispute over Gilo would have added some context to this piece. Finally, any coverage of this type about East Jerusalem should note that Israel annexed the area in 1967 and insists all its actions there are legal within the context of that annexation; however, the annexation has not been officially recognized by other countries. (More on this piece below under "Voices.")

Voices

Because NPR shows aired a relatively small number of stories about the region, the number and range of voices appearing on air was very limited. Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians and Lebanese) appeared in the 39 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 48 Israelis and 36 Arabs appeared on air; some individuals appeared multiple times. Of the 36 Arabs, 25 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.

In addition, 25 pieces or interviews that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 19 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians). Some individuals were quoted multiple times (for example, the Israeli prime minister, who was quoted in several stories). "Quotes" means all statements, not on tape, attributed either to named individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Palestinians." (An example would be a

story that quoted the Israeli prime minister.) The overall conclusion from these numbers is that NPR listeners heard infrequently from people in the region, and they heard somewhat more often from Israelis than from Palestinians and other Arabs.

For the full year, NPR listeners heard the voices of 207 Israelis and 231 Arabs in the items subject to this review; of the Arabs, 167 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities. In addition, 176 radio pieces quoted Israelis and 144 quoted Arabs during the year.

I also counted the appearances on tape, or in quotes, of individual Israelis and Palestinians, including government officials and opinion leaders. The purpose of this exercise is to determine how often listeners hear from decision makers on both sides. Following is a summary:

Israelis:

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 3 items
President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 0 items
Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 0 items
Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 0 items
Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 0 items
Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon: On tape in 1 items; quoted in 0 items
Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 1 item
Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 0 items
Spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 0 items
Other Israelis on tape: 40

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 4 items.
Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 1 item.
 Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 0 items.
 Hamas leader Khaled Meshal: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 0 items
Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 1 item
Other Palestinians on tape: 25

The overall conclusion from the above table is that NPR listeners heard very little during the quarter from Israeli or Palestinian leaders and top officials.

During the entire year, NPR listeners were much more likely to hear from either of the two Israeli prime ministers (Ehud Olmert and Binyamin Netanyahu) who served in

2009 (a total of 12 appearances on tape and 38 quotes), than from Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (2 appearances on tape and 10 quotes). Moreover, Hamas leaders were virtually absent from NPR's air during the year. Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh was quoted just once, and Hamas exile leader Khaled Meshal appeared on tape 3 times and was quoted twice.

The predominance of Israel's political leaders has been consistent in NPR's coverage. Over the past seven years, Israeli prime ministers (Ariel Sharon, Ehud Olmert, and Binyamin Netanyahu) have appeared on NPR's air a total of 111 times, and have been quoted 436 times.

By contrast, the top Palestinian leader (first Yasir Arafat, then Mahmoud Abbas) appeared on air 43 times and was quoted 226 times. This imbalance probably has several explanations, notably the fact that Israel's leaders tend to be much more accessible to the Western news media (and have had more sophisticated media relations operations) than either Arafat or Abbas.

Identification of voices. Once again NPR reporters and shows too often are failing to give adequate identification of individuals and institutions unfamiliar to many listeners. Following are several examples from this period:

- At the end of Garcia-Navarro's **October 6** piece for *ATC* about a confrontation between Palestinians and the Israeli police at the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, she used tape from a man who was described only as the owner of a small grocery store. The man, Samir Shaludi, was a Palestinian and should have been clearly identified as such.
- *Talk of the Nation* on **October 26** aired an interesting discussion of the negotiations over the future of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. The guest was Michael Singh, identified as a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. This institute, which began as an affiliate of the pro-Israel lobby (American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee) and retains a strong pro-Israel character, should have been more fully described for listeners who may not be familiar with Washington's numerous public policy research institutes.

- In a piece for *Morning Edition* on **November 13** describing attempts by Gazans to cross the border into Egypt, Garcia-Navarro used tape from Mohaima Abusayda, who was described only as a "Gaza-based analyst." Listeners should have been given more information about him and his affiliations.
- In her **November 26** piece (noted above, under "Fairness and Balance") for *ATC* reporting on Israel's demolition of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem, Garcia-Navarro used tape from Daniel Seidemann. He was described as "an Israeli lawyer and an expert on Jerusalem." This is a woefully inadequate description of Seidemann, the founder of an Israeli group called Ir Amim, which for many years has campaigned against Jewish settlements in Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and advocated on behalf of Palestinians in their legal battles with the city bureaucracy. Seidemann should have been described more fully, perhaps as an "activist" who opposes Jewish settlements in Palestinian neighborhoods of East Jerusalem.

Range of voices. In this quarter, listeners heard a narrow range of voices from the region. Garcia-Navarro did give listeners several excellent opportunities, in feature pieces, to hear from ordinary Israelis and Palestinians about their daily lives. This is the kind of coverage listeners need if they are to gain a full understanding of the region's problems. Once again, however, listeners heard very little from the extremists – on both sides – who continue to drive the conflict and make it difficult for political leaders to compromise.

Other Matters

Following are comments on several other matters:

- In a feature piece for *Morning Edition* on **October 13**, Garcia-Navarro took listeners inside the home of one of Israel's enormous ultra-Orthodox families. The

family patriarch, a 99-year-old rabbi, had at least 1,500 living descendants, according to his grandson. Almost in passing, the piece quoted a sociology professor as saying that 52 percent of Israel's elementary school children were either ultra-Orthodox or Arab-Israelis. This figure, along with other current demographic and political trends, could hold enormous implications for Israel's future, but the piece gave listeners no idea what those implications might be.

- Michele Kelemen on **October 27** reported, for *ATC*, on the first national conference of J Street, the new Jewish lobby in Washington, which has positioned itself as a center-left alternative to AIPAC, the increasingly conservative powerhouse lobby. This piece was fine reporting so far as it went. But it could have been stronger if Kelemen, after mentioning that President Obama's national security advisor James Jones attended the conference, had pointed out the widespread unease in American Jewish circles about the Obama administration's Middle East policies.
- Rob Gifford's piece for *ATC* on **December 15** reported on a threat by British authorities to arrest former Israeliforeign minister Tzipi Livni. It failed to attribute Palestinian casualty figures during the Israeli-Gaza war. Gifford said "more than 1,400 Palestinians were killed in the offensive, 13 Israelis lost their lives." There is no question about the Israeli casualties. But Palestinian and Israeli sources dispute the number of Palestinians who died (as well as how many were civilians). The Hamas government in Gaza and most Palestinian groups appear to have agreed on a figure of about 1,400 Palestinian deaths (most of them civilians). But Israel stands by its post-war assertion that 1,166 Palestinians died (most of them "terrorists.") War-time casualty counts should always be attributed. This is especially true when the figures are in dispute and cannot be independently verified.

Website

During this quarter, NPR's website, npr.org, carried 24 items pertaining to the Middle East conflict. These items were in addition to the audio and transcripts of stories that aired on radio shows. Of the 24 web-only items:

- 14 were news reports by the Associated Press,
- 7 were news-related postings by NPR's *Two-Way* blog,
- 1 was a movie review,
- 2 were commentaries provided by *Foreign Policy* magazine (one of NPR's web partners).

In general, these items stayed within the bounds of NPR's journalistic standards. I did find two concerns with a **November 25** *Two-Way* posting by NPR blogger Frank James. This item reported on Prime Minister Netanyahu's announcement earlier in the day that Israel would observe a 10-month "freeze" on construction in Jewish settlements in the West Bank, but not in East Jerusalem. James described this part of the city as "an area Arabs long inhabited but which conservative Israelis claim as part of their national capital."

There are two problems with this description. The first is that it could reasonably be interpreted as saying that only Arabs had lived in East Jerusalem, when in fact some Jews have long lived in that part of the city. Better wording would have been to say that Arabs in recent centuries have been predominant in East Jerusalem. The second problem is that it is not just "conservative Israelis" who claim East Jerusalem as part of Israel's capital. The Israeli government – then led by the center-left Labor Party – formally "annexed" East Jerusalem in 1967, an action that has been widely accepted within Israel (but not by other countries) ever since. It would have been better to say that Israel claims East Jerusalem as part of its national capital.