

NPR Mideast Coverage

October - December 2013

This report assesses NPR's reporting on events and trends related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians during the fourth quarter of 2013. Because of overall budget cutbacks at NPR, this is my final review of NPR's Mideast coverage. In this report I summarize some of my conclusions about NPR's Mideast coverage during the course of these reviews.

During the fourth quarter, NPR covered these developments with 56 stories and interviews on the radio shows for which it is solely responsible: *Morning Edition*, *Tell Me More*, *All Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition*. Also included in that total are two interviews of NPR reporters on *Here and Now*, produced by WBUR in Boston in collaboration with NPR. I did not review coverage by other public radio programs that are distributed by NPR but not produced by it, for example *The Diane Rehm Show*, *Fresh Air*, and *On Point with Tom Ashbrook*.

In addition to stories aired on the radio, I reviewed 33 blogs, news stories, and other items on NPR's website related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

All of the radio and website-only items covered by this review are shown on the ["Middle East" topic pages](#) of the website, except for *Here and Now* stories, which can be found on [WBUR's website](#). In addition, Associated Press news stories selected and edited by NPR staff are posted only for 30 days under a contractual arrangement.

For the full year of 2013, NPR radio shows aired a total of 234 news reports, interviews and other items subject to these reviews; NPR's website carried an additional 117 blogs, news stories, and other reports. These totals suggest that the bulk of NPR's news coverage of the Middle East continues to originate with the daily radio shows.

During the 11 years (2003 through 2013) of these reviews, NPR radio shows have carried 4,052 on-air reports related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Excluding 2006, which had an exceptionally high number of reports (827) due to the Israel-Lebanon war, NPR has averaged about 320 reports subject to my review each year. The 234 reports for 2013 thus was well below that annual average—as were most other recent years. A chart

summarizing the full 11 years is below, under the "Fairness and Balance" heading. A similar chart is included in the "Voices" section.

The opinions expressed in this report are mine alone.

Accuracy

I carefully reviewed all items for factual accuracy, with special attention to the radio stories, interviews and website postings produced by NPR staffers. NPR posted no corrections during the period for items subject to my review. No substantive errors have been brought to my attention and I found none in my own review.

Throughout the 11 years of my reviews, NPR's reporting on this topic has been remarkably accurate despite the time pressures of what has become a 24-hour news cycle. Listeners may not like the news or agree with the views they hear, but they can rely on the basic facts presented in NPR's reporting.

Fairness and Balance

Using the same method as for previous reports, I made a subjective determination of the "dominant focus" of each radio piece or interview that I reviewed. The term "dominant focus" describes the overall subject matter and does not necessarily mean that the piece or interview takes sides.

In terms of specific focus among the 56 radio items:

- 5 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 8 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 3 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 3 focused on U.S.-sponsored peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians;
- 26 focused on various aspects of the regional impact of events related to diplomacy over Iran's alleged program to develop nuclear weapons, in particular, Israel's concerns about Iran and the resulting strains in U.S.-Israeli relations. I should note that NPR reported many other stories, focusing specifically on the Iran negotiations, which I did not review;

- The remaining 11 items focused on other matters related to Israeli-Palestinian issues.

Individual items aired during the quarter generally met basic standards for fairness and balance.

An 11-Year Review

The following chart shows the key "dominant focus" findings of these reviews on an annual basis since 2003.

Annual Totals	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Total Items	514	358	356	827	361	280	345	250	232	295	234	4052
Israel Focus	112	100	120	165	35	42	52	28	16	39	33	742
Palestinian Focus	113	95	86	137	73	35	50	19	14	30	21	673
Israel-Pal Focus	131	56	86	69	56	54	56	35	27	36	15	621
Other Focus	158	107	64	456	197	149	187	168	175	190	165	2016

My principal conclusions from this chart, and from my 11 years of reviewing these 4,052 stories, are:

- Over the 11-year period, NPR listeners have heard slightly more stories focusing primarily on Israel than on the Palestinians. This is not surprising, for several reasons. Among them: NPR's sole full-time reporter for the region is

based in Jerusalem, Israel's de facto capital; Israel's democratically elected government is substantially more transparent (and its officials often are more accessible) than the governments in either of the Palestinian territories, Gaza and the West Bank; Israel routinely has elections and changes of governments, in contrast to the Palestinian territories, where political change comes slowly; and Israel and the United States are close allies, and top Israeli political leaders are frequent visitors to the United States. In short, Israel tends to generate more news — especially the "official" government-related news that is the staple of much news reporting—than do the Palestinian territories.

- Without question, NPR has aired (and published on the web) flawed or sloppy reports, has missed many important stories and trends, and too often has failed to give listeners the kind of in-depth coverage they have come to expect (and that [NPR promises](#)). In particular, I have often criticized NPR for skimping on its coverage of some topics that require intense reporting and generate controversy, for example the hardships faced by ordinary people in Gaza, the political paralysis within and between the two Palestinian factions, and the political power of Israel's far right and the settler movement.
- Despite the above, I have seen no systematic bias over the years in NPR's coverage in favor of one side versus the other. U.S.-based pressure groups and other critics frequently allege that NPR is "anti" or "pro" Israel or "anti" or "pro" the Palestinians. A careful analysis of such claims reveals that what the advocates really are complaining about is that NPR is not biased in their favor. In effect, they want NPR to produce one-sided reporting that supports their positions and discredits the other side. Reporting the news from the Middle East, by NPR or by any news organization that attempts to take its journalistic responsibilities seriously, is bound to make advocates on all sides uncomfortable because the news itself often is discomfoting.
- In the face of criticism, journalists tend to argue that they must be doing something right if both (or all) sides are unhappy with their coverage. I've heard this justification at NPR, as well as every other news organization with which I am familiar. It is natural to retreat to this position when the criticism

is intense and personal — as it usually is when the subject is the Middle East. But the argument ignores the possibility that both sides might have a point: that the coverage could, in fact, miss important facts or viewpoints or could reflect hidden or unintentional biases. The painful lesson for journalists is that it's necessary to listen to the critics, even when they are spewing venom. On some level, on some details, they might have a valid point.

- Except for periods of war in 2006, 2007 and late 2008–early 2009, NPR's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has declined dramatically in quantity in recent years, though not necessarily in quality. From 2003 through 2005, NPR aired 899 items primarily about Israel, the Palestinians, or a combination of the two (excluding items focusing on other related topics). This represented an annual average of about 300 items. From 2010 through 2013, the combined total was 313, for an annual average of about 78 items — about one-fourth the rate of the earlier period.
- Does the declining coverage mean there has been less news in recent years? Obviously not. Instead, the upheaval in several major Arab countries and other dramatic developments of recent years have prompted NPR to shift some of its coverage away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and more toward the rest of the region. As a result, even though my standards for deciding what to review have not changed, my reviews during the past few years have covered a much higher percentage of what I call "other focus" items. These include, for example, stories about the regional impact of events in Egypt and Syria and the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program – so long as they have some connection to Israel and/or the Palestinians.
- Listeners need to understand that NPR's overseas correspondents often work under extremely difficult and even dangerous conditions. This is especially true in the Middle East, where violence or the threat of violence is never far away and where Americans, including reporters, may be greeted with grave suspicion if not outright hostility. NPR has developed a cadre of some of the best reporters in the business. They work diligently to bring us stories that help us understand the world. This is not to excuse the mistakes or

misjudgments that, after all, should have been caught by editors and producers back in the home office. But it is a tribute to NPR's journalists that I found a very small number of serious problems among the more than 4,000 stories I reviewed during these past 11 years. Even NPR's harshest critics, while charging systemic bias, have singled out only a few stories for their complaints.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 56 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 55 Israelis and 35 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. Of the Arab voices, 33 were Palestinians.

In addition, 38 of the radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 22 items quoted Arabs (most of whom were Palestinians). Some individuals were quoted multiple times. By "quoted" I mean all statements, not on tape, attributed either to named individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Israelis" or "Palestinians."

Along with the aggregate counts mentioned above, I counted the appearances on tape, or in quotes, of individual Israeli and Palestinian government officials and opinion leaders. The purpose of this exercise is to determine how often listeners hear from decision-makers and influential individuals on both sides. Following is a summary, which also includes individuals who frequently appeared on NPR's air in the past but were absent during this quarter:

Israelis:

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: On tape in 11 items; Quoted in 16 items

President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item

Economy Minister Naftali Bennett: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 2 items

Finance Minister Yair Lapid: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Justice Minister/peace envoy Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Government spokesman Jonathan Peled: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Army spokeswoman Avital Liebovitch: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Former official Dore Gold: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Political scientist Yaron Ezrahi: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Political scientist Ruevan Hazan: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Political scientist Efraim Inbar: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Journalist David Horovitz: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Iran analyst Meir Javedanfar: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Other Israelis on tape: 34

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
Palestinian spokesman Ghassan Khatib: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas "exile" leader Khaled Meshal: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas official: Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas spokesman Gazi Hamad: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Diplomat M. R. Areikat: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Diplomat Riyadh Mansour: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Legislator Mustafa Barghouti: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Palestinian official Nabil Shaath: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
 Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttab: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Other Palestinians on tape: 31

The above numbers show that NPR listeners heard infrequently from Israelis and Palestinians during the quarter — a reflection of the relatively low number of stories about the two sides. Nearly all of the on-air appearances and quotes from Prime Minister Netanyahu were in connection with his comments on the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Both mentions of Palestinian President Abbas were references to his views on the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Hamas leaders were entirely absent from NPR's air, apart from one comment by a Hamas spokesman.

The following chart shows how often NPR listeners have heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the reports I have reviewed since 2003. Again, "on tape" means that listeners heard the actual voices of individuals; "quotes" means that NPR reporters or others quoted the remarks of individuals or groups. I did not start counting the number of Palestinian voices, separately from all Arab voices, until 2010.

Voices	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Israelis on tape	344	238	265	389	159	141	207	173	133	167	191	2407
# items with Israeli quotes	285	198	232	416	136	130	176	165	126	140	121	2125
Arabs on tape	355	263	283	582	294	174	231	164	153	110	142	2751
# items with Arab quotes	295	208	184	430	182	136	144	122	136	78	102	2017
Palestinians on tape (included in # Arabs)	not counted separately	134	114	88	112	448						
Israeli prime minister on tape*	31	12	17	23	9	7	12	7	19	12	20	169
Israeli prime minister quote*	88	69	66	103	46	26	38	47	35	40	45	603
PA leader on tape**	6	2	10	7	10	6	2	5	3	1	0	52
PA leader quotes**	23	10	76	58	30	19	10	17	12	7	9	271

*Ariel Sharon 2003–2006; Ehud Olmert 2006–2009; Benjamin Netanyahu 2009–2013.

**Palestinian Authority President Yasir Arafat 2003–2004; Mahmoud Abbas 2004–2013.

This chart illustrates that NPR listeners tend to hear about equally from Israelis and Arabs in the full range of stories subject to my review. If one considers broader coverage of the Middle East (for example, stories focusing solely on Egypt, Iraq or Syria, and thus not included in my reviews), it is likely that Arab voices greatly outnumber Israeli voices overall, as should be the case because of the nature of those stories.

More important than these overall totals (Israelis versus Arabs) is the discrepancy between how often NPR listeners hear from Israelis compared to Palestinians. In the four years (2010 through 2013) since I began counting Palestinian voices separately from Arabs, for example, NPR aired 664 voices of Israelis and 448 Palestinians; some of these numbers represented individuals who appeared on air numerous times, especially the Israeli prime minister.

The discrepancy is even greater when one looks at how often the views of Israeli and Palestinian leaders reach NPR's audience. Just to cite the gross figures for the entire 11 years of these reviews, listeners heard the voices of Israeli prime ministers more than three times as often as they heard directly from the top leaders of the Palestinian Authority (169 versus 52 in the above chart). Similarly, Israeli prime ministers were quoted (not on tape) more than twice as often as Palestinian leaders (609 versus 271 in the chart).

These ratios do not change even when the various top leaders of Hamas are included along with those of the Palestinian Authority leader. Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, for example, was not quoted a single time during 2013 (and he was quoted just twice during 2012 and once in 2011). Other top Hamas leaders are similarly absent from NPR's air. Except for 2007, when Hamas took over control of the Gaza Strip, NPR has reported only infrequently on what the top leadership of Hamas has to say.

What do all these numbers mean? First, to repeat, NPR listeners hear more often, and more regularly, from Israelis than they do from Palestinians in general — and they hear much more often from Israeli leaders than from Palestinian leaders. On radio, voices convey authority and emotion as well as information. It thus is reasonable to assume that, over time, NPR listeners tend to receive more information, both positive and negative, from Israel than from the Palestinian territories.

However, I do not believe it is justified to conclude from these numbers that NPR is biased in favor of Israel, or even against it, simply because listeners hear more often from Israelis as opposed to Palestinians. I noted above several reasons why NPR tends to cover more stories in Israel than in the territories, and the same factors apply to the number of voices.

A better argument, one I have made in the past, is that these numbers demonstrate that, over time, NPR listeners simply are not getting enough information from the Palestinian territories, in contrast to what they hear from Israel. The final quarter of 2013 was the exception that proved the rule, however. As noted below in the "Range of voices" section, Jerusalem correspondent [Emily Harris](#) reported a half dozen stories about daily life in the territories.

Identification of voices. In my reviews I often have made the point that listeners deserve some background information about the people they hear on air. This applies especially to individuals who might be unfamiliar to Americans, including academics, foreigners and others held out as experts on complex topics. During this quarter, I found several such cases meriting comment. Among them:

– An Emily Harris [news story](#) for *All Things Considered* on **October 15**, reporting on Israel's efforts to influence the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, included a taped comment from Max Singer, identified only as being "with Israel's BESA institute." [BESA](#) is the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University near Tel Aviv. Singer, according to his [biography](#), is a senior fellow at the center and also was a co-founder and first president of the conservative Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C. Given his writings and current and past affiliations, Singer should have been described as a conservative, or hawkish, Israeli analyst.

– In a [piece](#) for *Morning Edition* on **October 29** setting up another round of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, correspondent [Peter Kenyon](#) quoted Faridehi Fahri and described her only as an analyst "who recently returned to Iran." Fahri, according to a short [biography](#) posted on the site of the National Iranian-American Council, has taught at the University of Hawaii and other universities in the United States and Iran.

– Emily Harris [reported](#) for *Weekend Edition Saturday* on **November 16** about Israel's struggles in dealing with African migrants who seek to escape poverty and violence in their own countries by entering Israel, often illegally. For analysis, Harris quoted [Yair Sheleg](#), describing him as a research fellow at the [Israel Democracy Institute](#). Sheleg is a former journalist for the liberal newspaper *Haaretz*, and the institute describes

itself as an independent "think and do tank" that focuses on promoting democratic values and institutions. Most of its scholars and publications could be described as reflecting the center-left of Israeli politics.

– Peter Kenyon, [reporting](#) for *All Things Considered* on **November 19** about the international negotiations with Iran, quoted, without giving any background, two experts from think tanks that cannot be familiar to most listeners. The first was Mark Fitzpatrick, who Kenyon described as an analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The [institute](#) is a London-headquartered think tank — one of several around the world with similar-sounding names. It is perhaps best known for its annual "[military balance study](#)" that analyzes the world's armed forces. [Fitzpatrick](#), a former U.S. diplomat, heads the institute's nonproliferation studies. Kenyon also quoted [Ali Vaez](#) of the [International Crisis Group](#). Vaez has been a journalist and academic specializing in Iran. The Crisis Group is a Brussels-headquartered think tank that researches conflicts around the world and recommends ways to end them.

– [Reporting](#) for *Morning Edition* on Israeli views of the negotiations with Iran, Harris on **November 20** quoted Meir Javedanfar, describing him only as an "analyst." According to his [website](#), Javedanfar is an Iranian-born Israeli who runs his own research service specializing in Iranian-Israel issues. He seems to spend much of his time being quoted by Western news agencies. Harris also quoted Javedanfar in a **November 24** [piece](#) for *Weekend Edition Sunday* reporting Israel's reaction to an interim agreement with Iran reached the previous day. In that piece, Harris described Javedanfar as an "Israeli-Iranian analyst."

Range of voices. One of my frequent nags over the years has been that NPR does not give its listeners enough exposure to the broad cacophony of voices from the Middle East, particularly in Israel and the Palestinian territories. I have the same complaint about coverage during the fourth quarter of 2013 and will make the same point one last time: Americans cannot be expected to understand why the conflicts in the Middle East seem so intractable and so violent if they do not hear the full range of voices from the region, including the extremists who drive so much of the conflict.

Here are just two examples from opposite extremes. First, as noted above, NPR listeners hear very infrequently from the Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip or from the radical fringe of Israeli settlers. By their actions and words, these and other extremists have become deeply entrenched in their respective societies and have successfully imposed limits on the ability of more moderate factions to accept compromise. Listeners need to hear what these people have to say, not to glorify the extremists but as part of a full picture of the region's complexity.

Similarly, I have complained frequently in the past about the lack of stories portraying daily life in Israel and in the Palestinian territories—and thus the lack of opportunity for listeners to hear from ordinary Israelis or Palestinians. I am pleased to report that Emily Harris provided several stories during this quarter that gave listeners some insight into what it is like to be an Israeli or a Palestinian.

For example, Harris filed two reports in mid-October that described the obstacles faced by ordinary Palestinians caught up in the region's complex maze of security and political restrictions.

The first was a [report](#) aired on *Weekend Edition Sunday* on **October 13**, describing a Palestinian family whose West Bank home was cut off from their village (and their business, a tree nursery) by Israel's "security barrier" in and around the West Bank. One of the family's sons had been featured a few years earlier in a film documenting the impact of the barrier.

Three days later, on **October 16**, *Morning Edition* listeners heard another [report](#) by Harris chronicling the difficulties faced by Fida'a Abuassi as she tried to make her way from her home in Gaza to graduate school at the University of Indianapolis. Abuassi had spent the previous academic year in the United States on a Fulbright fellowship, then returned home for the summer. Abuassi faced Israeli and Gazan travel restrictions as she tried leave for the United States in time for the school year. In mid-October, two months after she began her attempted journey, Abuassi finally snagged a seat on a bus from Gaza to Cairo then flew to Turkey and Chicago before arriving in Indianapolis.

All Things Considered also aired a Harris [feature piece](#) on **October 16** reporting on efforts by Gazans to obtain funding from a Jordanian program so they could start Internet-related businesses. On **December 1**, Harris [reported](#) for *Weekend Edition Sunday*

on the work of the [UN agency](#) that aids Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Some listeners might have been surprised to learn the extent to which nearly 5 million Palestinians depend on the UN for food, housing, medical care and other services. The UN agency in turn depends on contributions from member nations and is routinely short of money — as was the case when Harris reported her story.

In a story touching on broader political conflicts, Harris [reported](#) for *Morning Edition* on **December 4** about the chronic electricity shortages in Gaza. Residents told how they arrange their daily activities to take advantage of the few hours when electricity — currently purchased exclusively from Israel — is available. Harris filed another [feature piece](#), carried by *Morning Edition* on **December 26**, about a cafe in the West Bank opened by a Palestinian documentary filmmaker and his Dutch wife.

Listeners had fewer opportunities during this quarter to hear from ordinary Israelis. One came in a Harris [piece](#) for *Morning Edition* on **October 22**, reporting on an attempt by five women to win election to local council in a town built specifically for the ultra-Orthodox. American listeners — at least those unfamiliar with ultra-Orthodox restraints on women's rights — might have been surprised to hear one woman in the town say she had never heard of women running for the town council, and she seemed uncertain what to think about it. In an online [posting](#) the following day, Harris reported that all five women lost; *Morning Edition* briefly [reported](#) the same news.

A striking contrast to Harris's December 4 story about electricity shortages in Gaza was a **December 17** [feature piece](#) for *All Things Considered* about an Internet social network for pre-teens started by an Israeli mother.

The Iran Negotiations

The big story covered by my review during this quarter were the negotiations between Iran and six world powers, including the United States, over Iran's alleged program to build nuclear weapons. I reviewed 24 radio stories and interviews, and 11 website postings on this topic during the quarter. I reviewed only those stories and other items that included significant references to Israel and/or the Palestinians, and so I did not

review a much larger body of coverage stories that focused only on Iran and/or the nuclear negotiations.

The two main events during the period were the last-minute scuttling of a potential agreement early in November, followed by the reaching later in the month of what was described as an ["interim" agreement](#). In general, NPR kept its listeners and readers adequately informed about the course of the negotiations and the international reaction (particularly from Israel). However, members of NPR's audience who wanted detailed information about and analysis of the agreement had to turn to other sources.

The current round of stories about Iran's nuclear program began in late September and early October with visits to the United Nations by Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, followed by Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. NPR's coverage of Netanyahu's visit included an interview by *Morning Edition* host Steve Inskeep, portions of which were [aired](#) on **October 4**; Inskeep's full [report](#) of the interview was posted online.

In his online report, Inskeep summarized Netanyahu's position toward Iran as being "essentially not to negotiate at all." This is a characterization that Netanyahu almost certainly would not accept, but it nevertheless seems accurate. Inskeep noted that the prime minister acknowledged that Rouhani's recent election might present an "opportunity" for a negotiated solution. Even so, he said, Netanyahu "then changed the subject back to the dangers of the moment and never fleshed out what opportunities he might see."

Other than the Netanyahu interview, NPR's most detailed report at that stage about Israel's objections to the Iran negotiations came in a [piece](#) by Emily Harris for *All Things Considered* on **October 15**. That story quoted Netanyahu's position that "it would be a historic mistake" to ease sanctions on Iran. Additional comments came from conservative Israeli analyst Max Singer (noted above, under "Voices"), and Israel's intelligence minister — the right-wing politician Yuval Steinitz. Harris also quoted a statement from Israel's security cabinet demanding no let-up in U.S. and international sanctions against Iran. The piece made clear that Israeli leaders feared Iran was in the process of duping the United States and other countries into accepting an agreement enabling Tehran both to continue its nuclear work and gain a reduction in sanctions.

As the international negotiations proceeded, NPR provided a range of news stories and interviews that — taken together, if not individually — gave radio listeners a reasonably complete picture of the global politics involved. The two key stages were:

- The second weekend in November, when France blocked a potential agreement that the other parties appeared ready to accept; and
- Two weeks later, when negotiators nailed down an "interim" agreement, one that later proved to require some fine-tuning.

Leading up to that first negotiating session in November, *All Things Considered* on **November 8** gave listeners two detailed reports. The first was a [news piece](#) by Peter Kenyon, who covered the Iran talks in Geneva. Kenyon discussed some details of the agreement that was pending at that point and reported Prime Minister Netanyahu's objections to it. Kenyon also quoted former U.S. arms control negotiator Robert Einhorn as saying a complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear program, as demanded by Netanyahu, was "not achievable." This was followed by an [interview](#) with [Dennis Ross](#), a long-time U.S. diplomat who had served until late 2011 as Obama's chief advisor on Iran and now is counselor at the pro-Israel think tank, the [Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#). Ross said the key test of any agreement was "how much we're actually limiting them [the Iranians] and what sort of relief they are getting for that limitation."

After French objections prevented acceptance of the agreement on the table in Geneva the second weekend of November, Kenyon described the obstacles in an [interview](#) with *Weekend Edition Saturday* on **November 9**; in a [piece](#) for *Weekend Edition Sunday* on **November 10**, and in another [piece](#) for Morning Edition on **November 11**. Listeners heard more detail about Israel's objections to the incomplete draft agreement when *All Things Considered* [interviewed](#) Herb Keinon, the diplomatic correspondent for the conservative *Jerusalem Post*, and on **November 12**, when *Morning Edition* [interviewed](#) *Bloomberg View* columnist Jeffrey Goldberg.

In a [report](#) for *All Things Considered* on **November 18** — just before the final round of negotiations in Geneva — diplomatic correspondent Michele Kelemen reviewed the broader tensions between the Obama administration and Israel. The most interesting comment in the piece came from [Daniel Kurtzer](#), a former U.S. ambassador to Israel and Egypt now teaching at Princeton. Kurtzer said he wondered why the Israelis "would so

undercut American credibility, at a time when American credibility is under assault anyway by opponents of the United States. That makes no strategic sense whatsoever." None of NPR's other reporting during the period explored this important question.

Emily Harris filed a [report](#) for *Morning Edition* on **November 20**, portrayed by the host introduction as being about the "range of views" in Israel about how to stop Iran's nuclear program. Of the five Israelis quoted in the piece (other than Netanyahu), one was a pollster who said Israelis don't trust Iran; one was a former senior national security official who said Israel needed to test Iran's intentions; one was an Iranian-Israeli analyst who suggested Israel's maximalist position on the negotiations was not sustainable; one was a businessman who said he liked Netanyahu's hard-line message but not the way Netanyahu conveyed it; and the last was a legislator who said Israel needed to lobby hard for its position among the parties negotiating with Iran.

After the interim agreement with Iran was announced late on **November 23**, Harris [reported](#) the next day for *Weekend Edition Sunday* on the heated reaction from Israel. She followed with a more detailed [piece](#) for *Morning Edition* on **November 26**. The latter piece put the U.S.-Israeli dispute with Iran in the context of other issues, notably the U.S.-sponsored peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

On **November 27**, in a [piece](#) for *All Things Considered*, [Ari Shapiro](#), then a White House correspondent, recalled the troubled personal relations between Obama and Netanyahu since the two men took office in 2009. While useful as a reminder of that history, the piece broke no new ground and failed to explain its apparent conclusion that the sour relationship could change "the arc of history."

Website coverage. NPR's website covered the Iran negotiations only sporadically, except of course for online versions of stories originating on the radio shows. One of the most detailed online-only reports was a *Two-Way* [blog](#) by Eyder Peralta, posted on **November 24**, summarizing the agreement reached the previous night in Geneva and the reaction to it.

This blog was not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of the agreement; in fact, most of the blog discussed Israeli and domestic U.S. reaction to it. On the agreement itself, the blog focused solely on the provisions limiting Iran's enrichment of

uranium. The blog did not mention the equally contentious issue that had held up an agreement two weeks earlier: Iran's construction of a heavy-water reactor at Arak, which could produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. (Greg Myre did mention the Arak reactor in a November 20 [analysis](#) titled "What You Need To Know About The Iranian Nuclear Talks.") The November 23 agreement said Iran could not "make any further advances" in developing the nuclear fuel cycles at Arak or two other disputed facilities.

On **November 25**, Myre, the website's international editor, posted a detailed [analysis](#) of Obama's diplomacy regarding Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. The president's foreign policy legacy "will likely be determined by what ultimately happens" on those matters, Myre wrote.

Iran and U.S. politics. Complicating the Iran negotiations for President Obama was the fact that he had an unpredictable negotiating partner at home: Congress. Obama's leverage over Iran consisted almost entirely of U.S. economic sanctions, many of which Congress had imposed by law and, as a result, could be lifted or modified only with congressional approval. In effect, this meant that Congress — and thus, it could be argued, Israel and its powerful advocates in the United States — would have veto power over any permanent agreement the United States and other countries might reach with Iran.

On questions involving the Middle East, especially Israel, Congress undeniably is influenced by the views of Israel and its staunch supporters in the United States. With the Israeli government heatedly denouncing virtually any concessions toward Iran, the result was that Obama sooner or later would have to get approval for a permanent deal from a potentially hostile Congress. Moreover, some in Congress in the meantime seemed determined to impose even more sanctions on Iran — a step the Obama administration insisted would undermine prospects for a permanent deal.

At various points during the quarter, NPR listeners heard reports and interviews that discussed congressional reaction to the negotiations with Iran. I found many of these reports to be superficial and uninformative because they tended to cast the dispute as a political contest strictly between Obama and Congress. They ignored or played down the

underlying policy questions and the broader political considerations, including the role of powerful pro-Israel pressure groups and direct lobbying of Congress by Israel itself.

Two of the best explanations of the politics came in *Morning Edition* interviews with veteran observers. In the first, on **November 4**, longtime Washington reporter and analyst [Cokie Roberts told](#) *Morning Edition* listeners how members of Congress viewed the question of imposing additional sanctions against Iran, even over Obama's opposition. "You're not likely to have any anti-sanctions voters in your district or your state if you're a member of Congress," she said. "And you are likely to have a lot of pro-sanctions voters because of the role of Israel here. And, of course, Israel has a point when it says that the question of nuclear weapons in Iraq is an existential one for that state."

On **November 12**, after the first attempt to negotiate a deal with Iran in Geneva failed, *Bloomberg View* columnist Jeffrey Goldberg [explained](#) that Netanyahu was using Israel's influence within Congress to pressure Obama to hold out for a deal that Israel could accept. Goldberg noted that, under any final agreement reached with Iran, Obama eventually would need congressional approval to lift any sanctions. Netanyahu "is a formidable foe," Goldberg said, and so Obama "definitely needs to neutralize Netanyahu's opposition if he's going to move this through Congress." At the moment, however, Netanyahu was "impotent" to steer the international negotiations with Iran, which was why he was frustrated and "yelling so much," Goldberg said.

After an interim agreement was reached, White House correspondent Ari Shapiro covered domestic and international reaction to it in a [report](#) for *Morning Edition* on **November 25**. On that same show, Cokie Roberts, Jeffrey Goldberg, and Karim Sadjapour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace provided a somewhat more detailed analysis of the agreement, and the reaction, in a joint [interview](#) with hosts Steve Inskeep and David Greene. Sadjapour, who monitors events in Iran, said the agreement had produced heightened expectations in Iran about economic relief — expectations that he said were "frankly unrealistic" because the bulk of international sanctions will remain in place. Goldberg repeated what he had told *Morning Edition* audiences two weeks earlier: that, for the moment, Netanyahu had been "boxed in" by Obama. Despite that, Goldberg said the "good cop/worse cop act" between Obama and Netanyahu had helped produce the Geneva agreement.

Peace Talks

Throughout the October–December quarter, the Iran issue overshadowed another diplomatic initiative by the Obama administration: the effort to restart peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Preliminary talks began in Washington in late July, and formal closed-door negotiations between high-level diplomats were launched in mid-August and continued sporadically through the rest of the year.

Secretary of State John Kerry clearly was the driving force behind this latest attempt to reach a "permanent" settlement of one of the world's oldest conflicts. He set a goal of reaching an agreement within nine months, or by mid-May 2014. By the end of 2013, reaching that goal seemed increasingly problematic.

For the most part, the peace talks were held in secret, and very few details leaked into the public domain. This was itself a remarkable achievement, given that most previous negotiations had foundered in part because of negative reactions to the mere mention of possible concessions by one side or the other.

Even so, as of year's end it seemed clear that Kerry had been unable to move either side very far toward concessions on the so-called "core issues" of borders, Jerusalem, refugees and security. Occasional references to possible compromises on these matters brought cries of betrayal from each side. Moreover, neither Israeli nor Palestinian leaders attempted to prepare their publics for necessary and painful compromise.

In addition to the longstanding core issues, Netanyahu in recent years has raised another matter that he insists is central: that the Palestinians formally recognize Israel as a "Jewish state." This is a demand the Palestinians have rejected as a "poison pill" intended to disguise what they say is Netanyahu's underlying unwillingness to reaching an agreement. Once again, as so often in the past, the two sides accuse each other of refusing to negotiate in earnest. NPR listeners have heard little of this back-and-forth.

During the fourth quarter NPR carried three stories explicitly about the peace talks and several other stories and interviews that touched on the negotiations.

In a [piece](#) for *All Things Considered* on **October 29**, just prior to Israel's release of 26 Palestinian prisoners as part of the peace process, Emily Harris reported on how Israeli and Palestinian leaders were portraying the negotiations to their publics. Harris

quoted one Palestinian official, Mohammed Shtayheh, as saying the two sides seemed dug into their customary positions: "There has not been really serious narrowing of gaps."

The following day, after the prisoners had been released, Harris [reported](#) for *Morning Edition* that this release, like all previous ones during earlier rounds of peace talks, brought joy in the Palestinian territories and stirred strong opposition in Israel. Harris noted another development that had become almost standard in such situations: Israel accompanied the prisoner release with plans to begin construction of an additional 1,500 homes in East Jerusalem, which Palestinians claim for their future capital. Harris said this step apparently was taken "in part to ease the criticism of the prisoner release."

Except for brief references, NPR did not follow up on the settlement announcement, although the website on **October 30** did carry an Associated Press story listing six controversies over Jewish settlements since 2010. As is standard, the AP story was posted for only 30 days.

NPR's most detailed report on the peace talks was a **November 6** [piece](#) by Harris for *All Things Considered* reporting on one of Kerry's attempts to keep the negotiations on track. Harris opened the piece with a customary comment by Netanyahu blaming the Palestinians for the lack of progress. Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas did not respond, Harris said, but Kerry did so on his behalf, saying he was convinced that Abbas "wants to find peace" and understands that compromise is needed.

Harris also reported [forceful comments](#) by Kerry on the always-sensitive issue of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. In perhaps the clearest U.S. denunciation of the settlements in many years, Kerry said that "we consider now, and have always considered, the settlements to be illegitimate." Kerry also rebuffed suggestions by Israeli officials that Palestinians had secretly agreed to allow more construction in the settlements as a price for the peace talks.

Nearly one month later, on **December 5**, Harris reviewed key developments in the peace talks as part of a [news report](#) for *All Things Considered* about Kerry's latest visit to Israel. That piece included a comment from Netanyahu casting doubt on whether the Palestinians were serious about peace — part of an apparent Israeli campaign to put all blame on the Palestinians if the peace talks fail.

Although not specifically about the peace talks, Steve Inskeep's **December 26** *Morning Edition* [interview](#) with Ari Shavit, a columnist for Israel's liberal daily newspaper *Haaretz*, enabled listeners to hear a viewpoint that has become submerged in the current Israeli political environment. Shavit stoutly defended Israeli's right to exist and called on Palestinians to recognize that right. But he also expressed deep sympathy for the "tragedy" Palestinians have faced in the hundred-plus years since European Jews came to occupy the land of Palestine. Shavit noted that modern Israel's founders, including his own grandfather, failed to see or acknowledge the Palestinians who lived on the land — and that failure contributed to the "ongoing tragedy of a 100-year war" between the two sides. That long-ago failure, he said, means that Israel now owes the Palestinians a state for moral, as well as political reasons. His recent book, [My Promised Land](#), has been an international best-seller but has been scorned by the right wing in Israel.

In the final report for the year, Harris on **December 31** [told](#) *Morning Edition* listeners about the opposite sides in the story of a Palestinian terrorist attack two decades ago. In that attack, Omar Masoud was one of two Palestinians who killed an Israeli lawyer working in the Gaza strip, Ian Feinberg. Caught by the Israelis, Masoud was sentenced to 90 years in prison. He was one of 26 prisoners released from prison early on December 31 as part of an Israeli goodwill gesture to promote the peace talks.

Harris quoted Masoud as expressing no remorse for the murder. Calling himself a "fighter," he said that "when the occupation [Israel] kills your children, your elderly, your vision becomes clouded. The Israeli occupation imposed injustice on us and didn't give us room to forgive."

Harris also quoted Feinberg's sister, Gila Molcho, who was deeply distressed by the government's decision to release Masoud. She said Netanyahu "can be easily bent," adding: "And until the Israelis stand up and say you are selling our blood as a gesture, and that's unacceptable, there won't be a change."

Website

In addition to reviewing NPR's on-air coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (and related matters), I reviewed relevant coverage on the NPR website, [NPR.org](#). During

the October-December quarter, NPR.org carried 33 items with some connection to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These items were in addition to the website versions of stories that aired originally on NPR's radio shows.

Of the 33 website-only items:

- 23 items were news-related postings by NPR's *Two-Way*, *Parallels*, and other blogs;
- 5 were news reports or background pieces by the Associated Press selected by NPR staff and edited for inclusion on the "Mideast" topic page of the website. In general, these reports are available for about one month after the initial posting, and thus, unfortunately, do not provide a permanent record of news events for users of NPR's website; and
- 5 were news or analysis stories by NPR reporters or editors.

In terms of dominant focus among these 33 website-only items:

- 2 items focused primarily on Israel;
- 1 item focused primarily on the Palestinians;
- 3 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 11 focused on the international negotiations with Iran and reaction to the agreement reached in November;
- 8 items focused on bombings and other events in Lebanon, as well as Israel's reaction to those events; and
- 8 items focused on various other matters with some connection to Israel and/or the Palestinians.

Of the 33 website-only items, 17 quoted Israelis and 9 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, website-only items met NPR's basic journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and balance.

