NPR Mideast Coverage
January - March 2010

The first three months of 2010 saw major news events related to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, notably the latest U.S. attempt to revive peace talks, the assassination in Dubai (possibly by Israel's secret service) of a Hamas operative, and a severe strain in relations between Israel and the United States. NPR covered these and other developments in 53 broadcast reports and interviews, plus 46 wire service stories, blogs, commentaries, and other items posted on the NPR website.

For the third quarter in a row, listeners to NPR news shows heard noticeably less about the Israel-Palestinian conflict than generally has been the case in the past. During the first seven years of these quarterly reviews, radio listeners heard an average of nearly 100 reports and interviews about this topic each quarter – about twice as many as in recent months. It should be noted that for much of February NPR's sole full-time Jerusalem correspondent, Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, was assigned to Baghdad, where she covered the run-up to parliamentary elections in Iraq.

The news and feature items reviewed for this report generally met NPR's high journalistic standards, notably for accuracy and fairness.

However, this review notes that listeners heard very little from the Palestinian side of the conflict and it discusses exaggerated descriptions of the "blockade" of Gaza and several cases in which sources were not adequately identified for listeners or readers.

Accuracy

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

As in the past, I carefully reviewed all items for factual accuracy, with special attention to the radio stories, interviews, and blogs produced by NPR staffers. Despite tight deadlines and other constraints, NPR's coverage of the region has been remarkably,
and consistently, accurate over the years.

In previous reports I have drawn attention to NPR's frequently imprecise language concerning the so-called "blockade" of Gaza's borders by Egypt and Israel. Since Hamas took control of Gaza in mid-2007, both countries routinely have closed some or all border crossings with Gaza, and Israel has imposed extremely tight restrictions on types of goods allowed into Gaza (and has made it very difficult for Gazans to cross into Israel). Israel also prohibits air and sea traffic into Gaza. These restrictions have created severe hardships in Gaza and, among other things, have led to active smuggling across the border via dozens of illegal underground tunnels between Egypt and Gaza and (to a lesser extent) overland across that border.

However, NPR reports too often give listeners the misleading impression that both Egypt and Israel have imposed total, unrelenting blockades of their borders with Gaza – refusing to allow passage of any people or goods. Examples were Cairo correspondent Peter Kenyon's introductions to two reports on January 4. Kenyon's reports dealt with a temporary opening of the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza. A Morning Edition intro to an interview with Kenyon said: "A border crossing opened today, which is rare, because Gaza is surrounded by Israel and Egypt, and both have kept the crossings closed for weeks at a time over the past couple of years." Later in the same day, the intro to Kenyon's All Things Considered news piece said, in part: "Israel has kept a tight blockade on Gaza ever since Hamas took control there more than two years ago."

As noted above, it is true that Egypt and Israel routinely have closed or restricted their borders with Gaza. Prior to January 4, the most recent opening of Egypt's sole official crossing, at Rafah, was in early November 2009, according to the United Nations. It also is true that Israel has imposed what Palestinians and the UN call a "blockade" of Gaza by often closing some or all of the four major crossings it controls. Even when those crossings are opened, Israel has tightly controlled the people and types of goods allowed into Gaza – banning most building materials and even some medical
equipment and seemingly innocuous consumer goods.

However, Israel regularly does allow trucks carrying food, medicine, and a limited range of consumer and construction items into Gaza. In the week prior to the January 4 reports, Israel allowed 1,009 truckloads into Gaza and also allowed shipments from Gaza of cut flowers and strawberries, according to the UN. Israel also provides some electricity to Gaza and allows limited supplies of fuel for the territory's one power plant.

Thus, the intros to both of the January 4 reports falsely implied the misleading impression that both Egypt and Israel had nearly total blockades of Gaza most of the time. More carefully worded intros would have said that Egypt rarely opened its border with Gaza, while Israel strictly limited what could be shipped into (and who could enter and exit) Gaza and routinely closed some or all of the crossings it controlled into the territory. A Two-Way blog on January 4, based on the Morning Edition story, gave a similarly misleading characterization of the border situation.

**Fairness and Balance**

Using the same method as for previous reports, I determined the "dominant focus" of each radio piece, interview, or two-way 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 53 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 5 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 2 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 9 focused about equally on those two sides (primarily U.S. efforts to restart peace talks);
- 18 focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
• 7 focused on aspects of the killing of a senior Hamas official in Dubai;
• The remaining 12 items focused on other specific matters, for example Iran's reported efforts to develop nuclear weapons.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from these figures is that NPR focused some attention during the quarter on Israel – and Israel's suddenly testy relationship with the United States. But NPR also told listeners little about events or trends inside the Palestinian territories.

Individual items aired during the quarter generally met basic standards for fairness and balance. I do have a comment about "balance" issues in Michele Kelemen's January 8, piece for All Things Considered describing the Obama administration's latest attempt to revive Mideast peace talks. The piece included tape from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the foreign ministers of Egypt and Jordan, and it briefly mentioned negotiating priorities of the Palestinian Authority. The only aspect of Israeli policy mentioned in the piece was Israel's temporary moratorium on construction of settlements in the West Bank (a moratorium that did not apply to East Jerusalem). This piece was cast as an overview of the subject, and so listeners also should have been given at least a summary of the current negotiating stance of the Israeli government.

Voices

Because NPR shows aired a relatively small number of stories about the region, the number and range of voices appearing on air was also limited. Using the same technique as in previous reports, I counted the number of times Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) appeared in the 53 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, 32 Israelis and 34 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared on tape multiple times. Of the Arabs, 16 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.
In addition, 36 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 28 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians); some individuals (for example, the Israeli prime minister) were quoted multiple times. "Quotes" means the reporter spoke rather than listeners hearing a subject's voice. It includes all statements, not on tape, attributed either to named individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Palestinians."

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 decision-makers and influential individuals on both sides. Following is a summary, which also includes individuals who often appeared on NPR's air in the past but were absent during this quarter:

**Israelis**
- Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu: On tape in 3 items; Quoted in 15 items
- President Shimon Peres: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
  - Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 2 items
- Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Deputy Prime Minister Dan Meridor: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Other Israelis on tape: 23

**Palestinians**
- President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
- Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
- 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 1 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Other Palestinians on tape: 14

The most striking conclusions to be drawn from all of the above findings in this study are that NPR listeners heard only infrequently from people in the region, and they heard more often from Israelis than from Palestinians. These trends have held for much of the past year or so. One explanation for the Palestinian leadership’s relative lack of
voices on NPR is that neither Palestinian Authority President Abbas nor the leaders of Hamas are routinely available to the Western news media. Another is that NPR has a full-time correspondent based in Jerusalem, but not in Gaza or the West Bank. However, Israeli voices did not exactly saturate NPR's airwaves, either. The only Israeli officials with any serious presence on NPR's air during the quarter were Prime Minister Netanyahu and Ambassador Oren – and they spoke largely in response to a "crisis" in U.S.-Israeli relations starting early in March.

Identification of voices. Once again NPR reporters and shows too often failed to give adequate identification of individuals and institutions that are unfamiliar to many listeners. Following are examples:

– As often is the case, several NPR reports during the quarter used the vague terminology of "analysts" or "critics" to describe a universe of unidentified voices commenting on the news. An example was a Morning Edition March 15 report by Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, which repeatedly quoted unnamed "analysts" to explain the fine points of Israeli politics. Reporters often use this technique to save precious air time. The result, however, is that listeners do not get enough information to help them judge the credibility of the reported views. Reporters can use various techniques to get around this problem. For example, they can quote (and identify) one individual who represents a particular viewpoint. A Morning Edition piece on January 11, by Garcia-Navarro, profiled a Jordanian double-agent who attacked a CIA installation in Afghanistan. She described two Jordanian men as "analysts" without telling listeners anything substantive about either of them. Were they associated with universities, think tanks, the government, or some other entity? Listeners were given no information to help-judge why these analysts said what they did. Garcia-Navarro quoted one analysts again in a follow-up piece for All Things Considered the next day, also not telling listeners anything substantive about him.

– Michele Kelemen filed a March 22 news piece for All Things Considered, covering the
annual conference in Washington of the pro-Israel lobby, the America-Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). The piece also reported on a protest demonstration outside the convention center where AIPAC was meeting and included tape from Ben Winkler, who was identified only as "a spokesman for the advocacy group Avaaz.org." Because nearly one-third of this piece dealt with the protest, listeners should have been given more information about the Avaaz group. Judging from its website, Avaaz appears to be associated with MoveOn.org and other left-of-center groups in the United States and internationally. Quoting people, especially sources unfamiliar to most listeners, without sharing information about their background or point of view is of little help to listeners.

**Range of voices.** As stated earlier, listeners heard a narrow range of voices from the region. For example, listeners heard very little from ordinary Palestinians in either the Gaza Strip or the West Bank, or from ordinary Israelis.

**U.S.-Israel Dispute**

From an American perspective, by far the biggest regional story of the quarter concerned the consequences of Israel's March 9 announcement of plans to add 1,600 housing units to a Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem – the part of the city Israel captured from Jordan in the 1967 Mideast war. The Israeli announcement was not all that unusual, in and of itself; the government routinely plans additional housing units in East Jerusalem, which it considers to be an integral part of Israel's capital. However, the announcement coincided with two other events: the previous day's announcement of planned resumption of peace talks (albeit indirect ones) between Israelis and Palestinians, and a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden, who was trying to paper over recent strains in relations between Israel and the Obama administration.
In reaction, angry Palestinians scuttled the peace talks, at least for the moment, and an angry Obama administration severely chastised Israel. The resulting diplomatic crisis represented the most severe bruising of U.S.-Israeli relations in 20 or 35 years, depending on which previous crisis one chooses for a comparison.

Nearly one-third (17) of the radio items covered in this review focused on one aspect or another of the Jerusalem housing controversy. Among the 17 items were news reports during Biden's visit, interviews with various experts about that visit, and news reports during Prime Minister Netanyahu's subsequent visit to Washington.

Each hard news report adequately told the narrow story of the day's news. A small number of more analytical reports and interviews did go behind the daily headlines to give listeners background information on such matters as the domestic political considerations facing both the Obama administration and Netanyahu's government. Listeners heard repeatedly, although with no detail, that Palestinians hope to make East Jerusalem the capital of a future state. One NPR report (by Garcia-Navarro on March 17) also took listeners directly to Ramat Schloomo, the Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem at the center of the dispute, where residents said they were puzzled by all the international fuss.

Even so, NPR's coverage provided listeners with little historical context necessary to fully understand why a relatively routine zoning decision by Jerusalem's municipal government would create such an international controversy.

- NPR would have better informed listeners if some of the 17 reports had noted that Israel formally annexed East Jerusalem after it captured that part of the city from Jordan during the 1967 war – and that the United Nations, the United States, and nearly all other countries have refused to accept Israel's annexation as legitimate.
- Also, none of the reports told listeners that the planned construction in Ramat Schloomo was the latest step in a long pattern of building
Jewish neighborhoods in East Jerusalem – a pattern that both Israelis and Palestinians see as intended to cement Israel's permanent control of that part of the city.

- Listeners also did not hear about the scale of Israel's settlements in East Jerusalem; some 190,000 Israeli Jews now live in that part of the city, in addition to 240,000 Palestinians, according to the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies. Some of the Israelis are in neighborhoods that used to be predominantly Arab, but most live in large suburban settlements (or "neighborhoods" in Israeli terminology) occupying what was Arab land prior to 1967.

Obviously, NPR could not provide its listeners with a complete textbook history of the controversies over Jerusalem. But it could have provided a background primer at npr.org and given listeners key historical information when it was appropriate. However, NPR missed an opportunity with coverage of this story, to explain more clearly to listeners why Jerusalem remains at the core of the dispute between Israelis and Palestinians, and thus why reaching a solution that is minimally satisfactory to both sides will be so difficult.

Other Matters

- Listeners to All Things Considered had a rare opportunity, on January 11, to hear a behind-the-scenes report on how Egypt is affected by the dozens of tunnels Palestinians use to smuggle goods across the border into Gaza. Peter Kenyon reported that criminal gangs have taken over much of the smuggling business – and in the process have disrupted life in the northern Sinai, particularly the old Red Sea resort town of El-Arish. The piece also had a passing reference – unfortunately not developed – to "the above-
ground smuggling farther west that goes on between Egypt and Israeli criminal gangs."
Listeners would have benefited from at least another sentence or two about this type of smuggling, particularly the involvement of Israeli criminal gangs.

– Robert Siegel's March 17 interview, on All Things Considered, with former U.S. diplomat Martin Indyk offered listeners an excellent insight into the current Israeli government, in particular Prime Minister Netanyahu. Indyk explained the competing views of Netanyahu's coalition partners and even the pressures the prime minister must feel at home because of the hard-line views of his father, his wife, and his wife's family. However, parts of this interview must have been difficult for many listeners to understand. Siegel and Indyk gave numerous unexplained references to particular aspects of Israeli history and politics. As an example, Siegel asked Indyk if Netanyahu "still has that core Likud revisionist, Zionist view of the world?" While many NPR listeners probably have some understanding of Israel's Likud party and Zionism, my guess is that only a small segment of listeners would instantly understand the full meaning of Siegel's reference to "revisionist" ideology, which in Israeli terms means a Jewish nationalist determination to regain permanent control of all of biblical Palestine. Nor do all listeners understand what position the Likud party takes.

Website

In addition to reviewing NPR's on-air coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (and related stories), I reviewed relevant coverage provided on npr.org. During this quarter, npr.org ran 46 items connected to the Middle East conflict. These items were in addition the audio and story transcripts from radio shows. Of the 46 web-only items:

- 20 were Associated Press news reports that NPR staff selected and edited for inclusion on the "Middle East" topic page of npr.org. I did not review dozens of AP stories that were automatically available on NPR's website through a
process known as "auto-feed." It is my understanding that these items are not selected or edited in any way by NPR staff.

- 17 items on the website were news-related postings by NPR's Two-Way and other blogs.
- 3 items were news-analysis pieces by NPR staff members.
- 1 item was a movie review written by a NPR staffer of an Israeli film, For My Father.
- The remaining 5 items were commentaries provided by NPR's "web partners," including Foreign Policy and National Review magazines.

A plurality (18) of these web-only items focused on the dispute arising from the East Jerusalem housing announcement. Another 10 items focused on the possible resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, and the rest on other matters, notably the assassination in Dubai of a senior Hamas operative.

The items from the "partner" organizations should give more information about the authors, all of whom are named but without any background or affiliation. For example, a March 11 posting of a Foreign Policy commentary should have identified the author, Amos Harel, as a prominent columnist for the liberal Israeli newspaper Haaretz.

In general, the news stories and news blogs posted on the website met NPR's basic journalistic standards. I do have concerns about the following items:

- An AP story on March 8: "Israel, Palestinians Agree To Indirect Talks." In discussing the obstacles to a renewed process, the story said: "Also underlining the difficulties are sharp divisions between Palestinian moderates and militants as well as a hard-line Israeli government opposed to many concessions seen as necessary for peace." This last part, about concessions for peace, should have been attributed because many Israelis (notably current government leaders) would argue that it is the Palestinians—not Israelis—who
need to make concessions for peace. A March 11 AP story, "Biden Tries To Wrangle Israel, Palestinians To Table," used similar, if somewhat better, language; it said Netanyahu had been reluctant to make concessions "widely believed to be necessary to reach a deal."

– A March 9 AP story, "Israel, Syria Announce Nuclear Energy Ambitions," reported on separate announcements by Israel and Syria about their plans for nuclear energy. The story gave some detail about the history of Israel's nuclear program – one that reportedly has produced a significant nuclear weapons arsenal but has not yet been used to produce energy. To give readers a balanced presentation, the story should have noted recent allegations that Syria has attempted to build its own nuclear weapons program. For example, in 2007 Israel bombed a facility in eastern Syria that it claimed was intended to produce nuclear weapons.