This report reviews NPR's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute during the first quarter of 2011. It begins with an assessment of 56 stories and interviews that aired on NPR-produced radio shows, then continues with an assessment of 39 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website.

The Israeli-Palestinian dispute generated plenty of news during the quarter, but it was overshadowed by two other major international news stories: the historic political unrest in nearly all Arab counties and the March 11 earthquake-tsunami in Japan that caused widespread devastation and led to the world's most severe crisis at a nuclear power plant in more than two decades. NPR poured enormous resources into covering these two stories (plus a federal budget showdown in Washington) and had little time left for important but seemingly routine stories from the rest of the Middle East.

Because of NPR's intensive coverage of the turbulence in Arab countries, I should note that my review concerns only those stories with a direct connection to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, plus related events in neighboring Lebanon. Only a few stories focusing primarily on the Arab unrest delved into the Israeli-Palestinian situation, and those are included in my review.

Overall, while coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute generally met NPR's journalistic standards, my report raises several concerns, particularly concerning fairness.

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 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; this was the case again during this quarter.

NPR aired one correction of its coverage of the Israel-Palestine story during the period: On March 28, Talk of the Nation host Neal Conan mistakenly referred to the March 23 bombing at a bus stop in Jerusalem as a "suicide bombing." In fact, the bomber (or bombers, still unknown as of early April) reportedly left a bag containing the bomb at a bus stop. NPR posted an online correction on March 31.

I did find one other inaccuracy. In a piece for Morning Edition on January 10, Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro reported on the implications of a recent discovery of a large deposit of natural gas (and possibly oil) off the coast of Israel. The introduction described the finding as "the world's biggest gas discovery in a decade." The introduction should have said it was the world's biggest deepwater gas discovery in decade; several other onshore discoveries
during that period, notably a 2008 discovery in northern Louisiana, were larger. This should be corrected.

Fairness and Balance

Using the same method as for previous reports, I made a subjective determination of the "dominant focus" of each radio piece, interview, or two-way covered by this report. The term "dominant focus" describes the overall subject matter and does not necessarily mean that the piece or interview takes sides. Of the 56 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 3 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 4 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 6 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 6 focused on U.S. efforts to revive direct peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians;
- 8 focused on the domestic political upheaval in Egypt;
- 6 focused on relations between Israel and Egypt in light of Egypt's political upheaval;
- 6 focused on various aspects of U.S. policy toward the Middle East, including 2 items focusing on U.S. relations with Israel, 2 focusing on U.S. relations with Egypt, and 2 focusing on broader U.S. concerns in the region;
- 5 focused on political events in Lebanon;
- the remaining 12 items focused on other matters related to Israeli-Palestinian issues.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from these figures is that NPR's radio shows paid relatively little attention to events in Israel and the Palestinian territories during the first quarter of 2011. Over the previous eight years of my reviews, NPR averaged about 100 stories and interviews on this topic for each quarter – about twice as many as during this quarter.

However, starting in late January, NPR did pay attention to the broader regional implications of the political turmoil in Egypt and other Arab nations, including implications for the landmark 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Again, I want to emphasize that my review does not deal with the bulk of NPR's coverage of the Arab unrest and, instead, discusses only the coverage that had a connection to Israeli-Palestinian issues.

Individual items aired during the quarter generally met basic standards for fairness and balance. However, I have concerns about the following:

- A piece by Garcia-Navarro, on January 4 All Things Considered (ATC), dealt with the controversial subject of Israel's alleged clampdown on domestic dissent. I had several problems with this piece, starting with the introduction, which said the recent death of a Palestinian demonstrator had focused attention on how Israel dealt with "a burgeoning protest movement that includes Jews, as well as Arabs." The term "burgeoning" suggested that Israel was faced with a new and rapidly growing series of protests. However, the story offered no data or even anecdotal evidence to support such a suggestion. As a democracy, Israel almost always
experiences protests of one kind or another, but it is not clear that the current level is unusually high by historic standards.

Moreover, the piece failed to give Israeli authorities an opportunity to respond to a claim of discrimination by a well-known Jewish activist who advocates on behalf of the Palestinians. Garcia-Navarro paraphrased the activist, Jonathan Pollack, as saying Israel targets protest-leaders who challenge the occupation of the West Bank even as the government refuses to act against rabbis "who break the law by preaching discrimination."

On tape, Pollack expanded on this by saying "open racism is advocated in Israeli society [but is] unanswered." Without more of an explanation, neither of these statements would be entirely clear to most American listeners, who probably do not pay attention to internal Israel politics on a daily basis. More important, the government should have been given an opportunity to respond to Pollack's allegations.

Finally, this story described an incident concerning Adnan Ghaith, an East Jerusalem resident. Ghaith said he was told by the Israeli government that he would be banished from his home for several months on the basis of secret evidence that his lawyer could not see. Because the story moved back and forth between Jewish and Palestinian protestors, it should have made clear that Ghaith is a Palestinian and an officer of the Fatah political movement, which governs the West Bank. In addition, the government should have been given an opportunity to respond to Gaith's statement, particularly the claim that his lawyer was barred from seeing evidence in the case.

– In a piece that aired on Morning Edition on January 20, Garcia-Navarro profiled the troubles of a small Palestinian village, in a contested area south of Jerusalem, that is nearly surrounded by Jewish settlements. The piece quoted Palestinians as making several allegations concerning Israel's construction of the "security barrier" intended to divide the settlements from Palestinians. Israel, the Palestinians said, had confiscated Palestinian lands, including two graveyards and a spring that provided water to the village. Garcia-Navarro noted that the Palestinians had petitioned an Israeli court to halt the construction. This piece gave listeners valuable insight into the impact of Israeli settlements on the daily lives of ordinary Palestinians. Unfortunately, however, Garcia-Navarro did not give the Israeli government an opportunity to respond to the allegations that graves had been desecrated and the village would be deprived of its water. The Ombudsman also wrote about this.

– An Israeli government-appointed panel on January 23 released the first of its two planned reports investigating Israel's raid of a Turkish-sponsored flotilla of ships carrying food and other supplies to the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. On May 31, 2010, Israeli commandos seized all six ships in the flotilla; a violent struggle aboard the lead ship, the Mavi Mamara, resulted in the deaths of nine activists and injuries to 55 other activists and nine Israeli soldiers. An international outcry over the incident deeply embarrassed Israel and led the government to modify its land (but not naval) blockade of Gaza.
NPR provided extensive coverage of the May 2010 commando raid and its immediate aftermath: The radio shows carried two dozen news pieces and interviews about various aspects of the flotilla incident, and the website posted 23 blogs, news reports, and commentaries related to the subject.

Given this relatively intensive coverage of the original incident, one might have expected NPR would air at least basic coverage of Israel's official investigation report. Unlike many countries, Israel does have a history of conducting serious investigations into alleged wrongdoing by its military and other government agencies – a history that justifies NPR doing serious coverage of this particular investigation. However, none of NPR's radio shows covered the January 23 release of the Israeli report; nor has any coverage of the report appeared since then. The network's only coverage was a news story – compiled from staff and wire service reports – posted on the NPR website on January 23.

Whatever one thinks of the findings in the report, basic journalistic fairness should have dictated at least some coverage by the radio shows, which had given so much coverage to the original incident. It is true that this particular story was quickly overtaken by the release later on January 23 by al-Jazeera of internal Palestinian documents concerning peace talks with Israel. NPR covered the so-called "Palestinian papers" with five stories and interviews on the radio and five postings on the website. Plus, the world's attention quickly turned to unrest in Tunisia and Egypt. Even so, NPR failed to give adequate attention to Israel's side of the latest episode in the Gaza flotilla story.

It should be noted here that Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, who is based in Jerusalem, was dispatched first to Egypt, then to Libya, to cover the uprisings there, which has left NPR relying on freelancer Sheera Frenkel.

– A news report, filed by Frenkel for ATC on March 23, used the unfortunate expression "tit for tat violence" to summarize a recent series of clashes between Israelis and Palestinians. (The same expression appeared in an "staff and wires" news story posted on NPR's website the same day).

Frenkel's report dealt with that day's bombing at a bus stop in Jerusalem, which left one person dead and about two dozen wounded, some seriously. Less than two weeks earlier, attackers had killed five members of an Israeli family at their home in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. Other incidents during this time period included the firing by Palestinians in Gaza of several dozen rockets and mortar rounds into neighboring Israel, and Israel's retaliatory air strikes that killed nine Palestinians. Taken together, these incidents represented a sudden upsurge of violence that caused deep concern in the region and internationally – and represented much more than was implied by the "tit for tat" phrase.

– Every once in a while, NPR seems to go overboard in its coverage of some events, notably the release of narrow-interest movies. Once such case may have involved a new movie, Miral, by filmmaker and artist Julian Schnabel. The movie tells the story of a young, female Palestinian journalist: Rula Jebreal, who is now married to Schnabel. The movie reportedly shows violence
by both Palestinians and Israelis, but it has come under widespread criticism from some U.S. Jewish groups, which complain that it has a pro-Palestinian slant. Two NPR shows did interviews about the movie: Weekend Edition Saturday interviewed Schnabel on March 26, and Tell Me More interviewed Jebreal on March 31. In addition, NPR’s website on March 24 carried a detailed, generally positive review by Mark Jenkins, an independent critic. One can reasonably question whether this particular movie justified this much publicity, which NPR gives very few movies or other artistic endeavors.

– In late 2010 and early 2011, the Palestinian Authority (which governs part of the West Bank) stepped up its campaign to win international recognition as an official state. As of late March, some 110 countries had recognized the Palestinian Authority as a state; this reportedly was part of a Palestinian effort to get the United Nations General Assembly to grant Palestinian statehood in September 2011. In one sign of how seriously Israel was taking this move, the Associated Press and Israeli news organizations reported on March 29-30 that the Israeli government was considering several retaliatory options, including annexing some Jewish settlements in the West Bank or even cutting off water supplies to some Palestinian areas.

The Palestinian drive toward statehood was a significant development with potentially serious consequences, particularly for U.S.-led peace negotiations. Garcia-Navarro did a piece about the Palestinian push for statehood in late December 2010, but NPR gave only two passing references to the story during the first quarter of 2001. One was in a January 20 Talk of the Nation interview with TIME magazine editor Parag Khanna about a trend toward microstates. The second was in diplomatic correspondent Michele Kelemen’s January 24 ATC story about the so-called "Palestinian papers" – internal Palestinian diplomatic records made public by the al Jazeera network.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) appeared in the 56 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 36 Israelis and 38 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared on tape in multiple stories or interviews. Of the Arabs, 23 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.

In addition, 30 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 39 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians); some individuals (for example, the Israeli prime minister) were quoted multiple times. "Quotes" means all statements, not on tape, attributed either to named individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Palestinians." In some cases, hearing the actual voice of a person in a radio report might have a greater impact on a listener than having a reporter simply quote that person, or even groups of people. This is one reason why this report distinguishes between taped and quoted statements.

Along with the aggregate counts mentioned above, I counted the appearances on tape, or in quotes, of individual Israeli and Palestinians, including government officials and opinion leaders.
This is done to determine how often listeners hear from decision-makers and influential individuals on both sides. Following is a summary. It also includes individuals – such as Israeli spokesman Mark Regev – who frequently have appeared on NPR's air in the past but were not heard or quoted this quarter:

Israelis:

Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu: On tape in 1 items; Quoted in 8 items

President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items

Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items

Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 1 item

Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

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

Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 2 items

Likud Party member Danny Danon: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Other Israelis on tape: 29

Palestinians:

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items

Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 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 1 item

Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 3 items
Palestinian official Nabil Shaath: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Other Palestinians on tape: 21

**Identification of voices.**

For the most part, NPR reporters and shows have been doing a better job lately of identifying people quoted on air. Following are two examples where listeners should have been given more information:

– Talk of the Nation on **January 31** interviewed Romesh Ratnesar, who argued that the United States needed to more quickly to push Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak from power. Ratnesar was identified only as an editor-at-large for TIME magazine, with no additional information about him and why his opinions were valuable.

– Middle East correspondent Peter Kenyon did a **February 7** piece for ATC on Hezbollah's increasing influence in Lebanese politics. Kenyon failed to give listeners any useful information to help them understand the views of the three "analysts" quoted in the story. Kenyon described Talal Atrissi as an analyst "at Lebanese University;" Judith Palmer-Harik as an analyst and "author of a book and many scholarly articles on Hezbollah;" and Hilal Kashan as a political scientist at the American University of Beirut. Each of these three people is well-known within Lebanon and to the broader world of specialists who focus on the Middle East, but the average NPR listener can hardly be expected to know anything about any of them. Because Lebanese politics can be confusing and because Hezbollah (the central focus of this story) is so controversial, listeners should have been given more information to help them judge the credibility of these three analysts.

**Range of voices.** With few exceptions, NPR listeners heard only a narrow range of voices in stories about Israel-Palestinian issues during the period. Among the exceptions were: two Palestinians in the village near Jerusalem, quoted in the **January 20** Morning Edition piece noted above; three young Israelis quoted in a **February 4** ATC piece on Israel's reaction to events in Egypt; and three young Palestinians in Gaza, who were quoted in a **February 8** Morning Edition piece on reaction to the upheaval in Egypt.

**Arab Revolt**

As noted above, very little of NPR's coverage of the dramatic events in the Arab world early in 2011 was subject to my review because it did not directly concern the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

However, I did include two dozen news stories, interviews and other items that focused primarily on the Arab revolt but also contained significant references to Israel and/or the Palestinians. The majority dealt with Israeli concerns – which deepened in late January and early February – about what might happen to the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty if Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak fell from power.
NPR was late in covering this aspect of the story. Its first full report came on January 31, more than two weeks after President Ben Ali fled from office in Tunisia, setting off the broader Arab revolt in the region. From that point on, however, NPR stepped up its coverage of the regional dimensions of the Arab revolt, including its implications for Middle East peace, relations with Israel, and the role of Iran in the region. The broader coverage included news stories by NPR's diplomatic correspondents Jackie Northam (on February 13) and Michele Kelemen (on February 16); a March 17 Morning Edition interview with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton during her visit to Egypt; and a March 26 Weekend Edition Saturday interview with Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States.

NPR's most thorough reporting on the subject came in two interviews on Talk of the Nation: on March 28 with former U.S. peace negotiator Aaron David Miller and on March 30 with Shibley Telhami, a professor at the University of Maryland who also conducts polling in the Arab world. Miller and Telhami gave listeners contrasting views of how the events in the Arab world might affect the prospects for resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Miller seemed deeply pessimistic that peace talks could get back on track anytime soon, while Telhami suggested there will be new opportunities "down the road" for the stalled peace process.

Taken as a whole, these stories and interviews gave listeners a reasonably complete picture of the regional dimensions of the Arab uprising – including the widespread, if possibly exaggerated, Israeli fears about the prospect of Egypt turning into another Iran.

Website

I also reviewed relevant coverage on the NPR website, NPR.org. During the January-March quarter, NPR.org carried 39 items with some connection to the Middle East conflict. These were in addition to the Web versions of stories on NPR's radio shows.

Of the 39 Web-only items:

- 13 were Associated Press reports selected by NPR staff and edited for inclusion on the "mideast" topic page of the website. I did not review dozens of other AP stories that were automatically, and temporarily, available on NPR's website through an automated process known as "auto-feed." These items are not selected or edited in any way by NPR staff.
- 6 items were news-related blog postings by NPR's Two-Way and other blogs.
- 2 items were longer-form news, news-analysis or commentary pieces by NPR staff members;
- 6 were hard news reports (similar to wire stories) compiled from staff reporting and AP stories;
- 2 were movie reviews by freelance critics; and
- 10 were commentaries provided by NPR's Web "partners" or by independent writers contracted by NPR.

In terms of dominant focus:
• 1 item focused primarily on Israel;
• 3 items focused primarily on the Palestinians;
• 5 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
• 3 items focused primarily on Lebanon;
• 5 items focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process;
• 4 items focused primarily on relations between Israel and Egypt;
• 5 items focused primarily on U.S. diplomacy in the region, particularly in response to the Arab unrest;
• 13 focused on other matters with some connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Of the 39 Web-only items, 17 quoted Israelis while 9 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, Web-only items met NPR's basic journalistic standards for fairness and balance. However, one news report failed to give Israel an opportunity to respond to charges against it. This was a March 1 report, compiled by NPR staff with assistance from the wire services, quoting Yemen's president, Ali Abdullah Saleh, as accusing Israel of plotting to destabilize the Arab world. Many Americans might find Saleh's charges bizarre, but such statements often are taken seriously in the Middle East. The Israeli government should have been given a chance to respond.

Also, the March 23 posting of an extended news report, compiled from NPR staff and wire service reports, used the same unfortunate expression "tit for tat violence" as noted above in a comment about a Frenkel story for ATC the same day.

Website postings were remarkably accurate, especially considering that many were written under very tight deadlines. I found no substantive errors.

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