

NPR Mideast Coverage January - March 2012

This report covers NPR's reporting on events and trends related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians during the first quarter of 2012. By far the major story during the quarter involved the increased international pressure against Iran because of its alleged program to build nuclear weapons. NPR's radio shows devoted 41 stories and interviews to that topic during the quarter, representing well more than one-half of the 71 radio items covered by this review. By contrast, listeners heard relatively little about news events in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The report begins with an assessment of the 71 stories and interviews, covered by this review, that aired from January through March on radio shows produced by NPR. It then continues with an assessment of 46 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website.

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. Despite tight deadlines and other constraints, NPR's coverage of the region has been remarkably, and consistently, accurate over the years; once again, this was the case during this quarter.

I found only relatively minor inaccuracies during the period:

– In a "Two-Way" [blog posting](#) on **January 14**, reporting on the assassination of an Iranian nuclear scientist, NPR staffer Steve Mullis referred to the international diplomacy concerning Iran's nuclear program as the "G5+1 talks (the five members of the UN Security Council plus Iran)." Actually, these talks are referred to as the "P5+1" because

they involve the five *permanent* members of the Security Council (Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States) plus Germany. Iran is on the other side of the table when these diplomats meet.

NPR posted a correction of this item on April 17:

In the original text of this post, we mistakenly wrote "G5+1" in reference to the talks. They are the "P5+1" talks. The "P5" are the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. The "+1" is Germany. Those six nations are, as a group, negotiating with Iran. The text has been corrected.

– A [piece](#) by freelance reporter Sheera Frenkel for *All Things Considered* on **January 20** described an "online battle" between Israeli and Palestinian hackers. In the course of the piece, Frenkel referred to the "Stuxnet" computer virus that reportedly attacked portions of Iran's nuclear facilities in 2010. Frenkel said the virus "caused the centrifuges in the Natanz nuclear facility to spin wildly out of control and destroy themselves." With its implication that the virus completely destroyed the centrifuges at the facility, this reference was misleading. According to all other news stories and publicly available expert assessments, the Stuxnet virus resulted in damage to only some of the centrifuges at Natanz, possibly no more than 20 percent of them.

NPR also posted this correction on April 17:

The audio of this story, as did a previous Web version, reports that the Stuxnet virus caused centrifuges at the Natanz facility in Iran to spin out of control and destroy themselves, implying that all the centrifuges were destroyed. In fact only some of the centrifuges were destroyed.

– *Talk of the Nation* host Neal Conan, in a **March 15** [interview](#) with two former U.S. diplomats, corrected his own mischaracterization of the sequence of events in a round of violence between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza. In his introduction to the conversation, Conan said that Palestinians launched a barrage of rockets the previous week, to which Israel responded. After reading an e-mail from a listener during the

interview, Conan corrected himself by noting that the violence started when Israel assassinated a leader of a militant Palestinian faction in Gaza.

NPR on April 17 added the following correction to the transcript of the interview:

In the introduction to this conversation, we said that Palestinians launched a barrage of rockets the previous week, to which Israel responded. That was inaccurate. Later in the segment it was noted that the violence started when Israel assassinated a leader of a militant Palestinian faction in Gaza.

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 aired during the quarter. The term "dominant focus" describes the overall subject matter and does not necessarily mean that the piece or interview takes sides. Of the 71 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 4 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 5 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 6 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 41 focused on concerns about Iran's alleged program to build nuclear weapons (of these, 20 focused about equally on U.S. and Israeli policy toward Iran; 10 focused primarily on Israel's policy toward Iran; 9 focused on events in Iran, and 2 focused on U.S. policy toward Iran, exclusive of Israel);
- 1 focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
- 3 focused on U.S. politics or other concerns;
- 3 focused on anti-Jewish violence in France;
- the remaining 8 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 continued to pay very little — although relatively balanced — attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the shows did give listeners substantial coverage of the controversy over Iran's nuclear program.

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

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 71 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 43 Israelis and 20 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. Of the Arab voices, 17 were those of Palestinians.

In addition, 42 radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 13 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians); some individuals (for example, the Israeli prime minister) 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 "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 2 items; Quoted in 23 items

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

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

Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 3 items; Quoted in 4 items
Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 0 item; Quoted on 0 items
Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Government spokesman Jonathan Peled: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Former Mossad head Meir Dagan: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
Journalist Ronen Bergman: 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 3 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 1 item
 Hamas official: Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas official Ahmed Yousef: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
 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
 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
 Gaza analyst Omar Shaban: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Other Palestinians on tape: 12

These figures show that NPR listeners heard very little during the quarter from key Israeli and Palestinian actors, as well as ordinary people on both sides. As usually is the case, listeners heard much more often from Israelis than from Palestinians. The scarcity of Palestinian voices reflects the ongoing lack of coverage of the West Bank and Gaza, certainly in relation to Israel.

Identification of voices. NPR reporters and shows increasingly have been careful to give listeners accurate and useful descriptions of the sources quoted on air. However, I did find a few cases during the quarter in which listeners should have been given more information about unfamiliar sources.

One notable example was Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro's **March 14** [piece](#) for *Morning Edition* describing the impact of the so-called "Arab spring" on Gaza,

which is ruled by Hamas. This was a well-timed piece because NPR listeners have heard very little from Gaza in recent years. Garcia-Navarro quoted four people who are well-known within Gaza but probably are unfamiliar to most Americans, and they should have been described more fully. Two were political commentators: Omar Shaban, described by Garcia-Navarro as a "Gaza-based political analyst," and Talal Okal, described only as an "analyst" in Gaza.

The description of Shaban, coupled with Shaban's rather clinical analysis of the political challenges facing Hamas, must have left listeners wondering about him. In fact, Shaban appears to be an independent political thinker who was a staffer for Catholic Relief Services in Gaza before founding [Pal-Think](#), which he describes as a "Gaza-based think and do tank." Okal is a columnist for *Al-Ayam*, a Gaza newspaper that has been harshly critical of Hamas and, indeed, has been repeatedly shut down by Hamas. In other words, both Shaban and Okal are independent of Hamas, and should have been described as such.

Garcia-Navarro also quoted, in what amounted to a debate, two representatives of Hamas but failed to provide enough information to help listeners fully understand the positions they took and why. They were Ahmed Yousef, who Garcia-Navarro described only as a "Hamas leader," and Mahmoud Zahar, described as "one of the founders of Hamas." Yousef has served Hamas in several capacities, including as a top spokesman and political advisor to the Gaza prime minister, and he occasionally has been a voice of relative moderation, at least when speaking to the Western news media. Zahar, who has been Hamas's foreign minister, seems to carefully gauge his statements, particularly when addressing Western audiences, sometimes voicing hard-line positions and at other times trying to sound moderate to Western ears.

In the murky world of Hamas leadership, it's often difficult for outsiders to understand who (if anyone) is in charge and what the group's true agenda might be. Garcia-Navarro's piece highlighted the apparent divisions within the Hamas leadership but offered listeners little help in understanding where it is headed.

In the same piece, Garcia-Navarro said that, despite the divisions, "most Hamas members agree that the Arab spring has been good for the movement." She should have cited sources to justify such a sweeping conclusion about the Hamas membership, which numbers in the thousands.

Range of voices. As noted earlier, NPR listeners heard very little during the quarter from Israelis or Palestinians—whether government officials or ordinary citizens—about the many issues dividing them. Even so, there were a few occasions when listeners heard voices and viewpoints that normally are absent altogether from NPR's air. One was on **January 9**, when Garcia-Navarro reported for *All Things Considered* on Israel's crackdown on extremist settler groups in the West Bank, including those who reportedly had raided an Israeli military base. Garcia-Navarro's [piece](#) quoted a woman, Liat Weisel, described as a member of the so-called "Hilltop Youth"—young people who helped build makeshift, unauthorized Jewish settlements on hilltops in the West Bank. Weisel expressed a view common among settlers, but rarely heard by NPR listeners, that it is the Palestinians in the West Bank who are "occupiers," not the Israelis who have moved there since 1967. "They're not supposed to be there," Garcia-Navarro quoted Weisel as saying of the Palestinians. "This is our land. The ideal situation is that they should leave."

Another example of rarely heard voices came in the **March 14** piece, cited above, with the comments from two senior leaders from Hamas. Similarly, listeners to *Weekend Edition Saturday*, on **March 17**, heard a [piece](#) by Garcia-Navarro quoting three workers in Gaza and a man who operates one of the several hundred underground tunnels linking Gaza to Egypt. This was one of the few occasions in recent years when ordinary Gazans appeared on NPR's air.

Iran's Nuclear Program

The main Middle East news during the first quarter of 2012 involved two neighboring countries and long-time allies: Iran and Syria. The Iran story is included in this review because of Israel's deep involvement. To date, the conflict in Syria has had little direct

connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and so NPR's coverage of it is not included in this review.

With its 41 stories and interviews on the radio and 25 news stories and commentaries posted online, NPR gave its audience reasonably complete and comprehensive coverage of the most recent round of debate over whether Iran is working to build nuclear weapons.

NPR listeners and readers were exposed to a broad range of views on the topic, including those of senior Israeli officials who insist that Iran is very close to achieving the capability of making nuclear weapons (and must be stopped, by military means if necessary, from achieving that goal) and of those who are more skeptical both of Iran's intentions and of the need for another war in the Middle East. However, the one viewpoint generally missing from NPR's coverage was that of Iran's. A handful of stories did quote Iranian views on the nuclear impasse, but listeners had only one opportunity during the quarter to hear the Iranian government's viewpoint directly and in any detail: on **February 9**, when *Morning Edition* host Steve Inskeep [interviewed](#) Mohammad Khazaei, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations.

As often is the case, NPR's most comprehensive coverage of this complex issue was on *Talk of the Nation*, which aired seven informative conversations during the period with analysts, journalists and retired diplomats. Taken together, these conversations gave listeners most of the information they needed to understand the basic details of Iran's nuclear program and the international efforts to persuade Iran to change its ways.

By far the most sobering of these conversations was host Neal Conan's **January 30** [interview](#) with Israeli journalist Ronen Bergman, whose lengthy [article](#) detailing Israel's concerns about Iran's nuclear program had been published the previous day in *The New York Times Magazine*. In that article, and again in the NPR interview, Bergman said he had concluded that Israel intended to attack Iran's suspect nuclear facilities some time in 2012, probably earlier in the year than later. He said he had reached this conclusion as a

result of his own reporting, including interviews with Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak.

The Bergman interview gave listeners a reasonably full understanding of why senior Israeli officials are so concerned about the potential of Iran mastering the technology to build nuclear weapons—and not just the prospect of Iran actually possessing these weapons. Iran is unlikely to attack Israel, which possesses its own large nuclear arsenal, Bergman said, but "the problem is that once Iran acquires this ability [to make nuclear weapons], it would change the balance of power in the Middle East." Bergman also explained the debate within Israel about the wisdom and practicality of attempting to destroy Iran's nuclear facilities with a military attack, and he noted that Israel would take U.S. concerns about such an attack into account but would not give Washington a veto.

In retrospect, it seems that Bergman's *Times* magazine piece and the extensive news coverage of it were largely responsible for a flurry of speculation throughout February and into March that an Israeli attack on Iran early in 2012 was all but certain. The impact in the United States of Bergman's piece was reinforced by *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius, who [reported](#) on February 2 that U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta "believes there is a strong likelihood that Israel will strike Iran in April, May or June—before Iran enters what Israelis describe as a 'zone of immunity' to commence building a nuclear bomb." Interestingly, Ignatius [told](#) *Morning Edition*'s Steve Inskeep on **February 15** that his sources said Israel had not yet made a decision about attacking Iran.

NPR joined in the speculation, with numerous stories, both on air and online, raising questions about when such an attack might take place and what the consequences might be. In a website posting on **February 8**, for example, NPR editor Greg Myre gave readers a clear, even-handed [summary](#) of the debate: "5 Reasons Why Israel Might Bomb Iran, or Not." Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman, in an excellent [piece](#) for *Weekend Edition Saturday* on **March 10**, also explained the military challenges of an attack against Iran.

The speculation quieted after Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu visited President Obama in Washington on March 5. Despite a huge quantity of rhetoric at the time, from all sides, it's still unclear exactly what took place in the Obama-Netanyahu and related U.S.-Israeli meetings. One apparent result, however, was that Israelis and Americans, in general, toned down the talk about imminent attacks against Iran, and the emphasis turned for the time being to Obama's preferred solution of using tougher economic sanctions to push Iran into accepting a diplomatic solution. By late March, the attack-on-Iran debate had largely receded—at least for the moment.

Reflecting the sensitivity of this topic—and bearing in mind the painful lessons from the run-up to the Iraq war a decade ago—most of NPR's reporting was appropriately cautious, avoided hard predictions, and was as precise as possible. Reporters, hosts and editors generally used such formulations as "Iran's nuclear program" or "alleged nuclear weapons program" to describe what Iran may, or may not, be doing in the facilities it has hidden from the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency. Even though many Israeli officials and some U.S. politicians have insisted there is no doubt that Iran is working to develop nuclear weapons, the publicly available factual record is less clear on this point. As always, it is appropriate for journalists to be careful to distinguish between facts that are reasonably certain and rhetoric that cannot be substantiated.

One example of imprecision occurred in Garcia-Navarro's otherwise fine [piece](#) for *All Things Considered* on **January 31** reviewing the debate within Israel about attacking Iran. In her opening paragraph, Garcia-Navarro referred to an American intelligence estimate "that Iran could cross the nuclear threshold this year." Unfortunately, Garcia-Navarro did not explain what she meant by "nuclear threshold"—a phrase open to numerous interpretations. This could mean that Iran is able to enrich uranium to the level needed for nuclear weapons, or that it has all the necessary technology to assemble a nuclear weapon, or that it could test such a weapon, or that it is able to fashion a nuclear bomb that can be delivered hundreds or thousands of miles by a missile or plane. Without a more precise definition, the careful listener might wonder just what it is that American officials believe Iran might be capable of doing this year.

One decision any show host must make is how strongly to challenge a questionable statement by a guest. *All Things Considered* host Robert Siegel had to make this decision on **March 7**, when he [interviewed](#) Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren. In describing why Israel feels threatened by the prospect of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, Oren said: "And the Iranian regime is openly saying it wants these weapons to wipe Israel off the map."

This was a false claim. Iranian officials have indeed talked of eliminating Israel, but the Tehran government has not threatened to use nuclear weapons to achieve that purpose.

Siegel responded to Oren with too mild of a rejoinder: "Well, what do you make of Iran never conceding that it's making a nuclear weapon?" Oren evaded that question and instead launched into a recitation of what he called Iranian "lie after lie after lie," highlighted by what he said was Iran's statement "that they weren't enriching uranium to 20 percent; they're enriching uranium to 20 percent." Again, Oren—a highly regarded historian—over-simplified and mischaracterized a complex and disputed history. Iran did hide its uranium enrichment work until it was uncovered by UN inspectors. But Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said as early as 2009 that Iran wanted uranium enriched to 20 percent to resupply the Tehran Research Reactor (for production of radioactive isotopes for medical uses), but a proposed fuel swap to give Iran that fuel fell apart late in 2009 after Iran [imposed conditions](#) the United States and its negotiating partners would not accept. In February 2010 Iran began enriching uranium on its own for the reactor, according to reports by the International Atomic Energy Agency, including its [major report](#) in November 2011.

Finally on this topic, while NPR's coverage during this period explored nearly all the important current questions, it did not adequately explain the recent history of the impasse over Iran's nuclear ambitions. The current diplomacy on the subject goes back for at least a decade, but much of NPR's coverage has ignored that history. Listeners and readers cannot be expected to recall the details or even the broad outlines of what

happened years ago. NPR thus has an obligation to put the current debate into context when doing so is helpful — and especially when there is serious talk of war.

I raise this question of background because the NPR website on **February 16** offered two competing versions of some of the diplomatic history: a [commentary](#) from *The Nation* by Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, who was highly critical of Israel's hard-line stance, and an [opposing view](#) from Tod Lindberg, a research fellow at the Hoover Institution, writing for the *Weekly Standard*, who sided with Israel and faulted the Obama administration for not being tough enough with Iran. These two pieces offered contrasting views on how and why the current impasse developed, leaving the careful reader uncertain which version to believe.

Some of the interviews on *Talk of the Nation* also included brief references to recent diplomacy, and, of course, the NPR website has archived all the coverage of this story. But a thorough and balanced updated examination of how this situation developed, including an objective accounting of why the various diplomatic initiatives failed, would help the audience understand the background and sort out the conflicting claims over who is to blame if war does come.

Israel-Gaza Violence

A sudden upsurge of violence between Israel and militant Palestinian groups in Gaza, in early-to-mid March, raised international concerns about a front that had been relatively quiet for more than a year. The violence began on March 9 when Israel assassinated Zuhair al-Qaissi, the local leader of the Popular Resistance Committees, a Palestinian militant group that had refused to observe a de facto cease-fire between Israel and the Hamas-led government in Gaza. In a repeat of similar incidents in the past, Palestinians from al-Qaissi's group and others retaliated by sending about 200 missiles across the border into southern Israel. The Israeli military responded with air strikes that, within a

few days, killed more than twenty militants and at least four civilians. Hamas, according to reports on both sides, stayed out of the violence.

The NPR website carried an AP news story on March 10, and Garcia-Navarro covered the story in 2-ways and pieces on March 11 and 12.

One major difference between this round of violence and previous ones was that Israel was able to deploy the initial stages of a new air-defense system called the "Iron Dome." Consisting of missiles capable of attacking incoming missiles, Iron Dome reportedly shot down nearly all of the Palestinian missiles that the Israeli military believed were headed toward populated areas, thus preventing casualties and significant property damage on the Israeli side; one missile did strike an unoccupied school. As Garcia-Navarro [reported](#), on *Morning Edition* on **March 11**, "This is the first time it's really been tested in such a large-scale way and it's worked remarkably well."

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 January-March quarter, NPR.org carried 46 items with some connection to the Middle East conflict. These items were in addition to the website versions of stories that aired originally on NPR's radio shows.

Of the 46 website-only items:

- 18 were news reports by the Associated Press 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." It is my understanding that such items are not selected or edited in any way by NPR staff.
- 16 items were news-related postings by NPR's "Two-Way" and other blogs.
- 4 were news or analysis pieces written by NPR staffers;

- 6 were commentaries provided by Foreign Policy magazine (3 items), The Nation magazine (2 items) and the Weekly Standard magazine (1 item);
- 1 was a NPR-prepared summary of a debate sponsored by [Intelligence Squared US](#);
- 1 was a book excerpt.

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

- 3 item focused primarily on Israel;
- 3 item focused primarily on the Palestinians;
- 3 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 25 focused on the Iran nuclear program (of these, 9 focused primarily on Israel's concerns about Iran; 9 focused on U.S. and Israeli concerns about Iran; and 7 focused primarily on Iran itself.)
- 9 focused on anti-Jewish violence in France;
- 2 items focused on Jordan's attempt to revive peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians;
- 1 item focused on U.S. policies toward the broader Middle East;

Of the 46 website-only items, 27 quoted Israelis and 8 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, website-only items met NPR's basic journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and balance. As was the case in several previous quarters, however, the website paid very little attention to domestic events in Israel or the Palestinian territories.

I want to take note of one website posting::

– On **January 23**, the website carried a [commentary](#), from *Foreign Policy* magazine, by Yousaf Butt, who was described as a nuclear physicist serving as a scientific consultant to the Federation of American Scientists. The piece cast serious doubt on claims by Israel

and others that Iran is attempting to develop nuclear weapons. In particular, the commentary questioned a January 11 piece, also from *Foreign Policy*, by Olli Heinonen, a former inspector for the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency. NPR provided a [link](#) to the Heinonen piece but did not post it. Butt's commentary should have been paired, in a reasonable time frame, with an opposing argument so readers could make their own judgments about the validity of each side in the debate about the seriousness of the challenge posed by Iran's alleged nuclear weapons ambitions.