Israel's May 31 raid on a flotilla of ships carrying supplies to the Gaza strip was by far the biggest news story in the region during the second quarter of 2010. NPR covered this story intensively for about a week, then it pretty much disappeared for the remainder of the period under review. Other news events in the region, including the incremental motion in U.S.-sponsored peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians, received minimal coverage.

The news and feature items reviewed for this report generally met NPR's journalistic standards. Several radio reports were exceptionally good, notably Peter Kenyon’s reporting in Gaza five days after the flotilla incident. The daily news shows also provided several interviews that helped listeners understand the background and meaning of often-confusing events.

However, I did find four inaccuracies (particularly on the website) and three cases in which context was missing or one side of a controversy was not presented adequately. Aside from Kenyon's reports from Gaza in the days after the flotilla incident, listeners heard very little news from the Palestinian territories. Also, as in the past, several reports failed to give adequate identification of sources in radio or Web stories.

This report reviews coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute on NPR radio shows and the website, starting with 70 stories and interviews that aired on the radio. I should note that the opinions expressed in this report are mine alone.

Accuracy

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

I found only one substantial inaccuracy in a radio story (inaccuracies in Web-based coverage are noted in the website section later in the report.

In reporter Sheera Frenkel’s two-way interview with Morning Edition (ME) on May 31, reporting on Israeli's raid of the Gaza flotilla, she gave an inaccurate history of previous Gaza aid missions sponsored by the activist Free Gaza group. Frenkel said, correctly, that five ships had made their way into Gaza. But then she added: "And the last ship was the only one to have been stopped. That was during Operation Cast Lead here, a year and a half ago. That boat was successfully turned away by the Israeli navy with a minimal amount of damage to the ship, and no injuries to the people onboard." In fact, Israel turned away three ships sent by the Free Gaza group: one in December 2008, one in January 2009 and one in July 2009. The incident to which Frenkel apparently referred was the one in January 2009, according to the Free Gaza group's history of its aid missions to Gaza.

I alerted NPR editors, who corrected the report on June 25 with the following statement: "We said that five ships have made their way into the Gaza Strip and that the last ship was the only one that was stopped. That was during Operation Cast Lead, a year and a half ago. Our report failed to mention a July 2009 attempt to breach the blockade of Gaza. We should have said the boats that have attempted to arrive since Operation Cast Lead were all turned away by the Israeli navy."

Fairness and Balance

Using the same method as for previous reports, I determined the "dominant focus" of each radio piece, interview, or two-way covered 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 70 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 7 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 7 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
• 9 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians (for example, U.S. efforts to restart peace talks);
• 10 focused on what happened during the May 31 Gaza flotilla incident and news about subsequent aid missions to Gaza;
• 8 focused on the regional and international reaction to the May 31 flotilla incident;
• 2 focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
• 5 focused on Turkey (in response to Turkey's role in the Gaza flotilla);
• 4 focused on relations between Israel and Turkey in response to the Gaza flotilla incident;
• The remaining 18 items focused on other specific matters, for example an uproar over derogatory remarks about Jews by long-time Washington journalist Helen Thomas.

The overall conclusion to be drawn from these figures is that NPR's radio shows devoted more attention (a total of 27 stories) to the Gaza flotilla incident and reactions to it than any other news event or trend covered by this review. Given the implications of the event, this relatively intense focus was appropriate and reflective of coverage by news organizations worldwide and in the region.

Aside from the flotilla story, NPR's coverage of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians during this quarter was sparse but was evenly balanced in terms of the overall number of stories.

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

-- In a piece for Morning Edition on April 15, Jerusalem bureau chief Lourdes Garcia-Navarro profiled a Palestinian couple (she from Jerusalem, he from the West Bank) whose options for a place to live are limited – by Israeli law and the giant fence Israel has built around the West Bank – to one small village in East Jerusalem. This was a compelling piece that highlighted the kinds of problems many Palestinians face every day as the result of Israel's control of their communities. The story also explained Israel's policy of providing fewer services for Palestinians under its control than for its own citizens. However, the piece needed more
background context, including an explanation of Israel's stated reasons for its restrictions on Palestinian travel and for building the West Bank barrier.

– In a piece for All Things Considered (ATC) on April 29, Sheera Frenkel said that Israel's refusal to freeze settlement expansion in East Jerusalem "has held up American efforts to restart peace negotiations." It is true that Israel's ill-timed announcement of a Jewish settlement project disrupted the start of peace talks in late March. However, this was simply the latest of several obstacles, placed by both sides, which stood in the way of former Senator George Mitchell's efforts to revive the peace talks, so it should not have been cited as the sole cause of the delay. This same piece referred to the large amounts of money Jewish settlers were using to build their housing projects in East Jerusalem. The piece would have been more informative for U.S. listeners if it had noted that much of the money – the exact amount is not known – has come from wealthy individuals and conservative organizations (including Evangelical Christian groups) in the United States.

– Garcia-Navarro, in a piece for ME on May 11, reported on a controversial move by the Israeli authorities to expel thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank who, according to the government, lacked proper permits to live in the area. Those targeted included Gazans who lived in the West Bank, foreigners who had overstayed their visas, and non-West Bank spouses of Palestinians. Many Palestinians and human rights advocacy groups said Israeli was unfairly targeting people who had few options. Israel insisted it was merely trying to enforce its laws against illegal residency, and said proper legal procedures would be followed.

The piece vividly described the hardships faced by individual Palestinians. However, the piece should have put the situation into the broader context of increasing tensions in the West Bank between Palestinians and Jewish settlers, some of whom clearly are determined to drive Palestinians out of the West Bank. Because extremist settler groups are backed by certain right-wing elements of the current Israeli government, it is understandable that Palestinians would perceive Israel's latest drive against "illegal" Palestinian residents as being part of a campaign to make room for more settlers. This broader aspect was not explained in the story.

Voices
Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) appeared in the 70 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, 40 Israelis and 33 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared on tape in multiple stories or interviews. Of the 33 Arabs, 28 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.

In addition, 48 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 33 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians). Some individuals (for example, the Israeli prime minister) were quoted multiple times during the period. "Quotes" means all statements, not on tape, attributed either to individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Palestinians."

I should note that these figures do not include Iranians or Turks (who are not Arabs), even though a number of stories (particularly those relating to the Gaza flotilla incident) quoted Turkish officials and citizens, and some stories in this review quoted Iranians.

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

**Israelis:**
Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 8 items
President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 2 items
Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Army spokesman Avital Liebovitch: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
Journalist Yaakov Katz: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Human rights activist Sari Bashi: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Other Israelis on tape: 29

**Palestinians**
The above figures, when taken as a whole, demonstrate that NPR listeners heard substantially more from Israelis than from Palestinians during the quarter. This was an exception to the general trend. Over the seven-plus years of my reviews, NPR has given its listeners a roughly equal balance of Israeli and Palestinian voices, with major exceptions occurring during periods when the news focused primarily on one side or the other. However, as in nearly all recent years, NPR listeners were much more likely during this quarter to hear from Israeli officials and opinion leaders than from their counterparts on the Palestinian side. For example, listeners have not heard the voice of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas since May 2009. Also, the June 1 appearance on air by senior Hamas official Mahmoud al-Zahar was a rare opportunity for listeners to hear directly from any of the Hamas leaders in charge of Gaza – even though Gaza was at the center of the news during the period. It is true that Israeli officials are more easily accessible to NPR's Jerusalem-based reporters (and to the Washington-based shows) than are Palestinian officials in Gaza or the West Bank. Even so, listeners need to hear from all sides if they are to understand this complex and often confusing conflict.

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

– Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, in an April 9 piece for ATC about Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to cancel a trip to Washington, used tape from Meir Javedanfar, who was described simply as "an Israeli political analyst." Since nearly everyone in Israel seems to consider him-or herself a political analyst, that description hardly gave listeners any substantive
identification. Javedanfar is an Iranian-Israeli who works for a Middle East consulting firm and is widely quoted by Western media outlets.

– ATC on April 26 ran a commentary by Reza Aslan, describing him only as a "commentator" and author of the book, "Beyond Fundamentalism: Confronting Religious Extremism in the Age of Globalization." I applaud the show, and NPR in general, for its new emphasis on finding commentators from outside the Washington Beltway. Even so, listeners deserved to hear a little more background about Aslan. He is an Iranian-American scholar on religious topics who lives in Los Angeles and writes for the Daily Beast. It was important to provide context about him – particularly since he was making the controversial argument that Israel and the Palestinians eventually will have to share the same state, whether they like it or not.

– Weekend All Things Considered on June 5 interviewed Hussein Ibish, who was described only as "a senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine." During the course of the interview host Guy Raz indirectly hinted that Mr. Hussein's group was a "pro-Palestinian advocacy group." But the reference was so indirect that many listeners probably missed it. The American Task Force on Palestine is one of many advocacy groups that should be clearly, and directly, identified for listeners.

– Peter Kenyon's piece on June 7 for ME described the aid operations in Gaza by the Turkish group responsible for the failed Gaza flotilla. For an Israeli perspective, Kenyon quoted Gerald Steinberg, a political science professor who has appeared many times on NPR's air with comments on Israeli politics. But in this case, Steinberg was identified as representing NGO Monitor, which Kenyon described only an "Israeli group." Although its name might seem innocuous, NGO Monitor (which Steinberg founded) is a conservative organization whose sole apparent function is attacking non-governmental organizations (for example, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International) that Steinberg apparently considers anti-Israel. Steinberg and his group should have been given fuller identification for listeners.

– One of the groups targeted by Steinberg's NGO Monitor is the Israeli Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, better known as Gisha. The group's director, Sari Bashi, appeared on tape in two stories. The first was a May 11 Morning Edition piece by Garcia-Navarro, who
described Gisha as an "Israeli human rights group." That description was inadequate because it failed to convey Gisha's specific agenda of vigorously battling Israel's restrictions on Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. The second piece was a June 11 story for ME on June 11 by freelancer Sheera Frenkel. It used two pieces of tape from Bashi and gave the name of her group but failed to provide any substantive information about it or its agenda. A careful listener might have discerned from either of these stories that Gisha often is at odds with the Israeli government, but NPR's reporting should be more explicit and not force listeners to play guessing games.

– In a June 16 piece for ATC, reporting on international pressure on Israel to ease its Gaza blockade, Frenkel noted that Israel had made some concessions to international pressure by appointing a high-profile commission to investigate the Gaza flotilla incident. The piece included tape from Raanan Sulitzeanu-Kenan, who was identified only as a political science professor at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Frenkel could have noted that Sulitzeanu-Kenan has done research on similar investigative panels, and presumably had some expertise in the subject.

**Range of voices.** Because of Turkey's role in the Gaza flotilla incident, NPR listeners heard more than usual about Turkey, and particularly from experts and ordinary citizens in Turkey about the current strained relations between Turkey and Israel. Peter Kenyon's reporting from Gaza also put the voices of several Gazans on the air.

Otherwise, however, listeners again heard only a narrow range of voices – and thus perspectives about events and trends in the region.

**The Gaza Flotilla**

For a few days, NPR pulled out the stops to cover the May 31 Gaza flotilla incident and the reaction to it. Over the first week, from May 31 through June 6, the radio shows carried two dozen news pieces and interviews about various aspects of the flotilla incident. The website posted 23 blogs, news reports, and commentaries related to the subject. This coverage gave
NPR's audience a reasonably full and balanced account of what was known, at the time, about the actual incident and events in the immediate aftermath.

Since then, however, the story has nearly disappeared from NPR's air and website, even though significant developments have occurred and new information has emerged about what happened on board the ship where nine people died. It should be noted that NPR's coverage was hampered by the absence of its Jerusalem correspondent, Lourdes Garcia-Narvarro, who was on a temporary reporting assignment in Baghdad. In her absence, NPR turned to freelancer Sheera Frenkel, who also reported for the McClatchy newspaper chain and other publications. NPR also sent Cairo correspondent Peter Kenyon to report from Israel and Gaza in the early days after the flotilla raid.

**What happened?** NPR's initial reporting during the first few days correctly emphasized the uncertainties about what had happened on board the *Mavi Marmara*, the Turkish ship where eight Turks and one Turkish-American died during a confrontation between the Israeli military and pro-Palestinian activists. This type of coverage was appropriate because few eyewitness accounts were unavailable, and the only people talking were those who were determined to tell only their side of the story.

For example, NPR shows interviewed an Israeli spokesman and two activists who were aboard other ships, and reporters in Israel filed stories quoting activists and the Israeli government. These reports and interviews added some details but still left a very unclear picture of what happened on the ship. The Israeli military started posting videos on YouTube late on May 31; these videos were so brief and so heavily edited that watching them was the equivalent of looking at a scene through a very narrow crack in the door. The same was true of videos posted by activists.

In subsequent days and weeks, however, additional accounts and videos emerged that provided a somewhat fuller view of the dramatic events on the ship. In essence, the new information suggested that a small number of people on board the ship were determined to resist the Israelis – no matter what the consequences – and that the Israeli commandoes were
completely unprepared for that type of resistance. Unfortunately, as of this writing NPR has not given its listeners any update on what has been learned so far about the struggle on the ship.

**The investigation.** The Israeli government has launched its own investigation and, until August 2, refused to participate in a broader probe by the United Nations. NPR listeners have heard little about the diplomatic feuding over who would investigate the incident, what type of investigation would take place, or the status of investigations.

**The "activists."** Nearly all of NPR's coverage identified those aboard the ships simply as "activists," which is about the most neutral term journalists could use in such a situation. It would have been even better to describe them consistently as "pro-Palestinian activists," as was done, for example, in the intro to Peter Kenyon's ATC piece on June 1.

However, none of NPR's coverage probed beneath the surface to explore the varying motives of those on the ships. Some activists appeared to be idealists who believed they were doing to something to protest what they viewed as Israel's oppression of Palestinians, particularly Gazans. Others, particularly some of the European participants, reportedly had long histories of anti-Israel activism. Still others appeared to be Islamists from Turkey and other countries who were eager for a fight; some reportedly even left behind messages saying they embraced the opportunity for "martyrdom." Only an exceedingly careful and persistent listener to NPR's coverage would have learned that the "activists" on these ships constituted a broad range of backgrounds and motivations. NPR's listeners deserved more nuanced information about this aspect of a controversial story.

**Easing the blockade.** Reaction to the flotilla incident put Israel under enormous international pressure, eventually forcing the Israeli government to ease its very tight restrictions on the type of supplies it would allow into Gaza. (Egypt largely escaped this type of pressure by immediately opening, and keeping open, its one border crossing with Gaza – a crossing Egypt previously had kept closed, for the most part, in collaboration with Israel).
The Israeli cabinet voted on June 17 to ease its restrictions on Gaza, but the government announced no details at that time. Even so, it quickly became clear that the government would reverse its previous policy: Instead of continuing to ban all but a few dozen types of items for export to Gaza (notably food and medicine), Israel would allow everything except for those items that had the potential to be converted to military use (this included cement and other building supplies, which are sorely needed in Gaza). The government formally announced this as a policy on June 20 but did not publish a list of banned goods until July 5.

NPR news shows did not cover either the June 17 vote to ease the restrictions or the June 20 follow-up action confirming the general principal of allowing most goods into Gaza. NPR’s only substantive coverage of the latter step was the posting of an AP story on the website.

Life in Gaza. In the wake of the flotilla incident, NPR listeners had a rare opportunity to hear news directly from Gaza. Peter Kenyon visited Gaza on June 4 and provided two reports that day: a two-way interview with ME and a full news report later in the day for ATC. Together, these reports gave listeners a limited but reasonably clear idea of the reality of life inside Gaza – as opposed to propaganda from those who had reason either to magnify or downplay the plight of the 1.5 million Palestinians there.

Kenyon told listeners that food and many other consumer goods were widely available thanks to the dozens of tunnels dug under the border between Egypt and Gaza; that few Gazans could afford to buy these goods; and that no one appeared to be starving in Gaza as the result of aid handed out by the United Nations. Kenyon also made clear that the vast majority of Gazans were deeply impoverished because the long-term Israeli and Egyptian blockades had destroyed the local economy.

Website

I also reviewed relevant coverage provided on the NPR website, npr.org. During the April-June quarter, npr.org carried 61 items with some connection to the Middle East conflict.
These items were in addition to Web versions of stories that aired originally on NPR's radio shows.

Of the 61 Web-only items:

- 20 were Associated Press news reports that NPR staff selected 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 these items were not selected or edited in any way by NPR staff.
- 25 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;
- 4 were hard news reports (similar to wire stories) compiled from staff reporting and AP stories;
- The remaining 10 items were commentaries provided by NPR's Web "partners," including Foreign Policy, The Nation, and National Review magazines.

In terms of dominant focus, more than one-third of the Web-only pieces (23) dealt directly or indirectly with the Gaza flotilla incident. Other topics included the flap over journalist Helen Thomas's anti-Jewish remarks, strained relations between the United States and Israel, and the indirect peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

There were three factual errors in Web postings, all of which have been corrected:

- The Web version (but not the original radio version) of a May 11 Morning Edition piece by Garcia-Navarro, describing an Israeli order forcing "illegal" Palestinians to leave the West Bank, understated the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. An NPR Web editor inserted into the story a sentence saying that 365,000 settlers lived in those two territories. The editor based the information on the current 2010 CIA World Factbook, which is a widely-used reference source but which, in this case, was wrong. In fact, the total number of settlers is closer to 500,000. The Israeli government estimates the Israeli population on the West Bank at 301,000. Most estimates for the number of Israelis living in East Jerusalem use the range
of 180,000 to 200,000 (the Israeli government does not differentiate between "East" and "West" Jerusalem, and therefore provides no figures for how many Israeli Jews live in the eastern part of the city). NPR posted a correction on June 7, using the figure of "about 500,000." A frequent NPR critic, pro-Palestinian activist Henry Norr of Berkeley, California, originally drew attention to the error.

– A "staff and wires" news compilation on June 2, reporting on various aspects of the Gaza flotilla incident, said that Israel had "expelled the families of Turkey's diplomats." This would have been big news, but it did not happen. Apparently the reference resulted from a misreading of news reports that Israel had recalled the families of its own diplomats who were posted in Turkey. NPR corrected this error on June 28 after I drew attention to it.

– A Two-Way blog on June 5, reporting on Israel's boarding of a subsequent Gaza aid boat called the Rachel Corrie, incorrectly stated that Hamas had been "elected" to control Gaza. In fact, Hamas did finish first in January 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections (for both Gaza and the West Bank), but this voting only gave Hamas control of the Palestinian legislature. Hamas seized control of Gaza during a violent battle with the rival Fatah faction in June 2007. NPR corrected this item on July 2 after I drew attention to the error.

I was pleased to see that NPR, belatedly, has begun providing background information about the authors of commentaries and other pieces on its website from "partner" organizations.

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

– A Two-Way blog on May 31, reporting on the Gaza flotilla incident, noted that Israel and Turkey had a "mostly respectful relationship" since 1949, then added: "But in recent years, since the coming to power of Erdogan's Islamist-leaning Justice and Development Party in 2003, relations have frayed as Turkey has strengthened ties with Syria and Iran, two of Israel's greatest antagonists in the region."

There are two problems with this statement. First, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party won elections, and took office, in late 2002, rather than 2003. More important,
the blog seems to put all the blame on Turkey for the frayed relations with Israel. This reflects an Israeli narrative that says that the current Turkish government has decided to side with Iran and Syria and abandon its long-term relationship with Israel. However, the recent deterioration of what had been a close friendship between Israel and Turkey has been a much more complicated process. Many in Turkey would argue, for example, that some of Israel's actions, notably its treatment of the Palestinians and provocative, anti-Turkey statements by prominent Israeli politicians, also contributed to the problem. A more balanced assessment, noting that Turkey and Israel each had taken actions that offended the other side, would have been more appropriate for this blog.

– On June 1, NPR's website posted a "partner" commentary from The Nation, written by Roane Carey (who was not identified), harshly criticizing Israel's Gaza policies and Israel's actions in the Gaza flotilla incident. This entirely one-sided commentary should have been balanced, within a day or two, with an opposing view, or at least with an explanation of Israel's viewpoint. The website did carry another commentary the same day on the Gaza incident, a piece from Foreign Policy by Blake Hounshell (also not identified), but it was more of a situation report than a commentary and did not counter the strong views in The Nation commentary. On June 2, the website carried a brief commentary from National Review by Michael Rubin (also unidentified) that called on the United States to support Israel as a matter of principal. However, this commentary cannot be considered a rebuttal of the previous day's commentary from The Nation because it did not address any of the specifics raised in the prior piece.

– On June 14, a Two-Way blog reported on Israeli cabinet approval of a committee to investigate the Gaza flotilla incident and named the two non-Israeli "observers" without explaining their backgrounds. One was David Trimble, the former leader of the major Protestant political party in Northern Ireland (and co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize), and the other was retired Brigadier General Ken Watkin, former Canadian military judge advocate general. This paragraph used a flattering quote about these two men but from the context it was not immediately clear that the quote came from a statement by Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. Nor did this blog item (or any other NPR coverage) mention that Trimble had been one of the most prominent signers of the "Friends of Israel Initiative" launched, coincidentally, by leading
international conservatives (with assistance from Israelis close to the government) on the same
day as the Gaza flotilla event.

– An AP story posted on June 20, "Israel Drafting List of Goods Banned From Gaza," stated: "Under its blockade, Israel has banned all exports from Gaza, further crushing its
economy." This sentence should have said Israel had banned "nearly all" exports. Israeli
occasionally has allowed small shipments from Gaza of fruits, vegetables, and other produce.
The underlying point was correct, however: Gaza's economy can function only if local farmers
and manufacturers could ship their goods to Israel and other destinations, but for three years
Israel generally has closed this trade route.