This report reviews NPR's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute during the second quarter of 2011. It begins with an assessment of 79 stories and interviews that aired on radio shows produced by NPR, then continues with an assessment of 40 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website.

Overall, coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute met NPR's journalistic standards. In particular, NPR gave its listeners and readers generally excellent coverage of the events surrounding President Obama's controversial May 19 speech outlining his vision for the Middle East. However, my report raises concerns about the accuracy, completeness or fairness of several specific stories.

My mandate from NPR is to review coverage related to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, plus events in Lebanon. For that reason, I have not reviewed NPR's extensive coverage of this year's protests in Arab countries (the so-called "Arab Spring") except in those cases where the protests had a direct connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

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 staff. 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.

However, one news report exhibited several problems, all of which were subsequently corrected in the online posting. This was a brief piece on May 20 for Morning Edition, by contract reporter Sheera Frenkel, reporting on Israeli and Palestinian reaction to President Obama's speech the previous day about the Middle East.

The most obvious problem was that Frenkel, in her first reference, described Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel's president, when in fact he is the prime minister. Frenkel got it right on a second reference, calling Netanyahu the prime minister, but the online transcript repeated the original error of calling him "the Israeli president."
A less obvious, but more substantive, problem concerned Frenkel's faulty characterization of President Obama's reference to negotiations over future borders between Israel and a Palestinian state. Frenkel said President Obama called for basing the borders on the pre-June1967 lines separating Israel from its neighbors – which Frenkel also described as the "UN-designated border" of a future Palestinian state. This characterization failed to note Mr. Obama's important qualification that there should be "mutually agreed swaps" of land between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition, Frenkel's reference to a "UN-designated border" was incorrect because the United Nations has never designated a precise border for a Palestinian state, even though the UN does consider Israel's occupation of the West Bank to be illegal under international law. This is a particularly sensitive matter because borders are a central issue in any peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

After I notified NPR of these mistakes, the following correction was posted on the website on June 7:

*Our story incorrectly referred to Benjamin Netanyahu as the president of Israel. He is actually the prime minister. In addition, we referred to "the U.S. president [Obama] acknowledging the 1967, U.N.-designated border as the lines of a future [Palestinian] state." The United Nations has not designated any borders for a future Palestinian state, and President Obama said the area of a Palestinian state should be "based" on the 1967 boundary lines, with land swaps mutually agreed by Israel and the Palestinians.*

**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 79 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 6 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 9 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 5 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
• 20 focused on President Obama's Middle East speech and U.S. efforts to revive direct peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians;
• 5 focused on relations between the United States and Israel (including the visit to Washington by Prime Minister Netanyahu);
• 11 focused on broader U.S. policies concerning the Middle East;
• 5 focused on political upheaval in Syria;
• 3 focused on Egypt's partial opening of its border crossing with Gaza;
• the remaining 15 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 devoted significant attention to President Obama's speech about the Middle East and related matters. However, NPR provided relatively sparse coverage (compared to most previous periods) of events within Israel and the Palestinian territories. In fact, listeners heard very little from within Israel or from within the Palestinian territories except for reaction to President Obama's speech. One explanation was that NPR's Jerusalem correspondent, Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, spent most of this quarter covering the unrest in the Arab world, notably Libya.

NPR shows did provide six reporter pieces and interviews concerning the controversial May 4 reconciliation agreement between the two main Palestinian political factions, Fatah and Hamas. However, most of this coverage dealt with how the agreement might affect peace talks with Israel rather than any possible impact on the daily lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

At least one other controversial subject did call for more coverage than NPR gave it: A retraction by South African jurist Richard Goldstone of some of the key claims against Israel by a UN fact-finding committee he chaired in 2009. In an April 1 op-ed column for The Washington Post, Goldstone said, among other things, that based on information he received after the fact he would not have charged that Israel deliberately targeted civilians during its 23-day attack on the Gaza strip in December 2009-January 2009. Goldstone's original report had severely tarnished Israel's reputation because of its allegations that the Israeli military engaged in such tactics as using civilians as human
shields in its largely successful campaign to stop Hamas and other groups from firing
rockets from Gaza into Israel. Goldstone's co-authors stood by the original report,
however.

NPR covered Goldstone's partial retraction with only one on-air story by Sheera
Frenkel (on Weekend All Things Considered on April 3) and no other coverage online. In
fairness to Israel – and also to its listeners – NPR should have given this story more play,
for example with an interview or analysis piece examining both the political impact of
Goldstone's retraction, the contrast between how Israel and Hamas investigated their
respective conduct during the war, and the broader question of how the United Nations
treats Israel.

Individual items aired during the quarter generally met basic standards for
fairness and balance. I do have a comment about a May 16 piece for Morning Edition by
diplomatic reporter Michele Kelemen previewing President Obama's speech about the
Middle East. The piece included perspectives from Washington-based experts but failed
to give listeners the viewpoints of those most directly involved: the current Israeli
government and the two major Palestinian factions. As too often is the case with NPR's
coverage, the piece did not help listeners understand the motivations of the opposing
sides – in particular the political pressures facing the leaders from within their own
constituencies.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times
listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 79 radio items
under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 44 Israelis and 68 Arabs
appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. Of the
Arabs, 53 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.

The unusual disparity between the number of Israeli and Arab voices resulted
from several stories that included relatively large numbers of Palestinian voices. For
example, listeners heard a total of 10 Palestinian voices in just two stories in late May
reporting the opening of a border crossing between Egypt and Gaza.
In addition, 45 radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 43 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 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 appeared on NPR's air in the past but were absent during this quarter:

**Israelis:**
- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: On tape in 12 items; Quoted in 17 items
- President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
- Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
- Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 3 items; Quoted on 0 items
- Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
- Likud Party member Danny Danon: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Army spokesman Avital Leibovich: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Former Mossad leader Ephraim Halevy: On tape in 2 items; Quoted on 0 items
- Jerusalem Post Editor David Horowitz: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Other Israelis on tape: 16

**Palestinians:**
- President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 1 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 1 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
- Hamas "exile" leader Khaled Meshal: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
- Hamas official: Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
- Diplomat M. R. Areikat: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Palestinian official Nabil Shaath: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Professor Ayman Shaheen: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Other Palestinians on tape: 46
Perhaps the most striking conclusion from the above list is that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu received far more attention from NPR than any other individual covered by this survey – indeed far more than all Palestinian officials combined. Israeli prime ministers typically appear on NPR's air more often than anyone else from the region, but the disparity during this quarter was substantially greater than usual. This can be explained by the heavy coverage of Netanyahu's high-profile visit to Washington in May, during which he met with President Obama at the White House and addressed both a joint meeting of Congress and the influential pro-Israel lobby, AIPAC.

Identification of voices. For the most part, NPR reporters and shows have been doing a pretty good job lately of identifying people quoted on air. A good example of how proper identification can help listeners understand viewpoints came in Talk of the Nation's May 17 conversation with Loren Jenkins, NPR's senior foreign editor. Host Neal Conan quoted an op-ed column in the previous day's Washington Post by Nawaf Obaid expressing bitter complaints about "misguided U.S. policies." Conan described Obaid as a senior fellow at the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia, the title given in the Post column. Jenkins, a veteran observer of the region, immediately told listeners that Obaid was a senior advisor to Prince Turki, the former head of Saudi intelligence and former Saudi ambassador to the United States. Obaid's piece, Jenkins said, should therefore be seen as "a show across the bow from Saudi Arabia to the U.S."

Following are examples where listeners should have been given more information:

– In his otherwise excellent piece for ATC on May 13, reporting on Palestinian views of the political upheaval in Egypt, Philip Reeves failed to give listeners any useful background information about two commentators. Reeves described Ayman Shaheen only as a "Palestinian political analyst" and Waleed el-Modallal only as a "professor of political science." Reeves should have told listeners that Shaheen is a former activist for Fatah (the Palestinian faction headed by Mahmoud Abbas) who teaches at al-Azhar University, the large university in Gaza closely aligned with Fatah. (Shaheen also was quoted by Peter Kenyon in a June 21 piece for Morning Edition; Kenyon described him
as an "analyst" at al-Azhar University, also without giving any background.) Modallal teaches at the Islamic University in Gaza, which is closely affiliated with Hamas; however, he is often quoted as a Palestinian political observer independent of Hamas.

– A Peter Kenyon piece for Morning Edition on May 31, reporting on Hezbollah's reaction to the uprising in Syria, quoted three Lebanese analysts but gave listeners adequate information about only one of them. The exception was Omar Nashabi, who Kenyon described as "an author and journalist with the al-Akhbar newspaper, which sides editorially with Hezbollah and its allies." Kenyon provided too-little information about Oussama Safa (described only as a "Beirut analyst") and Elias Hanna, described as an "analyst and retired Lebanese army general." Listeners should have been told more about these two men. Readers of the transcript posted on NPR's website would learn that Safa is general director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies. However, even the name of that organization gives little useful information about Lebanon's largest think tank, generally considered a pro-Western institution critical of Hezbollah, the Shiite militia and political group that now exercises great influence in Lebanon. Retired general Hanna teaches at Lebanon's Notre Dame University, the country's main institution of higher education for Maronite Christians, who once dominated Lebanon's political scene.

– On June 13, Talk of the Nation host Neal Conan interviewed Mideast scholar Fouad Ajami for 17 minutes about the domestic uprising in Syria but failed to give listeners any useful background information explaining Ajami's hostility toward the Assad regime in Syria. A native of Lebanon, who has lived in the United States nearly all of his adult life, Ajami has become increasingly critical of authoritarian Arab regimes in the Middle East, notably the Assad family in Syria, which dominated Lebanon for nearly three decades until 2005.

– Several NPR programs recently have quoted representatives from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies without giving any background about this relatively new Washington think tank. Although it claims to be nonpartisan (and in fact includes a few conservative Democrats among its leadership), the foundation appears to be run primarily by Republicans and other conservatives, with an explicit agenda of opposing what it calls attacks by "radical Islamism" against the United States and other Western democracies. Former NPR ombudsman Alicia Shepard said in April that NPR
should be more careful to identify think tanks that might be unfamiliar to listeners and that might have political agendas hidden behind their innocuous-sounding names.

**Range of voices.** As noted above, NPR listeners heard often from Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, particularly in connection with his visit to Washington. Listeners also heard the voices of several ordinary Palestinians, in response to the speech-making by Mr. Obama and Netanyahu and the opening of the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza. However, they heard little during the quarter from ordinary Israelis.

In the past I have argued that the NPR audience needs to hear a broader range of views from the region, including those of radicals (on all sides) who might offend American sensibilities but who nevertheless help drive events in the region. *All Things Considered* made one admirable attempt in this direction on **May 17** with an interview of Ghazi Hamad, the deputy foreign minister for Hamas. ATC host Robert Siegel – who has reported from the Middle East and knows the story well – did his best, but still failed, to pin down Hamad on the question of whether the Islamist group would ever recognize and come to any kind of agreement with the state of Israel.

Under persistent questioning by Siegel, Hamad made it sound as if Hamas finally has acknowledged Israel's existence: "Look, we said frankly we accept the state and '67 borders . . ." Later in the interview, Hamad seemed to dismiss the relevance of the Hamas charter (which denounces Israel in virulent terms) and said Hamas has shown "flexibility" and "became more pragmatic, more realistic." When Siegel asked again about the Hamas charter, Hamad said: "No one talk about removal of Israel. We're only talking about removal of the occupation, and I think this is according to the United Nations resolution, this is legitimate."

In an NPR blog posting the same day, Eyder Peralta quoted extensively from the Hamad interview. Peralta also noted that Hamad was quoted as telling PressTV, the English language news service in Iran, that Hamas would "never recognize Israel."

The Hamad interview demonstrates the perils of getting straight answers on controversial matters, particularly from foreign spokesmen know how to deliver the messages they believe audiences want to hear. An even more skillful side-stepping of reality was demonstrated by Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren,
during a May 5 interview with Morning Edition host Steve Inskeep. Oren, a noted historian and author with many years of experience in addressing U.S. audiences, carefully evaded Inskeep's probing questions and managed to convey his desired messages that Israel did not want a confrontation with the Obama administration and would not accept a Palestinian government that included Hamas.

"Peace Process"

One focal point of Mideast coverage during the quarter was President Obama's May 19 speech about the region – and reaction to it, particularly from Prime Minister Netanyahu, who visited Washington in the same time period. Speaking at the State Department, the president laid out a broad vision for democracy in the Middle East in the wake of this year's Arab uprising, and he called on Israelis and Palestinians to return to the negotiating table.

Over the course of one week, NPR covered President Obama's speech, and the reaction to it, in 25 radio stories and interviews and in 15 blog postings, analysis pieces and other items on its website. Taken as a whole, this coverage gave listeners and readers a good opportunity to understand why the Middle East peace process has dragged on so long and seems so resistant to a conclusion.

Despite the wide-ranging nature of the speech, most of the attention – from NPR and other news organizations – focused on just one sentence within President Obama's call for renewed peace talks: "We believe the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines with mutually agreed swaps, so that secure and recognized borders are established for both states." This was a reference to the de facto boundaries between Israel and its Arab neighbors prior to the June 1967 Six Day War, during which Israel captured substantial territory, including the West Bank. At a White House meeting the following day, Netanyahu bluntly objected to that sentence, telling President Obama that Israel would not accept a return to its pre-1967 boundaries because they were "indefensible." (Netanyahu neglected to mention that Israel defended itself very well from within those boundaries, handily winning the 1967 war and humiliating its combined Arab foes).
In numerous stories and interviews, NPR gave its listeners and readers a reasonably complete picture of why President Obama's reference to the "1967 lines" caused such a fuss. However, a listener or reader needed to be very persistent to get that picture because many of the individual stories (both on radio and online) either did not address the question or left critical details unexplained. For example, some of NPR's initial reporting about the speech seemed to miss the potential controversy. In an interview with Talk of the Nation just a couple hours after President Obama finished speaking, White House correspondent Ari Shapiro focused primarily on the president's remarks about the Arab uprising and did not even mention the statement about borders.

The main news piece about the speech for Morning Edition on May 20, by diplomatic reporter Michele Kelemen, had only a brief reference to the borders issue, saying: "In a bid to jumpstart talks, President Obama suggested clear parameters for negotiations, saying the borders of Israel and Palestine should be based on the 1967 lines before the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza." This would have been clearer, and more accurate, if it had included at least one more sentence noting that Mr. Obama allowed wiggle room for negotiations with his important reference to mutually-agreed swaps.

Listeners also received conflicting, and at times confusing, information on NPR shows about whether President Obama broke new ground with his statement. Most analysts and others quoted on NPR shows suggested that the president merely was voicing what had been an obvious, if generally unstated, component of U.S. policy for decades. NPR blogger Mark Memmott discussed this question in a useful posting on May 20. However, Glenn Kessler, author of The Washington Post's "Fact-Check" column (and a former Post diplomatic reporter) insisted, in a May 26 appearance on Talk of the Nation, that Mr. Obama did establish new policy for the United States. Previous presidents had "danced around" the borders question, Kessler said, and Mr. Obama was the first to say specifically that the 1967 lines should be the starting point for negotiations.

Perhaps the best analysis of the borders question came in a brief ATC interview on May 20 with Aaron David Miller, a long-time U.S. negotiator in Mideast peace talks. Miller said President Obama's formulation was new in the sense that it elevated a "tactic"
of negotiations "to the heights of an American policy position." But he noted that the U.S. stance during the 1960s and 1970s was even stricter, in the sense that it called for Israel to return to the pre-1967 borders without any changes. In essence, Miller said, President Obama did not say what many people – including Prime Minister Netanyahu – implicitly accused him of saying: that Israel would have to give up all of the West Bank.

In summary, NPR's coverage of President Obama's speech and the reaction to it – taken as a whole – gave listeners the basic information they needed to understand a very complex and controversial topic. Unfortunately, few listeners hear the entirety of the network's coverage even though it is posted on the website.

Website

In addition to reviewing NPR's on-air coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (and related stories), I reviewed relevant coverage provided on the NPR website, NPR.org. During the April-June quarter, NPR.org carried 40 items with some connection to the Middle East conflict. These items were in addition to the Web versions of stories that aired originally on NPR's radio shows.

Of the 40 Web-only items:

- 11 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 these items were not selected or edited in any way by NPR staff.
- 15 items were news-related postings by NPR's Two-Way and other blogs.
- 6 items were longer-form news or news-analysis pieces by NPR staff members;
- 4 were hard news reports (similar to wire stories) compiled from NPR staff reporting and AP stories;
- 3 were commentaries by Lee Smith, an editor of the conservative Weekly Standard magazine, one of NPR's Web "partners."
- 1 was a set of cartoons about the Mideast peace talks.
In terms of dominant focus:

- 1 item focused primarily on Israel;
- 7 items focused primarily on the Palestinians;
- 5 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 12 items focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process;
- 5 items focused on U.S. policies toward the broader Middle East
- 3 items focused on U.S. politics;
- 2 items focused on U.S.-Israeli relations;
- 3 items focused on the opening of the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza;
- 2 focused on other matters with some connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Of the 40 Web-only items, 28 quoted Israelis while 25 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, Web-only items met NPR's basic journalistic standards for fairness and balance, although not enough attention was paid to domestic events in Israel or the Palestinian territories.

I do have comments about the following items:

- An April 27 report by the Associated Press, no longer available on NPR's website, ("Officials: Fatah, Hamas Reach Deal to End Rift") contained a highly questionable assertion in the lead sentence: "Palestinians have reached initial agreement on reuniting their rival governments in the West Bank and Gaza, officials from both sides said Wednesday, a step that would remove a main obstacle in the way of peace efforts with Israel." The italicized phrase was misleading at best and not supported by any evidence. It is true, in theory, that unification of the two competing Palestinian governments could remove an obstacle to negotiations. As a practical matter, however, Hamas has rejected negotiations with Israel, Israel refuses to negotiate with any Palestinian government that included Hamas, and even the United States (the prime sponsor of negotiations) has refused to have any dealings with Hamas. Under these circumstances, it is difficult to imagine that the unification deal between Fatah and
Hamas, even if carried out, by itself would substantially improve the prospects for peace talks with Israel.

– The wording of a May 15 news posting, based on NPR staff and wire service reports, gave a misleading impression about the number of Palestinians living in refugee camps in Lebanon. The news report concerned clashes between Israeli troops and Palestinians who gathered along Israel's borders to protest the anniversary of the founding of Israel. After quoting one Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, the report said that many of the protesters "came from the 12 crowded refugee camps in Lebanon where some 400,000 Palestinian refugees live." In fact, according to the UN's Palestinian refugee agency, there are about 427,000 registered Palestinian refugees (or descendants of the original refugees) in Lebanon, of whom 227,000 live in the 12 camps administered by the United Nations.

– An Associated Press graphic, posted briefly on NPR's website on May 19, seriously misrepresented the history of the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The "interactive" graphic (a series of maps and photos, with text), was intended to illustrate the borders between Israel and its neighbors since Israel's founding in 1948. However, numerous components of the graphic were misleading, inaccurate or were unrelated to the point of the graphic. NPR quickly pulled the graphic from its website after I drew attention to these problems. NPR replaced it with a much-better analysis piece by staff editor Chuck Holmes: "Background: Israel's Pre-1967 Borders." Several other news organizations subsequently ran a corrected version of the AP graphic.

– I question why the only three commentaries posted on NPR's website about this topic came from the same individual, Lee Smith of the Weekly Standard, whose prime interest seems to be finding reasons to blame the Obama administration for nearly every ill in the Middle East. Smith is entitled to his views, but given the always-controversial nature of the Middle East, NPR editors should be able to find additional viewpoints from NPR's numerous editorial "partners," including Foreign Policy, The New Republic, The Nation, The Root, and, yes, the Weekly Standard.