

NPR Mideast Coverage April - June 2012

This report covers NPR's reporting on events and trends related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians during the second quarter of 2012.

The report begins with an assessment of the 37 stories and interviews, covered by this review, that aired from April through June on radio shows produced by NPR. The 37 radio items is just one more than the lowest number for any quarter (in July-September 2008) during the past ten years. Over that period, NPR programs have carried an average of nearly 100 items per quarter related to Israel, the Palestinians, or both. I also reviewed 20 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website. All of the radio and website-only items covered by this review are shown on the "[Israel-Palestinian coverage](#)" page of the 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. NPR's coverage of the region continues to be remarkably accurate for a news organization with very tight deadlines. NPR has posted no corrections on its website for stories that originated during the April-June quarter; two [corrections](#) were posted in April concerning items dealt with in my [report](#) for the January-March quarter.

I found no outright inaccuracies during the period, but I will point out two instances of misleading use of language.

Freelance correspondent Sheera Frenkel [reported](#) for *All Things Considered* on **May 8** about the status of a hunger strike among Palestinian prisoners. This was NPR's second report on the hunger strike, which had become a major factor in Israeli-Palestinian relations; the [first report](#) was on February 21. The prisoners demanded improved conditions (including more frequent family visits) and an end to Israel's practice, called "administrative detention," of holding some Palestinians in prison without formal charges, for periods of six months or more.

The May 8 piece gave a misleading characterization of one aspect of administrative detention, saying that "many [prisoners] are held for years, as the six-month term can be renewed indefinitely." This is a vague statement open to interpretation: How many is many, and how many years are they held? [Figures](#) compiled by B'Tselem, the Israeli human rights group that has sharply criticized the administrative detention policy, show that a relatively small portion, averaging 15 during 2011 and through June of 2012, of the nearly 300 Palestinian prisoners held under administrative detention procedures have been in that status for more than two years. Roughly three-fourths of administrative detainees have been held up to 18 months, according to B'Tselem. It thus seems a stretch to report that "many" prisoners are held "for years" under administrative detention.

Another example of apparently careless wording came in Frenkel's [piece](#) for *Morning Edition* on **June 11**, reporting on the results of an earlier court ruling that allowed the Israeli government to begin deporting some 50,000 to 60,000 Eritrean and South Sudanese migrants. Frenkel quoted Israeli's Interior Minister, Eli Yishai, as praising the court ruling and saying he "would continue to fight until every African national in Israel was expelled." Every other English-language news report I could find (for example, this June 5 [report](#) by Israel's Channel 7 news) quoted Yishai as threatening to deport all African "migrants," or "illegal aliens" or "infiltrators." These are different categories of people than "nationals," some of whom might reside legally in Israel.

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 37 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 11 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 2 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 4 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;

- 6 focused on developments related to Iran's alleged program to build nuclear weapons;
- 4 focused on Egypt and/or Israel's relations with Egypt;
- the remaining 10 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 attention during the quarter to the Israelis, the Palestinians, or the conflict between them. This has been a trend since mid-2009, as my [previous reports](#) have shown. To be fair, NPR also has overwhelmed its listeners with coverage of this topic during major news events, for example the war between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah faction in 2006 and Israel's brief but bloody invasion of the Gaza strip in December 2008–January 2009.

Within the small number of radio reports, NPR provided significantly more coverage of Israel than of the Palestinian territories. In fact, the radio shows provided no news or feature coverage from the Gaza strip during the quarter (for example, reaction to the political victories in neighboring Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is related to Hamas) and did not cover the latest reconciliation attempts by the two major Palestinian factions (Hamas and Fatah). NPR did update listeners about several key developments in Israel (including election-related politics and the controversy over African migrants) and continued to give listeners important coverage of the international debate over what to do about Iran's nuclear program.

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

I do have comments, however, about a [feature piece](#) by Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, which aired on *All Things Considered* on **June 4**, about Israel's status as a "gay-friendly" country. Both the host introduction and Garcia-Navarro's opening script said that Israel is promoting itself internationally as a haven for the gay community. No quotes or evidence are presented to back up this assertion; in fact, the piece has no comment at all from the Israeli government. One gay rights advocate is quoted as saying that Israel's openness to gays is "in spite of government policies." And in her one paragraph describing government policy, Garcia-Navarro described how gay

rights advocates had to use lawsuits to get action, adding: "and that continues today." In essence, the listener is left questioning the premise of the piece – that Israel, as opposed to the gay community, is promoting itself as a haven for gays.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 37 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 46 Israelis and 16 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. For the first time since I began these reviews, all of the Arab voices were Palestinians (in other words, none of the stories under this review included tape from non-Palestinian Arabs).

In addition, 27 radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 13 items quoted Arabs (nearly all of whom were Palestinians); some individuals (notably 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 1 items; Quoted in 10 items

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

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item

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 1 item

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

Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items

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

Government spokesman Jonathan Peled: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items

Kadima Party Leader Shaul Mofaz: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items

Interior Minister Eli Yishai: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items

Journalist Ronen Bergman: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items

Knesset member Miri Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
Other Israelis on tape: 44

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Palestinian spokesman Ghassan Khatib: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
 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 0 items
 Hamas official Ahmed Yousef: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 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
 Other Palestinians on tape: 15

These figures show that NPR listeners heard very little during the quarter from key Israeli and Palestinian government officials and opinion leaders – or from Palestinians in general. As noted in my previous report, the scarcity of Palestinian voices reflects the continuing lack of coverage of the West Bank and particularly of Gaza. Hamas leaders have been notably absent from NPR's air in recent years; Prime Minister Haniyeh (the most prominent public face of Hamas) has been quoted only four times since 2009, for example.

Identification of voices. NPR reporters and shows have done a better job in recent years of giving 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 example came in a *Talk of the Nation* [segment](#) on **April 23** exploring the forthcoming presidential elections in Egypt. Host Neal Conan interviewed NPR's Cairo correspondent Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson and, as the outside expert, [Tarek Masoud](#), who was identified only as "assistant professor of public policy at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government." Conan should have added more information to validate Masoud's credentials, for example that he is an American-born expert who has studied and written widely about the politics of Middle Eastern countries.

In a [May 7 report](#) for *All Things Considered* about Israeli politics (see related section below), Garcia-Navarro quoted two Israeli political analysts but identified them only by the universities where they teach: [Tamir Sheafer](#) of Hebrew University and [Tamar Hermann](#) of Tel Aviv University (she is now at the Open University). Both are well-known within Israel as political analysts (Sheafer specializes in political communication and Hermann conducts polls and studies the Israeli-Palestinian peace process), but probably are unfamiliar to most NPR listeners. As with all "analysts" quoted by NPR reporters, listeners deserved to hear a little more background, if only to help them judge the analysts' credibility.

Sheera Frenkel's [May 8 report](#) about Palestinian prisoners, noted above in the "Accuracy" section, quoted Sarit Michaeli and described her as "a spokeswoman for the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem." As I have noted several times in the past, NPR reports should give a more complete description of [B'Tselem](#) and similar advocacy groups, especially those without a high profile in the United States. B'Tselem often is at odds with the Israeli government (and the government's supporters in the United States) because of its advocacy on behalf of Palestinians.

Range of voices. NPR listeners again heard very little from Israelis or Palestinians—whether government officials or ordinary citizens. As a result, the range of voices continued to be very narrow. For example, listeners did not hear any voices from Hamas or other extremist Palestinian groups, and they heard very little from far-right or far-left groups in Israel, even those represented in parliament and the government.

One rare exception came in a [June 6 piece](#) on *All Things Considered* reporting on Netanyahu's attempt to assuage settler groups angered by his decision to withdraw support for legislation intended to legalize dozens of "unauthorized" (but government-supported) settlements on the West Bank. Garcia-Navarro quoted one settler, Nathaniel Epstein, as making the case for why Israelis can live anywhere they want on the West Bank: "We have a right to this land not given to us by flesh and blood; given to us by the creator of the whole world, and the whole world knows this. That's why there is a state of Israel. That's what this struggle is about."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, *All Things Considered* listeners on **June 26** heard from two Israelis and one Palestinian who live in the Israeli village of Neve Shalom, dedicated to peace. Garcia-Navarro's [report](#) found the residents skeptical that their peace message was having much impact in either Israel or the Palestinian territories.

Iran's Nuclear Program

Once again, the main Middle East story with a connection to Israel or the Palestinians concerned the international negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program – a program that Israel insists is aimed at producing nuclear weapons. NPR carried six news reports and interviews reports dealing with the Iran negotiations and that mentioned Israel's position and its threat to attack Iran's nuclear installations at some unspecified point.

NPR's most comprehensive coverage of this story continued to be on *Talk of the Nation*, where host Neal Conan led listeners through four extensive conversations on various aspects of international pressure against Iran. Perhaps the most informative of these conversations was on **May 22**, when Conan [interviewed](#) NPR correspondent Mike Shuster; Gary Sick, a scholar at Columbia University who was President Jimmy Carter's Iran expert during the Iran hostage crisis of 1979–81; and Matthew Kroenig, a national security analyst at the Council on Foreign Relations. Shuster explained the potentially negative consequences of a possible Israeli attack against Iran's nuclear installations; Sick suggested that Israel's frequent threats to carry out such an attack are bluster intended to keep up the diplomatic pressure on Iran to drop its nuclear program; and Kroenig expressed skepticism that international talks will produce an agreement because Iran might not see anything to gain from such an agreement.

Also, on **June 12** Conan [interviewed](#) Michele Flournoy, who had served as Obama's undersecretary of defense for policy until last February, about the diplomatic and military issues involved in the campaign to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons. Flournoy gave listeners a clear explanation of the Obama administration's juggling act: on the one hand, keeping up the pressure against Iran while on the other hand persuading Israel not to launch a unilateral military strike against Iran while diplomacy is underway.

During the quarter, NPR's website also carried three commentaries about Iran that, in essence, played down the imminent threat of Iran's alleged nuclear weapon program and cautioned against a military strike against Iran by the United States, by Israel, or by both. These commentaries were by Council of Foreign Relations analyst [Stephen A. Cook](#) on **April 3**; by [Jonathan Schell](#), a fellow at The Nation Institute, on **April 11**; and by Middle East specialists [Hillary Mann Leverett](#) (who teaches at American University) and Flynt Leverett (who teaches at Penn State) on **June 28**. Similar commentaries had appeared on **February 22** by [Robert Dreyfuss](#), a contributing editor of The Nation, and on **January 23** by [Yousaf Butt](#), a consultant for the Federation of American Scientists.

Each of these commentaries made important points worthy of consideration, but taken together they presented a one-sided view of one of the most hotly debated topics on the current foreign policy agenda. So far this year, the website has carried only one commentary piece from the opposite perspective: on **February 16**, by [Tod Lindberg](#), a research fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution. The website would provide a better service for its readers by offering them a broader, and more balanced, range of views on this and other significant topics.

Israeli Politics

News from the Middle East often is predictable, even when it involves a great deal of drama. Every once in a while something happens that initially is surprising but in retrospect should have seemed predictable. Such an event occurred early in May, when Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu shocked nearly everyone by reaching a secret, midnight political deal that bolstered his awkward coalition government and enabled him to pull back from calling early elections. Like everyone else, NPR was caught by surprise but managed to cover the story adequately, if not with a great deal of depth.

NPR for months had paid very little attention to domestic Israeli politics until May 7, when attentive readers of the web site might have seen an AP story (no longer available) reporting that Netanyahu's government planned to call elections on September 4. The AP's 250-word news summary touched on all the necessary domestic and international issues related to Israeli politics, without going into detail on any of them.

Among the domestic issues mentioned in the report was a dispute over a law exempting ultra-Orthodox Israelis from the military draft. NPR had covered that increasingly toxic dispute only once previously, in a **March 4** [report](#) by Sheera Frenkel.

On the evening of **May 7**, Garcia-Navarro [told](#) *All Things Considered* listeners that Netanyahu seemed intent on calling early elections and asking the voters to strengthen his grip on government. In a straightforward news piece, Garcia-Navarro said recent polls "show Netanyahu's party winning big" in elections planned for September 4, nearly one year ahead of schedule. This report contained no hint of a political deal cancelling the elections because word of the secret political negotiations had not spilled—a remarkable event in itself for a small country where politically motivated leaks are common.

Later in the evening of May 7 NPR posted a comprehensive AP story, (also no longer available) based on Israeli news media reports, saying Netanyahu had agreed with Shaul Mofaz, leader of the opposition Kadima faction, on a coalition government and had cancelled the early elections. This 581-word story, which is no longer available on the website, offered substantial background information as well as a clear explanation of what Netanyahu and Mofaz each expected to gain from their marriage of political convenience.

The following morning, on **May 8**, Garcia-Navarro [explained](#) the about-face to *Morning Edition* listeners and noted that Netanyahu now appeared to have "an unshakable broad-based mandate." The website posted another AP story (no longer available) reviewing the political state of play. Garcia-Navarro also explained the surprise move in a similar [report](#) that afternoon for *All Things Considered*. She quoted Israeli commentators as saying the deal appeared to be a "master stroke" by Netanyahu because it gave him a strong coalition with "an unprecedented mandate."

All three of Garcia-Navarro's radio reports mentioned important issues that Netanyahu's stronger government would have to deal with—Iran's nuclear program, domestic concerns, and the absence of peace talks with the Palestinians—but at this early stage none of the reports were able to offer listeners much guidance for what to expect from the government.

The new coalition turned out to be a short-lived one. Mofaz and his Kadima party pulled out of the government on July 17, citing continuing disagreements over the exemption of the ultra-Orthodox from military service. Garcia-Navarro covered that news with a [report](#) for *All Things Considered*, noting that early elections once again seemed to be likely.

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 April–June quarter, NPR.org carried 20 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 20 website-only items:

- 7 were news reports by the Associated Press selected by NPR staff and edited for inclusion on the "mideast" topic page of the website; in general, these reports are available for about one month after the initial posting. 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.
- 5 items were news-related postings by NPR's *Two-Way* and other blogs.
- 6 were commentaries provided by Foreign Policy magazine (4 items) and The Nation (2 items);
- 2 were movie reviews.

In terms of dominant focus among these 20 website-only items:

- 5 item focused primarily on Israel;
- 0 items focused primarily on the Palestinians;
- 2 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 1 item focused on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, or lack thereof;
- 4 focused on various issues related to Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program;

- 8 items focused on various other matters with some connection to Israel and/or the Palestinians.

Of the 20 website-only items, 11 quoted Israelis and 5 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, website-only items met NPR's basic journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and balance. However, as I noted above under "Iran's Nuclear Program," so far this year the website has not given readers a balanced presentation of commentaries about that issue. The website also reflected NPR's overall lack of coverage of domestic events in the Palestinian territories and even in Israel.

Fresh Air Interviews

My mandate is to review Middle East coverage on NPR-produced programs and on the NPR website. Even so, the work of news programs distributed by, but not controlled by, NPR frequently generates controversy that reflects on NPR itself.

This was the case in early April when *Fresh Air*, a show produced by WHYY in Philadelphia and distributed but not supervised by NPR, [interviewed](#) author Peter Beinart, whose recent provocative book, "The Crisis of Zionism," has generated enormous controversy, particularly within the American Jewish community. In his **April 3** interview, Beinart denounced Israel's continued control of all of the West Bank and called on other American Jews to boycott goods produced by Jewish settlements there. In an apparent attempt to balance its coverage, *Fresh Air* also [interviewed](#) Gary Rosenblatt, editor and publisher of the *Jewish Week of New York*, who said he shared Beinart's concerns about Israel's occupation of all the West Bank but strongly disagreed with his call for a boycott of products from the West Bank settlements. Rosenblatt thus did not offer much of a counterpoint to Beinart.

As is customary for *Fresh Air* content, postings about both interviews appeared on NPR's website, along with an extended excerpt from Beinart's book. The Beinart

interview and book excerpt prompted numerous comments attacking NPR for giving publicity to his views. The Beinart and Rosenblatt interviews on *Fresh Air* certainly did not cover the full spectrum of opinion among American Jews about the West Bank settlements, much less the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even so, the interviews and the controversy over Beinart's book suggest that NPR itself should give more coverage to the debate about the Middle East within the broader American Jewish community and not settle – as it usually does – for reporting the sparring rhetoric among lobby groups in Washington.