

NPR Mideast Coverage

April - June 2013

This report assesses NPR's reporting on events and trends related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians during the second quarter of 2013.

NPR covered these and other developments with 51 stories and interviews on the radio shows for which it is solely responsible: *Morning Edition*, *Tell Me More*, *Talk of the Nation*, *All Things Considered* and *Weekend Edition*. I do not review coverage by other public radio programs not produced by NPR.

NPR also posted 25 related blogs, news stories, and other items on its website. All of the radio and website-only items covered by this review are shown on the "[Israel-Palestinian coverage](#)" pages of the website, except for Associated Press news stories selected and edited by NPR staff; those AP reports are posted only for 30 days under a contractual arrangement.

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 reporting remains remarkably accurate despite the time pressures of the 24-hour news cycle.

NPR posted no corrections for radio or Web stories during the period. I found no significant factual inaccuracies in my review.

Fairness and Balance

Using the same method as for previous reports, I made a subjective determination of the "dominant focus" of each radio piece or interview, subject to my review, that 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.

In terms of specific focus among the 51 radio items:

- 4 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 6 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 4 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 4 focused on U.S. efforts to restart peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians;
- 26 focused on various regional aspects of the civil war in Syria, including 10 that focused on the role of Lebanon (especially the Hezbollah militia), 8 that focused primarily on Syria, 5 that focused on U.S. policy toward Syria, and 3 that focused on Israel's concerns about Syria;
- The remaining 7 items focused on other matters related to Israeli-Palestinian issues, for example U.S. and Israeli concerns about Iran's nuclear program.

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

One item met with a significant amount of controversy, including a [harsh critique](#) by the pro-Israel, self-styled media "watchdog" group CAMERA — a critique that generated numerous phone calls and e-mails to NPR. This was a [feature story](#) for *Morning Edition* on **May 30** by NPR's new Jerusalem correspondent, Emily Harris, dealing with the omnipresent issue of Palestinian stone-throwers. Harris, a former NPR reporter returning to the network, started work in Jerusalem at the beginning of April.

The news peg for the story — explained in the host introduction read by David Greene — was the release from the hospital of a three-year-old Israeli girl who had been severely injured two months earlier when her mother crashed the family car after it was hit by rocks thrown by Palestinian protesters in the West Bank. Harris started the story itself by describing the family of a Palestinian youth accused of throwing stones at Israeli soldiers (not at the car of the injured child, which was a separate incident). Next she quoted a spokeswoman for [Adameer](#), a Palestinian group that advocates on behalf of Palestinians in Israeli prisons. Harris then interviewed the mother of the injured child. The mother, who lives in an Israeli settlement in the West Bank, described the rock-throwing incident and denounced "Palestinian terrorists" who "wants [sic] to kill us,

wants to murder us." The piece then moved back to the family of the Palestinian youth, who had just been released from prison as the result of a plea bargain. His mother wanted him to study and go to college, but the young man seemed ambivalent. He said he was not afraid of being arrested again — but Harris said he also refused to join other boys throwing rocks at Israeli soldiers.

CAMERA complained that the story "romanticizes" Palestinian stone-throwers and gave the Palestinians a chance to air their grievances while failing to give enough weight to Israel's side. CAMERA also noted that listeners heard three Palestinian voices (the mother, the son and the Adameer spokeswoman) but only one Israeli voice (the mother of the injured child).

I believe it is an unsustainable stretch to argue that the story "romanticizes" Palestinian stone-throwers or that it failed to draw attention to the real-life consequences of violent protests by the Palestinians. Indeed, listeners heard that an Israeli child was severely injured, and they heard her mother's anguished protests. Listeners also heard the anguish of the mother of the Palestinian stone-thrower. By showing intense human emotions on both sides, the piece helped listeners understand why the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is so ingrained in both societies, neither of which wants to recognize the problems on the other side. In fact, this is the kind of story that gives depth to news coverage of a conflict that, for many Americans, too often seems distant and irreconcilable.

The piece did suffer from structural flaws that marred the narrative and probably gave ammunition to those who attacked it. Most important, the story moved back and forth between the two sides, likely confusing listeners. For example, some listeners might have concluded, wrongly, that the Palestinian stone-thrower was involved in the injury of the child. This type of split-screen storytelling can be effective, but only when listeners are given clearer signals about the narrative switches.

The piece also included a cryptic reference to a dispute in Israel over a [column](#) published in March by the left-wing Israeli journalist/activist Amira Hass defending the right of Palestinians to throw stones as a protest against Israel's occupation of the West Bank. Without further explanation, this reference added nothing useful to the story. Even with further explanation, I'm not sure the reference would have been appropriate because

Hass represents such a narrow slice of Israeli public opinion. If the point of this reference was to put the stone-throwing into the broader context of Palestinian protests against Israeli occupation and the expansion of West Bank settlements, a more direct statement to that effect would have been more helpful to listeners.

As for CAMERA's argument that the piece was unbalanced because it included the voices of three Palestinians but only one Israeli: I agree that the number of voices in a story can reflect a basic unfairness, especially in a report about a polarized situation such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Indeed, the following section of my report deals with the number of voices listeners hear from both sides of that conflict over an extended period. In this case, however, I thought the number of voices on each side was less important than the emotional impact of hearing about the trauma on both sides. The story of the Israeli child wounded as the result of Palestinian stone-throwing certainly carried the weight of any number of voices.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 51 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 30 Israelis and 47 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. Of the Arab voices, 29 were Palestinians; most of the others were Lebanese or Syrians.

In addition, 24 of the radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 31 items quoted Arabs (most of whom were Palestinians). Some individuals 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 "Israelis" 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 (the list reflects the recent changeover of several top posts in the Israeli government):

Israelis:

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 1 item
President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Economy Minister Naftali Bennett: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Finance Minister Yair Lapid: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Justice Minister Tzipi Livni: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 1 item
Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Brig. General Itai Brun: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 3 items
Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Government spokesman Jonathan Peled: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Army spokeswoman Avital Liebovitch: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Kadima Party Leader Shaul Mofaz: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Former official Dore Gold: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Political scientist Yaron Ezrahi: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Political scientist Ruevan Hazan: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Political scientist Efraim Inbar: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Journalist David Horovitz: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Other Israelis on tape: 19

Palestinians

President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Outgoing Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Palestinian spokesman Ghassan Khatib: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas "exile" leader Khaled Meshal: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas official: Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas spokesman Gazi Hamad: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
 Diplomat M. R. Areikat: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Diplomat Riyadh Mansour: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Legislator Mustafa Barghouti: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
 Palestinian official Nabil Shaath: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
 Palestinian journalist Daoud Kuttab: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
 Other Palestinians on tape: 25

The above numbers show that NPR listeners heard infrequently from Israelis and Palestinians during the quarter — a reflection of the relatively low number of stories about the two sides. Of particular note is that Benjamin Netanyahu appeared less often on NPR's air than at any time since he returned to the post of Israeli prime minister in mid-

2009. Most of the time, the Israeli prime minister (Netanyahu or any of his predecessors) is by far the most-quoted person in the stories subject to this review; for example, Netanyahu appeared on tape in 5 stories and was quoted in 23 others during the January-March quarter this year.

This also was the first time since the last quarter of 2010 in which the voice and words of Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas were totally absent from NPR's reporting. Abbas was mentioned briefly in some of the stories about Secretary of State John Kerry's diplomacy but was not quoted. In general, NPR reporters and shows quote senior Palestinian leaders much less frequently than their counterparts on the Israeli side. This is particularly true of the Hamas rulers of Gaza. For the second quarter in a row, Hamas figures were not quoted at all.

Identification of voices. Over the years I have regularly faulted NPR reporters and shows for telling listeners little, and sometimes nothing, about the people they quote. Listeners deserve some background information, especially about academics and others held out as experts on complex topics. During this quarter I found only a few such cases meriting comment.

One guest on *Talk of the Nation's* **April 23** [discussion](#) of Syria's alleged use of chemical weapons was Joshua Landis. When host Jennifer Ludden first introduced him, she described him as "director of the Center for Middle East Studies and author of the 'Syria Comment' blog." Because Landis is a controversial figure among Mideast experts, the description of him should have been more complete. An [associate professor](#) at Oklahoma University, [Landis](#) has spent a significant amount of time in Syria over the past decade and until recently was criticized by pro-Israel groups of being too uncritical of the Assad regime. Ludden did give Landis' full titles after he left the air.

An Emily Harris [news story](#) for *Morning Edition* on **May 6**, reporting on Israel's air strikes into Syria, quoted two Israeli analysts but gave no background information about either of them. Harris described Jonathan Spyer only as an "Israeli analyst" and Eytan Gilboa only as an "international relations professor." [Jonathan Spyer](#) is a British-born senior research fellow at the center for Global Research in International Affairs, in Herzilya. A one-time aide to former Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon, in 2010 he

published a book, *The Transforming Fire: The Rise of the Israel-Islamist Conflict*, warning that Israel faces a new threat from radical Islamists. [Eytan Gilboa](#) is a professor of international communications and director of the Center for International Communications at Bar Ilan University. Based on their published writings, both would appear to fall in the center-right of Israel's political spectrum.

Similarly, a Harris [piece](#) for *All Things Considered* on **May 22**, reporting on the near-completion of Israel's so-called "security barrier" around the West Bank, gave only limited descriptions of four of five people heard in the story (the fifth being an Israeli army captain). On the Palestinian side, Harris described Mustafa Barghouti as "a Palestinian political leader," which probably suggested to many listeners that he is an official in the Palestinian Authority that governs the West Bank. Barghouti was indeed elected to the Palestinian legislature, but that body is moribund. He is best known for having run unsuccessfully against Mahmoud Abbas in the last Palestinian president elections (in 2005); he has since been a frequent critic of Abbas and his Fatah political faction, denouncing the corruption of West Bank leaders. Also on the Palestinian side, Harris described Asa'd Ewaiwi only as a "Palestinian political analyst." Ewaiwi teaches political science at [Al-Quds Open University](#) in the West Bank, a school with close connections to the West Bank leadership.

On the Israeli side, Harris described Efraim Inbar only as an "Israeli professor." [Inbar](#) is a political studies professor at Bar-Ilan University and director of the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, a major Israeli think tank. Most of his writings seem to reflect a center-right viewpoint. Similarly, Harris quoted [Shlomo Brom](#), of whom she said only that he was "with" the [Institute of National Security Studies](#) at Tel Aviv University. A former Israeli general, Brom participated in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations during the 1990s; he has repeatedly criticized Israeli policies toward the Palestinians as being too harsh and counterproductive.

Range of voices. Because the number of Israelis and Palestinians appearing on air was relatively small, the range of voices listeners heard from the region also was limited. For example, listeners heard little from Gaza or from ordinary Israelis and Palestinians.

Syria

For this quarter I reviewed 26 radio items and 8 Web-only items that included information about the impact of Syria's civil war on Israel, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories. I did not review NPR's much more extensive coverage that focused directly on Syria but not the regional implications.

As often has been the case with complex international developments, some of NPR's best and most comprehensive coverage of Syria came in the *Talk of the Nation* program, which the network has ended as of June 27. In five segments during the quarter (on [April 1](#), [April 23](#), [May 9](#), [May 30](#), and [June 6](#)), host Neal Conan (and in one case substitute host Jennifer Ludden) walked listeners through intelligent, informed discussions of various regional aspects of the Syria conflict.

In some cases I might have preferred different guest experts and a broader range of viewpoints, in particular more voices from the region. But overall these discussions gave knowledgeable guests adequate time to make important points about a situation that must be as confusing to listeners as it is even to experts and the Syrians themselves. Even the best news and analysis stories aired on NPR's other programs necessarily skirt over important details and context — mostly because of time limitations. *Talk of the Nation* segments, while far from academic seminars, regularly dug into the heart of the matter and gave listeners the regular opportunity to hear detailed background to the headlines of the day.

Listeners who did not hear *Talk of the Nation* coverage did get fairly regular updates, if not in the same level of detail, about the regional dimensions of the Syria conflict from NPR's other news programs. I won't discuss every single story about Syria and instead will focus on NPR's coverage of three aspects: allegations in April that the Syrian government had used chemical weapons, Israel's airstrikes in early May against Syrian military installations, and Hezbollah's intervention on behalf of the Bashar al-Assad regime.

The question of whether Syria used chemical weapons was significant for several reasons, among them President Obama's [statement](#) in August 2012 that "a red line for us

is [if] we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized. That would change my calculus." The president was careful to avoid saying at that time what he would do in response to Syria's use of chemical weapons. However, that reluctance did not prevent rampant speculation about his options, ranging from arming the rebels to bombing Syrian military installations. Administration officials may have believed at the time Obama made his statement that Assad would never cross the chemical weapons red line.

Speculation about the president's intentions increased in mid-April when the British and French governments [sent letters](#) to the United Nations citing reports that the Syrian military had used chemical weapons against rebel forces. Israel further stoked the fires on **April 23** when an Israeli military intelligence official said, again with few details, that Syria had used "lethal chemical weapons against gunmen [the rebels] in a series of incidents over the past months." NPR reported the Israeli assertion that day in a Web [news piece](#) by Greg Myre and during an extensive [discussion](#) about Syria on *Talk of the Nation*.

The next day, **April 24**, *Morning Edition* carried a [news piece](#) about Israel's claim by Michele Kelemen, and *All Things Considered* [interviewed](#) two experts about whether Syria had used the weapons and, if so, whether that use had crossed President Obama's "red line." One of the experts, *Foreign Policy* magazine editor-in-chief Susan Glasser, called Syria "the land of no good options" for the United States. Charles Blair, a senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, also noted that all the reports of chemical weapons use in Syria, to that point, had been "vague."

In a companion [report](#) for *All Things Considered* on **April 24**, Emily Harris visited the Golan Heights (which Israel captured from Syria in 1967 and later annexed), and interviewed Israeli residents and military officials about the conflict nearby in Syria. This piece conveyed some of Israel's ambivalence about Assad: While a dictator, he was a known quantity and unlikely to attack Israel; moreover, Israel could not know whether a successor regime would be better or worse, from its perspective.

In all of NPR's coverage of chemical weapons in Syria, one of the points that most struck me was a comment by Rami Khouri, the Palestinian-Lebanese journalist/commentator in a **May 6** [discussion](#) of the Syria war on *Talk of the Nation*.

Khoury, now affiliated with a Lebanese think tank, described what he called a "moral quandary." Many people in the region, he said, wondered "why suddenly the chemical weapons become the red line, and the mass killings of tens of thousands do not become red lines." None of the other participants addressed that question. Nor, in fact, did NPR's other coverage during the period ask why the use of chemical weapons, which directly affected a relatively small number of people, might be the trigger for U.S. involvement in Syria when the deaths of tens of thousands of civilians had not been.

Yet another dimension of the Syria conflict emerged in early May when Israel carried out a series of strikes in the Damascus area, all reportedly intended to prevent the Syrian military from transferring upgraded missiles to Lebanon-based Hezbollah. At least one of the airstrikes targeted the same military facility, near the border with Lebanon, that Israel had attacked in January.

Hezbollah already had an arsenal of at least 50,000 missiles of varying capabilities, according to most reports, but Israel feared that Syria would give Hezbollah several additional types of missiles capable of hitting targets throughout Israel or hampering Israel's ability to dominate Lebanese airspace. *The New York Times* [reported](#) that Israel was particularly concerned that Syria would turn over to Hezbollah some of its short-range Iranian [Fateh-110](#) missiles, said to be more accurate than any of those in Hezbollah's large arsenal. (Some NPR reports mistakenly described these as "long-range" missiles, meaning they could travel many hundreds of miles).

NPR covered the Israeli strikes and related developments with several reports: *Two-Way* blogs on [May 4](#) and [May 5](#); a joint [interview](#) of NPR correspondents Kelly McEvers and Deborah Amos by *Weekend Edition Sunday* on **May 5**; a [news report](#) by Emily Harris for *Morning Edition* on **May 6**; the **May 6** *Talk of the Nation* [discussion](#) of the broader regional implications mentioned above; an *All Things Considered* [interview](#) of *New Yorker* correspondent Dexter Filkins on **May 6** and [interviews](#) the same day with two Syrian women, one a spokesman for the rebels and the other an Alawite supporter of president Assad; and a **May 7** [report](#) by national security correspondent Larry Abramson for *Morning Edition* on possible U.S. military actions against Syria. The Abramson piece addressed questions many listeners must have about U.S. military options in Syria —and

why some of the most widely discussed options, such as establishing a "no-fly zone" to protect the rebels, are not simple matters.

Despite initial suggestions that the Israeli strikes might broaden the Syria conflict, possibly by drawing Israel and/or Iran into deeper involvement, that did not happen — at least not directly. The one new external actor in Syria during this time period was Hezbollah. But Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah had already declared his continued support for the Assad regime, so it seems unlikely that the Israeli attacks were a deciding factor in Hezbollah's calculations.

Hezbollah's involvement was yet another aspect of the Syria conflict that might have been confusing to some listeners. Hezbollah is the powerful and heavily armed Shiite militia in Lebanon — a militia that also exercises considerable influence over the Lebanese government.

Since its founding in 1982 as an anti-Israel guerrilla force, Hezbollah has relied on Syria as a conduit of weapons and other supplies from Iran. The fall of the Assad regime in Syria thus would remove a key ally and pose enormous logistical problems for Hezbollah. Even so, the group's decision to intervene directly, and on a large scale, in the Syria conflict came as somewhat of a surprise to many people — and it represented a potential turning point.

In its **May 30** [discussion](#), *Talk of the Nation* reviewed many of the questions about Hezbollah's role in Syria. At that time, a significant battle was under way for the border town of Qusair, then held by the Syrian rebels, a battle [described](#) the same day by McEvers for *All Things Considered*. In that report, McEvers noted that the significance of the fight for Qusair went beyond the control of that one town. The involvement of Hezbollah, a Shiite militia, in helping the Syrian government retake a town from rebels, nearly all of them Sunnis, had "turned this fight into something more sectarian," she said.

Government forces, with considerable aid from Hezbollah, succeeded in capturing Qusair the following week, as McEvers [reported](#) for *All Things Considered* on **June 5**. A few days earlier, NPR listeners got something close to an eyewitness account of the battle for Qusair from *Morning Edition* host Steve Inskeep, on a reporting trip to the region. In a [report](#) on **May 31**, Inskeep described hearing the sounds of battle as he approached the town, only to be stopped short of the town by soldiers at a checkpoint.

One of the most interesting questions about Hezbollah's involvement in Syria concerned the reaction back in Lebanon, especially in the group's home base south of Beirut. *All Things Considered* explored this question in a **May 23** [interview](#) with Anne Barnard, the Beirut bureau chief of *The New York Times*. Barnard told host Robert Siegel that Hezbollah's followers remained loyal, but she also described attending the funeral of a Hezbollah fighter who had died in Syria. The fighter's uncle, Barnard said, "told us that he wished that all of this blood had been shed in southern Lebanon" — presumably in defense against Israel, rather than in Syria. "And I think that people are trying to bring their minds around the idea that some of these fighters are coming from southern Lebanon, and they're going and fighting against fellow Arab Muslims and not against Israelis," Barnard said. "It's a change that people have to make in their minds."

Visiting a similar funeral two weeks later, NPR's Kelly McEvers talked with a Hezbollah-supporting father of two fighters who had just died in Syria. In her **June 3** [piece](#) for *Morning Edition*, McEvers quoted the man as saying he had seven other children. He said: "I'm ready to sacrifice the rest for the righteous way" — in other words, to support the battle against the "unbelievers," as Shiites consider Sunnis to be.

For *Morning Edition* listeners who might have been uncertain why Hezbollah intervened in Syria, McEvers on **May 27** [described](#) some of the reasoning behind Nasrallah's speech two days earlier in which he formally acknowledged the Hezbollah role in Syria. McEvers reminded listeners that sending its fighters into battle against other Arabs was "a major switch for Hezbollah." Nasrallah justified the switch by arguing that the Sunni rebels in Syria "are part of some kind of grand conspiracy who are aligned with Israel and the United States," she said. In a [news report](#) for *All Things Considered* the same day, McEvers described a funeral service in Lebanon for Hezbollah fighters and quoted Nasrallah as saying Hezbollah's enemies were the United States, Israel and al Qaida. McEvers also quoted Thanassis Cambanis, an expert on Hezbollah at the Century Foundation, as saying Hezbollah's intervention "makes regional war more likely and makes the Syrian conflict harder to solve" but was "not a game changer."

One of NPR's best overviews of the Syria conflict came in a **June 6** [discussion](#) on *Talk of the Nation* between host Neal Conan and NPR correspondent Deborah Amos, who at the time was taking a short break from covering the fighting. Amos described the

increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict and said "there is no doubt that Syrians are alarmed, terrified about what has happened to their country."

Kerry's Shuttle Diplomacy

Another notable development during the quarter was the sustained drive by the new U.S. secretary of state, John Kerry, to promote a new round of peace talks between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Kerry took the initiative on this issue even though many other matters might have seemed more pressing (including upheaval in other parts of the Middle East) and many experts had said the prospects for renewed, let alone successful, negotiations were dim at best.

By the end of June, Kerry had made five trips to the region and had spent many days shuttling back and forth between top Israeli and Palestinian leaders. As of this writing he had missed his goal of getting Israeli prime minister Netanyahu and Palestinian president Abbas together in the same room. However, on June 30 he did [claim](#) "real progress" and insisted that "all of the parties are on the right path in order to get to a very good place."

NPR covered Kerry's shuttle diplomacy during the quarter in four radio news stories and interviews and one Web-only news report.

The first story of the quarter was an [overview](#) by Emily Harris, aired on *All Things Considered* on **April 9**. That piece described Kerry's shuttle diplomacy approach (in contrast to fact-to-face talks between the two sides) and outlined some of the key issues still on the table. Harris raised, but did not explore in any detail, one of the biggest current obstacles to resuming formal negotiations: the chaos in the broader Middle East. She quoted David Horowitz, editor of the generally conservative online newspaper *Times of Israel*, as noting that the region "is in absolute disarray," citing in particular events in Syria and Egypt and the split between the two main Palestinian factions. On both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian divide, but particularly in Israel, there was little appetite for spending time on peace talks when there was so much uncertainty around the neighborhood.

In a [two-way](#) with *Morning Edition* on **May 23**, Harris described plans for one of Kerry's numerous visits to the region. Harris outlined key stumbling blocks, notably the

dispute between the two sides over Israel's construction of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. In a follow-up [two-way](#) with *Weekend Edition Saturday* on **May 25**, Harris quoted Kerry as describing some of the obstacles to resuming peace talks, including a reduced sense of urgency on the part of Israelis now that Palestinian terrorism has been brought under control.

Kerry spent much of the last part of June in the region, meeting first with one side, then the other, in his attempt to get the parties together. For an analysis of the obstacles he faced, *All Things Considered* on **June 20** [turned](#) to an American diplomat with extensive experience in such talks, former State Department official Aaron David Miller, now a vice president at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. Miller seemed to offer listeners little optimism that Kerry's intense work would succeed. Unless Netanyahu and Abbas decided to "own" the negotiations themselves, he said, "I don't care how badly Kerry wants it or Obama wants it, we're not going to get there."

Emily Harris described the political difficulties facing the peace process on the Israeli side in a [piece](#) for *Morning Edition* on **June 27**; the piece focused primarily on Israeli politics but also mentioned the peace talks. Harris quoted two prominent members of Netanyahu's administration — economy minister Naftali Bennett and deputy defense minister Danny Danon — as opposing any negotiations leading to creation of a Palestinian state. Unfortunately, none of NPR's coverage during the period gave any real sense of how Palestinian leaders, or ordinary Palestinians in either Gaza or the West Bank, view the latest drive toward peace talks.

Kerry left the region at the end of June, claiming progress but without having achieved the start of direct talks. NPR's radio shows did not cover that story, but Harris filed a **June 30** [report](#) for the website summarizing Kerry's talks over the previous days.

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 25 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 25 website-only items:

- 10 items were news-related postings by NPR's *Two-Way*, *Parallels* and other blogs;
- 3 were news reports or background pieces 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, and thus, unfortunately, do not provide a permanent record of news events for users of NPR's website.
- 8 were news or analysis stories by NPR reporters or editors (5 by Emily Harris and 2 by Greg Myre);
- 2 were picture shows;
- 1 was a feature story provided by the website *Global Post*;
- 1 was an NPR interview with Israeli scholar D. A. Mishani.

In terms of dominant focus among these 25 website-only items:

- 4 items focused primarily on Israel;
- 5 items focused primarily on the Palestinians;
- 1 focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 1 focused on U.S. efforts to restart Israel-Palestinian peace talks;
- 9 focused on regional aspects of the war in Syria;
- 5 items focused on various other matters with some connection to Israel and/or the Palestinians.

Of the 25 website-only items, 14 quoted Israelis and 11 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

In recent months the Mideast [pages](#) of the website have been bolstered by an increasing number of NPR staff-written news and feature stories that go beyond routine, often superficial, blogs. I should note here that NPR in May launched a new blog with an international focus called [Parallels](#). During the April-June quarter, for example, Emily Harris contributed five Web-only stories (four news pieces and one feature), and Greg

Myre, the website's international editor (and a former Jerusalem correspondent for *The New York Times*) wrote two Web-only pieces. In some cases, I wish these Web-only pieces also had been offered to radio listeners, including Myre's **April 21** analysis [piece](#) comparing the Boston Marathon bombings with the terrorist attacks he had witnessed in Israel, and a **May 17** [story](#) by Harris about two young men in Gaza who were given forced haircuts by the Hamas police.

On the whole, website-only items met NPR's basic journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and balance. I do have a minor quibble about a *Two-Way* [blog](#) posted on **May 4**, reporting on an Israeli air strike against a shipment of missiles in Syria. The blog, by Dana Farrington, went beyond known facts in reporting Syria's alleged use of chemical weapons against rebel forces. The blog said that reports of the airstrike "follow news that Syria's government has used chemical weapons on the conflict, which President Obama had previously called a red line for the U.S." The word "news" suggests that Syria's use of chemical weapons was an established fact. The blog instead should have cited "allegations" or "reports." At the time, the governments of Britain, France, Israel and others had said they believed Syria had used chemical weapons but had published no hard proof. Washington's position at the time was that U.S. intelligence agencies had "varying degrees of confidence" that chemical weapons had been used in Syria and that the government was responsible.