This report reviews NPR's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute during the third quarter of 2010. It begins with an assessment of the 79 stories and interviews that aired on radio shows produced by NPR, then continues with an assessment of 61 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website. Coverage on both the radio and the Web generally met NPR's journalistic standards for accuracy and fairness. However, the most consistent problem is a pattern of not clearly identifying the background and political orientation of sources.

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

NPR has corrected one inaccuracy in a Middle East story that appeared on air during the quarter. A news story about Israeli settlements by freelance reporter Sheera Frenkel, which aired September 26 on Weekend Edition Sunday (WESUN), said: "The State Department estimates that nearly 500,000 Jews live among more than 2.3 million Palestinians in the West Bank." NPR later corrected this, in the transcript of the story, to say that "nearly 500,000 Jews live among more than 2.3 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem."

Even this correction was imprecise. It should have said East Jerusalem, rather than Jerusalem. The 500,000 figure represents a rough estimate of the total number of Israeli Jews who live on the West Bank (about 300,000) and in East Jerusalem (about 200,000); East Jerusalem is the part of the city Israel captured from Jordan during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. According to a report by the Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, another 300,000 Jews live in the western portion of Jerusalem, which has been part of Israel since the country's founding in 1948 and has not been an issue in the various rounds of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

NPR also corrected the headline on the Web site version of a story that aired August 5 on All Things Considered. The original headline, for a story by diplomatic correspondent Jackie Northam about the U.S.-sponsored peace talks, said: "U.S. Urges Israelis, Palestinians to Begin Direct Talks." That headline misrepresented the thrust of Northam's story, which focused on U.S. diplomatic efforts to persuade Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to set aside his misgivings about direct negotiations. After receiving a complaint from a representative of a pro-Israel group, the Committee for Accuracy of Middle East Reporting in America (CAMERA), on August 18 NPR changed the headline to read, more accurately: "U.S. Pushes Palestinians On Direct Talks With Israelis."
In addition, I found only one significant inaccuracy in NPR's on-air coverage of the Middle East during the quarter (inaccuracies in Web-based coverage are noted in the Web Site section at the end of this report):

– In a September 1 interview, on Tell Me More substitute host Tony Cox spoke with an Israeli student and a young Palestinian entrepreneur. He said: "Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu refused to freeze the building of new settlements, a key demand of the Palestinians." This was inaccurate. Netanyahu had, in fact, agreed in November 2009 to a 10-month-long freeze on issuing new permits for housing construction in West Bank settlements (though not in Jerusalem settlements, which Israel regards as an integral part of the country). The freeze was due to expire a little over three weeks after this interview aired. It was widely assumed at the time that Netanyahu would allow the freeze to lapse (which he subsequently did). Even so, Cox's statement was incorrect because Netanyahu had, however reluctantly, agreed to a freeze. Cox's wording also was imprecise in its reference to the "building of new settlements." The freeze concerned new construction of homes (and some public infrastructure) within existing settlements, not just the building of new settlements.

**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 79 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 8 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 9 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians;
- 11 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 24 focused on the U.S.-sponsored peace talks, which began early in September but lasted only about three weeks;
- 6 focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
- 4 focused on President Obama's annual speech to the United Nations General Assembly (the speech highlighted the peace talks); and
- the remaining 17 items focused on other specific matters.

The overall conclusion from these figures is that NPR's radio shows paid relatively little attention to political, economic, social and other trends within Israel and the Palestinian territories but did devote substantial airtime to the resumption of direct peace talks. The most sustained coverage of trends within the region was a five-part series, Life in the Hamas-Controlled Gaza Strip aired on All Things Considered from August 30 to September 2, which focused on the Gaza Strip (the final piece in the series focused on an Israeli community near Gaza). I discuss that series later in this report.

Individual items aired during the quarter generally met basic standards for fairness and balance. However, I have comments about the following items:
– In a July 8 piece for Morning Edition, reporting on reaction in Israel to Prime Minister Netanyahu's White House visit the previous day, Sheera Frenkel said: "Israel's settlements in the occupied West Bank are a key stumbling block to the peace process as they were built on land earmarked for a future Palestinian state." This statement undoubtedly reflects the views of Palestinians and of many in the international community, but the word "earmarked" is not strictly accurate. In all recent negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, the future status of the Jewish settlements in the West Bank has been on the table but without a resolution – and so no specific pieces of land on the West Bank have been "earmarked" for either side. If the two sides ever reach an agreement, it is likely that Israel will retain control of some of the largest settlements (the so-called "settlement blocs" near Jerusalem) while agreeing to dismantle others. A better, more accurate, characterization would have been that the settlements are a major stumbling block in the peace process because they are on land claimed by the Palestinians.

-- Pentagon correspondent Tom Bowman's September 14 piece for All Things Considered (ATC), about a $60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia covered the important bases except one: the reactions of Israel and its congressional supporters, which in the past often bitterly fought similar arms sales to Arab countries. By the time this piece aired, it was reasonably clear that the powerful pro-Israel lobby in Washington would not mount a major campaign to block the sale. This was in large part because the Obama administration had offered significant security assurances to Israel, including access to even more sophisticated weapons than were to be sold to the Saudis. At least some of this background should have been included 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 79 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 52 Israelis and 57 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared on tape in multiple stories or interviews. Of the Arabs, 45 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.

In addition, 50 items that aired during this period quoted Israelis and 46 items quoted Arabs (including Palestinians); some individuals (for example, the Israeli prime minister) were quoted multiple times. "Quotes" means all statements, not on tape, attributed either to named individuals or to groups, such as "analysts" or "Palestinians."

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 3 items; Quoted in 21 items
President Shimon Peres: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon: On tape in 4 items; Quoted in 0 items
Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 1 items; Quoted in 0 items
Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 2 items
Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 0 items; Quoted on 0 items
Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 items
Journalist Avi Issacharoff: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Other Israelis on tape: 41
Palestinians
President Mahmoud Abbas: On tape in 4 items; Quoted in 14 items
Prime Minister Salam Fayyad: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 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 0 items
Hamas "exile" leader Khaled Meshal: On tape in 0 items; quoted in 0 items
Hamas official: Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 1 item; quoted in 0 items
Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
Other Palestinians on tape: 37
The above figures, when taken as a whole, suggest that NPR gave its listeners a reasonably balanced selection of Israeli and Palestinian viewpoints during the quarter. Even so, I would note the following points:

- Nearly one-third (14) of the Palestinian voices were in just three stories in an ATC series on the Gaza Strip. This means that listeners heard very few Palestinian voices during the rest of NPR's coverage in the quarter.

- Listeners heard from Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas exclusively within the context of his participation in the U.S.-sponsored peace talks. This means that Abbas was not—and on NPR's air rarely is—quoted in any story about Palestinian society or politics. Likewise, listeners rarely hear Abbas's prime minister Salam Fayyad, even though he is widely credited with bringing a remarkable degree of professionalism to the Palestinian Authority government. The lack of coverage of these men would be appropriate if they were irrelevant figureheads, but that is not the case.

- Similarly, nearly all quotes from Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his government colleagues talked about the peace process and not about other developments concerning Israel. As a general rule, NPR listeners hear much more often from Israeli government officials than from their Palestinian counterparts.

- Once again, listeners heard virtually nothing from the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip, even during the series that focused on Gaza. Listeners often hear how the U.S. and Israeli governments characterize Hamas (as a terrorist group), but they rarely hear directly from Hamas. Whether or not one agrees with anything the Hamas leaders say, listening to them is a necessary first step toward understanding at least what Gaza's rulers say they are doing.

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:
– In a **July 5** piece for ATC, previewing the next day's White House meeting between President Obama and Israeli prime minister Netanyahu, freelancer Sheera Frenkel gave inadequate identifications of two people she quoted. One was Avi Shaked, identified only as "the head of the Kerem Shalom crossing" between Israel and Gaza. Frenkel should have made it clear that Shaked is an Israeli official. The second was Sari Bashi, identified as "director of the Israeli advocacy group Gisha." A careful listener might have discerned that Bashi and her group are harsh critics of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians, but the piece should have made this point directly.

– ATC on **July 9** interviewed Mohamad Bazzi, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Bazzi talked about the influence of Shiite cleric Hussein Fadlallah, who has often been described as an inspiration for the Lebanese group Hezbollah. ATC should have told listeners more about Bazzi and why he was qualified to discuss Fadlallah. Bazzi is a journalist who spent several years in Beirut as Mideast bureau chief for *Newsday* and currently is writing about Hezbollah's role in Lebanon.

– In an **August 7** piece for *Weekend Edition Saturday*, reporting on clashes along Israel's borders with Gaza and Lebanon, Lourdes Garcia-Navarro quoted Mkhaimar Abusada. She identified Abusada only as a political analyst with Al-Azhar University in Gaza. At the very least, the piece should have noted that Al-Azhar traditionally has been closely allied with the Fatah movement, which dominates politics in the West Bank but was pushed out of power in Gaza by Hamas in 2007.

– In an **August 8** remembrance of the historian Tony Judt (who had died the previous day), *Weekend All Things Considered* host Guy Raz quoted Rashid Khalidi, identifying him as a professor of Middle East history at Columbia University and Judt’s friend. Given the context of the piece – which focused heavily on Judt's recently harsh views of Israel – Raz also should have noted that Khalidi is an American scholar who in the early 1990s advised Palestinian peace negotiators. Khalidi’s numerous books and articles clearly sympathize with the Palestinians and are highly critical of Israel and of U.S. policies generally in the Middle East.

**Range of voices.** With few exceptions, listeners once again heard only a narrow range of viewpoints from the Middle East – generally from government officials and representatives of mainstream non-governmental organizations and institutions. A few far-right Israeli politicians and West Bank settlers did make it onto NPR's air during coverage of the so-called settlement "freeze," and listeners did hear from individual Palestinians during the ATC series on Gaza. However, as noted above, listeners were not exposed to the views of Hamas leaders and other extremist Palestinians, which represents a serious shortcoming. Getting to Hamas leaders sometimes can be difficult, but NPR owes it to its listeners to make the effort more consistently.

**The Peace Talks**

Unfortunately, the seemingly never-ending "peace process" between Israelis and Palestinians does not make for compelling radio. Nearly all stories about the peace process involve closed-door meetings – with little visible action and even less measurable progress to report. That is one reason why weeks or even months typically pass with very little NPR coverage of the so-called peace process.
The third quarter of 2010 was different. After more than a year of effort, the Obama administration finally got Netanyahu and Abbas to sit down together to discuss major issues that have been on the table for decades. This round of peace talks lasted only about three weeks because Israel (as expected) lifted a partial freeze of its West Bank settlement activity, and the Palestinians responded (also as expected) by refusing to participate further.

NPR covered these developments with 24 stories and interviews on its radio shows, plus another 20 news stories and blogs on its Web site. Most stories provided routine coverage of the day’s events. Examples were the largely symbolic meetings at the White House at the beginning of September and a more substantive round of meetings in Egypt and Israel two weeks later.

However, NPR reporters and shows did make numerous efforts during the period to take listeners behind the scenes of the peace process so they could understand what was at stake and why the key actors were behaving as they did. Perhaps the most illuminating moment in NPR's coverage was a 13-minute conversation moderated by All Things Considered host Robert Siegel on September 2. The participants were Aaron David Miller, a long-time U.S. Middle East negotiator; Gaith Omari, a former legal advisor to the Palestinian Authority and currently the advocacy director of the American Task Force on Palestine (a pro-Palestinian group in Washington); and Gideon Grinstein, a former Israeli negotiator and currently the head of the Reut Institute, a centrist Israeli think tank.

Siegel asked the participants – each of whom had played important roles at the failed 2000 Camp David peace summit – for personal recollections of that summit and for lessons from the failure of Camp David that could be applied to the current negotiations. Although the discussion dug into some details that might have eluded many listeners, a careful listener would have learned quite a bit about diplomacy and the rhythm of high-stakes negotiations. Perhaps the central lesson to be drawn from the discussion is that leaders can reach peace agreements, and carry them out, only if their constituencies are ready to accept the often-painful consequences. It seemed pretty clear, from what these experts said, that this condition does not yet exist.

Gaza Series

From August 30 through September 3, All Things Considered ran a five-part series of features focusing on the Gaza Strip, . The series apparently was intended to bring listeners up to date on what had happened in that territory, and in neighboring areas of Israel, since Israel's brief-but-bloody invasion of Gaza in December 2008 and January 2009. NPR and Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro are to be applauded for making this long-overdue effort to report on Gaza. The host introduction to the opening piece said that Garcia-Navarro "spent several weeks" reporting the series, which represents a substantial commitment of time and resources.

Three pieces in the series (on August 30, August 31, and September 2) used the stories of individual Gazans to tell the broader story of what has happened in Gaza since the Israeli invasion. The September 1 piece gave Israeli viewpoints about Gaza, including from a kibbutz that is adjacent to the strip and has suffered numerous rocket attacks launched from within Gaza. The final piece, which aired on
September 3, told the story of a young Israeli woman and a young Palestinian man who met in the late 1990s at a privately funded peace camp in Maine and have stayed friends ever since even though they have gone very different ways with their lives.

Garcia-Navarro excels at people pieces: using the stories of individual people to tell the broader story of a society, particularly a society under stress. In these pieces, she gave listeners a first-hand look, via the power of radio, at the everyday stresses of life in Gaza, where the electricity works only a few hours a day, thousands of houses remain in rubble from Israeli air attacks, and the vast majority of people lack work of any kind.

For the most part, these pieces skirted broad political questions, including those related to Hamas’ control of Gaza. Even so, the reports from Gaza were unrelentingly downbeat, giving the listener the impression that Hamas has not succeeded in turning Gaza into an Islamic paradise – but neither has Israel succeeded in its proclaimed campaign of punishing Gaza so much that Gazans would turn against Hamas.

**Web Site**

In addition to reviewing NPR's on-air coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute (and related stories), I reviewed relevant coverage provided on npr.org. During the April-June quarter, npr.org carried 61 items connected to the Middle East conflict. These items were in addition to the Web versions of radio stories.

Of the 61 Web-only items:

- 19 were Associated Press news reports NPR staff selected for inclusion on the "mideast" topic page of the Web site. 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." These items were not selected or edited in any way by NPR staff.
- 23 items on the Web site were news-related blog postings by NPR's Two-Way and other blogs.
- 11 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;
- 2 were movie reviews; and
- 2 were commentaries provided by NPR Web "partners," *Foreign Policy* magazine and "The Root" Web site.

In terms of dominant focus, 20 items (nearly one-third of the total) focused primarily on the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. Six others focused primarily on the Palestinians, 1 item focused on Israel, 5 focused about equally on the two sides, and the rest focused on other matters related to the Middle East conflict.

Web site postings were remarkably accurate, especially considering that many were written under very tight deadlines. I do have concerns about the following postings:
– A September 14 news posting by NPR Web reporter Scott Neuman about the peace talks, said: "Palestinians want a halt to all settlement construction on Palestinian land, while Israel's prime minister has offered a partial freeze at best." Settlement advocates and far-right politicians in Israel insist there is no such thing as "Palestinian land" on the West Bank because all the land rightly belongs to Jews. That position has virtually no international support and is disputed even within Israel. But it does emphasize that everything about the peace process is subject to debate, including the identification of land as "Palestinian" or "Israeli." More neutral wording would have referred to settlement construction "on Palestinian-claimed land." The sentence quoted above also slightly misrepresented the position of Prime Minister Netanyahu, who at the time of the posting had been deliberately vague about his position on settlements after the planned September 26 expiration of a 10-month-long partial freeze.

The same piece, and a follow-up piece on September 15, also contained a box listing the "key issues" in the peace talks, one of which was the status of Jerusalem. The box said that "Palestinians want Jerusalem as the capital of a future state, but Israelis have repeatedly said that the whole city – including parts of mostly Arab east Jerusalem captured in 1967 – are an integral part of Israel." The box would have been more accurate had it said (as another mention in the September 15 piece did) that Palestinians want East Jerusalem as their capital. President Abbas and other Palestinian leaders (except for those in Hamas) do not claim West Jerusalem, which is the seat of Israel's government.

– A July 5 Associated Press story reported on Israel's relaxing its restrictions on which consumer goods are allowed into Gaza. It should have mentioned that Egypt also had closed its border with Gaza until the May 31 Gaza flotilla incident. This story is no longer available on NPR's web site.

Despite some progress in recent months, NPR's Web site still does not make it easy for readers to learn about the backgrounds and qualifications of commentators, movie reviewers, and others who NPR pays to offer their opinions. Here are three examples from Middle East-related coverage during the quarter. Each example demonstrates that adding one or two lines alongside the byline might help readers evaluate the posting:

– An August 5 review by Mark Jenkins of the movie, "Israel's Vietnam," about the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. The review itself gives no information about Jenkins, although a search of the NPR web site did turn up this bio, which describes him as a film critic for NPR and the web site REELDC.com.

– An August 12 review by Ian Buckwalter of the movie "Salt of This Sea," about a Palestinian-American woman who returns to the land of her ancestors. Buckwalter is not identified anywhere on the NPR web site. Elsewhere on the Web, I did find a brief bio of Buckwalter, who is listed as a member of the Washington, D.C. Area Film Critics Association.

– An August 31 posting of a commentary by Greg Beals, discussing U.S. domestic debates about Islam, identified Beals as "The Root's Middle Eastern correspondent." The identification should have given more information about The Root, which surely is unfamiliar to many readers. The Root describes itself as "a daily online magazine that provides thought-provoking commentary on today's news from a variety of black perspectives;" it is published by Washingtonpost.Newsweek Interactive.