This report reviews NPR's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute during the third quarter of 2011. It begins with an assessment of 54 stories and interviews that aired on radio shows produced by NPR, then continues with an assessment of 38 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website.

The main story during this quarter was a controversial move by the Palestinian Authority to apply for membership in the United Nations – a step that, if granted, would constitute a form of statehood for the Palestinians. Israel and the United States strongly opposed this move, insisting that Palestinian statehood could be achieved only through negotiations with Israel. After paying little attention for months to this long-developing story, NPR's radio shows covered various aspects of it during this quarter with 18 interviews and news stories; the website carried 9 news stories and blogs on the topic.

Overall, coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute met NPR's journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and balance.

This report covers NPR's reporting on events and trends related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, plus related events in Lebanon. I have not reviewed NPR's coverage of this year's upheavals in the Arab world, except in a few cases where that coverage directly related to Israel or the Palestinian territories.

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

NPR has corrected one Middle East item that aired during the quarter: An August 23 Morning Edition interview with Times of London correspondent James Hider. The staff-written introduction, as read by host David Greene, said a series of violent incidents along the Israel-Egypt border "started when five Egyptians were killed as Israeli troops
launched a raid on militants at the border between the two countries, and it threatened to become a full-fledged diplomatic crisis." This introduction implied, incorrectly, that Israel started the fighting, when in fact Israeli troops had responded to attacks by Palestinians from Gaza who had crossed into Egypt and then crossed the border into Israel. After I drew attention to this error, NPR on August 30 posted a correction, on its website, saying: "The clash began when gunmen crossed from the Egyptian desert and launched a series of attacks in southern Israel. Israel responded with strikes along the Egyptian border and inside Gaza."

I found no other significant factual errors in NPR's coverage of the subject during the quarter.

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 54 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 3 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 0 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians (other stories focused on the Palestinian application for UN membership, see below);
- 2 focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 18 focused on issues related to the Palestinian application for UN membership;
- 3 focused on U.S. concerns at the United Nations (notably President Obama's speech to the General Assembly on September 21)
- 5 focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
- 2 focused on broader U.S. policies concerning the Middle East;
- 4 focused on relations between Israel and Egypt
- 3 focused on relations between Israel and Turkey
- the remaining 14 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 covered the Palestinian request for UN membership (and the consequences of that request) but paid very little attention to other events in Israel or in the Palestinian territories. The only domestic news in Israel to receive any attention was a prolonged series of demonstrations during the summer, in Tel Aviv and other cities, by a grassroots movement that protested high prices for housing and food. These protests led to the appointment of a government commission, which on September 26 released a report (not covered by NPR's news shows or website) calling for numerous changes in government policies.

NPR news shows did pay attention to Israel's deteriorating relations with two of its important neighbors: Egypt and Turkey. I discuss this subject later in the report.

Individual items aired during the quarter generally met basic standards for fairness and balance. I have comments on the following items:

– All Things Considered on August 5 carried a piece by reporter Sheera Frenkel about the domestic protests in Israel. This piece should have given a government response and mentioned that the government had promised to look into the issues raised by the protesters. In a previous piece for Morning Edition on August 1, Frenkel had mentioned that "Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu has promised to put forward a series of measures to reduce housing costs." Given the intensity and historic nature of the protests, NPR also should have covered the report, released on September 26, of a government-appointed committee calling for major changes in Israeli social and economic policies
– Talk of the Nation host Neal Conan on September 19 interviewed Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian-American professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University. Khalidi was one of several experts who had written essays for The New York Times website exploring various aspects of the Palestinian plan to seek recognition of statehood at the United Nations. Khalidi argued, both in his essay and in his appearance on TOTN, that the statehood application was futile – and basically a waste of time – because of Israeli intransigence and U.S. opposition. Because of the controversy over the statehood issue,
and the complexity of the arguments Khalidi made, listeners would have been better served if they also had heard an opposing viewpoint; at the least, Conan should have challenged or questioned some of Khalidi's assertions.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 54 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 28 Israelis and 29 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. Of the Arabs, 20 were Palestinians and the rest were other nationalities.

In addition, 26 radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 33 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 4 items; Quoted in 6 items
President Shimon Peres: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
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 0 items
Ambassador Michael Oren: On tape in 3 items; Quoted in 0 items
Defense Minister Ehud Barak: On tape in 0 item; Quoted in 0 item
Government spokesman Yigal Palmor: On tape in 0 item; Quoted on 0 items
Government spokesman Mark Regev: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Government spokesman Jonathan Peled: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
Other Israelis on tape: 20

Palestinians
Perhaps the most striking conclusion to be drawn from these figures is that NPR listeners heard very little from top Israeli and Palestinian leaders despite the controversy over the Palestinian membership application at the UN. Netanyahu and Abbas gave dueling speeches to the UN General Assembly on September 23, but listeners heard detailed comments from the two leaders only twice: in pieces by diplomatic correspondent Michele Kelemen for ATC on September 23 and for Weekend Edition Saturday on September 24. The website gave detailed quotes from the speeches in a September 23 blog but did not post the full transcripts.

Also of note is that Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren, seems to have become the go-to man for NPR shows needing an Israeli government perspective. A well-known historian, Oren is an articulate spokesman and is well-skilled at brushing aside difficult questions and advocating Israel's position in a manner likely to be well-received by American audiences. For a similarly articulate Palestinian voice, NPR turned three times in mid-September to Hanan Ashrawi, a long-time Palestinian Authority official who came to the United States to argue the case for UN membership.

**Identification of voices.** For the most part, NPR reporters and shows have been doing a better-than-usual job lately of identifying people quoted on air.

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

– In a 30-minute segment dealing on September 13 with Israel's troubled relations with its neighbors, Talk of the Nation host Neal Conan interviewed three people, including Akiva Eldar. Conan described Eldar as the "chief political columnist
and editorial writer for the newspaper *Ha'aretz.*" That is an accurate description, but Conan should also have mentioned that *Ha'aretz,* in its editorial positions, and Eldar, in his own writing, tend to be well to the left of current Israeli public opinion. Knowing this background would have helped listeners understand Eldar's opinions, which definitely contradict those of the current Israeli government on a wide range of issues. Listeners heard opinions much more in line with the government when Conan, in the same segment, talked with Dore Gold, who was described by Conan as a former Israeli ambassador who also has advised Prime Minister Netanyahu. Conan did not say, but could have, that Gold often represents the views of Israeli conservatives to American audiences, including on NPR.

– Sheera Frenkel, in a [piece](https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2011/09/25/141478422/neighborhood-watch-committees-form-in-west-bank) aired by Weekend Edition Sunday on **September 25,** profiled opposing "neighborhood watch" groups formed by Palestinians and Israelis in the West Bank. The Palestinians had organized to protect their villages against attacks by extremist Israeli settlers, and the Israeli settlers had organized (with help from the Israeli army) to prevent attacks from Palestinians. Frenkel described one Palestinian watch group was a "ragtag collection of local and international activists," and she quoted one member, Wasem Hawaja, but said nothing about him except that he arrived "to document settlers' actions with his camera." Was he a local man, or a Palestinian from somewhere else in the West Bank, or was he one of the dozens of foreign activists who went to the West Bank to demonstrate "solidarity" with the Palestinians? Listeners deserved more information about Hawaja, in particular, and the neighborhood watch groups on both sides in the West Bank, where tension appears to be mounting for a variety of reasons.

**Range of voices.** NPR listeners heard during this quarter from politicians, diplomats, and academic experts – but from very few ordinary Israelis and Palestinians, and then mostly in reaction to the events at the United Nations. The range of voices was even narrower than usual, and listeners heard almost nothing from the extremists, on both sides, who are often able to restrict the options of more moderate leaders. For example, only one story (the previously mentioned Sheera Frenkel [piece](https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2011/09/25/141478422/neighborhood-watch-committees-form-in-west-bank) about "neighborhood watch" committees for Weekend Edition Sunday on **September 25**) quoted hardline Israeli settlers. NPR also told its listeners (and readers) almost nothing about how Israel's
ascendant right-wing or dwindling left-wing political factions were reacting to the Palestinian statehood issue.

The Hamas leaders in Gaza, rarely quoted on NPR's air, were absent again this quarter. The only reference to them came in a September 24 Weekend Edition Saturday two-way with Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro who said, wryly, that the reaction of Hamas leaders to Abbas's speech at the UN the previous day "sounded very similar to Israel's."

Palestinian Statehood

Palestinian officials in late 2010 began lobbying governments around the world to vote for a UN resolution recognizing some form of Palestinian statehood. By early 2011 they had garnered more than enough votes to ensure its adoption in the General Assembly.

Normally, an application for UN membership is a routine matter that generates little attention outside the country involved. But nothing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is routine, except perhaps for the fact that it is so long-lasting that nearly everyone takes it for granted. The Palestinian case for membership was exceptionally controversial for several reasons, including Israel's adamant opposition and the many questions that remained unresolved, notably those involving borders: With Hamas controlling Gaza and Israel controlling much of the West Bank, what land, exactly, would a Palestinian state cover?

The Palestinian tactic took on greater significance in July when the Obama administration said it would use a Security Council veto to block full UN membership for the Palestinians. Moreover, right-wing elements of the Israeli government talked about taking extreme retaliatory measures, such as formally annexing the West Bank, if the Palestinians carried through with their plan.

Despite the growing controversy, NPR was slow to take this story seriously or to explain to listeners and readers the potential significance of a diplomatic showdown at the UN. NPR told its audience very little about this subject until just two weeks before Abbas formally submitted his application to the UN for full membership on September
23 – the same day Netanyahu also spoke to the General Assembly in opposition to Abbas's request.

NPR's first radio story of the quarter on this issue was a piece by Kelemen for ATC on July 28, reporting on preliminary diplomatic skirmishing. This piece quoted a retired Israeli general, an official of Abbas's Fatah party, a former Israeli negotiator who now works for an American think tank, and a U.S. diplomat. It did not, and should have, given listeners the viewpoint of the Israeli government.

NPR's radio shows and website dropped the subject for the next six weeks, until the annual opening of the UN General Assembly was on the horizon. Kelemen followed up with a piece for ATC on September 13 explaining how the Palestinian approach to the UN posed a diplomatic problem for the Obama administration. Kelemen recalled President Obama's plea at the United Nations one year earlier for a negotiated solution leading to a Palestinian state, and she said the administration still wanted negotiations and had pledged to veto a membership application if it came before the Security Council.

In subsequent stories during the following week, NPR listeners heard more about the Obama administration's attempts (ultimately unsuccessful) to head off the Palestinian membership application. Weekend Edition Sunday, on September 18, also gave its listeners a chance to hear the pros and cons from opposing diplomats: Michael Oren, the Israeli ambassador to the United States, and Maen Rashid Areikat, the Palestine Liberation Organization's representative in Washington.

Abbas made his dramatic speech to the UN General Assembly on September 23, followed 45 minutes later by Netanyahu. Kelemen covered the dueling speeches that afternoon for All Things Considered and again the following morning for Weekend Edition Saturday. The September 23 piece gave Abbas and Netanyahu roughly equal amounts of time to make their cases and gave a balanced presentation of the dispute. This piece also included a warning from Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan that Israel needed to adjust to this year's rapid changes in the Middle East. Kelemen's follow-up piece on September 24 also discussed the broader diplomatic implications of the Palestinian request and included comments by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Mideast envoy Tony Blair, and long-time Palestinian diplomat Saeb Erekat.
NPR gave its listeners only limited opportunities during the quarter to hear the views of the people most directly affected by the diplomatic maneuvering at the UN and in world capitals: Israelis and Palestinians. The only time NPR listeners heard the views of ordinary Israelis about the diplomatic tussle at the UN was on September 21, when Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro reported for Morning Edition on the views of three West Bank Palestinians and two Israelis in Jerusalem. NPR aired two stories, on September 23 and September 24, reporting on reaction among ordinary Palestinians to Abbas's speech at the UN. Because of the historic nature of the event, listeners should have heard more reaction both sides, including from Israeli citizens who were angered or unnerved by the Palestinian move and the (apparent) minority who argued that Israel should have embraced it.

The background. Although NPR eventually covered the diplomatic maneuvering over the Palestinian statehood issue, very little of its coverage during the quarter clearly explained the background. Questions that deserved more attention included: why President Obama's efforts to promote Israeli-Palestinian negotiations had failed; why a frustrated Abbas had turned to the UN and what he hoped to achieve; and why the Israelis were so adamantly opposed any upgrading of the Palestinian status at the UN. The only coverage that really dug into these issues in any detail were the two Talk of the Nation segments mentioned above: on September 13 and September 19.

NPR reporters and show hosts also did not ask Palestinian representatives hard questions about their statehood bid. For example: How could the Palestinians claim to have a state when they had no real control over its borders and when a major part of its presumed territory (the Gaza Strip) was controlled by a competing political faction; how would the Palestinian Authority survive without tax transfers from Israel and U.S. aid, both of which would be cut off; what would happen to the carefully built cooperation between Israeli and Palestinian security forces on the West Bank; and how could the Palestinian Authority protect its people against the all-but-certain violence from Israeli settlers on the West Bank once a Palestinian state was declared? Listeners deserved to hear these and similar questions, and the Palestinian answers to them.
Preconditions. One of the recurring features of all news media coverage of the Palestinian statehood issue was the position taken by Netanyahu and other Israeli spokesmen as demanding that the Palestinians return to peace talks without any "preconditions." This was a reference to Abbas's repeated statement that he would not negotiate until Israel froze construction in Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. NPR quoted the Israeli "no preconditions" demand repeatedly without examining the substance behind it.

Asking the other side to engage in unconditional talks would appear to be reasonable – until one considers that Netanyahu himself sought his own preconditions by imposing several limits on any negotiations. For example, Netanyahu insisted that, as a prelude to negotiations, the Palestinians agree to acknowledge Israel as a "Jewish state" (the PLO two decades ago accepted Israel as a state but not as a Jewish one). Netanyahu also insisted that several topics would be off the table in any negotiations: Israel would not agree to negotiate on the basis of the pre-June 1967 boundaries; Israel would never agree to accept Palestinian control over any part of Jerusalem; and Israel would never acknowledge even a token "right of return" by Palestinian refugees to Israel proper.

Unfortunately, none of NPR's coverage made the connection for listeners and readers that Netanyahu was insisting that the Palestinians refrain from doing what he himself was doing.

Israel's "Isolation"

Another big regional story during this period was the sharp downturn in Israel's relations with two of its most important neighbors: Egypt and Turkey. The causes and details of Israel's current problems with Egypt and Turkey are too numerous and complex for discussion in this report, but a series of incidents during the year created the strong impression that Israel was becoming, and Israelis were feeling, increasingly isolated.

NPR covered this trend both in news reports about specific incidents and in a handful of broader pieces and interviews that sought to put the situation in perspective. On September 10, Cairo correspondent Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson told listeners to Weekend Edition Saturday about the previous evening's invasion of the Israeli embassy.
in Cairo by a large mob, while Egyptian security personnel stood by. Two days later, Istanbul-based correspondent Peter Kenyon reported for All Things Considered on the near-break of relations between Israel and Turkey, which in 1949 had been the first Muslim country to recognize Israel.

One of the most detailed and successful of NPR's reports on this subject was a Talk of the Nation segment on September 13 featuring interviews with Joel Greenberg, the Washington Post's Jerusalem correspondent, and Israeli observers on the opposite ends of that country's political spectrum: Ha'aretz newspaper columnist Akiva Eldar (on the left) and former diplomat Dore Gold (on the right). Anyone listening carefully to this segment would get a pretty good idea why Israelis have become so unnerved about recent events in the world around them. Lourdes Garcia-Navarro offered more details from Israel on September 15 about the country's feeling of isolation in the wake of deteriorating relations with both Egypt and Turkey.

Gaza Flotilla

A UN-appointed commission, headed by former New Zealand prime minister Geoffrey Palmer (an expert in maritime law) issued a report on September 2 detailing its investigation into the Gaza flotilla incident of May 31, 2010. This incident was the confrontation in the eastern Mediterranean between Israeli navy commandos and a few dozen pro-Palestinian activists aboard one of several Turkish-sponsored ships attempting to break an Israeli naval blockade of the Gaza Strip. The Israelis killed nine Turkish activists (one of them an American citizen) during a struggle for control of the ship, then towed the ship to an Israeli port and sent the remaining activists home.

The incident caused an enormous international furor that eventually forced Israel to soften its restrictions on the types of supplies allowed into Gaza by land. The flotilla incident also was a major factor in the deterioration of relations between Israel and Turkey.

The UN report was drafted in July but withheld by the UN for several weeks to give Israel and Turkey a chance to work out a compromise response. Diplomats from the two countries reportedly negotiated a deal under which Israel would apologize for the deaths of the activists, but Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu refused to accept it.
The key findings of the UN report were that Israel's naval blockade of Gaza was a "legitimate security measure" designed to prevent militants there from importing weapons, but that the Israel military used "excessive and unreasonable" force in taking over the ship and subsequently mistreated some of the activists on board. The panel also suggested that Israel offer "an appropriate statement of regret" about the deaths and offer to pay compensation to the families of the deceased and injured.

Although both Israel and Turkey could each take some solace from elements of the report, Turkey chose to respond harshly, apparently because of Netanyahu's willingness to express only "regret" – but not apologize – for the deaths of the activists. Turkey expelled the Israeli ambassador, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan described Israel as a "spoiled child."

NPR aired only one radio report about the UN report – a news piece by Kelemen for ATC on September 2 – but, as noted above, followed up with several reports on how this incident had damaged Israeli-Turkish relations. The website also carried news stories and blogs about the subject.

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 July-September quarter, npr.org carried 38 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 38 Web-only items:

- 20 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.

- 12 items were news-related postings by NPR's Two-Way and other blogs.

- 3 items were longer-form news or news-analysis pieces by NPR staff members;
• 1 was a hard news report (similar to wire stories) compiled from NPR staff reporting and AP stories;
• 1 was a commentary provided by the Weekly Standard (a conservative journal);
• 1 was a set of cartoons, provided by politicalcartoons.com, about the Mideast peace talks.

In terms of dominant focus:
• 4 item focused primarily on Israel;
• 0 items focused primarily on the Palestinians;
• 3 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
• 9 items focused on issues related to the Palestinian application for UN membership;
• 1 item focused on U.S. policies toward the broader Middle East;
• 1 item focused on U.S.-Israeli relations;
• 6 items focused on relations between Israel and Egypt;
• 3 items focused on relations between Israel and Turkey;
• 11 items focused on other matters with some connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.

Of the 38 Web-only items, 28 quoted Israelis while 20 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, Web-only items met NPR’s basic journalistic standards for accuracy, fairness and balance. As was the case in several previous quarters, however, the website paid very little attention to domestic events in Israel or the Palestinian territories.

NPR has increasingly been using the website to provide supplementary – and in some cases substitute – coverage of news stories that apparently are not deemed significant enough for full-scale treatment by the radio news shows. Examples during this quarter included recent attempts in July by pro-Palestinian activists to break Israel's naval blockade of Gaza, initial reports of the deadly fighting on August 18 along the Israel-
Egypt border, some aspects of the Palestinian statehood issue, and Israel's decisions on August 11 and on September 27 to build a combined total of more than 5,000 new homes in large Jewish settlements (called "neighborhoods" by Israel) in East Jerusalem.

This use of the website does provide an important outlet for news, but it also means that people who listen only to the radio can miss important news coverage.