This report covers NPR's reporting on events and trends related to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians during the fourth quarter of 2011. My review also continues to include coverage of related events in Lebanon and regional reaction to Iran's alleged nuclear weapons program. However, I have not reviewed NPR's coverage of the upheavals in the Arab world, except in a few cases where that coverage directly related to Israel or the Palestinian territories.

The report begins with an assessment of 43 stories and interviews that aired from October through December on radio shows produced by NPR. It then continues with an assessment of 28 news stories, blogs and other items carried exclusively on NPR's website.

NPR radio shows carried 232 items related to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for 2011, which was the lowest number for any year since 2003; the previous low was 250 items in 2010. Prior to those two years, NPR had been averaging about 430 stories annually relating to the topic. The amount of news in the region has not diminished, but other priorities (for example, the Arab upheavals) apparently have assumed greater priority for NPR's coverage.

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.

I found only two inaccuracies during the period:

– In a two-way interview with All Things Considered on October 11, reporting on the announcement that Israel would release more than 1,000 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for one Israeli soldier, freelance reporter Sheera Frenkel said Israel recently had engaged in a similarly one-sided prisoner exchange with Hezbollah in Lebanon. "Two
Israeli soldiers, Goldwasser and Regev, their bodies were given back to Israel in exchange for thousands of soldiers that had fallen during the wars between Israel and Lebanon, some of them alive, some of them dead," she said.

Frenkel clearly was referring to the July 2008 exchange in which Israel received the bodies of its soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev and in exchange gave Hezbollah five living fighters and the bodies of 199 Hezbollah and Palestinian fighters who had been killed in previous years. Although seen in Israel at the time as an unequal exchange, that swap did not involve the "thousands" of Lebanese prisoners Frenkel recalled. Israel did exchange more than 4,600 Lebanese Palestinian prisoners for six Israeli soldiers in 1983.

NPR on February 13, 2012, posted the following correction:

*In the audio of this story, our reporter referred to an exchange between Hezbollah and Israel as involving "thousands" of remains of Palestinian fighters who had died in combat. The exchange in question took place in July 2008: Israel received the bodies of its soldiers, Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev, and in exchange gave Hezbollah five living fighters and the bodies of 199 Hezbollah and Palestinian fighters who had been killed in previous years.*

– In a short posting for the Two Way blog on November 21, Eyder Peralta made one inaccurate and one misleading statement about Iran's alleged work on nuclear weapons. The bulk of the blog consisted of a partial transcript of an interview on CNN the previous day with Israel's defense minister, Ehud Barak.

The inaccurate statement was in the first sentence of the blog, which said: "A report from the International Atomic Energy Agency, which concluded Iran was working on nuclear weapons, continues to reverberate internationally." This was a reference to an IAEA report released on November 8, which expressed "serious concerns" about Iran's nuclear program but did not conclude that Iran was working on nuclear weapons. The closest thing to such a statement in the report was that Iran had carried out several activities that "are relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device." This might seem like hair-splitting, but in the world of diplomacy and nuclear weapons, there is a difference between saying a country is "working on" nuclear weapons and saying that it is doing things that are "relevant to" developing those weapons. It would have been a much bigger deal if the IAEA had said directly that Iran was working on weapons.
The November 21 blog also made a misleading statement in quoting Israel's Barak as referring to the actions of the IAEA under its former director general, Mohamed ElBaradei. Barak, in his CNN interview, said current IAEA chief, Yukiya Amano "told straightly what he found [about Iran], unlike Baradei. . ." Peralta followed with this sentence: "What Barak is referring to when he talks about ElBaradei is the former head of the IAEA Mohamed ElBaradei, who from 1997 to 2009 consistently said the agency found no evidence that Iran was working on a nuclear bomb."

The last part of this sentence is misleading for two reasons. First, while Barak in his CNN interview obviously was dismissive of ElBaradei, he did not make the claim that ElBaradei had consistently said that there was no evidence Iran was working on a bomb. Second, ElBaradei in his numerous reports about Iran from 2003 onward repeatedly raised serious questions about Iran's nuclear program—he just didn't make the flat-out assertion that Iran was building nuclear weapons. It would have been accurate to say that ElBaradei had consistently said his agency could not prove that Iran was working on a bomb.

NPR on February 8, 2012, posted the following correction:

"An earlier version of this post said an IAEA report had found Iran was "working on nuclear weapons," when in fact the IAEA report was not as definitive and found Iran may have been working on nuclear weapons. This post also said that former IAEA chief Mohamed El Baradei had "found no evidence" Iran was working on a nuclear weapon, when it's more accurate to characterize El Baradei as saying his agency could not prove Iran was working on a nuclear weapon."

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 43 radio items reviewed for this report:

- 4 had a dominant focus on Israel;
- 1 had a dominant focus on the Palestinians (other stories focused on the Palestinian application for UN membership, see below);
• 14 focused on a prisoner exchange between Israel and the Palestinians, and thus focused about equally on Israel and the Palestinians;
• 3 focused on issues related to the Palestinian application for UN membership;
• 4 focused on regional concerns about Iran, notably its alleged program to build nuclear weapons;
• 4 focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
• 1 focused on broader U.S. policies concerning the Middle East;
• 2 focused on relations between Israel and Egypt;
• 1 focused on relations between Israel and Turkey;
• the remaining 9 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 paid very little attention during the fourth quarter to the Middle East conflict, other than the prisoner exchange that resulted in freedom for Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit.

As noted above, over the course of 2011 NPR aired 232 items related to the topic under review. Following is a breakdown of the 232 items by dominant focus:

• 16 items focused primarily on Israel;
• 14 items focused primarily on the Palestinians;
• 27 items focused about equally on the Israelis and Palestinians;
• 26 items focused on the peace process;
• 21 items focused on the Palestinian drive for recognition as a state by the United Nations;
• 16 items focused on relations between the United States and Israel;
• 13 items focused on relations between Israel and Egypt;
• 10 items focused on Egypt;
• the remaining 89 items focused primarily on other matters related to the Middle East conflict.
Most individual items aired during the fourth quarter generally met basic standards for fairness and balance. Later in the report, under the heading Jewish-Arab Tensions in Israel, I discuss one piece that clearly failed the fairness-balance test.

In addition, I have a comment about a feature story by NPR's Jerusalem correspondent Lourdes Garcia-Navarro. The story, which aired on Morning Edition on December 28, reported on stresses in one Israeli city between the so-called "ultra-Orthodox" known as the Haredim and more secular Israelis. This is an important subject that NPR has covered only sporadically in the past.

The introduction read by host Steve Inskeep briefly described the stresses and ended with the sentence: "Different interpretations of Judaism could be tearing Israel apart." Many listeners, upon hearing such a sentence, might have expected to hear a story about a society in extreme turmoil, possibly even in danger of implosion because of religious conflicts—as, for example, Iraq was in 2006 and early 2007.

The piece indeed described serious tensions between the Haredim and other Israelis in the one city Garcia-Navarro visited and in Israel generally. These tensions are growing and are the subject of much anguish in Israel, as Garcia-Navarro rightly noted. However, the piece, by itself, did not make the case that these tensions over the Haredim are, at least at this point, threatening to tear Israel apart. The language in the introduction appears to be an example of an attempt to heighten listener interest in a story by hyping its significance. Interestingly, the online version of the story did not use the "tearing apart" language.

Voices

Using the same technique of previous reports, I counted the number of times listeners heard from Israelis and Arabs (including Palestinians) in the 43 radio items under review, both on tape and in quotes. Overall, the voices of 25 Israelis and 18 Arabs appeared on tape; some individuals appeared in multiple stories or interviews. All 18 of the Arab voices were those of Palestinians.

In addition, 25 radio stories or interviews during this period quoted Israelis and 21 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 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 2 items; Quoted in 4 items
- President Shimon Peres: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
- 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 1 item; 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 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Kadima Party Leader Tzipi Livni: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Shin Bet leader Yoram Cohen: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 2 items
- Gilad Shalit's father Noam Shalit: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Other Israelis on tape: 20

**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 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Hamas "exile" leader Khaled Mashaal: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 1 item
- Hamas official: Mahmoud Zahar: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 1 item
- Diplomat Saeb Erekat: On tape in 0 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Diplomat M. R. Areikat: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Palestinian official Nabil Shaath: On tape in 2 items; Quoted in 0 items
- Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Hamas spokesman Osama Hamdan: On tape in 1 item; Quoted in 0 items
- Other Palestinians on tape: 11

The main conclusion to be drawn from this list is that NPR listeners heard very little during the quarter from key Israeli and Palestinian actors—but, as normally is the case, listeners heard more often from Israelis than from Palestinians.
Identification of voices. Generally in the past I have criticized NPR for failing to tell listeners enough about the backgrounds of people who appear on air, especially advocates who tend to be identified only through their affiliation with institutions that might be unfamiliar to an American audience. I have no such complaints for this quarter.

Range of voices. Because the range of stories covered by NPR during the quarter was so narrow, the range of voices heard on air also was even narrower than usual. Listeners did hear from ordinary Israelis and Palestinians in response to the prisoner exchange in October and from several Israelis about increased social tensions in the country. Listeners to All Things Considered on October 18 had an unusual opportunity to hear a full interview with spokesman for Hamas, Osama Hamdan, who commented on the prisoner exchange. That interview was paired with an interview with a much more frequent guest on NPR's air, Israel's ambassador to the United States, Michael Oren.

Israeli-Palestinian Prisoner Exchange

The single biggest story in this review of NPR's Middle East coverage involved the lopsided exchange of prisoners between Israel and the Palestinians. NPR devoted 14 radio stories or interviews and 10 website stories or blog postings to the topic—far more than to any other single subject covered by this review.

The central figure in the prisoner exchange was Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who had been captured by Palestinian fighters in June 2006 and held captive in the Gaza Strip ever since. Israel repeatedly had engaged in extensive negotiations, through Egyptian and German mediators, to secure Shalit's release, but those talks failed until the fall of 2011. On October 11, Israel and Hamas announced separately that they had reached a deal to secure Shalit's freedom in exchange for Israel's release, in two stages, of more than 1,000 Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

The first stage came on October 18 when Hamas freed Shalit and Israel released 475 Palestinians prisoners. This was a major event for both communities.

In Israel, Shalit's captivity under unknown conditions in Gaza had become a significant national trauma. His parents and other supporters had mounted a large-scale
campaign of pressuring the government to secure his release, so the first public sighting of him was a deeply emotional experience for many Israelis. On the other hand, some Israelis were horrified by the price the government ended up paying for Shalit's release: not just the number of Palestinians freed from prison, but the fact that among those released were Palestinians who had led or carried out some of the most notorious terrorist attacks against Israel.

For Palestinians, the prisoner swap was equally significant because, as NPR reporting noted, a very high proportion of Palestinian families have had at least one or two members jailed by Israel. In addition, the swap was widely seen as a major political victory for Hamas, which had controlled Shalit's captivity and used his potential release as a bargaining chip with Israel.

NPR gave its radio listeners and website readers full-scale coverage of all these issues during the days just before and just after the prisoner swap. In particular, correspondent Peter Kenyon offered insightful reporting from both sides: on October 17, All Things Considered listeners heard his report from Israel vividly describing mixed feelings about the exchange, and the following day they heard a matching report from the West Bank. NPR did not cover reaction in Gaza, except for the previously mentioned All Things Considered interview with Hamas spokesman Osama Hamdan.

NPR covered the second stage of the prisoner swap, on December 18, with only one AP story posted online (but since removed from the website). That stage involved the transfer of 550 Palestinian prisoners, the vast majority to the West Bank. This second prisoner release was a low-key affair, conducted overnight and without the media circus that accompanied the release of Shalit and the high-profile Palestinians in the first round.

Israel and Iran

One of the most pressing current questions in the Middle East does not relate, at least directly, to the conflict between Israelis and the Palestinians, but rather to the prospect that Israel might attack Iran hopes of damaging its alleged nuclear weapons program. NPR began ramping up its coverage of this subject late in 2011, possibly in anticipation of a potential Israeli attack some time during 2012.
NPR gave its radio and website audiences several news stories early in November about the most recent report about Iran's nuclear program from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a branch of the United Nations. The IAEA has monitored Iran's nuclear installations with onsite inspections, although the agency has repeatedly accused Iran of hiding key elements of its nuclear work.

Most of NPR's stories focused on the language in the IAEA report that raised the most specific concerns, of any IAEA report since 2003, about whether Iran was, indeed, attempting to build nuclear weapons. The IAEA report offered numerous pieces of information suggesting the answer to that question was yes, but it stopped short of providing a definitive answer.

In conjunction with this news report, Talk of the Nation gave its listeners four extended conversations between November 2 and November 30 on Iran in general and its nuclear ambitions in particular. Taken as a whole, these conversations helped listeners understand the internal politics in Iran, the international debate about Iran's nuclear program, and Israel's growing concern about—and apparent determination to preempt—the prospect of Iran building nuclear weapons.

For listeners who might not have been paying close attention to this subject, perhaps the most startling and sobering of the Talk of the Nation conversations was aired on November 10, two days after the release of the IAEA report on Iran. Host Neal Conan interviewed NPR's lead reporter on Iran, foreign correspondent Mike Shuster; Robert Kagan, a prominent "neoconservative" foreign policy analyst, now at the Brookings Institution; and Aaron David Miller, a long-time U.S. Middle East peace negotiator, now at the Woodrow Wilson Center.

Shuster recapped the key details of the IAEA report and reviewed the growing debate about whether Israel and/or the United States will or should take military action to stymie Iran's ability to build nuclear weapons. Kagan and Miller agreed that the strategy of both the Bush and Obama administration's to use diplomacy and sanctions to pressure Iran has not worked and is unlikely to succeed. Instead, Kagan and Miller both suggested that the "least bad option" might be military action, despite all of its potentially negative consequences.
Listeners heard contrasting views on **November 21**, when Conan interviewed Steven Walt, a Harvard University professor perhaps best known as the co-author of a controversial book about the Israeli lobby, and Trita Parsi, president of the National Iranian American Council, an Iranian exile group. Walt repeatedly questioned the assumption that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and suggested that some people (he did not say who) have been engaged in a "long-term campaign" to make an attack on Iran seem to be necessary and acceptable.

A listener who listened carefully to both the November 10 and November 21 *Talk of the Nation* sessions might well be confused by the conflicting viewpoints but probably would have a pretty good grasp of the major questions about Iran's nuclear program, at least from a U.S.-centric viewpoint.

Unfortunately, the last lines of an unrelated blog posting on **November 23** raised some of these same questions but did not address them adequately. The posting by Frank James on the "It's All Politics" blog described how Republican presidential candidates discussed Iran in the previous night's televised debate. James commented on several aspects of U.S.-Iranian relations that the candidates did not discuss.

James ended his posting this way: "Also left unsaid was the fact that the Iran-U.S. contest is not a one-way street. Iran has the ability to push U.S. pressure points. It could exert more influence over Iraq or cause instability elsewhere in the Middle East." The question of Iran's response to pressures over its nuclear program is indeed an important one worthy of much consideration. But, having raised the question, James should have offered more explanation for his rather cryptic references to pressure points and regional instability.

**Jewish-Arab Tensions in Israel**

Tensions periodically surface between the Jewish and Palestinian-Arab communities within Israel, although NPR generally has paid little attention to this story. Palestinian-Arabs make up about 20 percent of Israel's 7.7 million citizens, according to official estimates, and some of them insist they are treated as second-class citizens. Tensions between the Jewish and Palestinian-Arab communities within Israel proper
became notably high during the height of the second Palestinian "intifada" (or uprising) against Israel in 2001–03 and appear to have grown again in recent months.

NPR provided two stories about this subject during late 2011: a straightforward news account from the Associated Press, and a seriously flawed on-air feature story that generated significant controversy.

The news account was an AP story posted temporarily on the NPR website on October 3 (but no longer available): "Radical Jews Suspected of Burning Mosque in Israel." This story reported on the arson attack against a mosque in an Arab village in northern Israel—an attack that featured details suggesting it had been carried out by what the AP called "Jewish radicals." The story quoted senior Israeli leaders, including President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as rabbis and others, as denouncing the attack. It was the third attack against a mosque in Israel since the government destroyed an illegal Jewish settlement in the West Bank in September, the story said.

The problematic feature story, by freelance correspondent Sheera Frenkel, was aired by Morning Edition on November 18. The piece focused on protests in Jaffa, an historically Arab city that was incorporated into Tel Aviv after Israel gained independence in 1948. Frenkel said the protesters, who included both Arabs and Jews, were angry over a series of recent attacks, locally and elsewhere within Israel, against Arab mosques, businesses, and other targets. The introduction to the piece said the Arab sites had been "vandalized by militant Jews who've left graffiti such as Death to Arabs."

First, it must be said that this piece made listeners to NPR's most popular news program aware of an important development that NPR previously had pretty much ignored. A small number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank began attacking mosques in Palestinian villages in 2010. The attackers often spray-painted the term "price tag" on mosque walls, denoting that the attacks were in retaliation for periodic crackdowns by the Israeli government on illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank. By 2011, as noted in the October 8 AP story, several similar attacks took place against mosques and other Arab sites within Israel proper. The attacks within Israel were the subject of Frenkel's piece.
Two days after it aired, Frenkel's piece was subjected to a harsh attack by CAMERA, the pro-Israel advocacy group that denounces news coverage it considers to be negative toward Israel or positive toward Palestinians. CAMERA's posting carried the misleading headline: "NPR Jaffa Story Alleges Israeli Plot to Eradicate Arabs." The story made no such allegation, though one person quoted in it did say that.

NPR's ombudsman, Edward Schumacher-Matos, examined both the story and CAMERA's response to it in a thoughtful analysis posted on December 14. I agree in general with his conclusions.

Because so much attention has been paid to this piece already, I will not examine it in detail here except to say that it did not give listeners a fair, balanced, or complete presentation of a complex and emotionally fraught topic.

In summary, the piece failed to give the Israeli government an opportunity to respond to the violent incidents; it did not attempt to identify or explain the motivations of the "right-wing Israelis" who allegedly carried out the attacks; it did not put these attacks into the context of violence between Israelis and Palestinians, notably the much more numerous and violent terrorist attacks on Israelis over many years by Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups; and it did not explain the historical or contemporary context of uneasy relations between Jews and Arabs within Israel. Adding these other elements would have resulted in a longer piece, to be sure, but careful editing of the piece could have made room for additional explanatory information.

CAMERA on December 29 posted a subsequent criticism that NPR had "ignored" attacks against Jewish sites in Israel, including a Molotov cocktail attack against a synagogue in October and the desecration in November of the historic Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives. NPR obviously cannot, and should not, cover every single incident of violence against Jewish and Arab sites in Israel. However, CAMERA's criticism points up the fact that tensions between the two communities appear to be rising. NPR has an obligation to keep its listeners informed of this general trend and its possible significance for peace, or the lack of it, in the region.

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 October-December quarter, NPR.org carried 28 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 28 website-only items:

- 14 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.
- 10 items were news-related postings by NPR's Two-Way and other blogs.
- 2 were hard news reports (similar to wire stories) compiled from NPR staff reporting and AP stories;
- 1 was a commentary provided by the New Republic;
- 1 was a set of cartoons, provided by politicalcartoons.com, about the Shalit-Palestinian prisoner exchange.

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

- 1 item focused primarily on Israel;
- 1 item focused primarily on the Palestinians;
- 5 items focused about evenly on Israel and the Palestinians;
- 10 items focused on the Shalit-Palestinian prisoner exchange;
- 3 items focused on issues related to the Palestinian application for UN membership;
- 1 item focused on U.S. policies toward the broader Middle East;
- the remaining 7 items focused on other matters with some connection to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute.
Of the 28 website-only items, 20 quoted Israelis while 19 quoted Arabs (including Palestinians).

On the whole, website-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, except for the prisoner release story in October.