

# **THE BBC and THE MIDDLE EAST**

## **A CRITICAL STUDY**

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### **Biographies**

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## Executive Summary

This study seeks to provide a thorough analysis of BBC coverage of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and to assess the BBC's adherence to its own Guidelines, in particular with respect to its obligations of impartiality and accuracy.

As far as possible we have sought to approach the material in an objective manner. We have selected material in a consistent non-random fashion, and have likewise analysed a variety of 'control' sources in a similarly non-random fashion.

We have found that the BBC preserves a superficial impartiality by allotting broadly similar time to supporters of each side to the conflict. However against most other criteria we have found the BBC to fall consistently short of its aim of impartial and accurate reporting.

Breaches are at times subtle, and such as might pass unnoticed by a casual observer. Some breaches are perhaps minor, and would not be worthy of note in isolation. Taken together however we believe that even these subtler or more minor breaches reveal a clear and significant trend of bias.

Some of the breaches are in our view quite glaring. At times, by a mere selection or omission of facts, the BBC provides a report which portrays the very opposite of the truth. Frequently the BBC report is misleading. At times it appears to invent material to suit its own bias.

Whilst some errors of judgement will inevitably occur, we detected a consistent trend which demands an explanation beyond mere error. All of the many breaches of the Guidelines which we have highlighted in this report appear to us to indicate a marked and consistent pro- Palestinian bias within the BBC.

This report could not have been written without the dedication, intelligence and skill of my research assistant Elisheva Mironi.

This report contains the independent views of the author.

TREVOR ASSERSON

March 2002

## **1 Purpose of this Study**

This study analyses BBC coverage of the struggle between Palestinians and Israel, which for the purposes of this report we refer to as “the Middle East.” We have analysed BBC Middle East coverage against criteria of impartiality set out in the BBC’s own Producers Guidelines (“The Guidelines”).

Insofar as our findings indicate shortcomings we hope that this study can form a basis for any relevant action to persuade the BBC to correct such shortcomings.

## **2 Methodology**

We have recorded the bulk of BBC news output on TV, Radio and Website for the 7-week period 12 November 2001 – 30 December 2001. Over the same period we have also recorded reports from a variety of other sources to act as a control. (See Schedule I for details of all sources used). All programmes covered were recorded consistently to ensure impartiality in the selection of material.

All Middle East coverage has been transcribed, and then analysed to see whether it complies with the BBC Guidelines. Comparison with control sources was carried out to ensure an impartial analysis.

The period covered was selected at random and in advance. All relevant material was included in the study. The material covered is thus randomly, consistently and fairly selected. With minor – and clearly noted – exceptions, we have only used material covered by the period of the study.

## **3 Duties of the BBC**

The BBC was created by a Royal Charter in 1926. Pursuant to the Charter a Licence Agreement with the Secretary of State for National Heritage was entered into in 1995 (“the Agreement”). The Agreement forms the basis for BBC activities.[Emphasis added below]

S. 3.2(c) of the Agreement provides that the BBC shall:

“contain comprehensive, authoritative and **impartial** coverage of news and current affairs in the United Kingdom and throughout the world...”

S. 5.1 (c) of the Agreement provides that the BBC shall do all it can to secure that all programmes:

“...treat controversial subjects with due accuracy and **impartiality**... in the Corporation’s news services...and do not contain any material expressing the opinion of the Corporation...”

Pursuant to the Agreement, the BBC has published Producers Guidelines (“The Guidelines”). Chapter 2 of the Guidelines provides that:

“**Due impartiality** lies at the heart of the BBC. All BBC programmes and services should be open minded, fair and show a respect for truth... The BBC applies **due impartiality** to all its broadcasting and services, both to domestic and international audiences.”

The BBC has also published specific guidelines relating to all BBC material on the Internet, which states that such material must conform to the Guidelines.<sup>[1]</sup>

Extracts from the Guidelines are attached at Schedule III. Although a discursive document we believe that the Guidelines identify a number of independent, if at times overlapping, obligations. We consider that the BBC requires compliance with each of those obligations to ensure fulfilment of its legal obligation to report on news events in an impartial manner. Accordingly we analyse BBC output against each of these individual obligations.

We consider that the overriding duty is to broadcast in an impartial manner. The other obligations are the constituent elements which must be adhered to to achieve impartiality. Thus when we list each of the individual obligations we have not included “impartiality”. The overriding obligation, cannot be a subset of itself.

For the purposes of this study we identify the following independent obligations, each of which can be found in Chapter 2 of the Guidelines. References are to sub-headings within Chapter 2:

1. *fairness (part 1, sections 1 and 2.1)*
2. *respect for truth (part 1, sections 1 and 2.1)*
3. *due accuracy (part 2, section 1)*
4. *attachment to fundamental democratic principles (part 1, section 1)*
5. *not broadcasting own opinions on current affairs or matters of public policy (part 1, section 1)*
6. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented (part 1, section 2.1)*
7. *news programmes should be dispassionate, wide ranging and well informed (part 1, section 2.2)*
8. *must take account of events as well as arguments (part 1, section 2.2)*
9. *should offer viewers and listeners an informed account of issues, enabling them to form their own views (part 1, section 2.2)*
10. *audience should not be able to gauge reporter’s personal views (part 1, section 2.2)*
11. *research must be thorough, wherever possible- information should be gathered first hand by being there or by talking to those who were (part 2, section 1)*

12. *reluctant to rely only on one source (part 2, section 2)*

13. *if controversial issue – relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered (part 2, section 2)*

14. *if legally contentious issue – its accuracy must be capable of withstanding scrutiny in a court of law (part 2, section 2)*

15. *use language fairly (part 2, section 4)*

16. *not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity (part 2, section 4)*

## **4 Table of Findings**

We attach at Schedule II a table setting out a summary of specific instances where we consider that the BBC to be in breach of the Guidelines. That table is intended as a reference guide to specific programmes, and to specific breaches of the code. The majority of this report constitutes an analysis of trends deduced from analysis of the incidents covered in the table at Schedule II.

## **5 Legal Effect of Breach of Duties by BBC**

We consider that the publication of the Guidelines, and the relevant sections within the Charter and the Licence together create a legitimate expectation that the BBC will comply with the standards of accuracy and impartiality which are set for and by it. Thus a breach of those obligations can give rise to an actionable event.<sup>[2]</sup>

This report is not intended to suggest remedies for breaches. It is to be hoped that the BBC would remedy any breaches of its own volition. However if it does not, we consider that the courts can oblige it to do so.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **6 Use of Language:**

The BBC frequently shows partiality in its choice of language, in breach of the Guidelines. Examples include the following

### **I ‘terrorism’**

There are a number of international treaties dealing with acts that are recognised as terrorism. There is no standard definition of terrorism. The U.S. Department of State has defined ‘terrorism’ as:

“pre-meditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.”<sup>[4]</sup>

The Department of State and the U.K. Government classify Hamas and Islamic Jihad as terrorist organisations’.<sup>[5]</sup> Palestinians have used the term ‘terror’ to describe attacks on Israeli civilians.<sup>[6]</sup>

The BBC refuses to label the Hamas and Islamic Jihad groups as ‘terrorists’, instead using the terms ‘militants’, ‘hard liners’ or ‘radical’. The BBC usually refers to Bombings of Israeli civilians as ‘attacks’ or ‘suicide bombings’.<sup>[7]</sup> When suicide bombers killed 26 Israeli civilians in attacks on Jerusalem and Haifa,<sup>[8]</sup> the word ‘terror’ was used by the BBC only when describing Israel’s retaliatory attacks on Palestinian targets.<sup>[9]</sup>

Iain Duncan Smith recently stated that:

“...such misappropriation is absurd when even Palestinian moderates in Jerusalem describe the suicide bombers as terrorists.”<sup>[10]</sup>

We consider it implausible that the deliberate bombing of a bus full of civilians or of a pedestrian street full of teenagers does not fall within any meaningful definition of “terrorism”.

We consider that it is rarely going to be appropriate to use ‘terror’ to describe acts taken by a government to protect its citizens against a real threat of violence, and that the acts taken by Israel on 4 December 2001 was not such an occasion.

The BBC’s refusal to attribute the words ‘terror’ and ‘terrorism’ appropriately constitutes a breach of the following principles:

1. *fairness*
4. *attachment to fundamental democratic principles*
10. *audience should not be able to gauge reporter’s personal views*
15. *use language fairly*
16. *not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity*

## **II ‘Occupied Palestinian Land’**

The BBC frequently refers to territories occupied by Israel in 1967 as ‘occupied Palestinian land’ or ‘occupied Palestinian territories.’<sup>[11]</sup> This suggests that an autonomous sovereign Palestinian territory was conquered and remains occupied by Israel. The land generally being referred to is that also referred to as the West Bank and Gaza (i.e. this does not include the Golan.)

In 1948 the West Bank was conquered by Jordan and Gaza by Egypt. They were conquered by Israel during the 1967 war in what was widely accepted as a defensive action.<sup>[12]</sup> Jordan unilaterally abandoned its claim to The West Bank in 1988, which claim in any event had only ever been recognised by two states.<sup>[13]</sup> Egypt never claimed sovereignty over Gaza. Since then, excepting Jerusalem, no state has claimed sovereignty over the area, although obviously Palestinians aspire to sovereignty.

In 1993 The Oslo Accords, signed by the Palestinians and the Israelis, provided for the creation of a “Palestinian Interim Self-Government Authority in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.”<sup>[14]</sup> There are indications that the present Intifada has inhibited negotiations towards the creation of that Palestinian controlled territory. The West Bank and Gaza have never belonged to an autonomous sovereign Palestinian entity.

By referring to the West Bank and Gaza as ‘occupied Palestinian land/ territories’ the BBC is in breach of the following principles:

1. *fairness*
2. *respect for truth*
3. *due accuracy*
6. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented*
13. *if controversial issue – relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered*
14. *if legally contentious issue – its accuracy must be capable of withstanding scrutiny in a court of law*
15. *use language fairly*
16. *not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity*

### **III ‘Presidential’ Arafat**

The BBC frequently uses the adjective “Presidential” in connection with Chairman Arafat and will occasionally refer to him as “President”.<sup>[15]</sup>

Arafat’s correct title is “Chairman” or to adopt the wording of the Oslo Accords “Ra’ees.” It has always been an important aspect of the Oslo Accords that the characteristics of a Palestinian State should not be created at least in the initial stage. The title of Ra’ees/ Chairman was carefully chosen to avoid language implying statehood.<sup>[16]</sup>

By deliberately adopting use of a term which is contrary to the actual status, and contravenes a central principle behind the Oslo Accords, the BBC is using language to create a misleading impression, in breach of the following Guidelines:

2. *respect for truth*
3. *due accuracy*
6. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented*
10. *audience should not be able to gauge reporter's personal views*
15. *use language fairly*
16. *not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity*

#### **IV 'settlements'**

The BBC website refers to Israeli settlements in Gaza and the West Bank as 'illegal'.<sup>[17]</sup> The legality of the settlements remains a live issue. Cogent arguments exist on each side. We summarise some principal arguments at Schedule IV, together with a short bibliography of sources.

The classification of settlements as 'illegal' could be understood to imply that they and the 'settlers' who live there are legitimate targets for attack, justifying Palestinian acts of terror. The neutral and accurate term of 'disputed territories' is largely ignored by the BBC.

By appearing to favour one side of this legal argument, the BBC is in breach of the following principles:

1. *fairness*
3. *due accuracy*
5. *not broadcasting own opinions on current affairs or matters of public policy*
6. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented*
10. *audience should not be able to gauge reporter's personal views*
13. *if controversial issue – relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered*
14. *if legally contentious issue – its accuracy must be capable of withstanding scrutiny in a court of law*
15. *use language fairly*

*16. not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity*

## **V Use of Language - Summary**

Language is the principal medium for broadcast communication. Choice of language is fundamental to achieving an aim of impartiality. Where certain words or phrases have a specific legal or quasi-legal meaning which appears to support one side to a politically controversial debate a neutral term should be used where it is available. The BBC's failure to do so must impute its claim to impartiality.

## **7 Unbalanced Reporting**

The BBC reporting on the Middle East is unbalanced, in breach of the Guidelines. Many of the examples used by this report would come within this category. However, we restrict ourselves here merely to a comparison of two articles on the Website which we believe demonstrate this breach conclusively. There is a marked disparity in the treatment of the Israeli and Palestinian leaders on the BBC website – profile section.

### **I Ariel Sharon- Prime Minister of Israel**

Sharon is treated with undisguised hostility. Vitriolic comment is passed off as fact or as unattributed quotation. Examples include:

- **“Ariel Sharon has a thick skin and is proud of it.”**

An unattributed comment of this sort is out of place in a factual profile.

- **“He does not care who loves or hates him.”**

This is an implausible statement about a democratically elected politician, who includes his principle political opponents in his Cabinet and who was voted to power on the basis of a huge swing in popular opinion.

- **“[His] one aim in life... is to ensure total security for Israel on his terms.”**

This comment is inconsistent with Sharon's publicly stated aim to comply with the Oslo accords, which contain terms negotiated by people at the opposite end of the political spectrum to himself. The tone suggests that the security of Israel is an ignoble aim. In fact it is a foundation stone of UN Resolution 242.

- **“That means keeping maximum land and political rights for the Jewish state and giving the very minimum of both to the Palestinians.”**

The Oslo accords, to which Sharon is publicly committed, provide a framework for granting significant areas of land, and effective virtual sovereignty to Palestinians.

- **“Cynics say Mr. Sharon knew the visit [to the Al-Aqsa mosque] would trigger violence and gambled on the Israeli public turning to a tougher leader like him who would know how to handle it firmly.”**

This unattributed comment suggests that Sharon is happy to sacrifice human lives for his own political ends.

- **“But once again, Mr. Sharon is not interested in what cynics or anyone might say.”**

This is an implausible statement about a democratically elected politician, who includes his principle political opponents in his Cabinet, and who was voted to power on the basis of a huge swing in popular opinion.

- **“Ariel Sharon’s mission – his enemies call it a dangerous obsession – is to fight for Israel’s security, believing all the while that the end justifies the means.”**

This unattributed comment implies that Sharon uses unbridled violence. In fact, he operates under the glare of considerable international press presence, is answerable to an electorate, shares his Cabinet with his political opponents, and is subject to a rule of law which has in the past stripped him of office. It is implausible to suggest that he believes that any means are available to him.

## II Yasser Arafat – Chairman of the Palestinian Authority

Arafat is treated as a noble, dignified and courageous statesman:

- **“Mr Arafat has carried on his shoulders the burden of that struggle [for statehood]”**

Note the language of heroism and selfless devotion to public duty

- **“...his pathological refusal to share power or delegate responsibility has taken a toll on his health and is weakening popular support”**

Arafat has ruled in a dictatorial manner, employing many separate police forces, and carrying out “torture of detainees, arbitrary arrest, prolonged arbitrary detention...executions after grossly unfair trials [and failing] to bring to justice those responsible for vigilante killings.”<sup>181</sup> This is all painted as a mild character defect, which it appears, has troubled Arafat more than anyone else, by affecting his health and popularity. Yet even here the expression used is crafted principally to confirm that he remains popular notwithstanding his character defect.

- **“Arafat is, without question, the Palestinian’s greatest asset”**

More heroic language, and a comment of doubtful accuracy.

- **“But when the peace process failed to live up to expectations, more and more Palestinians lost patience with his mercurial and dictatorial style of leadership”**

Rather than criticise Arafat’s dictatorship, it is painted mildly as a character defect, with a hint that it is anyway only the result of the failure of the peace process, which could perhaps be blamed on Israel.

- **“...a natural publicist and a workaholic...”**

Arafat described as hardworking, with natural leadership talents.

- **“an obsessive desire to be leader of the pack and to get his way. The end always justified the means”**

Note the contrast of the expression “the end always justifies the means.” With Sharon it is used to suggest that any degree of violence against Palestinians can be justified. With Arafat it is used only to suggest that he will do what he can against his co-Palestinian political colleagues to attain his position as their leader.

- **“...to his credit, he did more than anyone else to put the Palestinian’s cause on the world agenda”**

Another expression of heroic leadership and achievement.

- **“Led by Arafat, the PLO...committ[ed] ...acts of violence”**

This is one of the few references to violence. The word ‘terror’ is avoided, and the words used distance Arafat from direct involvement. Arafat’s close involvement in encouraging and organising terrorist attacks, is effectively overlooked.

- **“When backs were against the wall ... Arafat never lacked for personal courage”**

Further words of heroic leadership qualities, evoking sympathy for the underdog.

- **“Arafat had no choice but to make peace with Israel from a position of weakness”**

Words evoking sympathy for the underdog, and appearing to excuse the making of peace as a form of ‘selling out’ to some greater cause.

- **“There was little that Arafat could do but accept whatever he was offered”**

Words evoking pity for the underdog.

- **“[if] Arafat die[s] before achieving his life long goals... he will die a broken man”**

Words evoking pity and heroism, suggesting that Arafat will even sacrifice his life for the noble cause for which he fights.

- **“Arafat is a brilliant leader but a hopeless organiser and negotiator”**

Note the unambiguous words of praise. Note also the way his dictatorial and brutal rule is summarised, and impliedly excused, by describing it as due to an almost quaint ‘hopeless[ness]’ at organising.

### **III Unbalanced Reporting - Summary**

We do not complain that words of praise be used to describe Arafat. Doubtless many are due. However we consider that, when reading the two profiles together, they betray breaches of a number of the Guideline principles, including:

1. *fairness*
4. *attachment to fundamental democratic principles*

7. *news programmes should be dispassionate*
10. *audience should not be able to gauge reporter's views*
13. *if controversial issue – relevant opinions as well as facts may need to be considered*
15. *use language fairly*
16. *not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity*

## **8 Inappropriate Selection of Material**

A factually accurate report can nevertheless be partial and even inaccurate if the selection of material produces a distorted emphasis. The BBC employs this technique in breach of its own guidelines.

On 12 December 2001 Palestinians attacked a civilian bus in Emanuel. 10 Israeli civilians were killed, and dozens were badly injured. In retaliation Israel attacked a Palestinian police station. There were no fatalities or serious casualties.

BBC radio broadcasts reported briefly on the attacks but went into very little detail of just how sophisticated and brutal the Palestinian attack was.<sup>[19]</sup> The main focus of the report concentrated on Israel's retaliation, which was reported very dramatically with graphic detail describing Israel's bombings, including a live account from Gaza despite the absence of serious casualties.<sup>[20]</sup>

The impression left with the viewer or listener was of a vicious militaristic state unleashing deathly attacks on defenceless civilians. In fact it was the Israelis who had suffered a vicious and effective attack on civilians, whereas their retaliation was – perhaps deliberately – almost harmless to human life. The selection of material and emphasis enabled the report to create an impression which was the precise opposite of the truth.

We consider this style of reporting to be in breach of the following Guidelines:

1. *fairness*
2. *respect for truth*
3. *due accuracy*
6. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented*
5. *must take account of events as well as arguments*
6. *should offer viewers and listeners an informed account of issues, enabling them to form their own views*

## **9 Context**

By omission of critical facts from a story the BBC frequently distorts or masks the true facts, again breaching its own Guidelines. We provide a few examples.

### **I 25 November 2001**

From September 2000 to November 2001 some 500 home made mortars were fired by Palestinians at Israeli civilian targets in Gaza causing many injuries.<sup>[21]</sup> On 24 November 2001 an Israeli soldier was killed and two injured in one of these attacks.

On 25 November 2001 the Israeli army took action against Palestinian Authority installations in Gaza causing civilian injuries. Towards the end of its report of the retaliation the BBC said:

“All of this, it seems, a response to the killing of an Israeli soldier in a Palestinian attack yesterday. The 26 year-old was part of an Israeli unit guarding a Jewish settlement, built on occupied Palestinian land in the Gaza Strip. Two other Israelis were wounded in the attack.”<sup>[22]</sup>

The reference to ‘settlements on occupied Palestinian land’ implies that the killing of the soldier was arguably justifiable. The failure to include the short-term historical context gives rise to the misleading impression that the Israeli reaction is disproportionate. In fact the Israeli army was reacting to a sustained level of military aggression which would arguably test the capacity for restraint of any government.

### **II 27 November 2001**

On 27 November 2001 two Palestinian gunmen opened fire indiscriminately in the heart of Afula, killing two Israeli civilians and wounding many others. The shooters were then shot dead by Israeli policemen.

The headline on the BBC website read: “Four Die in Israel Shooting Rampage”. Only the text of the article clarified the circumstances of the event.

The BBC headline implies that four innocent people were the victims of a shooting rampage in Israel. Arguably a careless reader might even assume that it was an “Israeli Shooting Rampage.” The choice of words created a misleading impression. According to the media watch group HonestReporting, BBC NewsOnline changed this headline, in response to a complaint.<sup>[23]</sup>

### **III 29 November 2001**

On 29 November 2001 Israeli soldiers near Nablus were on high alert following a recent bomb attack at their checkpoint, and security warnings of a pending attack. According to the Israeli army, a Palestinian driver, driving a suspected stolen car (a vehicle of

choice for terror attacks), sped away from the checkpoint. Soldiers shot first at the tyres and then at the car, killing the driver, and an innocent Palestinian (apparently by accident).<sup>[24]</sup>

The BBC reported merely that two Palestinians had been killed when Israeli troops opened fire on a Palestinian car after it had approached a checkpoint at speed.<sup>[25]</sup>

By omitting a number of pertinent facts/allegations – which were available from the Ha'aretz website, and doubtless other sources – and failing to mention the short-term historical context, the BBC reports created a misleading impression.

#### **IV 7 December 2001**

The BBC correspondent Kylie Morris often reports from Gaza, describing Israeli retaliatory attacks. On several occasions,<sup>[26]</sup> she focuses on the damage to Palestinian Authority police buildings caused by the Israeli F16s. She consistently omits mention of the Israeli Army claim that the buildings destroyed had been used for attacking Israel. These claims are reported by other media sources.<sup>[27]</sup>

If the BBC cannot examine the truth of these claims, they should at least be reported, to avoid giving a misleading account.

#### **V 9 December 2001**

On 9 December 2001 Israeli forces killed four Palestinian policemen. The Israeli army claimed that the incident was initiated by the Palestinians opening fire.<sup>[28]</sup> The BBC report fails to mention this possibility stating merely that “the circumstances of their deaths are unclear.”<sup>[29]</sup> The omission of the Israeli claims produces a misleading account.

#### **VI 17 December 2001**

On 17 December 2001 Israeli troops in Gaza shot dead three Palestinians, including a child. Israeli and Palestinian sources agree that the child held a toy firearm. The Israeli army claimed it mistook it for a real firearm.<sup>[30]</sup> The BBC omits this important fact from its report, creating a misleading impression.<sup>[31]</sup>

The BBC reports the Palestinian claim that there were no other shooting incidents, giving the impression that the boy was shot in a random act of violence. The Israeli claim that the boy was shot during a gun battle with Palestinian police is omitted.

The BBC report suggests that an innocent child was killed without cause. The all important mitigating circumstances make the child's death, however regrettable, appear more explicable

## **VII 28 December 2001**

On 28 December 2001 the Israeli army shot dead a Palestinian who was found in possession of arms and ammunition and with explosives strapped to his body. The BBC report merely states that the Israeli army says that it shot dead a “suspected suicide bomber.”<sup>[32]</sup>

By omitting the important fact that the Palestinian wore a belt of explosives the BBC misleads its audience. The omission leaves room for doubt as to whether the allegation of him being a suicide bomber was either credible or even believed by the Israeli army. Again, omission of vital information gives rise to a misleading account.

## **VIII Context – Summary**

By failing to provide relevant background details the BBC frequently portrays a misleading account of events in breach of the following Guidelines:

1. *fairness*
2. *respect for truth*
3. *due accuracy*
8. *must take account of events as well as arguments*
9. *should offer viewers and listeners an informed account of issues enabling them to form their own views*
12. *reluctant to rely only on one source*

## **10 Distortion and Omission of Facts**

The BBC frequently omits crucial facts, brings incomplete facts, portrays opinions as facts or even invents facts giving rise to inaccuracy and creating a misleading impression, in breach of the Guidelines.

The Media Watch Group honest reporting recently gave the BBC the “Dishonest Reporting Award” of 2001 for consistently demonstrating a fierce anti-Israeli bias”, and in particular for a programme in May 2001. Honest Reporting claims that the BBC inserted a clip of Israeli victims of Palestinian terror, passing them off as Palestinian victims from Israel. The report ended with the words “these are the pictures from Gaza”. In fact there had been no victims in the Israeli attack, which had been aimed at empty Palestinian buildings.<sup>[33]</sup>

That story was outside the period covered by this report. However it is a flagrant example of the breach complained of. Examples within the period covered include the following:

## I Human Rights Abuses

On 30 November 2001, the BBC website stated that a Report by Human Rights Watch found that the Palestinian Authority used “torture methods copied from the Israelis”.<sup>[34]</sup> This is both an inaccurate account of the Human Rights Watch report, and has no basis in fact.

Palestinian torture methods covered in the report include:

- *Shabah* (prolonged sitting or standing in a painful position)
- *Falaqa* (beating on the soles of the feet)
- Beating, punching and kicking (especially around the head and ears sometimes using a leather-covered stick)
- Suspension from the wrists
- Threats of death or injury, including rape
- burning with cigarettes
- exposure alternately to extremes of hot and cold
- whipping with electrical wire
- being forced to stand on sharp objects

Five Palestinians are known to have died in Palestinian police or security force custody since the current Intifada began. At least three Palestinians died in circumstances that suggest torture may have contributed to their death.

In a landmark case brought before Israel’s High Court<sup>[35]</sup> in 1994 and decided in 1999, use of torture by the Israeli security service was banned. Torture methods which emerged as having been in use included:

- Shaking in a way that can cause brain damage, spinal injury, unconsciousness, vomiting and headaches (only used in extreme circumstances to avert imminent danger)
- *Shabah* (prolonged sitting or standing in painful position, with sack on head)
- Squatting in a painful position
- Tight handcuffing
- Sleep deprivation

The case report reveals that one detainee is known to have died as a result of shaking.

The above indicates that the Palestinians employ a range of methods of torture which are not alleged to have been used by Israelis. The suggestion that the torture methods used by Palestinians were copied from Israel is thus implausible.

Moreover, The Human Rights Watch report itself makes no such claim. It brings opinions that some of the torture methods are “similar” (-not “copied”) to those used by Israel.<sup>[36]</sup> Clearly others are more brutal and exceed Israeli levels of creativity in this field.

The BBC report is misleading and inaccurate. The BBC fails to mention the Israeli High Court decision which prohibits the General Security Service from applying physical force.

More worryingly, the BBC chooses to cover the Report which is highly critical of Palestinians, by seeking to deflect the damage on to Israel, and even to blame Israel for Palestinian shortcomings.

## **II Palestinian Reactions to Suicide Bombings**

(a) On 2 and 3 December 2001 there were suicide attacks in Jerusalem and Haifa. The BBC website reported the international condemnation of the bombings including official Palestinian condemnation.

The Ha'aretz website reports: "...the head of the militant Islamic Jihad movement hailed the Palestinians for 'these great accomplishments', and children in a Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut chanted anti-Israeli slogans, dancing and cheering at the news." No mention of popular Palestinian reaction appears in BBC output.

(b) On 12 December 2001 Palestinians attacked a bus near Emanuel killing 10 and wounding dozens of Israeli civilians (see Section 7 above). The BBC reported that Arafat had condemned the attacks and had ordered the immediate closure of Hamas and Islamic Jihad institutions.<sup>[37]</sup> The BBC failed to mention that the closure was not implemented, although this was reported by several other sources.<sup>[38]</sup>

By omission of certain facts the BBC creates a misleading impression of a Palestinian Authority cracking down on militants who appear to lack popular support. In fact the impression given, at least on these occasions, was the very opposite of the truth.

## **III Israel's Attitude towards Yasser Arafat**

On 3 December 2001 Israel declared the Palestinian Authority to be a 'terror supporting entity.'

During a report on this story Orla Guerin, the BBC's correspondent in Israel stated "I think that there are undoubtedly some around the Israeli Cabinet table who would like to throw Yasser Arafat to the dogs..."<sup>[39]</sup> In 'Newshour' the presenter stated: "Right-wingers in the government would like the Prime Minister to go much further, to remove the irritant Arafat once and for all"<sup>[40]</sup>

These allegations are uncorroborated, and appear to be an expression of the personal views of the reporter. They ignore the fact that the Israeli system of government relies upon collective cabinet responsibility.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, where it cannot find facts to support a particular image of the Israeli government which it wishes to portray the BBC simply invents them.

#### **IV Apportioning Blame**

On 16 December 2001 Arafat made a speech calling for a cease-fire and a return to peace negotiations.

Islamic Jihad and Hamas issued public statements defying the cease-fire, and immediately carried out a number of attacks.<sup>[41]</sup> Israel responded to those attacks.

The BBC appeared to blame Israel for the resumption of violence, omitting any reference to Palestinian reaction to Arafat's call for a ceasefire. Reports included:

“Israeli soldiers have shot dead three Palestinians, including a child, just one day after Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat called for an end to violence and a return to peace negotiations.<sup>[42]</sup>”

“Israel and the United States have called on Yasser Arafat to follow up his words with actions, after the Palestinian leader gave a speech pledging to rein in militants and calling for a return to peace negotiations. But a few hours later, Israeli troops shot dead a member of the militant group Hamas...”<sup>[43]</sup>

By omitting relevant facts, the BBC apportions blame on Israel for initiating a particular round of violence, when the opposite is the case.

The BBC often implies that Israel is to blame for the violence in the region. Reports often fail to mention violent incidents from the Palestinian side. Alternatively the BBC asserts that Palestinian violence is only in reaction to Israeli aggression.

#### **V Portrayal of Hamas**

The BBC coverage of Hamas omits important facts, and attributes unsubstantiated comment, to present a misleading picture.

Hamas is recognised by the UK Government as a terrorist organisation (see Section 5 (I) above). One of its central aims is the total destruction of Israel:

“The Hamas movement believes that the conflict with the Zionists in Palestine... can not be brought to an end unless its cause-the Zionist settlement in Palestine ... is removed... Hamas believes that ... the Zionist occupation of Palestine should not be recognized and that ... all Arabs [should]... fight the Zionists until they leave Palestine”<sup>[44]</sup>

It does not support the Oslo Accords, and as such is “against” the peace process. It has carried out terrorist attacks against Israel for many years.

The BBC continuously omits reference to any of these facts, and tries to build up a picture at variance with them. For example on 4 December 2001 the BBC reported:

“Over the years, Hamas has been blamed for scores of suicide attacks on Israel.”<sup>[45]</sup>

This language suggests that Hamas is perhaps wrongly accused of these attacks. In fact Hamas has claimed responsibility for them.

On 21 December 2001 Hamas declared that it would suspend attacks on Israel. The BBC reported that:

“...much will depend on how Israel responds.... most Hamas attacks have taken place after Israel has carried out targeted killings of Hamas leaders.”<sup>[46]</sup>

This is pure invention. Hamas attacks were taking place many years before Israel's recent policy of targeted killings commenced. It also ignores the fact that Hamas calls for the destruction of Israel. Whilst Jews control any land in the area they can expect aggression from Hamas.

## **VI The Jewish Lobby In The USA**

On 19 November 2001 Secretary of State Colin Powel gave an important speech about terrorism, which also dealt with the Middle East. The speech was the object of considerable lobbying from interested parties – Israelis and Arabs included<sup>[47]</sup>.

The BBC omitted any reference to the lobbying by Arabs, but stressed ‘Jewish’ lobbying both on radio<sup>[48]</sup> and on the website:

“By all accounts, Colin Powell would have liked to deliver a different speech, with more dramatic ideas to push the peace process forward. The White House, sensitive to domestic pressure from the Jewish lobby, watered it down”<sup>[49]</sup>

The omission of any reference to Arab lobbying creates a misleading impression, and lends indirect support to the dangerous canard of ‘Jewish’ control of world events.

## VIII Distortion and Omission of Facts- Summary

The distortion, invention or omission of relevant facts provides a misleading impression on a number of aspects of the Middle East situation, and is a breach of the following guidelines:

1. *fairness*
2. *respect for truth*
3. *due accuracy*
4. *attachment to fundamental democratic principles (III above)*
5. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented*
9. *should offer viewers and listeners an informed account of issues, enabling them to form their own views*
10. *audience should not be able to gauge reporter's personal views*
15. *use language fairly*
16. *not use language inadvertently so as to suggest value judgements, commitment or lack of objectivity*

## 11 Palestinian and Arab Press

Palestinian and other Arab media stirs up a violent hate filled and blatantly anti Jewish feeling among its readers and listeners. The following is a selection<sup>[50]</sup>:

**"...my fate is to have my blood turned into songs... My fate is to become a human bomb.... We have nothing for you but death."**  
(A Palestinian Poem on Martyrdom- The Palestinian Islamic Jihad weekly, Al-Istiqlal, 13 December 2001)

**"The 'Zionist entity'[s]... history [is] replete...with barbaric massacres, deceit, and evil conscience....These are our enemies, and our hatred towards them is rooted in our souls, and the only thing that can remove it is their departure from our lands and the purification of their defilement of our holy places."**  
(The Saudi Government Daily 'Al-Riyadh' 22 November 2001)

**"Sharon is the last bullet in the Israeli rifle. If Sharon is defeated, the rapid countdown [to the end] of Israel will begin, because that country was established through historical coercion and will find its end as the USSR and Yugoslavia did."**  
(The London Arabic-language daily Al-Hayat, 12 December 2001, interviewing the PLO's Political Department Head, Farouq Al-Qaddumi)

Schedule V contains further examples and sources.

These quotations indicate that Israel is dealing with Palestinians who have a deep-seated hatred of Israel based on beliefs about world domination, and a desire to cleanse the land of infidels. These attitudes are constantly reinforced by senior clerics and institutional media sources, in schools, mosques and in children's summer camps.

Individuals fed with this propaganda are very hard to protect against, and pose an ever-present threat to normal society. The events of September 11 make this clear. It is important to portray this material in the context of the Israeli response to terrorist attacks is to be understood.

We consider that the reference to the existence of this virulent racist material, particularly when put out by institutional government controlled organs<sup>[51]</sup>, deserves occasional coverage if a balanced picture is to emerge. This is a particularly glaring omission from the website, which carries long term background material, including an article about the media.

The omission by the BBC of any reference to such material constitutes a breach of the following Guidelines:

1. *fairness*
2. *respect for truth*
3. *due accuracy*
4. *attachment to fundamental democratic principles*
5. *ensure that opposing views are not misrepresented*
9. *should offer viewers and listeners an informed account of issues, enabling them to form their own views*

## **12 Democracy, Media and Law**

Chapter 2, part 1, section 1 of the Guidelines provides:

“ It [the Agreement] states that due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles”

The inference is that, notwithstanding the obligation to report dispassionately, the BBC can be expected to exercise a level of moral judgement to indicate an attachment to fundamental democratic principles. Accordingly, we would expect some partiality in support of democratic principles and institutions to emerge in BBC coverage of the Middle East. It does not.

Israel is the only country in the Middle East to have a Western style democracy. All Israeli citizens, including Israeli Arabs, have and freely exercise the right to vote at secret ballots in local and national elections<sup>[52]</sup>.

The Israeli legal system is widely accepted as being independent of Government, and wielding considerable power<sup>[53]</sup>. The Israeli Supreme Court frequently criticises Government acts, and has been instrumental in removing senior Government figures from office, including ministers<sup>[54]</sup> and the President.<sup>[55]</sup> It will also criticise the acts of the security services<sup>[56]</sup>.

A glance at Israeli newspapers reveals that the Israeli press freely criticises the Israeli government and will probe for corruption in all Israeli institutions.

By contrast, the Palestinian courts are heavily criticised by Palestinians and beyond<sup>[57]</sup>. The Palestinian press is strictly controlled by the Palestinian Authority.<sup>[58]</sup>

There is a marked contrast between the fundamental democratic principles and institutions which are at the heart of the Israeli State, and their almost complete absence from the territories controlled by the Palestinian Authority. This contrast receives virtually no attention from the BBC. It is absent from the Website, and except when mentioned by Israeli spokesmen is largely absent from live reports.

Israelis see themselves at the forefront of the fight between Western Democracy and Terrorism. This view is also absent from the BBC website and except when mentioned by Israeli spokesmen is largely absent from live reports.

It is hard to classify these omissions as breaches of the Guidelines in a report covering only 7 weeks. However we consider that absence of these points on the Website and failure occasionally to mention these arguments as background and context in longer reports is inconsistent with an ‘attachment to fundamental democratic principles.’

## **13 Time Allocation**

We consider that the BBC allots approximately equal time to pro-Israeli and to pro-Palestinian sources.

## **14 Choice of Interviewees**

When selecting people for interview on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, we consider that the BBC tends to choose people of similar calibre, and to treat them in a similar manner.

## **15 Conclusion**

The BBC does not report on the Middle East with “due accuracy” or “impartiality”, as required by the License Agreement.

Breaches of the Guidelines which we have detected include:

- Incorrect use of language
- Unbalanced reporting
- Inappropriate selection of material
- Distortion and omission of facts.

We understand that the Israeli Palestinian Conflict is an emotive topic, and that it is difficult to avoid taking sides. Most broadcasters and other media may and do take sides. The BBC may not.

The BBC is funded by public money. Partly because of this, it has accepted a duty on itself to cover politically controversial issues in an impartial way. The persistent failure to treat the Middle East in an impartial way constitutes a breach of the trust which Licence payers have placed in the BBC.

Given the huge influence of the BBC on attitudes around the world, we believe that any bias by the BBC could have far reaching effects.

If the BBC is to adhere to the lofty ideals which it has set itself, and to which it is legally bound, it must strive to report on the Middle East in an impartial and accurate manner.

**TREVOR ASSERSON**

LONDON

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