

**THE BBC AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

**- AN ANALYSIS**

**DECEMBER 2002**

**TREVOR ASSERSON**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page No.</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1. THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. THE BBC'S DEFENCE TO THE FIRST REPORT</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>3. THE BBC – AN APPROPRIATE SUBJECT FOR ANALYSIS</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>4. LEGAL DUTIES OF THE BBC</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5 PROCEDURES ADOPTED IN THIS REPORT</b>	<b>8</b>
i. Time period monitored	
ii. Events covered by the Report	
iii BBC Broadcasts monitored	
iv Comparators	
<b>6 YASSER ARAFAT : A PROFILE – BBC FOUR – 5 JULY 2002</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>7. USE OF LANGUAGE : TERRORISM</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>8. OMISSIONS</b>	
(i) Reporting only one side of the debate	<b>14</b>
<b>9. OMISSIONS</b>	
(ii) Suppression of news stories	<b>15</b>
<b>10. OMISSIONS</b>	
(iii) Background Information	<b>17</b>
<b>11. USE OF PICTURES</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>12. JOURNALISTIC COMMENT</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>13. MISCELLANEOUS</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>14. IMPARTIALITY OF REPORTERS</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>15. CHANGES IN THE BBC</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>16. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>SCHEDULE 1 – BBC GUIDELINES</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>SCHEDULE 11 – BBC BROADCASTS MONITORED</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>SCHEDULE 111 – Correspondence with Director of BBC News</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>SCHEDULE IV – Failure To Mention Relevant Background Facts</b>	<b>37</b>
i. Palestinian Organisations call for the Destruction of Israel.	
ii. Palestinian Children's Education	
iii. Arafat's rule has been despotic and undemocratic	
iv. Arafat linked to terrorism	
<b>SCHEDULE V - BBC WATCH COMMITTEE MEMBERS</b>	<b>40</b>

# THE BBC AND THE MIDDLE EAST

## SUMMARY

We have analysed the BBC's coverage of the Middle East in main news programmes on UK television and radio and on the BBC's main website over a 9-week period from the end of May to the end of July 2002.

The content was assessed for compliance with the BBC's legal obligations of accuracy and impartiality. We found numerous significant breaches of these obligations. These breaches included an inaccurate and one-sided profile of Yasser Arafat; unjustified discrimination in the use of language; omissions of material events, facts and viewpoints; misleading use of pictures; and the improper inclusion of journalists' personal comments hostile to Israel and the Israeli government.

We noted that some complaints raised in an earlier report published in March 2002 had been addressed. However most had not.

The BBC's reporting of the Middle East remains partial, inaccurate and in frequent breach of BBC guidelines. There is an apparent widespread antipathy towards Israel within the BBC which emerges in its news reporting of the Middle East. The British public is obliged to pay for the BBC through the licence fee. In return the BBC is obliged to provide a fair, impartial and accurate news service. The BBC is failing to keep to its side of the bargain.

## **1. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY**

In March 2002 we published a report titled “The BBC and the Middle East – A Critical Study”<sup>[1]</sup> (“the First Report”). The First Report sought to study 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.

We received a large number of emails letters and phone calls from around the world in response to the First Report. All of them were encouraging of the work carried out, with one notable exception. The BBC itself, to whom the report was sent, refused to admit a single breach of any of its guidelines notwithstanding the detailed and careful way in which the numerous breaches had been particularised in the First Report. The BBC failed to respond to our offer to meet to discuss the concerns raised by the First Report. We were disappointed by its inadequate response which ignores the BBC’s obligations under its Charter.

This Second Report continues the work of the First Report, based upon new material broadcast by the BBC during the period 26 May – 28 July 2002. We have taken advantage of the advice of a variety of people<sup>[2]</sup> to reconsider the procedures adopted in preparation of this report. It is different in style to the First Report. However it retains the overall aim of assessing the BBC’s adherence to its obligations of impartiality and accuracy by analysis of its UK and internet news coverage relating to Israel.

We are indebted to the various research assistants who helped in the preparation of this report. Susan Monty, a solicitor, assisted in the early stages. Sonia Taylor was indefatigable in her monitoring and analysis during the later stages and I owe her a special debt of gratitude.

This report was privately funded and reflects the personal views of the author.

## **2. THE BBC'S DEFENCE TO THE FIRST REPORT**

We sent a copy of the First Report to Richard Sambrook head of BBC News. A copy of his response is at Schedule III.

The BBC did not deal with the detail of any of the points which we raised in the First Report, but sought to defend itself against the allegation of partiality by suggesting that there are “many truths” and that it receives a similar number of complaints from “the other side.”<sup>[3]</sup>

We do not regard this contention as capable of justifying inaccuracy or partiality on the part of BBC journalists. One breach of these duties cannot be remedied by a second breach of the same duty. If the complaints are well founded, this “defence” merely admits multiple breaches of duty. Impartiality can be achieved by presenting a wide range of different views, even though each view is partial. The same point does not apply, however, to accuracy or to partiality on the part of the BBC journalists. Furthermore, while there are different viewpoints and arguments, we do not agree that there can be “many truths” when it comes to facts. It is the BBC’s job to establish and report the relevant facts and not to report unsubstantiated allegations as if they were facts. It is also their obligation to correct reports which are subsequently found to be inaccurate<sup>[4]</sup>.

In any event we take issue with the suggestion that an equal number of complaints from “the other side” is of any relevance at all. We have sought to approach our analysis in a methodical, coherent and robust way. It is a weak argument for the BBC to suggest that an equal number of complaints proves the BBC’s impartiality, without any qualitative reference. We do not consider it legitimate to accord equal weight to complaints regardless of the merit of the arguments and in the absence of evidence brought to substantiate those arguments.

The BBC must assess the validity of complaints. We are aware of many complaints which appear to have very limited validity. For example Paul de Rooij, a journalist, wrote a long article on 21 May 2002 in which he argued that the BBC was partial in favour of Israel.<sup>[5]</sup> He alleged breaches in almost every category covered by the First Report and many covered in this one. However he provided only one supporting reference in the entire article. The rest consisted of entirely unsupported assertions.

A study often quoted in this debate is that of Greg Philo of the Glasgow Media Studies group.<sup>[6]</sup> Professor Philo was kind enough to come down to address the BBC Watch Committee about his work, and ours. He claims to demonstrate that the television news generally is biased against Palestinians because it fails to provide historical context. An underlying assumption appears to be that a better knowledge of the history will produce an anti Israel view. This opinion in itself perhaps betrays a lack of objectivity. He partly bases his conclusions on what his selected news consumers “know” after listening to the news. Philo’s study may have significant value. However, given his methodology, we are not convinced that it has any value as a tool for measuring whether the BBC is in breach of its legal obligations under the Charter.

We consider that it would be quite wrong for the BBC to accord to Philo’s study, or others like it, any significant weight when considering the issues which we raise. We do not consider it legitimate to accord equal weight to complaints regardless of the merit of the arguments and the evidence brought to substantiate them.

The BBC failed in its response to the First Report to deal with the detail of any of the complaints raised. Instead it confined itself to a blanket denial of any breach. This leaves limited scope for progress and is profoundly disappointing. Furthermore the BBC’s response acts as an unnecessary

snub to its licence payers, viewers and listeners in this country and across the world. A considered response or dialogue would be likely to enhance its reputation. A blanket denial of breach, in the face of clear evidence that breaches have occurred, brings the BBC into disrepute, and suggests an arrogant disdain for the opinions of the public it purports to serve.

### 3. THE BBC – AN APPROPRIATE SUBJECT FOR ANALYSIS

The BBC is an extremely influential news source. It is reputed to provide fair and unbiased reporting of world political events, both within the UK and internationally. It broadcasts news through TV, Radio and a much visited Internet site. Its principal language is English, which has established itself as the dominant language of world commerce, politics and education. The BBC World Service also broadcasts in a number of other languages. The BBC is funded by a public tax. This leaves it free from the need to attract advertising revenue. It claims also to be free from Government interference<sup>[7]</sup>. These factors enhance its credibility as an impartial news source and so increase its influence

Some English language TV news sources in the USA have a comparable reach to that of the BBC. However, the USA is widely accused of lacking balance in its approach to the Middle East. We consider that this fact will tend to undermine (however unjustifiably) any reputation, which US news sources have for impartiality. The BBC by contrast can bask in the reflected glory of the British reputation for “fair play.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Taken together, we consider that these factors give the BBC a unique position to influence opinion not only in the UK but also far beyond. However this influence is dependant upon the BBC maintaining its reputation for ‘accuracy and impartiality.’ Accordingly were cogent evidence of lack of impartiality to emerge; this should cause the BBC considerable concern.

Unusually for news sources, the BBC is legally obliged to cover news items in an accurate and impartial manner.<sup>[9]</sup> As explained below this is an obligation which is enforceable in the UK courts. This provides a further reason for the BBC to be concerned to ensure that it adheres to its duties of accuracy and impartiality.

There is another reason why it is important to analyse the BBC. The reputation and coverage of the BBC guarantees the immense influence of its output. Arab literature frequently appears to make no distinction between Jews and Israelis.<sup>[10]</sup> It is not fanciful to contemplate that, by portraying Israel in an unnecessarily negative light, the BBC might itself unwittingly encourage aggression not only against Israelis, but also against UK Jewish citizens.<sup>[11]</sup>

In light of the BBC’s significant influence and its susceptibility to legal redress, we consider that the output of the BBC is uniquely appropriate for analysis.

### 4. LEGAL DUTIES OF THE BBC

The BBC was created by a Royal Charter in 1926 and continued by subsequent Royal Charters, most recently in 1996. In accordance with the current Charter, the BBC’s public services are governed by an Agreement between the BBC and the British Government (“the Agreement”<sup>[12]</sup>).

S. 3.2(c) of the Agreement provides that the BBC’s UK public services 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 UK public service programmes:

“...Treat controversial subjects with due **accuracy** and **impartiality**...and do not contain any material expressing the opinion of the Corporation on current affairs ...”

S. 5(3) of the Agreement requires the BBC to draw up and maintain a code giving guidance as to the rules to be observed in connection with s.5 (1)(c) and to “do all that it can to secure that the provisions of the code are observed”. This code is contained in “the Producers’ Guidelines” (“the Guidelines”<sup>[13]</sup>). The Charter further requires the Governors of the BBC to monitor and supervise compliance with this code<sup>[14]</sup>.

The BBC has also published “Online Editorial Guidelines”<sup>[15]</sup> applicable to all BBC material on the Internet, which state that such material must conform to the Guidelines.

We consider that the obligations contained in the Agreement and Charter to ensure compliance with the Producers’ Guidelines are legally binding and could, if necessary, be enforced by the Courts<sup>[16]</sup>.

We believe that the Guidelines identify a number of independent, if at times overlapping, obligations. We consider that compliance with each of those obligations is required to ensure fulfilment of the BBC’s primary legal obligations of impartiality and accuracy.

Chapter 2 of the Guidelines states that<sup>[17]</sup>:

“**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... No significant strand of thought should go unselected or under represented on the BBC ...<sup>[18]</sup>”

It reiterates the prohibition in the Agreement on broadcasting the BBC’s own opinions on current affairs, stating:

“The BBC is explicitly forbidden from broadcasting its own opinions on current affairs”<sup>[19]</sup>

Thus, insofar as a broadcast would lead a fair-minded listener to consider that the BBC or its reporter favours one side more than another, the BBC would be failing in its duty of impartiality. This concept of impartiality is akin to that required of tribunals and judges:

“The concept requires not only that the tribunal must be truly independent and free from actual bias ... but also that it must not appear in the objective sense to lack these essential qualities ... The question is whether the fair-minded and informed observer, having considered the facts, would conclude that there was a real possibility that the tribunal was biased.”<sup>[20]</sup>

With regard to accuracy, the Guidelines emphasise,

“The BBC must be **accurate**. Research for all programmes must be thorough. We must be prepared to check, cross-check and seek advice, to ensure this ...<sup>[21]</sup>” and

“...**Accuracy** is often more than a question of getting the facts right. All the relevant facts and information should be weighed to get at the truth of what is reported or described ...”<sup>[22]</sup>

This last point recognises that it is insufficient to report a careful selection of true facts where the result is to create a misleading impression. Thus, for example, to report merely that “*A hit B causing him severe injury*” would not be “accurate” in the sense intended by the BBC Guidelines if the report omits to mention that *A* and *B* were engaged in a regulated boxing match at the time.

We consider that the BBC thus has a duty at two levels. It must report a judiciously chosen selection of relevant facts to ensure that it gives an accurate and not a misleading impression. At the same time, it must present the facts in a way, which does not reveal to the viewer or listener whether the BBC favours a particular cause.

Further relevant extracts from the Guidelines are attached at Schedule I

## **5. PROCEDURES ADOPTED IN THIS REPORT**

### **i. Time Period Monitored**

It is not possible to predict in advance when events would occur which might excite public interest and media coverage. A period of nine weeks was likely to provide sufficient information over a variety of incidents to allow for effective monitoring and analysis. Accordingly it was decided to record a significant body of the BBC news output on TV, Radio and Website for a 9-week (two month) period with a randomly chosen start date. The dates covered by this report are Sunday 26 May 2002 – Sunday 28 July 2002.

We accept that the BBC need not achieve total evenhandedness in every aspect of every report. Whereas news stories should probably strive to be accurate and impartial other stories cannot. A human-interest report about Israelis will probably evoke sympathy for the Israeli cause. Showing such a programme would not of itself indicate bias. However, a decision to carry a disproportionate number of such stories over time without balancing them with human-interest stories about Palestinians might well indicate impartiality. In the interest of fairness to the BBC, we consider it appropriate to judge BBC output over a period of several weeks.

### **ii. Events Covered by the Report**

The monitoring period commenced just over six weeks after the highly publicised battle in Jenin, and some three weeks after the Church of the Nativity siege and standoff ended.

The period included a number of incursions into PA territory by the IDF, a number of suicide bombings, the speech of President Bush calling for a change of Palestinian Leadership, a dispute about UK weapons sales to US destined for Israel (F16 head-up displays), the dismissal of Israeli academics from editorial positions on a UK magazine pursuant to an academic boycott and the killing by the IDF of Selah Sheathe and others in Gaza.

We set out below a link to a fuller account of events which occurred during the period monitored.  
<sup>[23]</sup>

### **iii. BBC Broadcasts Monitored**

Given the quantity of BBC news output, we did not consider it feasible to monitor all of it. Accordingly, we chose to monitor what we considered to be a representative sample of the most significant news programmes. We set out at Schedule IV a list of the programmes monitored. With rare exceptions, we monitored the same selection of BBC output each week.

Where specific in-depth programmes were dedicated to the Middle East, we monitored these in addition to the standard list of programmes.

The Middle East content of programmes monitored was transcribed and the original tapes have been retained.

#### **iv. Comparators**

Establishing the “truth” or accuracy of reports is difficult. However, comparison with other news sources can occasionally provide some indication as to the completeness or accuracy of a report. Where one article/story omits a fact, which is included without contradiction in various other articles/stories, we might assume the veracity of the fact and comment on its omission. This is an approach also set by Professor Philo in considering issues of veracity.

The principal comparators used were the websites of Reuters and The New York Times. On occasion we considered a range of other publications including The Economist, Sky, CNN and Ha’aretz.<sup>[24]</sup>

#### **v. Coverage of the Report**

This Report commences with an analysis of one specific programme: “Yasser Arafat – a profile”, which was broadcast on 5 July 2002, and which displays a range of examples of impartiality and inaccuracy. We then analyse 6 distinct categories of impartiality/inaccuracy, including improper use of language, omission or suppression of news, inappropriate use of pictures etc. We consider it helpful to try to identify and categorise specific devices employed by the BBC to distort the accuracy of its news coverage. The last section provides a conclusion.

The report ends with some Schedules containing copies of correspondence with the BBC and other relevant material.

## 6. YASSER ARAFAT: A PROFILE – BBC FOUR 5 JULY 2002

On 5 July 2002 BBC Four broadcast a 30-minute profile of Yasser Arafat. This was broadcast some two weeks after President Bush had called for a change in Palestinian leadership following revelations linking Arafat to an active support of terrorist attacks against Israelis.

The programme opens in an almost hagiographical way describing Arafat variously as “*hero*,” “*an icon*,” having “*performers flare*,” and “*charisma and style*” and “*personal courage*” and being “*the stuff of legends*.” Adjectives used to describe him include *clever, respectable, glory, triumphant*. He is also inaccurately referred to as “*President*.”<sup>[25]</sup>

The programme omits any reference to Arafat’s recently revealed active support of terrorism. Rather he is quoted – without contradiction – in one of his many renouncements of terror. Arafat’s well-documented support and organisation of terrorist activities throughout his earlier career<sup>[26]</sup> are restricted to an oblique reference suggesting Arafat’s non-involvement. “*Arafat’s role [in the Munich Olympics attack] was unclear*.” References to actual Palestinian terrorist activity is ascribed to groups apparently outside Arafat’s control.

Arafat’s despotic rule of the PA is referred to principally by interviewees. However, the only detail of this is a brief reference to nepotism and bribery. No mention is made of intimidation, torture, unlawful killings, and manipulation of the court system and the press. He is widely and reliably accused of all these and more abuses.<sup>[27]</sup>

Arafat’s election is recorded in glowing terms, connected with the “*glory of his return... triumphant return...Arafat rode the wave of euphoria to election as President (sic)*.” No mention is made of the allegations of abuse which resulted in Arafat’s Fatah party providing the only candidates and Arafat’s efforts to ensure that he selected the candidates<sup>[28]</sup>. Equally no mention was made of the fact that further elections are three years overdue.<sup>[29]</sup> Thus the misleading impression is given that Arafat is a duly elected democratic leader ruling in a democratic fashion.

A number of individual passages are misleading and inaccurate in a variety of ways:

- **“...while Yasser Arafat condemned the attack [a major suicide bombing] and promised to punish the bombers, Israel says he is guilty.”**

This comment, without any explanation of Israel’s view, makes Israel appear most unreasonable. Omission of reference to evidence linking Arafat to numerous suicide attacks and his history of failure to punish bombers creates a misleading impression.<sup>[30]</sup>

- **“The battle of Jenin reduced a whole refugee camp to rubble. This was not part of the plan when Arafat embraced peace with Israel”**

By omitting any mention of the fact that Jenin was the acknowledged terrorist capital of the West Bank, the comment misleadingly suggests that Israel has duped Arafat to offer peace and responded with war. In fact, Israel argues that Palestinians abandoned negotiation (in breach of the Oslo Accords) in preference for war.

- **“Arafat fought in Gaza in 1948 during the war that established Israel, as the Jewish militias were victorious and the Palestinians were driven out.”**

This is a highly tendentious version of history. Israel's legitimacy is founded on a United Nations resolution of 29 November 1947. The 1948 war consisted of Israeli resistance to an unprovoked attack on Israel by its neighbours, attempting to strangle the new state at birth<sup>[31]</sup>. The Israeli forces were an army under the control of an elected government. Independent militias were forcibly suppressed.<sup>[32]</sup> The argument that the Palestinians were "driven out" is hotly debated amongst historians. It is at best arguable and at worst quite wrong<sup>[33]</sup>.

- **"... Israel's policy of building settlements on Palestinian land. There are 270 illegal Jewish outposts in the occupied territories."**

Use of the expression "Palestinian land," particularly in conjunction with "occupied territories" suggests that an autonomous territory belonging to Palestinians is being settled. This is wrong. It is also wrong to suggest that the settlements are "illegal." These points are dealt with in more detail in the First Report.<sup>[34]</sup>

- **"The problem is Arafat has never been fully in charge. Israel controls most of the West Bank and the Palestinian economy."**

The juxtaposition of these two sentences suggests that Arafat's lack of control is the fault of Israel. Again this is tendentious. Israel argues that it has had to re-occupy autonomous Palestinian territory only because Arafat refused or was unable to prevent terrorist attacks against Israel.<sup>[35]</sup>

Arafat's corruption<sup>[36]</sup> and the exigencies caused by Israel's curfews in response to terrorist attacks all affect the Palestinian economy.

- **"Ariel Sharon...[made] a symbolic visit to the most hallowed ground in Jerusalem in September 2000. It was a deliberate provocation. A day later six Palestinians were shot dead in Jerusalem."**

Yet again this is a highly tendentious account of events. Sharon argues that he visited the Temple Mount as a provocation to his Israeli political opponent, then Prime Minister Ehud Barak, not to the Palestinians as the programme suggests.

Sharon's visit had been pre-arranged with the Palestinian authorities in charge of the Temple Mount who had approved it. Notwithstanding that approval, a Palestinian riot broke out which led to the deaths to which the article refers.<sup>[37]</sup>

## SUMMARY

This programme constitutes the most concentrated and sustained series of breaches of the BBC's obligations which we encountered over the period monitored. The picture which emerges, principally by omitting a number of well-documented criticisms of Arafat, is one which we consider entirely fails to provide an accurate, or in any way balanced, profile.

The combination of omissions and the use of tendentious historical background pieces appears to reflect a significant degree of partiality. The reporter, Suzanne Goldenberg, has a history of publishing articles which are hostile towards Israel.<sup>[38]</sup> Her partiality is thus to be expected and the BBC could have taken steps to guard against it emerging in such a flagrant way in this programme.

In light of the increasingly well-documented evidence of Arafat's dictatorial manner, corruption and links to terror, we consider that it is particularly inappropriate that the BBC should choose to allow this programme to be aired.<sup>[39]</sup>

No comparable programme giving a portrait either of Ariel Sharon or another Israeli leader in a favourable light was shown during the period under review or, so far as we are aware in the months before or since that period.

## 7. USE OF LANGUAGE: TERRORISM

The BBC frequently shows partiality in its choice of language.

In the First Report we highlighted a number of breaches under this category. The BBC appears substantially to have changed its editorial policy in relation to some of those complaints.<sup>[40]</sup>

Although we did not find examples of BBC reporters using some of the language about which we complained in the First Report, such language was used on some BBC output. Examples will be seen in the BBC Four programme "Yasser Arafat: Profile."<sup>[41]</sup> This programme is the subject of specific analysis at section 6 above.

Most notably the BBC has failed to change its policy toward use of the word "Terrorist."  
The Terrorism Act 2000 defines "terrorism" as:

*"the use or threat of.... serious violence against a person... where the use or threat is designed to influence the Government or to intimidate the public... and is made for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause"*

Terrorism Act 2000 S.1 (1) and (2) <sup>[42]</sup>

The U.S. Department of State has defined 'terrorism' as:

*"premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience."*  
<sup>[43]</sup>

The Department of State and the U.K. Government classify Hamas and Islamic Jihad as terrorist organisations'.<sup>[44]</sup> Prime Minister Tony Blair and Home Secretary Jack Straw have both referred to Palestinians responsible for attacks on Israeli citizens as Terrorists.<sup>[45]</sup>

The EU has added a number of Palestinian groups to its terrorist black list. These include Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Palestine Liberation Front, The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, The Abu Nidal Organisation and the Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development.<sup>[46]</sup>

Palestinians have used the term "terror" to describe attacks on Israeli civilians.<sup>[47]</sup>

The BBC itself is happy to use the word terrorist elsewhere. For example in an interview in March 2001, following a bomb attack on the BBC Television Centre, Richard Sambrook, Director of News for the BBC was quoted as having said:

*"terrorist attacks on the media [are] rare and so the bomb mark[s] a significant change."*  
<sup>[48]</sup>

A more startling example is the attack on a nightclub in Bali, Indonesia, on Saturday 12 October 2002 (after the period under review). The opening headline on the Radio 4 10 O Clock news bulletin commenced with the words:

*“There has been international condemnation of the terrorist attack on a night club in Bali...”*

Thus here the BBC was content to refer to an attack as “terrorist” before it was known what had caused the explosion, who had caused it or for what purpose. With so little known it was almost certainly prejudging the issue to term that attack as “terrorist.”

Attacks against Israelis are carried out by politically motivated groups for whom terrorism is an open strategy. These groups rush to claim credit for attacks they organise. Notwithstanding this the BBC abjures from labelling Palestinian suicide bombers and perpetrators of other atrocities against Israeli civilians as terrorists. Instead the BBC generally uses the term ‘militants.’ The BBC usually refers to bombings of Israeli civilians as ‘attacks’ or ‘suicide bombings’.<sup>[49]</sup> There are double standards operating here.

On 20 August 2002 we wrote to the BBC to enquire as to the reasons for its editorial policy in relation to the use of the word terrorism. A copy of the letter and the reply appear at Schedule III. In its reply the BBC appears to suggest that the word “terrorist” cannot be used *“where the political legitimacy of particular actions is hotly and widely contested.”* We do not follow this argument, which confuses accuracy of language with a political debate as to whether terrorism is a legitimate method of operation.

If the word “terrorist” is an accurate adjective which precisely describes an act or an individual, we consider it should be used. Failure to do so is a breach of the obligation to report accurately. If the BBC seeks to protect the terrorist from the opprobrium of those who consider terrorism reprehensible then the BBC reveals a desire to favour the terrorist. Thus, the BBC’s response demonstrates not only an abandonment of accuracy but also a lack of due impartiality.

The BBC appears to use the perceived political legitimacy of an act as a plumb line against which to judge when it is appropriate to use the word terrorism. Thus the BBC judges the killing of a Jewish Israeli politically legitimate and so need not describe it accurately as a terrorist act. It considers the killing of an Australian in Bali as illegitimate and therefore can describe that as a terrorist act.

The BBC seeks to balance its decision regarding the use of the word “terrorism” by highlighting other similar difficulties with other words and expressions.<sup>[50]</sup> This again clouds the issue. It is the BBC’s duty to reach a decision with regard to each of these words and expressions based on the relevant facts.

Most disturbing and extraordinary is the BBC’s contention that it can ignore the law. Sambrook states:

*“...we have to decide on our use of language according to our own principles. It would be wrong for us to allow the terminology we use to be determined by the legal definitions adopted by some states...”*

The legal definition to which we had referred the BBC was that under UK law. Sambrook’s reply suggests a breath-taking arrogance which seeks to place the BBC not only above the normal philological principles which govern the use of language but also seeks to place the BBC above or beyond the legal system which gave it birth and continues to define the scope of its duties.

## 8. OMISSIONS – (i) REPORTING ONLY ONE SIDE OF THE DEBATE

We consider that the duty of due impartiality requires the BBC to give expression to both sides of the conflict when covering regular news stories. During the period under review the BBC generally allotted approximately equal time to the expression of views which were pro Palestinian and those which were pro Israeli.<sup>[51]</sup> This was effected both through editorial comment and through selection of interviewees or quotations from sources.

However, we note that the BBC failed to include the views of one side. All the examples which we have found during the period monitored have been instances where the Israeli view has been omitted. In none of the examples was there an attempt to explain the failure to obtain an Israeli commentator. Examples include the following:

### a) 30 May 2002 – BBC Online, “Israel detains suspects in Hebron”<sup>[52]</sup>

The BBC quotes a statement by “the Palestinian Leadership” which is highly critical of Israeli actions during incursions into West Bank towns alleging, inter alia, that Israelis were “*killing and wounding many civilians.*” The statement remains unchallenged by the journalist. No Israeli source is quoted in response, either to deny or to explain the alleged actions.

### b) 6 June 2002 – PM

Following the death of 17 Israelis at the hand of a suicide bomber near Megiddo on 5 June 2002, Israel raided Arafat’s headquarters in Ramallah. Saeb Erekat, a leading Palestinian Authority source, was interviewed. He made some far-reaching allegations.<sup>[53]</sup> No Israeli source was interviewed or quoted.

### c) 8 – 9 July 2002

In early July 2002, the UK Labour Government was criticised for selling weapons parts to America which were to be placed in planes destined for Israel. This was a lead story covered by World at One, PM, Ten O clock News, Newsnight and News Online.<sup>[54]</sup>

An intense debate took place. Eight pages of text, containing three separate stories on the topic, were posted on BBC Online. A further ten pages were required to transcribe the coverage on the other programmes listed. Two principle issues were debated. One was whether the sale of the arms parts was consistent with guidelines recently published by the Defence Secretary. The other was the morality of Israel’s behaviour with regard to the Palestinians.

Israel was accused, principally by the interviewees, of “terrorising Palestinians,” and of “internal oppression.” It was alleged that “Ariel Sharon doesn’t want to make peace,” and Sharon was accused of “refus[ing] to stop the occupation, to seriously discuss peace.” It was said “it is completely immoral supporting Israel.” It was said that sale of the weapons parts “undermines our values.”

Of nine people interviewed, three had known pro-Palestinian views.<sup>[55]</sup> None of those interviewed had pro-Israeli affiliations that we have been able to discover. In the resulting debate we counted 33 statements which were critical of Israel and only 3 which put an argument in defence of Israel. This disparity was a foreseeable result of the choice of interviewees.

## Conclusion

We consider it a breach of the duty of impartiality to fail to provide a balance of views for such news stories. We are concerned where repeated breaches of duty all favour the same side of the debate.

## 9. OMISSIONS - (ii) SUPPRESSION OF NEWS STORIES

Journalists are free to select the stories which they choose to cover. We have compared BBC coverage with that of other news sources. For the most part, all chose to cover the same important stories, such as terrorist attacks, or major Israeli incursions. There is considerable variety as to which news sources choose to cover minor stories,<sup>[56]</sup> or human interest stories.<sup>[57]</sup>

We make no general point about the variety of topics covered. However, on occasion an important story is covered by the BBC and not by comparators, or is covered by a comparator and not by the BBC. We consider these occasions are worthy of analysis.

We accept that the definition of which stories are important is subjective. Accordingly we have restricted ourselves to what we consider the least contentious examples.

### a) 18 June 2002 – The New York Times, “EU Expands Terrorist Blacklist”<sup>[58]</sup>

On 18 June 2002 The New York Times was one of many news sources to run a story under the headline “EU Expands Terrorist Blacklist.” The story covered the decision by the EU to expand its list of terrorist organisations to include five Palestinian organisations.<sup>[59]</sup>

We do not understand why a European based news source, the BBC, should choose to ignore this story entirely when it concerns a European decision. The decision is harder to understand given that an American news source did consider it worthy of coverage.

We have mentioned above the reluctance of the BBC to refer to atrocities committed by Palestinian groups as acts of terrorism. Public recognition of the terrorist nature of the organisations which carry out these atrocities would perhaps highlight the difficulties with the BBC’s position on this issue. It is hard to avoid a conclusion that the BBC would prefer not to highlight information which might lead one properly to disparage certain Palestinian groups.

### b) 25 June 2002 – The New York Times, “Aides to Bush say Arafat Financed a Terrorist Group”<sup>[60]</sup>

On 25 June 2002 The New York Times ran a story under the headline “Aides to Bush say Arafat Financed a Terrorist Group.” The story explained that Bush’s decision to call for Arafat’s removal was based on evidence of Arafat’s support of terror.<sup>[61]</sup>

We note below how the BBC report of President Bush’s speech of 24 June 2002 failed largely to mention or to engage in any debate on the criticisms which the President levelled at the PA. Neither did the BBC seek to examine why President Bush had reached, and expressed, these views so critical of Arafat.

The BBC made almost no reference to this new information,<sup>[62]</sup> which emerged only one day after the President had made a major speech. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the BBC was reluctant to provide the public with any compelling reason to be critical of Arafat, or to explain Israel’s disquiet at Arafat’s behaviour, even when such evidence was playing a critical role in the decision making of the President of the USA.

### c) 19 July 2002 – PM

On 19 July 2002 the PM programme ran a story which dealt with payments to the families of suicide bombers. The Israeli spokesman stated, “*We know that all these families (of homicide bombers) get cheques for \$25,000 from the government of Iraq.*”

Considerable evidence exists which supports the view that the Iraqi government does indeed pay money to the families of suicide bombers.<sup>[63]</sup> In an article posted on Sky News the previous day the Arab Liberation Front appears to admit the existence of such payments.<sup>[64]</sup>

The BBC omits reference to any of this evidence. It raises unsubstantiated doubts as to whether such payments are in fact made. “*A human rights activist in Gaza says he’s suspicious when he hears reports that the families of suicide bombers benefit from Iraqi money.*” Issan Unis “*I hear this only in the...actually in the Israeli media. Nobody has proof that the Iraqis are paying.*” Mr Unis’ comments are left unchallenged. In particular the evidence, from media outside Israel, that these payments are made is not put to him.

### Conclusion

With each of these examples we see the BBC appearing to suppress information which it would find inconvenient to highlight. In particular it suppresses information which would lend credence and sympathy to Israeli branding of Palestinian actions as terrorist. Having decided not to use the word terrorist to describe these organisations and their activities the BBC appears to suppress news stories which would challenge the validity of this policy.

## 10. OMISSIONS - (iii) BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There are certain aspects of the Middle East conflict which significantly affect an understanding of news events. We do not advocate that the BBC or any other news source seek to write a history of the conflict. Indeed, history has become part of the battlefield.<sup>[65]</sup>

However we do consider that certain current background aspects of the Middle East are relevant and should be given an appropriate degree of coverage. Such items include:

- i. Many prominent Palestinian groups, some connected with Arafat and the PA, call for the destruction of Israel. This must raise doubt as to whether Israel's departure from the occupied territories would stop the violence, as most European commentators assume.<sup>[66]</sup>
- ii. Palestinian children are routinely educated towards adulating hatred and the perpetration of terror against Israelis, which raises questions as to whether it is accurate to suggest that acts of terror are the result of despair.<sup>[67]</sup>
- iii. Arafat's rule has been despotic, brutal and tyrannical. He has failed to hold new elections, which are significantly overdue. This raises questions as to whether it is appropriate to refer to him as a democratic leader.<sup>[68]</sup>
- iv. Evidence exists linking Arafat to terror, and suggesting that he funds and encourages terrorist activities, raising a question as to the integrity of his condemnations of terror.<sup>[69]</sup>

We do not suggest that the above views are undisputed. However we have indicated some compelling supportive evidence which also demonstrates that these views are widely held. As such they are likely to play an important part in forming opinion in the Middle East.

A failure to give adequate prominence to these important topics will constitute a failure to provide the audience with the facts which they need to develop an informed view and to understand the thoughts and beliefs which probably affect the minds of the relevant decision makers.

Israeli leaders are often criticised for failing to speak with Arafat. When it is understood that those leaders have credible evidence to believe that Arafat is a corrupt despot who supports groups that wish to destroy Israel, that train children to hate Israel and that actually attack Israel the reluctance to talk to Arafat at least becomes comprehensible.

### Conclusion

Failing to provide the context which explains Israeli mistrust of Palestinians is to fail to provide an accurate picture. By omitting evidence which might reduce the standing of Palestinians and by the same omission making Israelis seem incomprehensibly intransigent the BBC appears to be partial in its reporting. It sets up a picture which it continues to foster whatever the evidence available. This influences public opinion which then lends yet further support to the BBC's inaccurate and impartial view. This cycle appears to provide the BBC with a misplaced sense of the correctness and moral rectitude of its position.

Unless the BBC breaks out of this position the cycle will reinforce itself. Apart from continuing to spread news which is both inaccurate and partial, this cycle also has the unfortunate effect of isolating Israel and Israelis and making the peace process itself more difficult.

## 11. USE OF PICTURES

The use of pictures to illustrate a story provides an important additional message. We noted that the BBC would on occasion use pictures whose direct relevance to the spoken story was unclear.

### a) 4 June 2002 – BBC Online, “US presses Arafat on tackling terror” <sup>[70]</sup>

On 4 June 2002 BBC Online ran a story under the headline “*US presses Arafat on tackling terror.*” The article covers a recent meeting between Arafat and the director of the CIA George Tenet to discuss the failure of Arafat to prevent terrorist attacks.

The principal picture illustrating this story is of a Palestinian woman holding a child apparently being refused passage by Israeli soldiers, under a caption “*The Israelis go into Palestinian areas almost daily.*”

There seems to be no adequate reason for the BBC to use this story as a platform to promote an image which evokes a negative attitude towards Israel.

### b) 13 June 2002 – BBC Online, “Bush steps up Mid-East diplomacy” <sup>[71]</sup>

On 13 June 2002 BBC Online ran a story under the headline “*Bush steps up Mid-East diplomacy.*” The article covers a meeting between President Bush and the Saudi foreign minister to discuss peace initiatives.

The principal picture illustrating the story is of an armed Israeli soldier apparently looking over an Arab town.

There seems to be no adequate reason for the BBC to use this story to promote an image of Israeli incursions into PA territory.

The caption under the picture reads: “The Bush administration seems divided on how to deal with the Middle East.” The relevance of the caption to the subject matter and headline of the article serves only to emphasise the irrelevance of the picture.

### c) 8 July 2002 – Newsnight

On 8 July 2002 Newsnight ran a story about Britain’s decision to sell weapon parts to America destined for Israel. The reporter explains that Israel considers the weapons (F16 planes) to be defensive whereas others consider them offensive.

Whilst these opinions were expressed the viewer was shown film of distressed Palestinian women atop the rubble of a destroyed building. In the context the picture appears to suggest that Israel has destroyed the home of innocent civilians using the weapons under discussion. No such allegation is actually made in words.

In the absence of any clear explanation of the relevance of the pictures the choice of illustration suggests a desire by the BBC to give legitimacy only to one of the opposing views expressed in the ‘text’ of the story.

**d) 10 July 2002 – Newsnight**

On 10 July 2002 Newsnight ran a story concerning the decision by European academics to boycott Israeli academic institutions.

A studio interview on the piece used two background pictures. One of Israeli soldiers in a tank and the other of Israeli soldiers pointing a gun.

It is not clear that it was appropriate to select such pictures at all to illustrate a debate about academic freedoms and racism. The choice of pictures, both of which emphasised Israeli violence, appeared to endorse only one of the two views being discussed.

**Conclusion**

The picture is a powerful weapon for influencing public opinion. The fact that it does not comprise words renders it no less eloquent. Its use must therefore be as much subject to the legal obligations of accuracy and impartiality as other aspects of BBC news reporting. The BBC fails properly to deploy the use of pictures in an impartial manner.

## 12. JOURNALISTIC COMMENT

We have noticed that BBC correspondents will often give their own value judgements which display partiality.

### a) 2 June 2002 – BBC Online, “EU pushes for Mid-East conference” <sup>[72]</sup>

On 2 June 2002 BBC Online posted a story under the title “*EU pushes for Mid-East conference.*” The story covered the EU urging Israel and the Palestinians “to create the right climate for peace talks within two months.”

The article ends with the following: “*BBC correspondent Jonny Dymond in Jerusalem says much will depend on the attitude of the US, and whether or not Israel continues to occupy territories which are supposed to be under Palestinian control.*”

This comment of the BBC reporter is unconnected with any opinion referred to in the article and appears to be merely an expression of his personal views. The views expressed mention criticism only of Israel and are silent as to any criticism of Palestinians.

### b) 6 June 2002 – BBC Online, “Mubarak brings peace plan to US” <sup>[73]</sup>

On 6 June 2002 BBC Online posted a story under the title “*Mubarak brings peace plan to US.*” The story covered Mubarak’s plan to hold a peace conference in Turkey.

This three page article ends with the following:

*“Our correspondent says the Arabs are worried that Israel would use the conference to start yet more interminable negotiations, leaving the occupation in place.”*

This comment of the unnamed BBC reporter appears unconnected with any opinion referred to in the article. The comment suggests that Israel cynically prolong negotiations to continue its occupation. This highly negative view of Israel, inconsistent with Israel’s actions and stated aims <sup>[74]</sup>, is unattributed. It appears that it is in fact the view merely of the BBC reporter.

### c) 19 June 2002 – BBC Online, “Analysis: Israel’s new tactics” <sup>[75]</sup>

On 19 June 2002 BBC Online posted an article by Paul Reynolds under the title “*Analysis: Israel’s new tactics.*” The article argues that Israel has a new policy of re-occupation of the West Bank. The article ends with the following:

*“Maybe, under international, especially American pressure, some new peace process will come forward. And Israeli public opinion might one day demand a peace settlement. But not for now, it seems.”*

This suggests that Israeli public opinion is not interested in a peaceful settlement. There is no basis for this statement in the article. Certainly the historical evidence contradicts it. Israel made peace with Egypt in 1978 as soon as it was offered, giving up the Sinai. It has consistently attempted to make peace with its neighbours. The statement is also inconsistent with Israeli policy. <sup>[76]</sup> We have not found any evidence which suggests that the majority of Israelis do not demand a peaceful settlement

This expression of views by the BBC's reporter reveals his own unsubstantiated belief. By presenting this view in the guise of a reported fact he is giving credence to a view which is probably the opposite of the truth.

**d) 24 June 2002 – BBC News at Ten O'clock, President Bush calls for new Palestinian leadership**

On 24 June 2002 BBC News at Ten O'clock ran a story concerning the speech which President Bush had made that day concerning the Middle East. <sup>[77]</sup>

The speech contained 28 paragraphs. It devoted 19 to calls for reform of Palestinian leadership and institutions. It issued a sustained attack on Palestinian leadership and institutions:

*“[Palestinian leaders are] compromised by terror...[have] no authority...power is concentrated in the hands of an unaccountable few...Palestinian people live in economic stagnation made worse by official corruption... the Palestinian people lack effective courts of law and have no means to defend and vindicate their rights... Palestinian authorities are encouraging, not opposing terrorism...the Palestinian Authority has...trafficked with terrorists”*

The speech contained only 2 or 3 paragraphs which criticised Israeli policy. The speech was printed on the White House web site under the title “President Bush Calls for New Palestinian Leadership.”

By contrast, the BBC report of this speech mentioned only one of the allegations raised, namely the support of terrorism by the PA. It preceded this mention with a report of the Israeli siege of Arafat. Immediately following this mention it detailed a recent targeted killing by Israel. This sandwiching of the mention of PA support of terror between two items critical of Israel appears designed deliberately to dull the effect of the criticism.

The BBC report failed to engage in any debate on the raft of criticisms levelled at the PA. Nor did the BBC report seek to examine why President Bush had reached, and expressed, these views.

The BBC instead allowed its journalists to use the report as a platform for their own unsubstantiated views. Orla Guerin, a BBC reporter, stated:

*“And if you don't get rid of [Arafat] you don't get a state and you presumably have to live with the Israeli occupation of the West Bank forever.”*

There is no basis for this comment in the story, nor is there any in the speech which is the nominal subject of the story. The comment appears to be an expression by Ms Guerin of her personal analysis and views. By presenting such views in the guise of a news report they are given a degree of credibility when they in fact appear to be unsubstantiated invention.

**e) 28 June 2002 – BBC Online, “‘Baby bomber photo’ shocks Israel” <sup>[78]</sup>**

On 28 June 2002 BBC Online ran a story about a photograph of a baby Palestinian dressed as a Hamas suicide bomber.

Two Palestinian sources were interviewed. Neither challenged the authenticity of the picture. <sup>[79]</sup> However the BBC article chose to challenge the authenticity of the picture at least 5 (arguably 7)

times in a 3-page story. <sup>[80]</sup> The authenticity of the picture was also challenged in the Today programme on the same day.

We are not aware that Israel has a reputation for falsifying evidence. <sup>[81]</sup> It is curious that the BBC raise this allegation when none of the sources interviewed suggest it. The innuendo of falsification which fills the story appears to be an expression of the ideas of the BBC reporters.

**f) 4 July 2002 – BBC Online, “‘Gentle’ incursion raises Palestinian fears” <sup>[82]</sup>**

On 4 July 2002 BBC Online ran a story concerning the improved treatment of Palestinians by the ‘occupying’ IDF.

In 1992 Israel signed the Oslo Peace Accords with a view to leaving the bulk of the ‘occupied territories’. In 2000, this policy was further confirmed at Camp David. The policy has since been confirmed by the present Israeli government. <sup>[83]</sup>

Notwithstanding these facts, the Online article chose to give prominence to, and thereby to suggest credibility for, a suggestion that Israel had a secret agenda permanently to re-occupy the West Bank. <sup>[84]</sup> No explanation was given as to the reason why Israel might consider it in its long-term interest to re-occupy on a permanent basis. None of the comparator news sources which we were monitoring ran this story.

One might expect this story of improved treatment of Palestinians to result in positive coverage of Israel. Instead it is reported by the BBC as something for which Israel should probably be criticised.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that the BBC allows news reporters to infiltrate news stories with their own personal views runs directly counter to the expressed aims of impartiality. The Licence Agreement specifically states that programmes should “*not contain any material expressing the opinion of the Corporation...*” <sup>[85]</sup> The Guidelines state that “*A reporter may express a professional journalistic judgement but not a personal opinion.*” <sup>[86]</sup>

It is unacceptable that these Guidelines should be broken at all. It is particularly unacceptable when there is a pattern of breaking them either to throw unsubstantiated allegations at Israel or to shield Palestinians from substantiated allegations.

Once again the BBC finds itself unable to break out of its cycle of misreporting, of inaccurate and partial information and the desire to support its singular thesis and approach. The bias of its reporters is amply evidenced by the personal opinions they express.

### 13. MISCELLANEOUS

#### a) 25 June 2002 – Today

On 25 June 2002 the Today Programme aired a report by Mike Williams about Israeli and Palestinian reactions to the speech of President Bush made the previous day. He interviewed both an Israeli government spokesman and a Palestinian Authority spokesman. The speech had principally dwelt on the need for Palestinians to replace its leadership. It also mentioned the need for Israel to halt settlement on the West Bank and for Palestinians to halt violence.

Williams' interview with the Israeli spokesman, Ra'anan Gissin, was conducted in a tough and aggressive manner. He opened by alleging that Israel "could have almost written" Bush's speech. He then asked repeatedly if Israel was going to "*halt all settlement activity in the West Bank.*" After Gissin's reply, Williams commented: "*so you will not do as Yasser Arafat asks and halt settlement activities in Gaza and the West Bank. And you will not do as he asked and withdraw from the Occupied Territories.*"

The tone and manner of questioning of the Palestinian was quite different. He did not ask any questions about the Palestinian Authority's attitude to preventing terrorism – a subject which had occupied much of Bush's speech. He closed the interview by asking an open question "*What do you think lies ahead*" thus providing an open platform for him to present unchallenged views.

There was a stark contrast between the aggressive manner towards the Israeli spokesman and the less challenging manner towards the Palestinian. This emphasis was the converse of the emphasis in President Bush's speech, which was the subject of the interview.

#### b) 22 June 2002 – BBC Online, "West Bank pull-out deal outlined" <sup>1871</sup>

When two or more events have occurred on one day in the Middle East, we have noticed that the most significant event has often been only briefly mentioned by the BBC, or mentioned after the less significant event.

On 22 June 2002 Ha'aretz ran a story concerning a Palestinian Authority initiative to end violence and to end Israeli occupation of West Bank towns.

The Ha'aretz account said that the PA plan "*emphasises the need for a change in the public atmosphere, with a campaign against violence in order to fight terror.*" It also reported that "*Palestinians are ready to resume security coordination with Israel along the lines drawn up in the Wye agreement, to confiscate illegal weapons, and to arrest those who break Palestinian law.*" The Palestinians declared a desire to "*work for a change in atmosphere, and against encouragement of violence*" It reported that Palestinian leaders wished to "*take action against the terror groups.*" The emphasis of the article was on Palestinian initiatives to curb the activities of their own people to build confidence as a route to ending the occupation.

On 22 June 2002 BBC Online ran a story about the Ha'aretz article and a subsequent Israeli radio interview with Peres. The emphasis was starkly different. Of 13 paragraphs only two mentioned the Palestinian initiatives. Details of most of the initiatives were omitted. However 9 paragraphs, the headline, the main picture (an Israeli tank) and the caption ("*Israel controls much of the West Bank*") all emphasised Israeli occupation.

The BBC is covering a story based on a Ha'aretz article specifically about Palestinian recognition of initiatives which they must take to restore confidence in their ability to rule. Yet the BBC emphasises the Israeli occupation.

**c) 4 July 2002 – BBC Online, “Aid agencies condemn Israel”<sup>[88]</sup> and World Briefing**

On 4 July 2002 BBC Online posted a story under the heading “Aid agencies condemn Israel.” The story stated that 32 international aid agencies had signed a joint statement accusing Israel “*of obstructing their operations to the point that they can no longer fulfil their mandates.*” Two aid agencies were mentioned.<sup>[89]</sup> A BBC World Briefing piece on the same story mentioned a third.<sup>[90]</sup>

This story was not found on any of the comparator news sources. We also searched for it elsewhere, but found no reference.<sup>[91]</sup> Neither Oxfam nor ‘Medecins Sans Frontiers’ covered the story on their website. Neither replied substantively to letters from us on the subject. The BBC also failed to respond to a letter seeking further information.

We were unable to verify even the existence of the American Near East Relief Agency, referred to in the World Briefing piece.

We hesitate to conclude that this story has no basis in fact. However, given the apparent obscurity of this story we question whether it merited the level of coverage given to it by the BBC.

## **14. IMPARTIALITY OF REPORTERS**

We have been approached by a number of people who read the First Report asking us to complain about the blatant partiality displayed by certain reporters. In particular it has been suggested that some reporters have close links/are living with or are married to Palestinians. A particularly egregious example was of a BBC reporter who, according to Hamas reports, participated in a Hamas rally that praised those journalists who had joined " the nation struggling fiercely against the enemy."<sup>[92]</sup> Another involved a reporter whose girl friend appeared to be a pro Palestinian human rights activist.<sup>[93]</sup>

A different but equally worrying incident is of an individual in his private capacity signing an anti Israel email petition and adding the words "save us from Israel" after his name.<sup>[94]</sup>

In private conversation with senior BBC journalists we have ourselves been told that anti-Israel feeling is rife within the BBC. Our own analysis of its output is of course consistent with this.

Nevertheless we have resisted commenting on these rumours or attempting to investigate them. We do not consider it appropriate to seek to judge the attitudes of a reporter based on external factors such as ethnic origin or choice of spouse. Indeed we do not consider the attitudes of a reporter relevant provided those attitudes do not affect their professionalism.

We do however consider it appropriate for the BBC closely to monitor and appraise the attitudes of its reporters and news editors to seek to identify when such people do develop a marked bias in relation to a topic which they are covering which does impair their ability to provide impartial and accurate coverage.

In our letter to Richard Sambrook of 20 August 2002 we raised this point. He replied that journalists are subject to editorial review and that appraisals do occur on an annual basis, although he provided no details about the system used.<sup>[95]</sup> We are concerned that reliance should be placed on the review of editors who might themselves share the bias of the journalists. Without knowing more about the content of an annual review we can merely make generalised observations. An annual review in most organisations deals with all aspects of an employee's performance. We consider that the issue of bias requires a separate pro-active and focused review in this area, which the BBC recognises as being a sensitive one.

It is not the job of this report to probe further into the nature of the BBC's present appraisal system. We can however express considerable doubts as to its effectiveness as indicated by the footnotes on this topic.

## **15. CHANGES IN THE BBC**

We have noticed that a number of matters raised in the First Report now seem less prevalent. For example:

- i. References to "Occupied Palestinian Land" are now rare. Instead the less emotive and more accurate term "Occupied land" is used.<sup>[96]</sup> The phrase "disputed territory" is the most accurate term, which the BBC apparently cannot bring itself to use.
- ii. Arafat is now rarely referred to as being "Presidential." The more accurate term "Chairman" is now used.<sup>[97]</sup> The hagiographical profile of Yasser Arafat by Suzanne Goldenberg was a notable exception.<sup>[98]</sup>

- iii. Settlements in the occupied territories are no longer referred to routinely as being “illegal.”<sup>[99]</sup> Instead the BBC now appears to accept that it has no authority to pronounce judgement on this unresolved legal argument.<sup>[100]</sup> Again Suzanne Goldenberg’s piece is a notable exception.
- iv. The profiles of Sharon and Arafat, which tended to demonise the first and to lionise the second, have been removed from the website.<sup>[101]</sup> No correction of those grossly misleading pieces has been published.
- v. We consider that the BBC continues to produce misleading reports by failing adequately to provide the factual context to certain stories.<sup>[102]</sup> We found when preparing the first report that such omissions were frequent. In the material covered by this report such instances are less frequent.

We do not know why these changes have been effected. We assume that the BBC has responded to well founded criticism.<sup>[103]</sup> If so, then the BBC is to be praised for responding to criticism even as it is to be condemned for the breaches of obligation which gave rise to the criticism in the first place.

However we do not consider that there is any room for complacency by the BBC which continues consistently to fall short of the standards which it is obliged to meet in its reporting of the Middle East.

## 16. CONCLUSION

We consider that the BBC has responded to criticism and has taken a few steps to remedy some of its most egregious breaches of its duties of accuracy and impartiality. However these steps have not been entirely successful and there are a number of areas of the news services which have not been addressed at all.

Most worryingly we continue to find numerous occasions where a story is told in a misleading way. The devices most commonly used are those set out in the various categories within this report. They include, but are not limited to, inappropriate use of language; reporting only one side of an argument; omissions of background facts; suppression of facts; frequent use of anti Israel journalistic comment and abusive use of photographic images.

It is clear that no news source can avoid error entirely. However we detect a consistent pattern in the type of "error." Time and again we find stories critical of Palestinians either suppressed or in some other way neutralised. By contrast we find time and again stories critical of Israel given undue prominence. Stories which would reflect well on Israel are apparently down-played.

Journalists employ various techniques of various degrees of subtlety to portray their bias. But the overall trend indicates the existence of a widespread antipathy towards Israel within the BBC which is seen in its news reporting of the area. We hope that the BBC will take little comfort from the fact that it has addressed a few of the breaches which previously existed. They should not have existed in the first place.

The reputation and coverage of the BBC guarantee the immense influence of its output. Where that output is inaccurate or partial the BBC should not rely on the opinions which it has formed as evidence of the acceptability of its output. This cycle of opinion forming constitutes a particularly dangerous abuse of position by the BBC where it has the effect of isolating Israel and Israelis and thus making the peace process itself more difficult.

The BBC has significant power, heavy responsibilities and clear legal obligations. By failing to break out of its own cycle of inaccuracy and partiality in its reporting of the Middle East the BBC is abusing its power, behaving irresponsibly and is in breach of its legal obligations. If it is to maintain its reputation for impartial and accurate reporting we consider that it should now put its house in order.

TREVOR ASSERSON

DECEMBER 2002