

**THE BBC**  
**THE WAR ON IRAQ**  
**AN ANALYSIS**

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and

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## **Biographies**

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SCHEDULE I – Programmes Monitored

SCHEDULE II – BBC correspondence

# THE BBC THE WAR ON IRAQ AN ANALYSIS

*“...these things happen if you are fighting a war. Mistakes happen.”*  
John Simpson - Online, 07/04/03

## 1. SUMMARY

The recent Gulf War provided a unique opportunity to examine the BBC's ability to report news in an accurate and impartial manner.

The coalition forces in Iraq were widely accused of invading a country in breach of international law. They faced opposition from the local defending forces who frequently fought from or hid within densely populated urban areas. As part of their defence the Iraqi army employed suicide bombers.

The Israeli army faces some similar problems. It too is widely criticised for alleged breaches of international law. It faces an enemy which fights from densely populated urban areas and employs suicide bombers.

The coalition forces, although claiming to be defending the security of their own countries have singularly failed to convince popular opinion that Iraq posed a real threat. By contrast popular opinion clearly accepts that the Israeli army is defending its civilian population from a very real threat which does constantly claim Israeli lives. This difference between the two conflicts, if it affected an impartial news provider at all, would logically tend to result in Israel receiving a more sympathetic coverage than the coalition forces. The opposite is in fact the case.

The BBC has a legal obligation to report news in an accurate and impartial way<sup>1</sup>. A comparison of the way in which coalition troops and Israeli troops are reported when dealing with such similar military problems provided a rare opportunity to compare like with like in a more direct way than our earlier studies have allowed.

What emerges from this study is the marked contrast between the way the BBC reports the two conflicts. British troops are described in warm and glowing terms, with sympathy being evoked both for them as individuals and also for their military predicament. By contrast Israeli troops are painted as faceless ruthless and brutal killers with no or little understanding shown for their actions.

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<sup>1</sup> See The BBC and the Middle East An Analysis December 2002 – (“the Second Report”) – [www.bbcwatch.com](http://www.bbcwatch.com) section 4 – Legal Duties of the BBC

The BBC goes to considerable lengths to explain, excuse and mitigate any civilian deaths at the hands of coalition troops. Israeli troops receive totally different treatment; little sympathy is shown for their situation, and mitigating arguments brushed aside or scorned if voiced at all. At times the reporting of events in Israel amounts to distortion and at times to what appears to be discrimination against Israel.

We consider that this report shows conclusively that the BBC's claim to provide impartial news coverage is unsustainable. Our two earlier reports<sup>2</sup> showed that the BBC's coverage of the Middle East was infected by an apparent widespread antipathy towards Israel. However those reports were based almost exclusively upon a comparison of the media treatment of the Palestinians with media treatment of the Israelis. This current study, which compares treatment of Israelis with that of coalition forces, suggests that the partiality of the BBC's reporting quite possibly infects its coverage of all politically sensitive issues.

The British public continues to pay for this unfair, partial and inaccurate news service through the licence fee. We wonder whether it is healthy for Britain's democracy that such huge public funds should be provided to what is an essentially monopolistic and unaccountable body. If the BBC cannot provide impartial news coverage it has no legitimate call on public funds simply to promote its own prejudices.

## 2. **THE BBC – AN APPROPRIATE SUBJECT FOR ANALYSIS**

We have chosen to study the BBC's coverage both because of its considerable influence on public opinion and because it has a legal obligation to provide accurate and impartial news coverage. Readers are referred to a more detailed explanation of the reason for studying the BBC and of the legal duties of the BBC which are set out in the earlier two reports which we have written.

Most crucially we are concerned at the possible effect of BBC partiality. As stated in the second report, the reputation and the coverage of the BBC guarantee it immense influence. Where its 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. The 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.

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

### (i) Time Period Monitored

We commenced recording BBC news output on 3 April 2003, and continued until 18 April 2003. When we commenced recording the coalition forces were already advancing on Baghdad and the war was a few days old. We stopped recording shortly after the war had effectively ended.

Because of the media concentration on Iraq during this period there was comparatively little coverage of the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. However we did record such events as were covered.

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<sup>2</sup> Both to be found at [www.bbcwatch.com](http://www.bbcwatch.com)

(ii) Outside Material

The principal aim of this study was to compare treatment of the coalition forces with the treatment of Israeli forces in comparable situations. In our previous reports we attempted to consider what the BBC reported with the events that actually occurred. This necessarily involved considering external material to establish the relevant facts.

The present study is based almost exclusively on BBC material. Where possible we have limited sources to the ten day period monitored. However, given the small number of incidents covered in Israel during this period, we have had to consider material from outside that period to illustrate certain points. We assume that our readers will have some familiarity with background facts in the region and we do not attempt to provide a historical context.

(iii) 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. The programmes selected are set out at Schedule I. All programmes monitored were transcribed and the original tapes have been retained.

#### 4. **BBC RESPONSE TO EARLIER REPORTS**

Both of our earlier reports were sent to Richard Sambrook, head of BBC news.

The first report was met with a two page letter in which Mr Sambrook stated *“I am sorry you feel that [the BBC] has not adhered to its Producers Guidelines. I think it has.”*

The second report was treated with somewhat more respect. In a short letter Mr Sambrook admitted that the BBC *“do sometimes make mistakes.”* However he was unable to agree that any of the mistakes which we had identified were in fact examples of the mistakes which the BBC makes. His letter attached a 21 page detailed refutation of every allegation.

Many of the arguments and defences raised by the BBC were unconvincing or evasive. A few good points were made. We reproduce here at Schedule II the BBC’s reply on the question of its use of the word terrorism. That single page of the BBC’s reply is an example of the quality of its response generally. It is enclosed because we analyse it in this report. We assume that the BBC will provide people with its full response, on request.

Notwithstanding the huge effort to which the BBC went to deal with the complaints raised, it refused to meet with me to discuss its response. Thus legitimate and well founded complaints continue to be brushed aside by a BBC which appears incapable of admitting error, at least on this subject.

In view of the sterile response from the BBC we welcome the recent proposal by the Governors of the BBC to set up an independent monitoring body. Self regulation is a difficult task at the best of times. For an unaccountable incumbent and establishment institution such as the BBC, it is probably impossible.

## 5. OMMISSION OF CULPABILITY

The US and UK military were responsible for many civilian deaths and injuries in Iraq. However, we find that the BBC operates a subtle omission of culpability when reporting on these civilian casualties. A good example of this technique is seen in the reporting of Ali Abbas, a twelve year old Iraqi boy who lost both his arms and his family as a result of the coalition bombing of Baghdad. The BBC's coverage of the Ali Abbas story lacks much of the punch that would normally accompany their coverage of an equivalent story arising in the disputed territories. The BBC spares the coalition the shame of its own actions. The BBC consistently omits any direct and explicit expression of coalition culpability for Ali's injuries saying merely, "...[the] Iraqi boy who had both arms blown off...when a missile hit his Baghdad home...". By failing explicitly to state that it was a US or UK bomb that maimed Ali and destroyed his family, the BBC gloss over coalition guilt and spare it negative publicity. This contrasts with the way in which the BBC will report of an "*Israeli* tank" or "an *Israeli* soldier", repeating the word Israel so consistently that it becomes inextricably intertwined with the scene of destruction that is being witnessed.

The word "Israel" or "Israeli" is frequently pinned to aggressive images or hostile acts. The BBC glosses over coalition culpability by omitting an explicit reference to the political entity behind a particular attack that results in civilian casualties.

### **Gulf war...**

*"...he's had both his arms blown off...his whole family were killed...his mother was pregnant and they were killed by a bomb..."* [Today, 09/04/03]

### **Israel...**

*"...he lies in a coma with a bullet in his brain after being shot at by Israeli troops..."* [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03]

### **Gulf War...**

*"...Nine civilians killed in Baghdad blast..."* [Online, 08/04/03]

### **Israel...**

*"...Six killed in Israeli raids..."* [Online, 04/04/03]

### **Gulf War...**

*"...At least nine civilians are reported to have died when a bomb hit a residential neighbourhood in central Baghdad..."* [Online, 08/04/03]

### **Israel...**

*"...At least five Palestinians have been killed in an Israeli air raid on Gaza City..."* [Online, 09/04/03]

**Gulf war...**

*"...warplanes...pounded Saddam Hussein's hometown..."* [R4, 6pm, 11/04/03]

**Israel...**

*"...Israeli attack helicopters fired missiles into the town..."* [Online, 11/04/03].

**Gulf War...**

*"...bombing raids by F-15 and F-16 jets..."* [Online, 08/04/03]

**Israel...**

*"...Israeli F-16 planes flew low over the city..."* [Online, 09/04/03].

**Gulf war...**

*"...there's a new sound in the city - rotor blades from attack helicopters..."* [Online, 08/04/03]

**Israel...**

*"...A palestinian was killed and two others injured when they were fired at by an Israeli helicopter gunship in Gaza city..."* [R4, 6pm, 10/04/03].

**Gulf War...**

*"...Pleas for help – Ali the orphan begs to be treated in London..."* [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03]

*"...an Iraqi orphan injured in the bombing of Baghdad has pleaded to be allowed to come to Britian for treatment. [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03]<sup>3</sup>.*

**Israel...**

*"...Israeli planes strike Gaza..."* [Online, 09/04/03]

**Gulf war...**

*"...two journalists were killed by a tank shell, a third died in a strike on Al-Jazeera's headquarters..."* [R4, 6pm, 08/04/03].

**Israel...**

*"...crushed under sand pushed up by an Israeli army bulldozer..."* [R4, 6pm, 11/04/03].

**Gulf war...**

*"...Meet little Farrah, just four years old....the bomb that shredded the muscles in both her arms also killed her parents..."* [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03].

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<sup>3</sup> NB These BBC reports fail to stress that Ali wasn't an orphan until the coalition killed his family. A casual listener might think that Ali was born an orphan.

*“The Ministry does look pretty battered, but then it has been attacked in an earlier phase of this conflict by **air strikes**.”* [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]

*“...**an A10 tank-buster** swooping down on its target.”* [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]

**Israel...**

*“...**an Israeli F-16 warplane** fired two missiles...”* [10/04/03]

*“**Israeli warplanes** appeared to be targeting a car,”* [Online, 09/04/03].

## 6. MITIGATION

Where coalition culpability is conceded efforts are made to excuse, explain and even justify the loss of civilian life. The BBC shows a persistent drive to convey deep empathy and understanding of the problems, difficulties and fears faced by the British and American soldiers as they wage battle in Iraq. As well as serving to mitigate individual incidents as they occur, this ongoing process of mitigation has a cumulative effect, which seems to offer the coalition the freedom to pursue its military objectives free of the heavy criticism which one might expect from a genuinely impartial news provider.

The existence of fear is used by the BBC to explain away the killing of unarmed civilians. We even find that the BBC displaces responsibility onto the victims themselves – children are apparently blamed for their own deaths, having failed to stop the vehicle they were travelling in.

The military engagements faced by the coalition army in Iraq are similar to those faced by the Israel army in her battle against Palestinian terrorists who, like Iraqis, hide down alleyways, in built up areas, set boobytraps, place snipers and use civilians as shields. The principle distinction lies in the fact that the coalition faced a minimal amount of such tactics compared with the amount faced by Israeli troops.

Yet when an Israeli weapon causes civilian death the BBC is quick to criticise and slow to explain, excuse or indeed to show any significant level of understanding of the military difficulties Israel faces.

This chapter looks at the BBC’s mitigation of Iraqi civilians killed in Mosul, Iraqi children killed at a US checkpoint, journalists killed at the Palestine Hotel and journalists killed in “friendly fire” incidents. It also looks at the BBC’s mitigation of the coalition’s use of cluster-bombs – a highly controversial and highly destructive weapon.

(a) **MOSUL KILLINGS**

*“...Brigadier-General Vince Brooks said US marines and special forces soldiers fired at demonstrators on Tuesday **after they came under attack from people shooting guns and throwing rocks...**” [Online, 16/04/03]*

*“...A US spokesman said troops were returning fire from a nearby building and did not aim into the crowd...” [Online, 16/04/03]*

*“...**The incident underlines the difficulties US forces face** in trying to keep the peace in a country now confronting an uncertain future...” [Online, 16/04/03]*

(b) **TWO CHILDREN KILLED AT CHECKPOINT**

*“...In southern Iraq US marines shot dead two children when they opened fire on two cars at a checkpoint. **Soldiers had feared a suicide bomb attack...**” [BBC1, Ten Special, 11/04/03]*

*“...**a very unfortunate incident** at one checkpoint this morning where two young children were shot when marines that were on duty at the checkpoint **suspected that a suicide car-bomb attack was taking place...**” [BBC1, Ten Special, 11/04/03]*

*“...**there’s no doubt at all that it was simply a dreadful error and the US marines have said so...**” [BBC1, Ten Special, 11/04/03]*

*“...**It was only when they really felt under threat of a possible suicide attack that they opened fire...**” [Today, 11/04/03].*

*“...US marines have opened fire on two vehicles as they approached a checkpoint killing **two** Iraqi children and wounding a number of adults. **The soldiers at Nasiriya feared a suicide bomb attack...**” [Midday, 11/04/03]*

*“...Two children have been shot dead by American marines **reacting to what they thought was an attempted suicide attack...**” [R4 6pm, 11/04/03].*

*American marines in Nasiriya opened fire on a vehicle as it approached **them**, killing two Iraqi children and wounding a number of adults. **As the BBC’s Adam Mynot says, the marines still fear suicide attacks**” [Midday, 11/04/03]*

*“...**after a similar incident a week or so ago there were strenuous efforts to put up signs in arabic and so on, warning civilians that they would be required to stop because of the fear of suicide bombings and so on...**” [Today, 11/04/03]*

(c) **THE PALESTINE HOTEL**

On the 7<sup>th</sup> April 2003 an American tank fired at the Palestine Hotel – a Baghdad hotel where Western journalists were staying. A number of journalists were killed in this incident. We often find that the BBC correspondants work hard to mitigate this coalition action which killed a number of innocent people. Again, it is a case study in military empathy and mitigation, and it raises the question over whether such efforts are made to understand and humanise the actions of the Israeli army.

*“...as I was saying, this is a microcosm for what has been happening and the kind of security challenges faced by the coalition forces in the centre of Baghdad...”* [Ten Special, 07/04/03]

*“...and cameras can be mistaken for rocket-propelled grenades....in this kind of situation it’s difficult for a tank commander or any kind of infantry vehicle to distinguish between a camera and an RPG...clearly there is a possibility I suppose that somebody could be operating, could be sniping from the top floor of the hotel...Could it be that journalists who are watching the action could be mistaken for snipers, particularly if they’re using binoculars?...”* [Ten Special, 07/04/03]

*“...But can you give any indication as to whether there could be any confusion within the building in terms of who’s in the Palestine hotel, as to who’s a journalist, who’s a member of the press and who might be representing other interests within that building?...”* [Ten Special, 07/04/03]

*“...it is entirely possible, I mean we are formally not supposed to film from the hotel, we’re only supposed to film from our live positions on the first floor roof...”<sup>4</sup>* [Ten Special, 07/04/03]

*“...It’s been a very, very upsetting incident for all the journalists here. A time to take stock of the dangers of reporting this war. **And hope that the targeting of journalists by whoever, ceases...**”* [Online, 08/04/03].

The above incident contrasts with the BBC’s treatment of a similar incident involving the accidental death of an ISM activist on April 11<sup>th</sup> 2003:

*“An American peace activist has been killed as she was run over by an Israeli bulldozer in the southern Gaza Strip...”* [Online 16/3/03]

The BBC fails to explain that the ISM is an organisation which, far from seeking peace, actually promotes the support of the Palestinian “armed struggle” – a moniker which is generally understood to refer to terrorism. The strenuous effort to mitigate an accidental death, which is seen for coalition forces, is absent here.

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<sup>4</sup> Note the almost frantic efforts made by BBC journalists scrabbling about to find some form of excuse for the US tank which has just killed journalists who throughout the war have been reporting from this hotel whose position must surely have been well known to coalition forces.

(d) **CLUSTER BOMBS**

The use of cluster bombs has been very controversial. There is little doubt that they significantly increase the risks to civilians and particularly to children. The BBC does enter this debate. But it also goes to considerable lengths to justify the use of cluster bombs by coalition troops. Explanations by military personnel are barely questioned and are often repeated. The use of cluster bombs is mitigated by the authoritative information that the weapons were used only against Republican Guards and Iraqi soldiers away from civilian centres. And where civilians are killed this is blamed on Iraqi soldiers for hiding in civilian areas, and in any event “*All war results in civilian casualties...*” [Today, 04.04.03].

*“...these are being fired, we are told by the military, only into open areas on the outskirts of Basra - not into the city centre...”* [BBC Online, 04/04/03]

*“...the British say they are using them to destroy large numbers of Iraqi troops only when they move into open ground...”* [BBC Online, 04/04/03]

Yet in fact we find that a report the previous day suggests that this is untrue:

*“...There is no doubt though that civilians of Basra are in danger of being hurt by many of the weapons being fired towards Iraqi troops taking shelter in the city...<sup>5</sup>”* [Today 03 04 03]

*“...the British military have been very careful to point out that they are not being used in the city centre...”* [BBC Online, 04/04/03]

*“...a British military spokesman said the rounds are used only in open areas where they’ve identified large numbers of Iraqi troops...”* [Today, 03/04/03]

*“...Air Chief Marshall Sir Peter Squire told reporters that British pilots had dropped about fifty cluster bombs in Iraq during the conflict **but only against Republican Guards...**”* [R4, 04/04/03]

*“...British troops have used a form of cluster bomb on targets<sup>6</sup> outside Basra...”* [Today 030404]

*“...British forces have been using cluster bombs on areas around the southern city of Basra where large number of Iraqi troops are reported to have been gathering...”* [Midday, 03/04/04].

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<sup>5</sup> The use of cluster bombs is mitigated by displacing responsibility for their use onto the Iraqi forces that hide among civilians in built up areas

<sup>6</sup> The word “targets”, although extremely vague, mitigates the use of the weapon. It implies that the weapon is accurately deployed and on legitimate targets.

*“...Ministry of **Defence** Officials then further clarified that the weapons had so far been used in open spaces away from built up areas...”<sup>7</sup>  
[Newsnight, 03/04/03]*

*“...let’s deal with this, impossible in many ways, question of civilian casualties. All war results in civilian casualties...” [Today, 04.04.03]*

*“...and haven’t we in the end, Richard Lloyd, haven’t we in the end got to say, well if that’s what the military planners really believe, and they wouldn’t argue for them otherwise, then **that’s** it?...” [Today, 04.04.03]*

We are left in no doubt that the British military mean well, and any harm caused is the fault of the Iraqi troops. By contrast it is extremely rare for the BBC even to express, let alone to repeat, the military reasons given by Israelis for taking the steps they do to protect Israeli citizens. It is inconceivable that they would justify the means by reference to the end as they do for coalition forces. Equally inconceivable is the show of insouciant disregard for a few Palestinian deaths as an inevitable consequence of war.

#### (e) **FRIENDLY FIRE**

“Friendly fire” relates to the incident of an army mistakenly attacking its own troops. During the Iraq conflict the term was also applied to instances where journalists were the inadvertent targets of coalition strikes. BBC presenter John Simpson was involved in one such incident on April 6<sup>th</sup> 2003. According to the BBC’s own reports at least 15 people were killed and 45 injured in this attack. As with the Mosul killings, the two checkpoint deaths and the Palestine Hotel deaths, the BBC goes to great lengths to explain, absolve, excuse and mitigate such uncontrolled displays of lethal force. This contrasts starkly with the lack of sympathy approaching vilification that accompanies “collateral damage” arising out of Israeli actions.

*“...I think what probably happened was that there was a burned out Iraqi tank at the crossroads and **I suspect that either the pilots got the navigational details wrong**, which is possible, but I think it is probably more likely one of them saw the burned out Iraqi tank, assumed that was what was to be hit - and dropped the bomb...” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...It was a mistake. They were so apologetic afterwards, as you can imagine....” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...these things happen if you are fighting a war. **Mistakes happen...**” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...The American and British forces pride themselves on hitting military targets and sparing civilian lives. **But the bombs don’t always fall where they’re meant to...**”<sup>8</sup> [BBC Online, 07/04/03].*

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<sup>7</sup> Note how the MOD’s “clarification” is effectively accepted as true. Israeli statements are almost always attributed with less authority and with an air of suspicion.

*“...There is no doubt that when you deploy air power close to your own troops, **incidents like this will happen...**” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...**A pilot can have real difficulty**, especially in the midst of battle, spotting the correct target from their aerial vantage point, and may have to differentiate between several potential targets on the ground to identify the correct one...” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...It's more risky not to use air power in this situation. For example, Iraqi tanks could have disrupted more supply convoys if coalition air power hadn't been targeting them...” [Online, 07/04/03]*

The tone of the coalition reports suggests a BBC ready to forgive the occasional, or even frequent, accident because of its understanding of the military difficulties which the coalition forces face and the need to fire under stressful circumstances and often with civilians in the vicinity. No such indulgence is given to Israeli errors.

#### (f) **DISPLACEMENT OF BLAME**

The most frequent technique employed in the mitigation of coalition culpability is the displacement of responsibility onto the Iraqis themselves. There is a suggestion that were it not for Iraqi tactics, their trickery, and their persistence in not letting the coalition kill them, risks to civilians would never occur. They initiate violence; they invite reciprocation; they “draw” the military into using their biggest weapons. US and UK actions are always seen as a response to an Iraqi action. A pattern of cause and effect is established in which coalition actions are always seen as a response. Coalition forces are cast as trying to play a gentle role and being pulled reluctantly into confrontations. It is hard to extract from this narrative the reality of the largest concentration of sophisticated weaponry ever seen, the coalition, fighting a demoralised, poorly armed and even worse led rag tag militia.

*“...the main reason for these [friendly fire] incidents is the fact that air power is being used in an environment where Iraqi targets are mobile and operating close to mobile coalition forces...” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...But British troops have been **drawn** into urban fighting...” [BBC Online, 04/04/03]*

*“...but clearly it is really difficult fighting terrain because the British have been **drawn** into urban warfare...” [BBC Online, 04/04/03]*

*“...**The Iraqis** are taking **shelter** in-between civilian houses and using those houses as places to fire from. **This means** civilians could be in the line of fire that comes back from the coalition forces...” [BBC Online, 04/04/03]*

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<sup>8</sup> Note how this comment so depersonalises the incident that one is almost invited to blame the bombs themselves for their errant behaviour, naughtily refusing to fall where they are meant to.

*“...So no matter how well intended the British troops might be, the civilians are trapped in the fighting and they are under severe pressure....” [BBC Online, 04/04/03]*

*“...Vital to the allied forces is confronting the Republican Guard before they withdraw into the city. Otherwise the British and American forces risk being **lured** into a highly undesirable urban conflict involving street to street fighting in Baghdad...” [Today, 03/04/04]*

*“...Gavin Hewitt is with the troops and described the Iraqi fighters tactics.*

*GAVIN: They jump out of the alleyways, try and fire a rocket-propelled grenade at the Americans, and then leap back in the houses again. And of course dealing with those people is not only difficult, but quite often puts civilians at risk as well, because when you then respond with heavy machine gun fire or tank fire, that's pretty devastating in these neighbourhoods...” [Today, 10/04/03]*

*“...This is Noah...he's twelve and he's fighting for his life in hospital since a bomb **targeting Iraqi fighters hiding in his neighbourhood hit his house...**”<sup>9</sup> [BBC1, 6pm, 09/04/03]*

*“...there is no doubt...that **civilians** of Basra are in danger of being hurt by many of the weapons being fired towards **Iraqi troops** taking shelter in the city...” [Today, 03/04/04]*

*“...Americans are hesitant in their response, suspicious of the faces which are not smiling in the crowd, behind the man wielding nothing more than a garland of faded plastic flowers...” [Newsnight, 11/04/03]*

*“...**The americans are unsure about who they're talking to, who to trust...**” [Newsnight, 11/04/03]*

*“...They're very, very jumpy at the moment, simply because, for example, cell phones are being used to orchestrate attacks on American forces...” [Today, 11/04/03]*

## 7. SUICIDE ATTACKS

The occurrence of suicide attacks in Iraq strikes instant parallels with the Palestinian suicide attacks against Israel. It is important to note that Palestinian suicide attacks are almost unanimously directed against non-military targets - against Israeli men, women and children in restaurants, cafes and shopping centres. Iraqi suicide attacks were targeted against the US and UK military - an invading army of contested international legitimacy. It is important to bear this distinction in mind when examining the discrepancy in how these similar acts are

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<sup>9</sup> With almost breathtaking gall the BBC reporter appears to place the blame for this child's injuries almost entirely on Iraqis for having the nerve to defend themselves from the coalition invasion. He does not even hint at coalition responsibility for firing the bomb which caused those injuries.

reported in the Gulf and in Israel. The BBC has a discriminatory practice not to describe Palestinian attacks against Israelis as ‘terrorist’ attacks.<sup>10</sup>

A suicide attack against US marines in Iraq is described as an act of terrorism. The BBC empathises with the coalition potential targets of terrorism, trying to understand the psychological pressures which it brings. The pernicious nature of suicide bombing is vividly expounded upon, and is used to mitigate the loss of innocent lives, such as those of the two Iraqi children shot dead at a checkpoint. The BBC shows a full understanding why fear of suicide bombers gives rise to a need to restrict movement through use of checkpoints. In Israel checkpoints are usually the source of criticism. The BBC paints as instruments of oppression and humiliation of Palestinians by Israelis, with scant regard paid to the military imperative which leads to their creation.

*“...there have been reminders too of the dangers posed by Iraqis resorting to **terrorism**. Last night a car packed with explosives was driven into an American checkpoint and blown up, killing three soldiers...”* [Radio 4, 6pm, 04.04.03]

*“...the americans are wary at checkpoints now and **who can blame them? Suicide bombers in the early days changed the tone of the whole relationship. ...every Iraqi is treated as a potential threat...**”* [Newsnight, 11/04/03]

*“...that of course is what the Americans fear most isn’t it? We know from a previous suicide attack that is what they dread because if civilians, or people who look like civilians, and this was a woman, are going to carry out these attacks, where do they feel safe?...”* [Midday, 04.04.03]

*“... after that first attack **they are obviously very nervous, very edgy** about how they deal with civilians in the area in which they operating...but in the circumstances, obviously the coalition forces are very, very aware of this danger...”* [Midday, 04.04.03]

*“...Coalition troops were put on **heightened alert** after the first attack and there have since been incidents of soldiers firing on civilian vehicles that have approached checkpoints...Eleven members of the same family were killed when troops fired on their vehicle near Najaf this week.”* [Online, 04/04/03]

*“...obviously, yet another frightening moment for the marines...”* [BBC1, 6pm, 10/04/03]

*“...If that’s correct and it was a suicide attack, **it points to the difficulties the US soldiers face** as they try to bring peace and security to Baghdad. The thought that suicide bombers may be lurking among the people they’re here to liberate can only distance them from ordinary Iraqis...”* [R4, 6pm, 10/04/03]

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<sup>10</sup> The BBC’s explanation of its discrimination against Israel, refraining from labelling attack against Israeli citizens or their perpetrators as ‘terrorist,’ is the subject of a separate essay which appears at the end of this report.

*“...It was at a checkpoint like this that the suicide attack took place. The problem for these troops, they came here as a fighting army, they’re being sucked into police work...”* [Newsnight, 10/04/03]

*“...the Americans have their own worries. This was the scene in Baghdad tonight, marines taking up positions, wary that the next Iraqi to greet them, could be a walking bomb...”* [Newsnight, 10/04/03]

*“...These pictures from our sister network ABC shows what happened when a suspicious vehicle gets too close...”* [Newsnight, 10/04/03].

The essence of these quotations is to drip feed a message that suicide bombers create a constant fear which justifies an edgy and over cautious response to the slightest threat. The shooting of 11 unarmed civilians at a checkpoint is mentioned casually and almost in the same breath excused as the inevitable result of Iraqi tactics. A clear line of cause and effect is established. We are invited to think that the death of Iraqi civilians is the result of Iraqi military strategy. Such a narrative allows us to excuse the killing of civilians at checkpoints. There is an absence of such mitigating narratives in the BBC’s coverage of mistakes at Israeli checkpoints.

## 8. CHECKPOINTS

As well as garnering approval for coalition checkpoints by energetically highlighting the fears and dangers faced by the coalition army, the BBC also explains the advisability of using checkpoints. No aspersions are cast over their use. They are presented as a logical and a reasonable response to the threat of suicide-bombers and unconventional attacks. The BBC understands the military necessity of checkpoints and conveys this to the audience.

*“...Screening... all the major access points to Baghdad will be controlled...there will be checkpoints. Civilians who are just conducting their normal business will be allowed to move in and out. Others, young men of military age, will definitely be the subject of scrutiny by the American forces who will be on those checkpoints...”*  
[Online, 04/0403]

*“...Route protection...in southern Iraq British forces have launched a crackdown on guerrilla attacks by Iraqis dressed in civilian clothes...the tighter checks on civilian vehicles follow guerrilla-style attacks by Iraqi fighters on coalition supply lines in areas supposedly already under the control of British and American control...BBC correspondent Jonathan Charles said...“The routes need to be protected otherwise frontline units could find themselves short of food, fuel and ammunition.”* [Online, 03/04/04]

These checkpoints are presented as the result of Iraqi actions. Their “guerilla-style attacks” are concretely defined as the cause, the impetus and the logical progenitor of checkpoints.

The extracts below are taken from two articles on BBC online. They are titled: “Analysis: Palestinians’ disrupted journeys” and “Eyewitness: West Bank Commuter Odyssey.” Whereas

the BBC seeks to garner support for checkpoints in Iraq by vividly highlighting the fears and dangers faced by the military, the BBC seeks to garner antipathy for Israeli checkpoints by stressing the inconvenience caused to civilians.

This imbalance is hard to understand. There were only two suicide attacks in Iraq during the Iraq war. Israel has suffered hundreds of attacks and attempted attacks in the past two years. Those attacks have killed and maimed some 6,000 Israelis. Checkpoints have been instrumental in preventing many of the unsuccessful suicide missions. Logically you would expect the BBC to show more understanding for Israeli checkpoints than for Iraqi ones. The opposite is in fact the case.

*“...Israel has imposed **severe restrictions** on Palestinian movement in the West Bank...the vast majority of Palestinians just trying to go about their business see the **restrictions as a humiliating collective punishment** that fuels their frustration and anger...travel restrictions mean most Palestinian journeys have become increasingly complicated, time-consuming and costly, and often quite dangerous as well....the **journey times are extended by sometimes lengthy waits** to walk through checkpoints, as soldiers check everyone's papers,...the checkpoints have posed a **particular danger** to people with medical conditions or women in labour who are being rushed to hospital...for most Palestinians, the blockade is just an **intimidating and oppressive part of everyday life**...the 45 minutes it once took to travel between Ramallah and Nablus has now increased to 3 or 4 hours...”*

[Online, “Analysis: Palestinians' disrupted journeys”, 06/0402]

*“...Before Israel's latest military campaign, which has **brought Palestinian travel to a standstill**, BBC News Online's correspondent Martin Asser sampled the life of a Palestinian commuter, from the West Bank's administrative capital, Ramallah, to its biggest town, Nablus. Without Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks, the 45-kilometer journey takes 45 minutes. On 21 March 2002 it took more than three hours...”*

*“...Israeli troops patrol through the throng - a jeep with soldiers on foot front and rear. The **rearguard points his weapon menacingly** at the Palestinian drivers and passengers, who avert their eyes nervously...”*

*“...a stiff, muddy climb against a head wind takes us to the brow of the hill...”*

*“...Israeli soldiers are guarding a dozen-or-so Palestinian men on a piece of flat ground. Two of the men are kneeling with their arms behind their heads...”*

*“...several people fall on the slippery, mud-covered stones...”*

*“...our shoes are caked in sticky brown mud...”*

*“...our joint exertion makes the vehicle's windows immediately steam up with perspiration and hot breath...”*

[Online, “Eyewitness: West Bank commuter odyssey”, 6 April, 2002]

A tremendous amount of energy goes into humanising coalition checkpoints. Israeli checkpoints by contrast are demonised by unsympathetic appraisals which adopt a perspective that appears to be partial in its treatment of Israel.

## 9. TARGETED STRIKES

Israel has often used targeted strikes pre-emptively to attack Palestinian terrorists intent on planning or carrying out attacks on Israeli civilians. Israel is often criticised for her use of targeted strikes and is vilified for any collateral damage that arises.

The British and American used targeted strikes against supposed Iraqi leadership targets. These strikes are explained, justified and mitigated by the BBC although they cause damage only to civilians and property and consistently miss their targets. The danger posed to civilians is rarely mentioned. The attacks are reported in strong, confident language that justifies the action and casts no suspicions or questions over the event. The attacks are reported as being against “targets” suggesting a legitimate attack against a legitimate subject. Newsnight, 22.30, 8/4/03 cites the fact that nine Iraqi civilians were killed in the targeted strike. This fact is rarely mentioned in the days that followed. One would think that such a fact should feature prominently in any following coverage.

### (a) **STRIKE ON BASAM IBRAHIM HASSAN AL-TIKRITI**

Basam Ibrahim Hassan Al-Tikriti is Saddam’s half-brother. A targeted strike on April 10<sup>th</sup> 2003 was believed to have killed him. No details were given as to whether any civilians were killed. The attack is described in favourable terms, without questions being raised about the legitimacy of using such strikes in built up, residential areas.

*“...the coalition remains **concerned that some elements of the regime are still functioning**. That appears to be the reasoning behind a particularly violent air-raid on the building occupied by Saddam Hussein’s favourite half-brother – Basam Ibrahim Hassan Al-Tikriti – **which doubled as a headquarters for Iraqi intelligence**...” [Online, 11/04/03].*

Tikriti turned up a few days later. We found no report which suggested that the “*particularly violent air-raid*” actually caused any civilian deaths.

### (b) **STRIKE ON SADDAM HUSSEIN**

On 8 April 2003 coalition forces attacked a restaurant where Saddam Hussein was believed to be hiding. We recorded forty-two occasions in which a reference to the attempted strike on Saddam Hussein was made. He was not killed in the bombing. Nine civilians were. Only four times was reference made to the nine civilians killed in the bombing. The first reference to these civilian deaths was made on April 8<sup>th</sup> 2003 on The Today Program (8-9am). One would have expected a reference to these deaths to have been made in every following reference to the incident. It was not. Compounding this omission is the absence of any significant appraisal of the risks posed to civilians by such targeted strikes employed in residential areas. This is in stark contrast to the BBC’s coverage of Israeli targeted strikes. Furthermore, we find that a tone of victory is woven out of a failure to hit targets – something we are unlikely to see in the BBC’s coverage of Israeli strikes. In pursuit of this drive for a positive spin on coalition targeted strikes, we find that the rare instances in which civilians are killed are knocked aside by a greater emphasis placed by the BBC upon the alleged benefits of such strikes.

*“American forces have bombed a house in the city after being told that **Saddam Hussein might have been there.**” [Today, 08/04/03].*

*“JOANNA: American bombers target Saddam Hussein. It’s not known if they were successful.” [Ten special, 08/04/03].*

*“CHRIS: Well yesterday’s strike on Saddam was the second time coalition forces have targeted the Iraqi leader himself.” [Ten special, 08/04/03]*

*“GEORGE: At six o’clock these are tonight’s top stories. Honing in on Saddam himself – attacks on regime strongholds.” [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]*

*“Aircraft tanks and artillery have hit buildings linked to the regime. Saddam Hussein himself was a target of one air raid.” [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]*

*“Eye witnesses say **two houses were flattened and nine Iraqis were killed**... There’s no authoritative word on whether Saddam Hussein was injured, killed, or indeed in the building at the time. Even if he has lived on to fight another day the Americans will be hoping that the reporting of **this strike contributes to the mounting pressure, both militarily and psychologically, that they are exerting on his leadership.**”<sup>11</sup> [Today, 08/04/03]*

*“We do not yet know who was killed in that first strike on 19 March by US F-117 fighters on an Iraqi command bunker... But it set the scene for the whole campaign. Iraqi command and control was knocked off balance at the very start of the war and never recovered.” [Online, 14/04/03]*

*“This was testimony to **the ability of US air power to precisely target command and communications at all levels.** The nervous system binding the Iraqi military together simply fell apart”. [Online, 14/04/03]*

*“American bombers target Saddam Hussein. It’s not known if they were successful.”<sup>12</sup> [Ten special, 08/04/03].*

*“Aircraft tanks and artillery have hit buildings linked to the regime. Saddam Hussein himself was a target of one air raid.” [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]*

*“Intelligence said he was in this suburb, al-Mansour, yesterday. A B1 bomber was ordered to attack and bombs hit a building where Saddam*

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<sup>11</sup> Note how the death of nine civilians is virtually brushed aside and the BBC concentrates on the “psychological” pressure which he assumes the failed attack on Saddam Hussein has had. No evidence is supplied to support what appears to be mere speculation on behalf of the BBC journalist, trying to put a brave face on what should be castigated as an appalling error.

<sup>12</sup> Note that the death of the nine Iraqis, having been reported, is forgotten in most subsequent reports.

*was apparently at a meeting. The coalition isn't sure.*" [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]

*"Now in the last few minutes British security services have told the BBC that they believe Saddam escaped the attack by a matter of minutes. But **they also claim he's lost effective control over most of his forces.** One thing's for sure tonight – the focus is still on Saddam.<sup>13</sup>"* [BBC1, 6pm, 08/04/03]

*"British security sources have said tonight that they do not believe Saddam Hussein is dead. The Iraqi leader was targeted by four two thousand pound American bombs...None the less it has been another day on which the Americans have extended their control across the city."* [Newsnight, 08/04/03]

*"...it is thought that for safety the Iraqi leader often hides out in residential areas..."* [Online, 08/04/03]

*"...even if Saddam Hussein has lived on to fight another day, the Americans will be **hoping that this strike adds to the pressure they are exerting on his leadership,** says the BBC's Peter Hunt in Qatar..."<sup>14</sup>* [Online, 08/04/03]

*"...the Americans certainly targeted Saddam in the last 24 hours. They bombed the residential district of Mansour yesterday afternoon. That's exactly the kind of place where you would expect to find Saddam. He doesn't go to his bunkers. He knows the Allies know where they are. He hides out in ordinary neighbourhoods..."* [Online, 08/04/03]

### (c) STRIKE ON CHEMICAL ALI

Ali Hassan Al-Mujeed was the Iraqi general labelled "Chemical Ali" by the BBC. He was reported to be the target of a particularly violent coalition air strike. It is doubtful whether this strike was successful. What is certain is that this air-strike resulted in the deaths of a substantial number of civilians. We counted twenty references to the alleged strike on Ali Hassan Al-Mujeed. Only twice was reference made to the civilian casualties incurred. The BBC twins its coverage of such strikes with a concerted effort to depict Ali's terrible past as a war criminal and murderer. This has the effect of justifying the use of such air attacks even when they prove unsuccessful.

*"...The army says a body found in Basra is believed to be that of the Iraqi commander known as "Chemical Ali". **He ordered poison gas attacks on the Kurds in 1988...**"* [R5, 07/04/03].

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<sup>13</sup> The death of the nine Iraqis remains ignored. However an attempt is made to justify the attack by suggesting that it has somehow linked with the fact that he has "*lost effective control over most of his forces.*"

<sup>14</sup> The BBC suggests that an attack which missed Saddam Hussein is nevertheless somehow successful. This "success" appears to excuse and mitigate eleven civilian deaths.

*“...A British army spokesman said it’s almost certain that the body of the Iraqi commander Chemical Ali has been found in a building in Basra. **He ordered a poison gas attack which killed thousands of Kurds in 1988...**” [R5, 07/04/03].*

***“Up to my left is the house of the Hamoudi family where ten people died. On the other side another eight civilians were killed. In between them there’s just a tangle of bricks and steel and concrete. It’s a place where the coalition believe they killed Ali Hassan Majid, the man known as Chemical Ali, Saddam Hussein’s military commander in the south, and a man with a great deal of blood on his hands.”***<sup>15</sup> [Today, 18/04/03]

*“...the murderous Ali Hassan Al-Majid...”* [Today, 18.04/03]

*“...Chris Vernon, spokesman for the British army in Iraq says the attack on Ali Hassan Al-Majid was a turning point in the war...”*<sup>16</sup> [Today, 18/04/03]

## 10. DEHUMANISATION OF IRAQIS

There are certain moments when the BBC incorporates the language of the coalition military into their narratives. This is frequently military jargon that dehumanises the Iraqi enemy, making it more palatable and less disagreeable for extreme measures to be taken against them. It glosses over the full nature of what the coalition were doing in Iraq. The BBC plays a role in harnessing the public’s support for the death and destruction taking place. They legitimise coalition actions and dehumanise the Iraqi army. They talk of “mopping up”, of “tidying up” of “business” being “tied up.” The human life behind these expressions is glossed over by abstractions. In the case of “mopping up” one thinks of dirt, mess and disease. We have not found the BBC using such quaint expressions to describe the activities of Israeli soldiers.

*“...**business** has according to the British military commanders been **tied up**”<sup>17</sup> now...”* [Newsnight, 07/04/03]

*“...There may still...be pockets of resistance. **Complete celebration may be premature, there may be quite a lot of resistance to mop up...**”* [09/04/03].

*“...These **mopping up operations** could take days or weeks longer...”* [Newsnight, 10/04/03]

*“...in parts of the city now there’s **a little bit of mopping up going on. But nothing significant...**”*<sup>18</sup> [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03].

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<sup>15</sup> Note that when the deaths of innocent civilians are finally mentioned we are immediately also reminded of Chemical Ali’s criminal past, thus mitigating the legitimacy of the failed air strike.

<sup>16</sup> Why the killing of a number of civilians was “a turning point in the war” is not convincingly explained, but the comment again helps to mitigate the civilian deaths.

<sup>17</sup> The ‘business’ which has been ‘tied up’ is the killing of Iraqi soldiers.

<sup>18</sup> The destruction of a few lives and some property is “nothing significant.”

*“...is it your sense that **the** war is effectively over and it is **just a matter now of tidying up?**..” [Today, 08/04/03].*

All this squeezing, mopping up, tidying, nibbling, and tying up of business is in fact the BBC’s account of the final destruction by the world’s mightiest army of the struggling remains of a defeated and invaded regime. It is the description of the death agony of human beings. Unless the Iraqis who are being nibbled/killed agree with the BBC’s conclusion that their death is “nothing significant” then it is hard to see how this coverage can even begin to be seen as impartial or accurate. The fact that we have not found such language to describe the acts of the Israeli army merely demonstrates that BBC coverage is both partial and unfair.

## 11. DEMONISATION OF IRAQIS: “DIEHARD FANATICS”

Saddam’s Republican Guard unit is consistently described by the BBC as “fanatics” or “fanatically loyal” or “diehard fanatics”. To the unaligned observer these are rather demeaning, two-dimensional terms which have the effect of alienating the audience from the Republican Guard and viewing their subsequent behaviour as the mad, volatile actions of an irrational element diseased by their own fanaticism. As a result BBC viewers will be less inclined to lament their liquidation - they are after all fanatics. BBC terminology appears designed to create the aura of something alien and unwelcome, suggesting that the world is a better place without them.

A Palestinian group such as Hamas is actually more deserving than the Iraqi army of the label “fanatic.” The core goal of Hamas is the destruction of Israel, a country recognised by the UN. Its method is terror. Its motivation is an extreme interpretation of Islam.<sup>19</sup>

Yet the BBC studiously avoids describing the acts of Hamas as “terrorist<sup>20</sup>,” let alone “fundamentalist” or “fanatical.” This double standard is hard to understand.

*“...the airport...might serve almost as a magnet for militia men and **diehards**...” [Newsnight, 04/04/03]*

*“...the Special Republican Guard...is a **hard-core** protecting the Iraqi leadership...” [Online, 040403 am]*

*“...the Iraqi leader's feared loyalist **Fedayeen**...” [Online, 040403]*

*“...**diehard elements** of Saddam Hussein’s regime...” [R4, 6pm, 07/04/03]*

*“...there’s a real air of menace as aggressive and angry **Saddam Fedayeen** patrol streets and bridges...” [R4, 6pm, 07/04/03]*

*“...these small militia forces are **the true believers, the most loyal of the loyal**...” [Newsnight, 07/04/03]*

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<sup>19</sup> “There is no solution for the Palestinian question except through Jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are all a waste of time and vain endeavors.” “Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it” Hamas Covenant.

<sup>20</sup> See the section on “Terrorism” at the end of this report for a fuller discussion of this.

“...*In a chilling statement an Iraqi government minister said American troops...will face what he called martyrdom operations...*” [BBC1, 6pm, 04.04.03]

“...*they’re now battling the true believers, the most loyal of the loyal...*” [Newsnight, 08/04/03]

“...*the diehards, the true believers, the most loyal of the loyal...*” [Ten special, 09/04/03]

“...*his with him to the death supporters...*” [Today, 09/04/03]

“...*those who were fanatically loyal to him...*” [Today, 10/04/03]

“...*his...henchmen and diehard loyalists...*” [Ten special, 10/04/03].

“...*these bullies...*” [Online, 07/04/03]

“...*his lackeys...*” [Today, 11/04/03]

“...*henchmen ...*” [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03]

Unchecked, the BBC language demonises these fighters in an almost unthinking way. They take on the two dimensional character of the cartoon villain whose only role is to be vanquished by the forces of good. We found no attempt to understand why any of these people, leaderless and hopelessly outgunned, should be risking their lives to fight the coalition forces in what the BBC accepts were almost suicidal engagements. Whilst we do not pretend any sympathy for Saddam’s regime we find the BBC’s abandonment of any attempt to approach this narrative with impartiality quite extraordinary.

Another method used to demonise and dehumanise the Iraqis was the imposition of labels. This helps to legitimise any military action which follows - even if resulting in the deaths of civilians.

Ali Hassan Al-Mujeed was the Iraqi general referred to by the BBC as “Chemical Ali”. He was reported to be the target of a number of coalition air strikes. It is still unknown if any of these strikes were successful. What is certain is that these air-strikes resulted in the deaths of a substantial number of civilians. We counted twenty references to the alleged strike on Ali Hassan Al-Mujeed which took place on March 6<sup>th</sup> 2003. Only twice was reference made to the civilian casualties incurred.

“...*The Iraqi commander known as Chemical Ali is said to have been killed...*” [R5, 07/04/03].

“...*the army says a body found in Basra is believed to be that of the Iraqi commander known as Chemical Ali...*” [R5, 07/04/03].

“...*Chemical Ali is reported to have been killed...*” [R5, 07/04/03].

*“...There are persistent reports that Saddam’s commander in the south, nicknamed **Chemical Ali**, was killed by an aerial attack on his villa there...<sup>21</sup>”* [Newsnight, 07/04/03].

We do not here suggest that there is any direct comparison to be drawn between this and the coverage of Israel. We merely comment that the extensive use of this labelling, dehumanising and demonising of individuals is entirely inconsistent with a duty to provide an impartial account of events.

## 12. HUMANISING THE COALITION ARMY

The BBC treats the coalition military with sympathy and empathy. It is sensitive to the problems and struggles the soldiers face, always keen to highlight the fears and dangers by which they are confronted. The coalition military are presented in a reasonable, rational and sophisticated light, even when engaging in acts of extreme violence. They are presented as peacemakers, people trying to win hearts and minds; the caring military – the army with a human face. The BBC finds benign euphemisms to describe actions designed to kill and destroy human life, rendering those actions more palatable.

The BBC also broadcasts countless human interest stories designed to humanise the British army. We know them personally. We know their names and their families. We mourn for them when they die. During these moments the BBC’s idiom takes on a more elevated tone, even slipping into poeticisms, eulogising individuals.

By contrast the Israeli Defence Forces are usually presented as an alien force without an iota of humanity. They are faceless automotons, robotic killers only characterised by the tanks and bulldozers that they drive. They lack the human face, and apparently gentle touch, of the coalition army.

### (a) **A DELICATE ARMY**

*“...The one thing the Americans are not going to do is to storm into the capital in a full-frontal military assault, which would have catastrophic effects for the population of Baghdad. **It will be a very delicate strategy of mixed elements....**”* [Online, 04/04/03]

*“...the American’s have been able to destroy very significant amounts of military equipment possessed by the Republican Guards. Just up the road from where I’m talking to you there are two or three burning vehicles, and I think in the past thirty six hours I must have seen, oh, twenty to thirty burning tanks or armoured personnel carriers. And in terms of total destroyed equipment it could well be seventy or eighty pieces...”<sup>22</sup>* [R5, 07/04/03]

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<sup>21</sup> All of these reports proved to be false. An interview with Ali Hassan Al-Mujeed’s next door neighbour, who lost many family members in the attack on the General, later confirmed that he was not in the house when the attack took place.

<sup>22</sup> Note how the BBC gloss over the unsavoury reality of the coalition’s actions. We are given a wonderful description of the equipment burning – interestingly we are given no description of the people inside

“...As the American military spokesman said, Baghdad is being **squeezed**...” [R4, 6pm 08/04/03]

“...now what we’ve seen in the last few days is **nibbling away** at some of these suburbs and fighting patrols further in...” [Newsnight, 04/04/03]

“...Operations in Baghdad will be similar to those in the southern city of Basra, where the British continue to **nibble** away at the defences there” [Online, 04/04/03]

“...the other two worked for the Reuters agency and a Spanish channel. They **lost their lives** in the attack on the Palestine hotel, where most of the international media are staying”<sup>23</sup>. [R4, 6pm, 08/04/03]

“...**business has** according to the British military commanders **been tied up now**...” [Newsnight, 07/04/03]

“...these **mopping up** operations could take days or weeks longer...” [Newsnight, 10/04/03]

“...in parts of the city now there’s **a little bit of mopping up going on. But nothing significant**...” [BBC1, 6pm, 14/04/03].

“...is it your sense that the war is effectively over and it is **just a matter now of tidying up?**...” [Today, 08/04/03].

“...They are working with their army colleagues combining, what they have dubbed **'the giving hand of war'**<sup>24</sup>, with policing duties in towns which at times have been on the edge of anarchy...” [Online, 07/04/03]

“...**winning hearts and minds** with food and water is something they are struggling with, although they admit in the long term it appears the only way to gain some trust...” [Online, 07/04/03]

“...**General Myers has denied targeting the power grid** and coalition forces have repeatedly stressed they do not want to damage civilian infrastructure...” [BBC online, 040403 am]

“...The troops on the ground have been told by senior commanders that they must not hit civilians if they can possibly avoid it...” [BBC Online, 04/04/03]

“...US commanders are **anxious to avoid** having to fight in Baghdad's streets, where **civilian casualties** could be high and where Iraqi soldiers would have the advantage of local knowledge...” [Online, 03/04/04]

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<sup>23</sup> Note how these two journalists simply “lost” their lives. They were not “killed.”

<sup>24</sup> The British military bombardment of Basra, with attack helicopters, lazer-guided missiles and a ground-force of thousands, is described variously as “nibbling,” “squeezing,” “mopping” and “tidying up.” The deaths caused by all this house keeping are “nothing significant.”

*“...The UK troops are keen to defeat the 1,000 or so Iraqi fighters believed to be holed up in Basra, so **food and water can be given to ordinary Iraqis there.**” [04/04/03]*

The very human army of the coalition contrasts with the picture of the Israelis as robotic ruthless killing machines.

### **The Coalition**

*“...They’re hunkered in their armoured vehicles. Their tank guns swivel and scan. They’re trying to pick out today’s Iraqi mortar positions, knowing that overnight those positions will have changed. **It’s the most dangerous time of day for these British soldiers** who in turn are the closest to Iraq’s second city....” [Today, 03/04/04]*

The coalition use of tanks and military hardware is humanised. Military equipment is described in the appropriate dual context of human beings actually using them. We don’t just have the faceless imagery of tanks and helicopters inexplicably wreaking havoc. We have the imagery of human beings inside them applying thought and reason in their application. We are informed by the BBC of their motives, why they are employing such equipment. Empathy is aroused for their feelings. This contrasts with the depiction of Israeli weapons.

### **Israel**

*“...**Israeli planes** strike Gaza...at least five Palestinians have been killed in **an Israeli air raid** on Gaza City...this is the first **Israeli air strike** in the Gaza Strip since the beginning of the war in Iraq...witnesses say **Israeli aircraft** fired missiles in an apparent attack on a car....there were **scenes of pandemonium** as ambulances rushed casualties to hospital....the remaining dead and wounded were civilians, said doctors, including children hit by shrapnel from the second missile, which exploded after people had run into the street to see what had happened....residents said two **Israeli F-16 planes** flew low over the city just before the **air strike**. A few minutes later, **helicopter gunships** went into action....the **Israeli warplanes** appeared to be targeting a car,..” [Online, 09/04/03].*

*“...the army **launched** a raid with **tanks, bulldozers and helicopters** on the Rafah refugee camp in Gaza.... About **30 Israeli tanks** accompanied by **armoured bulldozers and helicopter gunships** exchanged fire with Palestinian gunmen after moving into the Rafah refugee camp in southern Gaza overnight... Troops backed by **armour and helicopters** swept into Tulkarm on Wednesday morning and **imposed** a curfew, **ordering** males aged between 14 and 30 to assemble in a school courtyard **or face punishment...**” [Online, 04/04/03]*

The Israeli military is completely faceless, as opposed to the intensely humanised tanks, weapons and soldiers of the British and American military. No mention is made of the reasoning or motivations behind these Israeli actions. There is certainly no mention of any human Israelis – only mechanised Israeli equipment. Also note how the BBC adopt the perspective of the military when reporting on the coalition in Iraq. This is in stark contrast to a narrative perspective that is always esconsed firmly outside the military when reporting on Israeli actions. (See also section on Humanisation of military) Compounding this depiction of an inhumane, unfeeling entity, note how aggressive, bullying language is used for Israel.

Both armies have much in common, they are both tackling security threats. However it would seem that, in the eyes of the BBC, the Israelis are less reasonable and less humane for doing so.

(b) **AN ARMY WITH A HUMAN FACE**

*“...I have eaten with them, shared their chores and their fears when in the dead of night (and up to five times on some nights) the **Orwellian tannoy call** of 'Red Red Red ' saw us leap from our beds, don our gas masks and stumble through the sand into air raid shelters...” [Online 07/04/03]*

*“...many of the crews, that we've grown to know and who trust us, have displayed a **genuine sense of humanity - intelligent regular guys, pondering privately**, as much as anyone else, on what the outcome of war will bring and no doubt what their individual contribution has been...” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...The US marines I have spent weeks with now are an extra-ordinary bunch of young men and I emphasise young. Some are still in their teens. They have never been through conflict before. After yesterday their commanding officer **described them as heroes**. It is an awesome ordeal for young men...” 11/04/03]*

*“...this has been a very long and tough journey for the marines, no question about that. **They've endured all sorts of deprivations**, not least sleep. They've gone without proper meals on many occasions, and of course they've had to endure sandstorms and come under enemy fire. Now, some of the men that I was with haven't come through that ordeal ...” [BBC1, 6pm, 11/04/03]*

*“...It is incredibly hot, **it is incredibly tough**, and most of the troops will be happy to finish their job and get out...” [Online, 15/04/03]*

*“...My two newspaper colleagues and I have had privileged access to briefings here from an impressive and very open detachment commander...” [Online, 07/04/03]*

*“...four weeks ago Scott Williams wondered what the war would bring. The youngest Harrier pilot, no battle experience, he told the six o clock news he was nervous...” [BBC1, 6pm, 03/04/04]*

*“...Have you changed as a pilot, and maybe as a person after what you've been through? ...”*

*“...a lot has changed in a few short days, and there are many like Scott getting used to the risk and to the pressure of war...” [BBC1, 6pm, 03/04/04]*

*“...well those **wives** are among thousands who can do little now but sit at home and **wait for news of their loved ones**. But Denise Mahoney has been to meet three women with family members serving in the Gulf. They’ve come up with their own ways of coping with the anxiety...”*  
[BBC1, 6pm, 03/04/04]

*“...though they’re trying to cope in different ways, **each family shares the same hope** that their loved ones return home safely and soon...”* [BBC1, 6pm, 03/04/04]

*“...As we go on air tonight, the first of the navy’s submarine’s to return from the gulf is arriving home in Plymouth. Some of them haven’t seen their families for ten months. We’re live with the families on the dockside.*  
[BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

*“...**there’s going to be some emotional scenes** there today I can imagine, some of them haven’t seen their families for months!...”*

*“...that’s right Sophie, a few of the crew haven’t actually been back for about ten and a half months. This is the longest ever deployment for one of the navy’s nuclear subs. **I’ve seen a lot of returns but few have had the sense of anticipation that this one has**. A lot of people here. A lot of children here. Their fathers haven’t seen them in the early stages of their growing up. A lot of excitement, a lot of reunions in a few minutes time...”*

*“...Out of the skies to the east, three specks are appearing at speed. Three tornado aircraft on a victory fly past before banking sharply to starboard and coming into land. And in the control tower behind them, the wives and children of the six crewmen waving. Together these tornadoes from 111 squadron have defended coalition bombers over Iraq, they’ve been shot at, and between them have notched up more than five hundred hostile flying hours since they first went to the gulf back in March. Now they’re home. **British soil bathed in spring sunshine has probably never looked so inviting...**”* [BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

*“...Happy family groups standing around chatting on the tarmac...”*  
[BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

*“...Tell us what it was like coming down that runway when you first spotted your family?...”* [BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

*“...Good to see your daughter isn’t it?...”* [BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

*“...Have you done one of these homecomings before?...”* [BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

*“...It’s a lump in the throat. Always emotional isn’t it?...”* [BBC1, 6pm, 16/04/03]

It is inconceivable that the BBC would write in these gushing tones about Israeli troops. It would also be undesirable. We do not wish to diminish the trauma which these young men and women experienced. We understand that the BBC, being a ‘British’ broadcasting corporation, will tend to empathise with ‘British’ troops. That is quite appropriate and as it should be. The troops doubtless deserve this treatment.

However, these British troops have returned from a very one-sided and politically controversial war, where the majority of coalition casualties were caused by “friendly fire,” not by the enemy. These facts would produce a more critical coverage from the broadcasters of many other countries. The coverage which the BBC understandably gives these returning troops, demonstrate how impossible it is for the BBC to remain impartial under these circumstances, notwithstanding its legal obligation to be so.

Whilst coverage of a British war emphasises this inherent contradiction in the clearest terms, we consider that the aim of impartiality is in fact equally unattainable in other conflicts around the world. The Middle East conflict, which tends to polarise views, is no exception. We remain convinced that the BBC consistently fails in its duty to report in a fair, accurate and impartial manner.

### 13. **THE BBC AND TERRORISM**

The BBC frequently uses partiality in its choice of language. Nowhere is this more stark than in the way in which it deploys the word ‘terrorism.’

Prior to writing the First Report we approached Richard Sambrook on this specific subject. Mr Sambrook also addressed it in his reply to the Second Report. His two replies, which we are intended to take as the official BBC view, are set out at Schedule II. Quotations here are from those two replies.

It emerges that *“the BBC seeks neutral precision in its language”* and indeed that *“The BBC values precision.”* This is laudable. Terrorism has been defined both in dictionaries, by various international bodies and most importantly has recently been defined by Statute.

*“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)]

In light of this clear definition, which is instituted by the same parliament which gave and continues to give the BBC its corporate identity, one might think that an institution valuing precision must use the word in appropriate instances.

For example Hamas' motives are political, religious and ideological. This is clear from its website. It threatens and inflicts serious violence against Israelis in order to influence the Israeli government and to intimidate the Israeli public. Any doubt over whether Hamas is a terrorist organisation should be dispelled, as far as the BBC is concerned, by the fact that the Foreign Office has classified Hamas as a terrorist organisation<sup>25</sup>. If the British Government department with responsibility for deciding on such issues, interpreting its own laws, can reach a conclusion on the subject, the BBC would need a good argument to differ.

Notwithstanding this, the BBC refused for example to refer to the bombing on 11 June 2003 of a Jerusalem bus killing 16 and injuring 100 as terrorist act, even though carried out by Hamas, a terrorist organisation, for terrorist motives.

Initially Sambrook tries to defend his position by stating that the BBC "*...does not believe that there is any agreed international definition of what constitutes a terrorist group.*" This argument is nonsense. There is almost no word which enjoys an '*agreed international definition.*' Short of abandoning the use of language altogether, the BBC must select its terms of reference. Absent other compelling argument, the correct reference point for the BBC must be the legal and linguistic environment which gives it birth and sustains it. Thus the BBC need look no further than definitions of words in the English language and as defined by English legislation.

Presented with this argument Sambrook makes a stunningly arrogant statement:

*"We have to decide on our own 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."*

This is an astonishing statement. The '*some states*' to which he refers is the UK, whose citizens pay for the BBC and whose legislature grants it life and sets its rules. Sambrook however considers the BBC to be above the law and the dictionary.

Sambrook however then goes on to state what are the BBC's '*own principles*' by which it does in fact operate. Firstly there is a reluctance to use the word terrorism at all. "*We are sparing in our use of the word (terrorist)*" he explains. The BBC prefers to use "*neutral language*" which does not carry "*emotional weight.*"

This is perhaps a worthy idea. However as a statement of BBC practice it is simply untrue. In the course of the present study we recorded a report of the capture of some members of the Provisional IRA. The words 'terror' or 'terrorist' were used to describe them or their organisation 19 times in a single day.

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<sup>25</sup> HM Treasury, in a press release from 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2001, named various organisations who are believed to have committed or pose a significant risk of committing or providing material support for acts of terrorism. See [www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Newsroom\\_and\\_Speeches/Press/2001/press\\_121\\_01.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/Newsroom_and_Speeches/Press/2001/press_121_01.cfm). See also: <http://www.hms0.gov.uk/egi-bin/htm hl3? URL = http://www.hms0.gov.uk/si/2001/20011261.htm>

When the Bali bombing occurred the BBC referred to it as a terrorist act before it had been established who did it or why.<sup>26</sup> Without knowledge of who committed the attack or their motives, it is quite wrong to define it as being a terrorist attack. At most it can be described as ‘a suspected terrorist attack.’ The more recent bombing attack in Saudi Arabia was described as a terrorist attack,<sup>27</sup> as were the almost simultaneous attacks on various targets in Morocco<sup>28</sup>. The attacks on the World Trade Centre are habitually referred to as terrorist attacks and the BBC has no difficulty in describing UK foreign policy as a war against terror. An extreme case was the US marine who threw grenades at his fellow soldiers just as the Gulf War commenced, an act which the BBC was quick to adorn with the adjective “terrorist.” Even had it been an Iraqi attack (as was presumed) one cannot legitimately call an attack on an invading army by defending troops as “terrorist.” Yet that is precisely what the BBC did both for this event and for other such events throughout its coverage of the war.<sup>29</sup>

In fact, far from being sparing in their use of the word terrorist, the BBC is quick to use it in the event of almost any attack, sometimes even before the attackers or their motives can be identified. Yet in Israel, where the attackers and their motives are often abundantly clear is the exception. The act of singling out a particular group for special disfavour is known as discrimination<sup>30</sup>. But why is Israel discriminated against in this way. Sambrook provides an answer:

*“We prefer to use neutral language where the **political legitimacy of particular actions** is hotly contested”*

What Sambrook appears to suggest is that the blowing up of teen-agers in a disco, of old age pensioners at a religious service, of school children on a school bus, or kids at a pizza bar – these are actions which could have “*political legitimacy*.” In other countries they are described as terrorist acts. In Israel, when perpetrated against Israelis, according to the BBC they could be politically legitimate, and are not described as terrorist acts. Why. Sambrook explains:

*“We do not believe there is [a] definition of ...terrorist group that gets round the **pejorative charge** the word carries which is what makes it so difficult a word for the BBC”*

It is true the word terrorist does carry a pejorative charge. That is why it is important to use it when it is the precise and accurate word to describe a particular event. To refrain from so

<sup>26</sup> Radio 4, 10 o'clock news, Saturday 12 October 2002 – “*There has been international condemnation of the terrorist attack on a night club in Bali*”

<sup>27</sup> Wednesday 13 May 2003 Today programme – twice referred to use of ‘terrorism.’ Also referred to “terrorist attack” several times later during the day.

<sup>28</sup> BBC online subsequently sought to mitigate this attack by referring the Moroccan synagogue bombed as “a Western target” The synagogue is in fact the place of prayer of a religious group which has lived in Morocco for centuries. Suggesting that it is a “Western target” indicates that the BBC sees little or no distinction between Jews - wherever they may be- and Israelis.

<sup>29</sup> “...there have been reminders too of the dangers posed by Iraqis resorting to **terrorism**. Last night a car packed with explosives was driven into an American checkpoint and blown up, killing three soldiers...”(*Radio 4, 6pm, 04.04.03*)

<sup>30</sup> We have used a Collins dictionary definition but might also apply the various definitions within UK legislation e.g. where “...on racial grounds he treats the other less favourably than he treats or would treat other persons” (Race Relations Act 1975 S.1(i)(a)). We do not suggest that the BBC is motivated by issues of race. We do not pretend to know why it discriminates against Israelis.

doing is to abandon both precision and accuracy. By protecting a group from this pejorative charge because of its “*political legitimacy*” the BBC also abandons any claim to treating news in an impartial way. In contradistinction to its own government, most international bodies, and common sense, the BBC wishes to protect organisations which blow up innocent civilians, provided that the civilians are Israelis.

We consider that the way in which the BBC refrains from labelling as ‘terrorist’ certain groups attacking Israelis is discriminatory, inaccurate and impartial. Its explanation of its policy is incoherent. Its execution of that policy is an indefensible public disgrace.

**Trevor Asserson**

**Lee Kern**

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# SCHEDULE I

## MEDIA OUTPUT RECORDED FOR THIS REPORT

TV/RADIO STATION	PROGRAMME	TIME
BBC RADIO FOUR	The Today Programme	0800-0900
BBC ONE	Iraq War: Ten O'Clock Special	1000-
BBC RADIO FIVE	The Midday News	1200-1300
BBC RADIO FOUR	The Six O'Clock News	1800-1830
BBC ONE	The Six O'Clock News	1800-1830
BBC TWO	Newsnight	2230-2320

### **BBC ONLINE**

BBC Online Reports were monitored at 1000 and 2100

## SCHEDULE II

### EXTRACT FROM THE RESPONSE OF THE BBC TO BBCWATCH REPORT DECEMBER 2002

Use of language: terrorism. (Report pp13-15)

The charge here is that the BBC uses double standards: failing to use the word "terrorist" to describe those who attack Israeli civilians, while sometimes using the word to describe people who kill civilians from other countries. The Report claims that the BBC "*puts itself above the law and the dictionary.*"

As far as the claim that the BBC is putting itself above the law and-the dictionary goes, we are unaware of any law compelling journalists to describe particular sorts of people as terrorists; and we do not believe there is any agreed international definition of what constitutes a terrorist group - and certainly none that gets round the pejorative charge the word carries - which is what makes it so difficult a word for the BBC, which seeks neutral precision in its language.

As far as BBC editorial policy goes, the key text here comes from the BBC *Producers' Guidelines* (18.2):

*Reporting terrorist violence is an area that particularly tests our international services. Our credibility is severely undermined if international audiences detect a bias for or against any of those involved. Neutral language is the key: even the word "terrorist" can appear judgmental in parts of the world where there is no clear consensus about the legitimacy of militant political groups.*

Policy in this area is in a constant state of development. Increasing amounts of our journalism - although primarily produced for a domestic audience - can now be readily accessed by international audiences through the Internet, or via BBC World. As a result of the BBC becoming a global broadcaster, a policy developed for our international journalism, is now increasingly applicable to our domestic journalism. This suggests that we should become less rather than more ready to label particular people as "terrorists."

And this, by and large, is what is happening. Partly this is a laudable desire to avoid cliché. BBC journalism values precision. The word "terrorist" has been bandied about so often, and sometimes without much thought, that there is a danger of it ceasing to mean very much, or any longer to be a usefully enlightening label. But partly it is also a recognition that the word carries emotional weight and thus runs the risk of partiality. We have to be alert to our many audiences who rely on us to stand back from what they would see as political engagement.

This, it has to be said, is sometimes easier to say than to do. We are not attempting to banish the word terrorist from the lexicon. We would never attempt to censor an interviewee who wished to describe a group who attacked civilians as "terrorists." But it seems right that, in our own lexicon, we should be less rather than more ready to