

The BBC Goes Native

An Analysis of BBC Arabic

by

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I Introduction

The BBC has been broadcasting for some years in Arabic on radio. In March 2008 it will commence broadcasting in Arabic on television. This is likely to increase the impact of the BBC in the Arabic speaking world.

Our study of BBC Arabic radio broadcasts shows what a baleful influence that has been, providing the Arab speaking world with a 'respectable' platform for terrorist organizations, rogue states and those who hate the USA and Israel. We believe that BBC Arabic Television will follow the same pattern.

II Methodology

We decided to conduct a study of BBC Arabic during the 2006 War between Israel and the Hizbollah in Southern Lebanon because the war presented a sizeable body of material about a single unfolding story.

We recorded, translated and transcribed the BBC's principal news analysis programme, Hadeeth Al-Sa'a, for a period of four weeks from 19 July to 20 August 2006. We analysed views expressed by the invited programme guests whose selection we believe is the weather vane of BBC attitudes.

We categorised all programme guests, based on what they said, as either neutral or likely to encourage support or antipathy for one of the warring parties. In order to lend depth to the categorisation, we graded their attitude as mild (1) or forceful (2). We also graded the likely impact of an individual guest based both on his status, the institution he represented and the nature of his argument and the manner of its conveyance. The aggregate words spoken multiplied by the attitude and impact grades provided a 'weighted word' count.

Our detailed findings are set out in the attached table at Schedule I.¹ We set out in Schedule II a summary of views expressed by individual programme guests together with selected quotations which we think indicate principal views held by the person quoted.

We have not considered the time given to individuals. What they say, rather than the speed at which they say it, appears to us to be a more sensible measure.

III BBC Obligations

The BBC has an obligation to be fair and impartial. It fails time and time again, as our earlier reports have shown. The Independent Panel, set up by the BBC to analyse its Middle East broadcasts, recognised the systemic problem within the BBC and recommended that it set up a 'guiding hand' to monitor its programmes to ensure that it achieves its obligation of due impartiality.² The BBC refused and instead set Jeremy Bowen in charge of its Middle East broadcasts, despite there having been questions raised as to his impartiality.

The BBC guidelines explain that:

"...due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles".³

The BBC has always ignored our calls for it to explain how it interprets those words. In fact the BBC appears to ignore them. Thus it refuses for example to use the word 'terrorist' to describe the blowing up of a school bus full of children, because it wishes to remain "neutral".⁴ This refusal was maintained notwithstanding a call from the Independent Panel to use the word terrorist more widely.⁵

Hizbollah is listed by the UK government, amongst many others, as a "terrorist organisation." This is the same UK government through whose laws the BBC was born and is sustained. Hizbollah is armed and trained by Iran, a country whose President has called for the total destruction of Israel.⁶ This is a public call for genocide. Israel has a free press; an independent judiciary; and representative forms of Government. Iran and the Hizbollah do not. If the BBC had remained attached to democratic principles it should be more ready to give air time to the dilemmas of a democratic Israel than to its undemocratic enemies.

In fact we identified 17 spokespeople for Hizbollah and Iran amongst programme guests and only 5 for Israel.⁷

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the BBC has in fact become detached from democratic principles and has become a proactive participant in the war of ideas, reflecting back to the Arabic speaking world some of its nastiest views.

IV Overview of Findings

We found that, excluding 'neutral' guests, some 82% of programme guests were pro Hizbollah and some 18% pro Israel.⁸ Our analysis of weighted words produced identical results – 82% weighted words pro Hizbollah and 18% pro Israel.

In terms of attitudes to the 2006 War, our findings are alarming, but given our previous reports, unsurprising. The airtime given by BBC Arabic to the pro Hizbollah position outweighed that given to the pro Israel position by a ratio of some 4.5 to 1.

What was more surprising was the very marked anti American sentiment which we detected. Many programme guests expressed blatantly and viciously anti American positions, examples of which are set out below. While this unto itself may be acceptable and even desirable in a

free press, the latitude afforded to these guests in sharing their sentiments, the highly evident disproportion in the representation of such views and the relative absence of challenge of these views in a manner which would conform with journalistic principles of impartiality and balance prompt serious concern.

In addition we came across a number of quite extreme statements. For example we were told that the bombing of an electricity station was a “*crime*” which is “*unprecedented historically*”⁹ and we learn that it is US policy “*to crush the Palestinians completely and to take all of their lands.*”¹⁰ When comments as extreme as this go uncorrected and unchallenged, the BBC appears to have tossed its moral compass into the waves and completely to have lost its bearings.

What emerges is a BBC which is providing a solid and respectable platform for anti Western ideologues. Many of these people have respectable sounding titles and doubtless – on television – will be smartly turned out. However their words will support people seeking to undermine the social values of those who built the BBC and who continue to pay for it.

V Attitudes towards the USA

The following is a selection of some of the statements made by various programme guests, indicating their attitudes towards the USA. The identity of the speaker and date of the interview are in the endnotes, together with a reference to the page in Schedule II where the full quotation can be found.

When reading these words it should be remembered that they were broadcast by the BBC, the incumbent national UK broadcaster, during a period when the UK had soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan fighting shoulder to shoulder with the USA against a threat of Islamist terrorism which had brought bloody death and destruction to the streets of both London and New York.

While some of the statements are by themselves innocuous, taken together they amount to a campaign to delegitimise and demonise the USA in the eyes of the Arabic speaking world.

“...[we] are doubting their [America’s] sincerity and respect”¹¹

“America has to change its politics and speak honestly”¹²

“That [Bush] government wanted to have complete control over the world”¹³

“...the world, which is controlled by the US”¹⁴

“...the main side of this conflict is the US”¹⁵

“As we all know on the Arab street, if your enemy is Israel or America, you are on the right side”¹⁶

“...the problem is not with Israel; it is with the American Government...American politics is a failure that has no logic”¹⁷

“This talk about the war being that of Iran and Syria is nonsense. However, it is true that this is an American war; that was stated clearly by Condoleeza Rice”¹⁸

“Hizbollah has been leading this fight with dignity and justice... the positions of Europe and America center on their own obsessions ... their war on terror... and they have considered Hizbollah a terrorist group, which is, of course, wrong”¹⁹

“...there is a kind of vision in the American government...to crush the Palestinians completely and to take all of their lands”²⁰

“...the Americans constantly talk about breaking the hearts and minds of the Arabs and Muslims”²¹

“This new [American] strategy...is totally contrary to the principles of human rights”²²

VI Israel Demonised

The 2006 War started when Hizbollah invaded Israeli territory, attacked an army convoy killing some Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two others. Israel responded with a massive bombardment of Hizbollah positions and economic targets in South Lebanon, being the area controlled by Hizbollah. This was followed by an invasion in the last days of the war. Hizbollah rained thousands of medium range missiles on Israeli civilian areas.

There were civilian and military deaths and destruction on both sides, although all agree that the Lebanese suffered more deaths and greater destruction. There were massive population evacuations in both Israel and Lebanon from the affected areas. Israel was criticised internationally for overreacting to the initial aggression. After the war Amnesty International accused both sides of carrying out indiscriminate attacks against civilians.²³

The BBC Arabic gives little indication of the destruction, the evacuations and the deaths (often of Israeli Arabs), caused by the thousands of Hizbollah rockets fired into Israel. By contrast some of the language used to describe Israel is hysterical in tone and the translated transcript reads like an Islamist extremist tract. Here are some examples:

Facing the “Israeli aggression”²⁴

Israel is said to have “evil objectives... this way of twisting things and the aggressive attitude”²⁵

“...the Israeli military machine...works to a great extent based on hatred”²⁶

“Israelis, who are violating all international law”²⁷

“...breaching all of the international laws”²⁸

“The crimes that they are committing...a real crime, which contradicts all of the laws”²⁹

“...barbaric Israeli attack”³⁰

*“...the barbaric Israeli army”*³¹

Lebanon is facing *“a barbaric war”*³²

They are *“destroying villages completely”*; they are *“racist barbaric”*³³

*“We are facing a monster who does not care about the law or about morals...a killer monster”*³⁴

*“...Israel is the deadly monster...a destructive monster”*³⁵

*“They are committing massacres”*³⁶

*“... the atrocities in Lebanon that we have seen so far from Israel, including all of their massacres”*³⁷

There is a need for an *“assurance against further [Israeli] massacres”*³⁸

They refer to *“a month of killing our children”*³⁹

There is reference to *“this ugly crime against the Lebanese and the Palestinian people”*⁴⁰ (notwithstanding that Israelis including Israeli Arabs were in fact being killed by Hizbollah rockets at the time.)

*“...this is collective punishment, Nazi punishment”*⁴¹

VII Analysis of the Causes of the War

Almost all commentators at the time agree that the initial Hizbollah incursion and kidnap of two Israeli soldiers caused the war. Without it there would have been no war. One obtains a very different view from listening to BBC Arabic:

*“...the kidnapping of the two soldiers was just an excuse”*⁴²

*“I believe that the reason for this attack is not the two soldiers”*⁴³

*“...we all know that this attack over the last three weeks has nothing to do with the release of the Israeli detainees...Israel wanted to destroy the infrastructure of Lebanon and this is part of historical revenge against the Lebanese people”*⁴⁴

*“Olmert took...the kidnap of the Israeli soldiers as an excuse to invade, destroy and kill innocent people”*⁴⁵

*“...I don't see any relationship between Israel's attacks on Lebanon and the existence of Hizbollah”*⁴⁶

VIII Absurd Comments

There are some comments made by programme guests which are so shrill and absurd that they should disqualify these guests from being given air time by any serious broadcaster. The BBC Arabic brings us the following gems:

“Israel is a country that wants to expand and they have a plan to force on to the regions of Palestine, Lebanon or even Egypt”.⁴⁷ (In fact, Israel has voluntarily withdrawn from territory in Gaza (Palestine), Lebanon and Egypt.)

*“...barbaric Israeli attack, which kills everybody everywhere”*⁴⁸

“We faced Israel in 1967 and won militarily”.⁴⁹ Israel would doubtless be happy to suffer a repeat of its military defeat of 1967.

*“These are crimes unprecedented historically”*⁵⁰ (referring to the Israeli bombing of electricity stations).

“Israel is extensively targeting every part of Lebanon”.⁵¹ In fact, Israel was targeting Hizbollah controlled South Lebanon. In Beirut people were sunbathing on the beach.

*“...it became apparent that Israel is targeting the entire Lebanon, its people, and infrastructure”*⁵²

*“...all the massacres committed by Israel, like no one in history has seen something similar. It is even worse than what Germany committed”*⁵³

IX Dangerous Comments

UK and indeed Western foreign policy is presently pre-occupied with a belligerent Iran which is issuing blood curdling threats against the West, supporting terrorists who threaten the West – including Hizbollah – and is building a nuclear capability.

One would like to imagine that the BBC would be supportive of the intellectual battle which the West is fighting. At the very least, one would hope that the BBC would be balanced in its coverage of the issue. In fact the BBC appears to be lending support and providing a platform to those who legitimise Iranian aims and deprecate those of the West.

*“I hope that Iran has something to scare Israel, as an Arab citizen from the Middle East. I wish that all Arab countries would have nuclear weapons”*⁵⁴

*“Iran’s opinion is rooted in morals and rules, legal and logical”*⁵⁵

*“...claims of Iranian instigation are untrue”*⁵⁶

Europe and America *“have considered Hizbollah a terrorist group, which is of course wrong”*⁵⁷

The Hizbollah soldiers are referred to as *“martyrs...the honour resistance which does the utmost that any group can do...to defend their country”*.⁵⁸

Calling the Lebanese who died in the conflict *“martyrs [whose] blood is still fresh”*.⁵⁹

“Hizbollah was clear that their operation...targeted military objectives, not civilians, as did Israel”⁶⁰

“I will ask Iran, and every Arab country who can, to have nuclear weapons”⁶¹

X Conclusion

The BBC Arabic radio appears to be out of control. It is providing a platform for a wide range of anti Western and in particular anti American ideologues to express their nasty, at times absurd and sometimes dangerous views in a forum that is almost invisible to most Westerners. The often unchallenged broadcast of such views by the BBC gives those views a veneer of legitimacy and truthfulness.

Overall, in the 25 programmes analysed, there emerges an unmistakable identification with parties with whom Israel is in conflict. While most programs provided a forum for the expression of a variety of positions, the blatant disproportion, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in the voice afforded to the respective views points to an unequivocally biased programme to the detriment of the Israeli position. Frequently, programme hosts make no pretence at objectivity, and even when the questions posed by the host were relatively neutral, they were often tainted by clear animosity toward Israel and the West, while generally no attempts were made to challenge the virulently anti-Israel and anti-West views expressed.

The relative lack of Arabic speakers amongst those who pay for the BBC means that the BBC does not benefit from the criticisms of the general listening public as it does for its English speaking programmes. The corrective influence which those complainants normally provide is necessarily absent.

Having rejected the Independent Panel’s recommendation to appoint a “guiding hand” to monitor its Middle East output, the BBC has no systems in place to know what its own journalists think. We are not aware of any systematic method it has for monitoring programme content. It seems that the BBC has less control of its Arabic programmes than of any others, because it appears that relatively few of its senior staff speak Arabic.

We are left with the disturbing fear that the most powerful media organisation in the world has left the fox guarding the hen house.

TREVOR ASSERSON
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Biographies

Trevor Asserson is a UK solicitor. Having been for many years head of litigation at one of the UK's leading law firms and subsequently a senior partner in one of the world's largest law firms, in 2005 Trevor started his own firm which he continues to lead.

Deena Pinson is a graduate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She is a researcher and writer and has contributed to numerous academic publications.

¹ Schedules are only available in the electronic copy of this document, available at bbcwatch.com

² The panel recommended that "there should be a strong editorial 'Guiding Hand'. That requires a senior figure, with the clout to provide direction and resources, to give more secure editorial planning, grip and oversight." This will "ensure consistent full and fair coverage".

Report of the Independent Panel for the BBC Governors on Impartiality of BBC coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. April 2006. www.bbcgovernorsarchive.co.uk/docs/reviews/panel_report_final.pdf.

³ BBC Editorial Guidelines. Section 4 "Impartiality and Diversity of Opinion".

http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/assets/guidelinedocs/chapter_four.pdf

⁴ The BBC is entirely inconsistent in this respect, using the word 'terrorist' very freely and frequently when describing the bomb attacks in London on 7 July 2005.

See, for example Limbajee, Khevyn "London: Terrorist Attack" BBC News 8 July 2005.

⁵ "We think they should call terrorist acts 'terrorism' because that term is clear and well understood". Report of the Independent Panel for the BBC Governors on Impartiality of BBC coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. April 2006.

⁶ In October 2005 the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, described Israel as a "disgraceful blot" that should be "wiped off the map".

⁷ Schedule 1 "BBC 'Hadeeth' Table Breakdown".

⁸ Schedule 1 "BBC 'Hadeeth' Table Breakdown".

⁹ 3 August 2006. Musallam, Tal'at. Retired Egyptian Major General. [See page 80 in Schedule II]

¹⁰ 20 August 2006. Hamada, Hassan. Lebanese Journalist and Political Commentator. [60]

¹¹ 27 July 2006. Gharib, Dr. Edmond. Lecturer, International Relations, American University, Washington DC. [59]

¹² 20 August 2006. Al-Barghouti, Dr. Mustafa. Director of Palestinian Media and Studies Institute, Member of Palestinian Legislative Council. [16]

¹³ 8 August 2006. Al-Sayyed, Dr. Muhammad Sa'id. Deputy Director of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. [32]

¹⁴ 8 August 2006. Al-Sayyed, Dr. Muhammad Sa'id. Deputy Director of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. [32]

¹⁵ 8 August 2006. Shams al-Waizin, Masha Allah. Iranian Researcher and Specialist. [100]

¹⁶ 20 July 2006. Awad, Dr. Muhammad. Cabinet Minister, PA. [41]

¹⁷ 24 July 2006. Al-Nuyami, Dr. Musib. Editor in Chief of Al-Vefagh Daily Newspaper (Iran). [30]

¹⁸ 16 August 2006. Izz al-Din, Hassan. Hizbollah Member. [67]

¹⁹ 26 July 2006. Khan, Abd al-Wahhab Badr. Deputy Editor of Al-Hayan Daily Newspaper. [75]

²⁰ 20 August 2006. Hamada, Hassan. Lebanese Journalist and Political Commentator. [60]

²¹ 25 July 2006. Atwan, Abd al-Bari. Editor in Chief of Al-Quds Al-Arabi Daily (London). [38]

²² 29 July 2006. Fawzi al-Shuaybi, Dr. Imad. Director of the Center for Strategic Data and Studies, Damascus. [54]

²³ Amnesty International "Israel/Lebanon: Hizbullah's Attacks on Northern Israel" 14 September 2006. "During the recent 34-day war between Hizbullah and Israel both sides committed serious violations of international humanitarian law".

"Directing attacks at civilians or civilian objects is a violation of international humanitarian law".

²⁴ 17 August 2006. Naila Muawad, Lebanese Minister. [79]

²⁵ 19 August 2006. Bu'zenab, Ghalib. Senior Hizbollah Member. [48]

²⁶ 5 August 2006. Al-Naggar, Ahmad. Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies; "Al-Ahram" Newspaper, Cairo. [27]

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- ²⁷ 25 July 2006. Atwan, Abd al-Bari. Editor in Chief of Al-Quds Al-Arabi Daily (London). [38]
- ²⁸ 12 August 2006. Nafi'a, Dr. Hasan. Dean of Political Science, Cairo University. [85]
- ²⁹ 30 July 2006. Saraya, Usama. Editor in Chief of Al-Ahram Daily, Cairo. [95]
- ³⁰ 20 July 2006. Abu Zayd, Hikmat. Journalist, political analyst and former PR officer of former Lebanese PM Salim al-Huss. [10]
- ³¹ 8 August 2006. Khan, Abd al-Wahhab Badr. Deputy Editor of Al-Hayan Daily Newspaper. [76]
- ³² 8 August 2006. Khouri, Rafiq. Editor in Chief of Al-Anwar Daily. [77]
- ³³ 9 August 2006. Bishara, Dr. Azmi. Israeli Arab Member of Knesset. [48]
- ³⁴ 20 July 2006. Nafi'a, Dr. Hasan. Dean of Political Science, Cairo University. [83]
- ³⁵ 27 July 2006. Nafi'a, Dr. Hasan. Dean of Political Science, Cairo University. [84]
- ³⁶ 23 July 2006. Rahal, Dr. Hussein. Hizbollah Spokesperson. [90]
- ³⁷ 25 July 2006. Hamzawi, Dr. Amr. Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington. [62]
- ³⁸ 14 August 2006. Suwailem, Hussam. Retired Egyptian Major General. [111]
- ³⁹ 17 August 2006. Al-Mussawi, Nawwaf. Hizbollah Representative. [24]
- ⁴⁰ 2 August 2006. Ashki, Dr. Anwar. Director of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, Saudi Arabia. [36]
- ⁴¹ 31 July 2006. Al-Himali, Ahmad. Israeli Affairs Commentator. [22]
- ⁴² 22 July 2006. Shlala, Rafiq. Lebanese Government Spokesperson. [104]
- ⁴³ 22 July 2006. Sidqian, Dr. Saleh. Director of the Arab Institute in Teran. [104]
- ⁴⁴ 3 August 2006. Ghanem, Dr. Asad. Department of Political Science, The University of Haifa. [58]
- ⁴⁵ 15 August 2006. Duri, Latif. Secretary for the Committee for Israeli-Palestinian Dialogue, Meretz Political Party. [52]
- ⁴⁶ 19 August 2006. Nafi'a, Dr. Hasan. Dean of Political Science, Cairo University. [82]
- ⁴⁷ 20 July 2006. Nafi'a, Dr. Hasan. Dean of Political Science, Cairo University. [83]
- ⁴⁸ 20 July 2006. Abu, Zayd, Hikmat. Journalist, political analyst and former PR officer of former Lebanese PM Salim al-Huss. [10]
- ⁴⁹ 2 August 2006. Ashki, Dr. Anwar. Director of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies, Saudi Arabia. [36]
- ⁵⁰ 3 August 2006. Musallam, Tal'at. Retired Egyptian Major General. [80]
- ⁵¹ 13 August 2006. Salman, Talal. Editor in Chief of Al-Safir Daily Newspaper, Beirut. [94]
- ⁵² 2 August 2006. Saraya, Usama. Editor in Chief of Al-Ahram Daily, Cairo. [96]
- ⁵³ 20 August 2006. Hamada, Hassan. Lebanese Journalist and Political Commentator. [60]
- ⁵⁴ 24 July 2006. Al-Khazen, Jihad. Journalist. [21]
- ⁵⁵ 24 July 2006. Al-Nuyami, Dr. Musib. Editor in Chief of Al-Vefagh Daily Newspaper (Iran). [30]
- ⁵⁶ 24 July 2006. Al-Sayyed, Dr. Muhammad Sa'id. Deputy Director of Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. [31]
- ⁵⁷ 26 July 2006. Khan, Abd al-Wahhab Badr. Deputy Editor of Al-Hayan Daily Newspaper. [75]
- ⁵⁸ 30 July 2006. Khalil, Anwar. Lebanese MP, Beqa Valley. [74]
- ⁵⁹ 30 July 2006. Saraya, Usama. Editor in Chief of Al-Ahram Daily, Cairo. [95]
- ⁶⁰ 31 July 2006. Ahmad, Dr. Ahmad Yusuf. Director of the Institute for Arab Research Studies, Cairo. [12]
- ⁶¹ 31 July 2006. Al-Khazen, Jihad. Journalist. [22]