

Israeli-Palestinian Impartiality Review
BBC Governance Unit
Room 211,
35 Marylebone High Street
London,
W1U 4AA

Friday 25th November 2005

Dear Sirs,

Thank you for giving the Muslim Council of Britain this opportunity to comment on the BBC's coverage of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

It would be fair to say that there is a widespread and strongly held perception among many British Muslims that large sections of the media are unfair in their coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and view them as being biased in favour of Israel. At the Muslim Council of Britain, we believe that this bias is particularly pronounced in the print media, but the broadcast media is also culpable. Indeed, as several studies have shown that people trust the broadcast media more than the print media, we believe broadcasters have a greater responsibility to be impartial in their treatment of major news stories.

This disillusionment with much of our established media has led to many British Muslims seeking out alternative sources for news including from the Muslim media, the internet and other foreign based satellite stations, including al-Jazeera.

Below we list areas of the BBC's coverage which have caused us the most concern in recent years with respect to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- a) Many viewers could be forgiven for not knowing that Israel has been illegally occupying Palestinian lands for almost 40 years now. This is because all too often news reporters fail to point this rather basic fact out to BBC viewers or readers of the BBC News online website. Indeed, in a rather alarming finding in a study by the Glasgow University Media Group, they found that more viewers believed it was the Palestinians who were occupying Israeli land rather than vice versa. You can imagine how failing to understand this core issue can distort the way one comprehends current events in the region. We would rightly expect most Britons to know that it was Iraq that invaded Kuwait in August 1990 – and we would be appalled if anyone thought that the reverse had occurred. Why therefore – after almost 40 years of illegal occupation – should we accept a situation where many people are uncertain about who is illegally occupying whose land in Israel-Palestine?

Whereas the BBC sometimes qualifies its news reporting by saying that many Israelis believe that the occupied territories are theirs by "God's decree," and that the Palestinians dispute this, rarely does the BBC inform its viewers that it is the long-held opinion of the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, successive British governments (including the current one) and the

European Union that such occupation of Palestinian lands and the denial of their right of return by Israel is illegal under international law.

Commenting on this situation in a passionately argued comment piece for *The Observer* (20 June 2004) the former BBC Middle East correspondent, Tim Llewellyn, criticised the BBC News Management saying that:

"The [BBC news management] is, by turns, schmoozed and pestered by the Israeli embassy. The pressure by this hyperactive, skilful mission - and by Israel's many influential and well-organized friends - is unremitting and productive... That 37 years of military occupation, the violation of the Palestinians' human, political and civil rights and the continuing theft of their land might have triggered this crisis is a concept either lost or underplayed. Nor are we told much about how Israel was created, the epochal dilemma of the refugees, the roots of the disaster... The result is that the Israelis have identity, existence, a story the viewer understands. The Palestinians are anonymous, alien, their personalities and their views buried under their burden of plight and the vernacular of 'terror'. I am not confident of change. The reasons for this tentative, unbalanced attitude to the central Middle East story are powerful... The general BBC and ITN attitude is to bow to the strongest pressure. The Arabs have little clout in Britain, and their governments and supporters have much responsibility to bear for not presenting their side of the story and for abysmal public relations."

It is not just a distinguished reporter like Tim Llewellyn who worries about the tendency to bow to the strongest pressure. The award-winning reporter Robert Fisk too refers to this tendency in his most recent book. "Ever-supine" is how he describes the BBC's indulgence of Israeli politicians (Robert Fisk, *The Great War For Civilisation – The Conquest of The Middle East*, p539).

- b) As a consequence of the failure to clearly enunciate the above, many viewers will be unaware of the desperate and frustrating conditions under which many Palestinians live. They may not know that hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were made refugees when the state of Israel was founded in 1948 and were made refugees a second time in 1967 when Israel occupied the Gaza and West Bank. Official Israeli policy allows anyone who is Jewish to "return" to Israel, even if they and many of their ancestors going back hundreds of years, had never lived in Israel, and yet it denies Palestinian refugees with valid land deeds to return to their own home towns, their villages, their houses.

Israel has a stated policy of ensuring that its population retains a Jewish majority. By way of contrast with apartheid South Africa, reporters rarely question how Israel can claim to be a democracy and yet still pursue such a blatantly race-based policy.

Because of this lack of historical background there is a tendency among reporters to portray the Palestinians as initiating trouble and the Israelis are then presented as "responding" or "retaliating". This is manifestly unfair and serves to reinforce the image of an embattled Israel defending itself from

hostile foes instead of the actual situation in which it is a mightily armed US-backed occupying power.

- c) We believe that Israeli figures are given far more time to air their views than the Palestinians. In their study 'Bad News From Israel', the authors Greg Philo and Mike Berry found that on British television, particularly on BBC1, there was a preponderance of official 'Israeli perspectives'. Israelis were interviewed or reported more than twice as much as Palestinians. There were also a large number of statements broadcast from US politicians who – for various reasons - tended to strongly support Israel.
- d) We believe there is also strong emphasis placed in news reports on Israeli casualties, relative to Palestinians even though the Palestinians have suffered around four times the number of deaths as the Israelis since the start of the second intifada in September 2000. Indeed, according to Philo and Berry, in one week in March 2002 which the BBC reported as having the most Palestinian casualties since the start of the second Intifada, there was actually more coverage on the news of Israeli deaths.

By overly focussing on the 'bang-bang' stories, it is possible to underplay the larger picture of illegal occupation, routine humiliation, and dire economic situation that the Palestinians actually face. In such circumstances, the deaths of Palestinians in one's and two's at the hands of the Israeli army becomes mere 'background noise' that rarely – if ever - makes the splash headlines often allocated to suicide bombings against Israelis.

To their credit, BBC News Online did – in the initial months following the start of the second intifada – list the numbers of Israeli and Palestinian fatalities to date at the end of their reports. However, this practice was soon abandoned and we wonder how many viewers are now aware of the true ratio of Israelis and Palestinians that have been killed since September 2000?

- e) How many viewers will be aware that illegal Jewish settlements have gobbled up over 40% of the Palestinian West Bank? Not many, we fear. Again, much of the responsibility for this lack of awareness must be squarely placed at the door of news organisations such as the BBC. Despite regular news reports from the region, the most basic causes that lie behind the ongoing conflict are rarely communicated to viewers. We believe that providing these basic facts would enormously help viewers to begin to make sense of what is happening in Israel-Palestine.
- f) In the past, news organisations, including the BBC, used to attempt to convey how Israel was illegally occupying East Jerusalem (overrun in 1967) by having their reporters sign off by saying they were reporting from 'Arab East Jerusalem'. Today, no such effort is made and it has become routine for reporters to simply state that they are in 'Jerusalem' – thereby, unwittingly acquiescing in Israel's plan to Judaize the Holy City in defiance of international law.

We can accept that it is not always possible given the time constraints that news reporters face to give the full background to events in the region, however, an effort to provide some basic facts should surely be undertaken. The BBC has available resources that are the envy of just about every other media organisation in the world. Can in-depth links not be provided on BBC News Online or on the new BBC Digital format which would enable viewers to obtain an easily accessible overview of the origins of the conflict and the reasons behind its continuance?

We are appending to this note two past complaints which we sent to the BBC's Controller of Editorial Policy, Stephen Whittle on the subject of Israel-Palestine coverage on the Today Programme, Radio 4. We usually send our complaints to Mr Whittle who to his credit always forwards it to the relevant person at the BBC to respond to. Unfortunately we do not seem to have received any response to the two letters attached but we hope they will give you a flavour of our other concerns in this area.

Once again, we thank you for giving us the opportunity to make this submission and we would be delighted to help you with any further information should you require it.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Inayat Bunglawala,
Secretary,
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http://www.mcb.org.uk/media/09_10_03_2.php

BBC Radio 4, Today Programme
The need to challenge ex-Mossad head on Israel's WMD

Stephen Whittle
Controller, Editorial Policy
BBC

9th October 2003

Dear Stephen,

The Today programme just after 7.30am today carried an interview with the former head of the Israeli intelligence service, Mossad. This gentleman explained why he thought Iran's alleged nuclear weapons procurement programme was a threat to the world and needed to be 'dealt with'. At no time during the interview did John Humphrys pose the one question that all Muslims (and I am sure a lot of non-Muslims too) must have been asking themselves at that moment: why are not Israel's **KNOWN** possession of nuclear weapons regarded as a threat to the region's stability? Surely, if Israel has developed nuclear weapons then other states in the region may want to do the same to act as a deterrent?

Also, earlier this week, Israel carried out a military strike against a sovereign neighbouring country, Syria. Imagine, if the reverse scenario had occurred and a Syrian official was being questioned - can we imagine the Today programme not asking him about his country's illegal actions?

Kind regards,

Inayat Bunglawala,
Secretary,
Media Committee,
The Muslim Council of Britain

http://www.mcb.org.uk/media/06_1_03.php

'Today' programme bulletin - need to mention full facts

Mr Kevin Marsh
Editor, Today Programme
BBC Radio 4

6 Jan 2003

Dear Mr Marsh,

We have received a number of complaints from British Muslims who were listening to this morning's Today programme on Radio 4. They said that at around 7.09am there was an item about yesterday's twin bombings in Tel Aviv which have killed at least 22 innocent people (Israelis and non-Israeli immigrants) and wounded over a hundred others.

Our correspondents say that no mention was made of the fact that at least 69 Palestinians (including women and children) have been killed by the Israeli army since 1st December 2002. As these killings have been on a daily basis they do not usually appear as a leading item in your news reports. Indeed, since the second Intifada began in September 2000 over 1800 Palestinians have been killed and over 40,000 wounded, while the number of Israeli dead is around 700. We believe it is important that these facts should be pointed out in your reports because they show that the killings are not just perpetrated by one side. Eleven Palestinian children were killed by Israeli soldiers in December alone, as well as a 95-year-old woman - the oldest victim to date.

The Today reporter then went on apparently to discuss what sort of 'response' could now be expected from the Israelis to this latest tragedy. We are concerned about the use of this word 'response' as it implies that the Palestinians are 'initiating' the attacks while the Israelis are merely 'responding' to them. This is a travesty of the actual situation which is that the Israelis have been illegally occupying Palestinian land for over 35 years now, while several generations of Palestinian children have known nothing other than occupation, humiliation, rotting refugee camps and poverty. It is this illegal occupation of Palestinian land by the Israelis which lies at the heart of this conflict. Palestinian attacks on Israelis are hardly ever described in your reports as 'responses' to Israeli killings and assassinations. We believe this same concern about the use of terminology by the BBC and other news organisations was also highlighted by the Glasgow University Media Group's report last year about the media's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Of course, it is possible that these listeners were mistaken about what they had heard, in which case, I would like to apologise in advance.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Inayat Bunglawala
Secretary,
Media Committee,
The Muslim Council of Britain