

.....

Editorial coverage of Israel and the Palestinians

i) Our overall editorial strategy

Our strategy for covering Israel and the Palestinians aims to be consistent with our overall strategy for BBC News. That is, above all, a commitment to reporting the story first hand, through the eyes of our correspondents on the ground. To this journalistic principle we add specialist knowledge, both in the Middle East and London, so that we can more easily explain and calibrate developments in a part of the world where there are two histories and two different interpretations of news events, as well as sharp political divisions within both Israel and the different Palestinian groupings.

This editorial strategy is reflected in four key areas: we invest in newsgathering and specialist expertise in the region; we add extra analysis from our Middle East editor; we aim to provide a range of output and analysis on our programmes, appropriate to their format and audience; and above all we aim to uphold our impartiality, independence and integrity while reporting a complex story in a pressurised environment.

ii) Investing in expertise

In order to report the story properly, we invest more resources in our coverage than any other news organisation.

In Jerusalem, we employ three Middle East correspondents under the direction of a bureau Editor and a senior producer. Each correspondent has developed an area of expertise and has core responsibilities for specific programmes, but will also be expected, when necessary, to file for the full range of BBC output. We also have a producer specifically to provide interview and feature material for radio.

To reflect our long standing commitment to reporting on the spot from both sides, we also have a Gaza Correspondent. The latest post-holder is Alan Johnston, who is the only western reporter to be permanently based in the Gaza Strip. He is a source of expertise on Palestinian politics and the militant factions, such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

As bureau Editor, Simon Wilson is expected to take the editorial lead on the ground and be a source of advice and expertise on BBC coverage throughout the region. We employ a team of experienced local production staff reflecting the rich mixture of the region.

(iii) Adding analysis

The challenge for our daily news coverage is to provide an appropriate balance between the reporting of a 'spot news' event and the analysis that might help set it in its context. This challenge is particularly acute on the television news bulletins, where space is at a premium, and because the context is often disputed by the two sides in the conflict. To add more analysis to our output, our strategy is to support the coverage of our bureau correspondents with a Middle East editor.

Jeremy Bowen's new role is, effectively, to take a bird's eye view of developments in the Middle East, providing analysis that might make a complex story more comprehensive or comprehensible for the audience, without the constraints of acting as a daily news correspondent. His remit is not just to add an extra layer of analysis to our reporting, but also to find stories away from the main agenda. It is important to note that although the Governors' review is concentrating on our coverage of Israel and the Palestinians, his role is wider - to explore and explain wider developments in the many countries of the Middle East.

Similarly, Tarik Kafala has been appointed as Middle East editor of BBC News Online in order to add extra authority to our website.

iv) Programme strategy - news

Our editors in London aim to provide impartial, fair, news coverage on their programmes, with a level of background information which is appropriate to the medium on which it is broadcast.

Our news bulletins, whether on radio or television, aim to be bulletins of record, so they will mainly cover *news* events from Israel or the occupied territories. News is a relative commodity and editors must weigh up such events against developments at home and abroad before making their selection. In the **television newsroom**, the Ten o'clock news has a more international agenda than the earlier bulletins and can be expected to carry more stories from the region. The BBC's Middle East editor is expected to provide further analysis of major or complex issues. From time to time, the Six or the Ten will

commission special foreign features – for example, on the aftermath of the Israeli army’s operation in Rafah.

Newsnight, as a daily news and current affairs programme, covers fewer stories than the news bulletins, but will do so at greater length. It will therefore report upon Israel and the Palestinians less frequently than the television news bulletins but, when it does so, it will aim to be distinctive. Through a mixture of longer format films, interviews and discussions it aims to explain issues in the region in greater depth and to shed light on sometimes unreported trends or points of view. Most reports will come from correspondents with extensive experience in the region, such as Mark Urban (a former BBC Jerusalem correspondent) and David Sells. Newsnight also uses BBC correspondents who specialise in the area, such as Jeremy Bowen, James Reynolds and Matthew Price.

The prime aim of our domestic news channel **News 24** is to cover breaking news, supported by specialist analysis where appropriate. Occasionally, however, it will devote time to tackling an issue in greater depth, such as its day-long broadcast of special reports from both sides of the barrier.

The **Radio News** bulletins, particularly those at 1800 and midnight on Radio 4, have more space than their television counterparts, and are able to cover developments more frequently than the television news bulletins. The bulletins’ primary remit is again reactive, to cover the main stories of the day, but the medium is one in which correspondents can naturally produce a blend of reporting and analysis, untrammelled by

the demands of pictures. The bulletins also have the space to commission “what does it all mean” reports so when appropriate, the BBC’s Middle East editor will provide further analysis of the issues involved. The Radio News coverage is informed by the twice daily link up with the World Service Department of the Radio News operation. A World Service planner works from the Radio News desk to enhance co-ordination.

The **Today** programme aims to provide in-depth analysis through longer-format reporting and studio interviews. With its wider network remit, it will cover fewer stories than the news bulletins, but at greater length, either through features-based reporting, or through the testing of political positions in interviews. It is important to note, however, that ‘features’ can be news-making: in one such Today report, James Reynolds uncovered the British government’s contacts with Hamas, which dominated that day’s news agenda. **Radio 5 Live Drive** will seek to update listeners on the day’s developments, in an informal, accessible, manner, mainly through presenter interviews with correspondents or guests. Radio Five Live has a remit to inform less well-informed and less widely read audiences, so the amount and complexity of our coverage on the Drive programme is adjusted accordingly. The bureau correspondents will also file for **Radio 1** news audiences, including the **Newsbeat** programme.

Inevitably, many of the reports on our daily news programmes are related to the conflict. But in recent months, we have also covered the nightlife scene in Tel Aviv, a conference for cartoonists in Jerusalem and a major archaeological find in the Gaza Strip.

Among the requests from both sides in the conflict is that we should more frequently recount its history in our daily journalism. We do not think daily news journalists have

the time in their reports to go into such a level of detail, not least as there are two versions of the history. Instead, our strategy is to supplement our news coverage by providing detailed background on **BBC News Online**. It has the space to carry more information than broadcast news programmes, helping readers to understand the political, historical or economic background to an event.

There are two key sections. Detailed Middle East news can be found in a dedicated site which is accessed from the BBC News home page. This site carries three or four main news stories, and a score of links to further Middle East reports, features or analysis. Here, there is a link to a Country Profile site, which provides in-depth background on Israel and the Palestinians. It contains archive material, facts and figures, background information and analysis. It also carries two comprehensive histories of the conflict - as a timeline and in maps. There is also a 'have your say' section so that web-users can make their views known. BBC News Online aims to react to events by demonstrating a depth of understanding and a commitment to explanation, so it will publish 'guides' to specific issues that are in the news – for example, the holy sites in Jerusalem or the West Bank barrier.

v) Programme strategy – weekly current affairs

Weekly current affairs programmes, on both radio and television, aim to provide, at greater length, the understanding, explanation and revelation that might otherwise be lost in the rush of daily news events. Under the new Director of News there is a greater emphasis on collaboration between daily news programmes and weekly current affairs, with the latter encouraged to broadcast some of its original journalism on the former.

The Channel Controllers of Radio 1, Ixtra, Radio 4 and Radio 5 Live are also keen for collaboration between daily and weekly journalism and actively encourage it.

With its remit to concentrate exclusively on foreign coverage, **This World** is the most regular platform in weekly television current affairs for covering Israel and the Palestinians. It aims to add insight through strong personal stories, or through long term filming, covering stories that represent a wider trend, process or development. For example, “Inside Israel’s jails” (which won two major prizes in November 2005 at the Foreign Press Association awards) showed the relationship between jailed Palestinians convicted of terrorist offences and their Israeli jailers, while “The Last Stand” recorded one family’s reaction to the Israeli withdrawal. Under its previous title, *Correspondent*, the programme examined Yasser Arafat’s relationship with the Al Aqsa brigades, and Mordechai Vanunu’s legacy. It also examined the impact of the barrier on three different communities – a Palestinian family, an Israeli settler family and a mixed community Kibbutz.

To this mixture, we aim to add political analysis and explanation by investing in landmark television series such as **Elusive Peace** which explored the peace process before and after the second intifada through the eyes of the participants, including President Clinton, Ariel Sharon and Yasser Arafat.

Like its television counterpart, **Radio current affairs** aims to tackle significant issues or stories with depth and expertise. Each year it will commission a landmark series on a key issue – for example, **A Year in the Arab-Israeli Crisis**, a four-part series presented by Edward Stourton. The programme’s aim was to be present with both sides at key

moments during the year, and to carry out in depth, high-level interviews with key players.

Other programmes about Israel and the Palestinians appear within regular strands, such as **From Our Own Correspondent** and **Crossing Continents**. The brief of Crossing Continents is to complement Radio 4's daily current affairs programmes with in-depth coverage from around the world – focusing on the human dimension of big international issues, with original, reliable, journalism and engaging story telling. For example, it followed the lives of three Israeli settler families in Gaza – before and after the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 - and examined the impact on Israeli society of the pull-out.

Our overall programme strategy can be summed up quite simply: on our daily news programmes, we aim to bring our audience the major news developments, with occasional features and a level of analysis that should make events explicable, while in our weekly current affairs programmes, we aim to provide a wider window on the world. A member of the audience who watches, listens and reads the full range of our output should be coherently and cogently informed about events in Israel and the occupied territories, and should better understand the complex forces that are at work.

(vi) Upholding impartiality

There are genuinely difficult issues in covering the Middle East. They range from the difficulty in reconciling facts on the ground, to arguments over language, context and history.

In the middle of a constant debate about our coverage, we aim, above all, to uphold our impartiality. This means that we aim to provide professional judgements where appropriate, but never promote our own personal opinions. Impartiality also means we place a premium on accuracy, and that we should report the facts first and explain their context. It does not mean that each and every story requires an interviewee from each side of any given argument, but there will be some stories of obvious and immediate controversy where this must clearly happen. To try to achieve impartiality, we aim to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range of views so that no significant strand of thought is absent or under represented.

Although impartiality cannot be measure scientifically it must be subjected to editorial review. In addition to the checks and balances provided by our editorial structure, we now monitor our output through regular reports, partly quantitative but mainly qualitative, from the senior editorial adviser, Malcolm Balen.

It is perhaps hard to appreciate the level of pressure that is placed on the BBC over its Middle East coverage. This means that it is vitally important for the BBC to maintain and is seen to be maintaining its independence. Our aim, therefore, is always to make accurate journalistic judgments for sound editorial reasons, not as the result of improper pressure. For example, we ran an interview with Mordechai Vanunu after his release from prison because we thought it was editorially justified, even though the Israeli government arrested several members of the production team and seized most of its tapes.

But it is nonetheless important to be aware of the reaction to our coverage and to calibrate it. We need to be able to reflect calmly on our audience's views, which are sometimes strongly expressed, while not, of course, undermining our independence, or being accused of doing so. To this end, the senior editorial adviser liaises informally with many interest groups and members of the audience and reports back to the Director of News. Each year, senior members of the BBC News editorial team also meet interest groups as part of their regular duties, for example, BICOM, CAABU and the Anglo-Israel Association. The Director of News and the Head of Newsgathering have been on a fact finding trip to Israel and the occupied territories to visit key people on both sides. (Both the Director General and deputy Director General have also visited the region in recent months).

The choice of language in covering this part of the world is often seen as a determinant of impartiality, or its failure, so we have written a 'key points guide' to help inform staff. It has been circulated to all of them via an e-mail link to the BBC News Analysis and Research website. The guide contains information on the appropriate language that producers might use, and some historical background on the conflict. Not every phrase can win the approval of one or both sides in the conflict, nor is this our motivation. The guide is instead designed to help us choose words carefully and consistently across all our programmes from a considered position. For example, the BBC uses the term 'barrier', to avoid the political connotations of using either 'security fence' – preferred by the Israeli government – or 'separation wall' – preferred by the Palestinians.

The key points guide is issued electronically so it can be regularly updated. More generally, the most sensitive linguistic or editorial policy issues that face all BBC

programme-makers, not just BBC News, (for example, the BBC's policy on the use or non-use of the word "terrorist") are determined by the Editorial Policy unit. Such policies are contained in the BBC producer guidelines, which are issued to all staff, and are agreed by the Board of Governors.

BBC News has also produced a guide to the background of nearly a hundred Middle East 'experts' who have appeared on some of our programmes, to help producers judge their likely views. Again, this is posted on the Analysis and Research website.

In addition, our senior foreign affairs analyst, Louisa Brooke at BBC News Analysis and Research, provides a regular source of expertise and knowledge for producers in London. She will post intranet briefings on the facts that lie behind big stories and organises regular seminars with guest speakers to help inform our staff. The new College of Journalism is shortly to launch an interactive training module on Israel and the Palestinians for all news staff, and separate workshops will start in the New Year.