

**REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT PANEL
FOR THE BBC GOVERNORS
ON IMPARTIALITY OF BBC COVERAGE
OF THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

April 2006

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IMPARTIALITY REVIEW: NOTE BY THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PANEL

We were appointed by the Governors to assess whether the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict meets the required standards of impartiality. All the members of the Panel, Lord Eames, Professor Stewart Purvis, Philip Stephens, and Dr Elizabeth Vallance, worked as a team. I am very grateful to them for the enthusiastic commitment each gave to what proved no small task.

I should also like to thank the many people, named in the Report, who helped us in carrying out the Review.

We considered a large number of programmes, examined a great deal of evidence, talked to many people inside the BBC and outside and visited the Middle East, mainly to meet BBC correspondents working there. The details of all this are set out in our Report.

As every viewer and listener knows, the BBC has an impressive record, produces a great range of output and has much of which it can be proud. This goes for news and current affairs, on radio and TV, and for its online content, which is widely regarded as leading the field.

The BBC's coverage of the conflict also attracts a good many complaints, each of which must be considered carefully on its merits. Many of them come, like much of the evidence put to us, from people taking sides in the conflict, suggesting that the BBC is biased against them.

Interestingly, the evidence shows that most viewers and listeners, at least within the UK, present a different challenge. They regard the BBC as unbiased. But they say they do not understand the conflict and, perhaps for that reason, do not see it as important or interesting. Given how little history or context is routinely offered, it is easy to understand their bewilderment.

We believe that the impartiality requirements - for accuracy, fairness, context, balance and lack of bias - are best taken together as a package.

First, was there identifiable bias or lack of balance? This is the way most people complaining about the BBC approach the issue.

Second, did the BBC's coverage give a full and fair account of the conflict?

This meant we also needed to consider the quality of the programmes: the extent to which they were comprehensive, penetrating and illuminating. We asked ourselves whether a reasonable and attentive viewer or listener could, on the basis of the BBC's coverage of the conflict, come to an informed and independent judgement of the issues and of the respective merits of each side's story.

Our assessment is that, apart from individual lapses, there was little to suggest deliberate or systematic bias. On the contrary, there was evidence of a commitment to be fair, accurate and impartial. There is high quality reporting from location, some outstanding current affairs programmes and the website provides much valuable historical and other context. Management's commitment is clear and has led to several recent changes to strengthen

performance.

Nonetheless, there are identifiable shortcomings, particularly in respect of gaps in coverage, analysis, context and perspective and in the consistent maintenance of the BBC's own established editorial standards, including on matters of language. All of this points to the elusiveness of editorial planning, grip and oversight.

In short, we found that BBC output does not consistently give a full and fair account of the conflict. In some ways the picture is incomplete and, in that sense, misleading.

We propose a number of remedies:

1. We want the BBC to provide more consistently a full and fair account, and to fill in the gaps, most obviously in respect of context and history. We say, too, that TV should look for the important stories and not be dazzled by striking, and available, pictures;
2. We think there should be a stronger 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;
3. We say that the BBC should get the language right. We think they should call terrorist acts "terrorism" because that term is clear and well understood. Equally, on this and other sensitive points of language, once they have decided the best answer they should ensure it is adopted consistently;
4. We want the BBC to be more proactive in explaining the complexities of the conflict. Much can be done through directly linking broadcast programmes to related background available online.

All of this amounts to a demanding prescription, but we believe the BBC has the necessary resources and commitment. It certainly has the outlets and airtime.

In addition, it is what the BBC has led us all to expect. And it is what the public deserves. Through the licence fee, they fund the BBC to provide something which the market otherwise would not: something distinctive in range, quality and depth.

What the BBC does now is good for the most part; some of it very good. But, it could and should do better to meet the gold standard which it set itself in its best programmes.

Quentin Thomas
11 April 2006

IMPARTIALITY REVIEW: THE PANEL'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION AND PRINCIPAL CONCLUSIONS

1.1 Our task was to assess the impartiality of the BBC's news and current affairs coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with particular regard to accuracy, fairness, context, balance and bias, actual or perceived.

1.2 These impartiality requirements impose an appropriate standard, are well understood within the BBC and have been incorporated as central to its journalistic and corporate culture.

1.3 It seems clear from the evidence put to us that most viewers and listeners support these requirements.

1.4 Audience research from Opinion Leader Research, commissioned by the Panel, shows that the impartiality requirements are widely supported. It also suggests that, beyond those who take a keen interest in the conflict from either perspective, the generality of viewers and listeners are less than convinced by its importance to them, feel ignorant about it and have little sympathy with the protagonists. They want the BBC to be impartial and believe that it is. By contrast, those who put evidence to us appear to regard the issue as very important, to identify with one side, to feel knowledgeable about it and want BBC coverage to be more supportive of their favoured protagonist.

1.5 A number of factors (including the nature of the conflict, the existence in the UK of significant bodies of opinion identifying with the protagonists, the reach and standing of the BBC, and the significance of media coverage for such a conflict) mean that the BBC operates under intense critical scrutiny, bringing pressure to all levels of the organisation. The marked asymmetry in the positions of the Israelis and Palestinians also provides a significant professional challenge.

1.6 Though much of our evidence in effect sought to recruit the Panel to support one side or other in the conflict, our task was to assess the impartiality of the BBC's coverage. On this, we took the view that a good consideration is whether a reasonable and attentive viewer or listener could, on the basis of the BBC's coverage of the conflict, including, importantly, such analysis and interpretation as it offers, come to an informed and independent judgement of the issues and of the respective merits of each side's story (each of the "dual narratives", see paragraphs 2.1 and 4.19 below). In short, the impartiality requirements should not be seen as constituting a straight-jacket inhibiting distinctive or original programming. On the contrary, meeting them requires coverage that is not only fair but also creative and challenging. (There is a brief discussion of the impartiality requirements in paragraphs 5.5-5.7)

1.7 As is detailed in the body of the Report, in making our assessment we took account of a wide range of evidence, including that submitted to us, material on past complaints, the research commissioned for the Review, the many people we consulted inside and outside the BBC, here and in the Middle East, and of the extensive sample of BBC radio, TV and online coverage we reviewed. (In case the Review itself was thought to influence programming our sample included retrospective as well as current coverage.) We also looked at non-BBC

programmes for comparative purposes.

1.8 Looking at the evidence we received as a whole, and other inputs, there was some common, if not universally shared, ground. While, with some exceptions, there is general acceptance that the BBC is not deliberately or systematically biased, there was a common view among our witnesses that coverage was biased or unfair, at least to some extent. Opinion was, however, divided, with striking symmetry, on the question of which side was thought to benefit. Many agreed that both narratives should be fully exposed but complained that their favoured narrative was not fully and fairly covered.

1.9 Our assessment is that:

a) apart from individual lapses, sometimes of tone, language or attitude, there was little to suggest systematic or deliberate bias; on the contrary there was evidence, in the programming and in other ways, of a commitment to be fair, accurate and impartial;

b) the news reporting from location, particularly that from the Jerusalem Bureau, is of high quality, especially when account is taken of the tensions and complexities of the conflict and the pressures brought by interested parties;

c) there are outstanding examples of current affairs programmes and the BBC has used its website to provide historical and analytical background to the conflict;

d) the BBC has made considerable efforts through the Journalism Board, enhanced dialogue with representative organisations from both sides and the work of the Senior Editorial Adviser on the Middle East to improve its output on the conflict;

e) nonetheless, and taking account of the consideration in paragraph 1.6 above, there are identifiable shortcomings. There are, in particular, gaps in coverage, analysis, context and perspective. There is also a failure to maintain consistently the BBC's own established editorial standards, including on language. There are shortcomings arising from the elusiveness of editorial planning, grip and oversight. In summary, the finding is that BBC coverage does not consistently constitute a full and fair account of the conflict but rather, in important respects, presents an incomplete and in that sense misleading picture.

1.10 More specifically, these shortcomings include:

a) deficiencies in output: given that the BBC has more news airtime and resources than any other UK broadcaster and probably more than any other European broadcaster there were several deficiencies in the broadcast news output. These included an absence of historical background and deficiencies in the provision of other contexts (such as the role of the wider Middle East in the conflict), and insufficient analysis and interpretation of some important events and issues, including shifts in Palestinian society, opinion and politics. There was little reporting of the difficulties faced by the Palestinians in their daily lives. Equally in the months preceding the Palestinian elections there was little hard questioning of their leaders. The broader themes covered in current affairs programmes only partly offset these shortcomings.

b) elusiveness of editorial planning, grip and oversight as evident in imbalances in coverage (e.g. in the menu of current affairs programmes, on the background of commentators relied on,

spokespeople interviewed or on the implications of the Gaza disengagement for the Palestinians), insufficient diversity of stories, and of perspectives. This elusiveness is also manifest in the failure to achieve the ideal of a consistent exposure of both the Israeli and Palestinian view (the "dual narratives") and the lack of a self-conscious address to the important issue of how stories are framed ("newsframes").

c) imprecision and inconsistency in the use of sensitive language and terminology. Although this is, rightly, an issue to which the BBC and its senior managers have given much thought, there is significant scope for improvement, particularly in reporting terrorism. The fact that these issues are difficult to get right makes it vital that when the BBC does reach a considered view on terminology, it is consistently followed in practice.

d) reactive journalism, instead of a purposive effort to tell a complicated story in the round and to remedy the well-attested incomprehension of the generality of viewers and listeners (incomprehension further evidenced in the research commissioned for this Review). One important feature of this is the failure to convey adequately the disparity in the Israeli and Palestinian experience, reflecting the fact that one side is in control and the other lives under occupation. Although this asymmetry does not necessarily bear on the relative merits of the two sides, it is so marked and important that coverage should succeed in this if in nothing else.

1.11 Some of the shortcomings may in part be a function of the high degree of editorial delegation in the BBC. The editorial function is discussed more fully in Section 5 below.

1.12 The BBC is well placed to remedy these shortcomings and to raise its performance to achieve more consistently the high standards benchmarked by its best programmes because it has:

a) more than adequate resources absolutely and relative to other producers of news and current affairs;

b) a plenitude of outlets (TV, radio, online, podcast etc) and ample airtime;

c) a newsgathering and analytical capability of a high order, the analysis arguably not fully exploited in the programmes commissioned and packaged in the UK;

d) the resource of an experienced and senior correspondent in the Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen;

e) a professional cadre of journalists available;

f) a number of invaluable central facilities available to deepen expertise in support of programme makers including: Analysis and Research Department, a Senior Editorial Adviser on the Middle East (Malcolm Balen), BBC Monitoring, a large training capability now enhanced by the in-house College of Journalism (which has already developed an online training module on the conflict) and the BBC website, a well-used market leader on which more detailed explanatory and analytic material can be and is made available;

g) senior management committed to fostering and maintaining high standards of journalism.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1

1.13 We recommend the BBC should provide more consistently a full and fair account, that is: improve coverage to enable the reasonable and attentive viewer or listener to come to an informed and independent judgement of the issues and of the respective merits of each side's story. It should do this by providing:

- a) more comprehensive coverage which remedies omissions of significant events and topics;
- b) more historical and other background and context;
- c) a fuller account of situations and issues, conceding, in the case of TV, less to events of less inherent importance, but yielding striking (and available) pictures.

Recommendation 2

1.14 We recommend the BBC should provide an editorial "Guiding Hand": that is, a senior figure with sufficient executive authority to command resources and give direction should be tasked with providing more secure editorial planning, grip and oversight to ensure:

- a) consistent full and fair coverage including of issues overlooked under the pressure of events;
- b) a range of current affairs programmes which, over a period, provides a coherent overview;
- c) consistent exposure of the dual narratives;
- d) greater self consciousness about news and current affairs as a construct, and about the selection of newsframes to avoid conveying misleading analysis;
- e) more systematic monitoring of parity in such matters as outside commentators, official spokespeople deployed on air, vox pops and style of presentation. The Senior Editorial Adviser on the Middle East has conducted an internal audit of Middle East experts which provides useful background for journalists and should be widely used to ensure correct identification of commentators and experts.

Recommendation 3

1.15 We recommend the BBC should get the language right, that is: remedy deficiencies on language and ensure consistent application of best practice, when agreed. In particular:

- a) it should consider issuing to staff a crisper and more operationally useable guide to facts and terminology than that currently made available internally to BBC journalists. This should be published so that the public has the same access to this as they already have to many other BBC editorial guidelines;

b) the BBC is right to avoid terms which are a barrier to understanding, and should use words which best express the desired meaning clearly and effectively. The term "terrorism" should accordingly be used in respect of relevant events since it is the most accurate expression for actions which involve violence against randomly selected civilians with the intention of causing terror for ideological, including political or religious, objectives, whether perpetrated by state or non-state agencies. While those immediately responsible for the actions might be described as terrorists, the BBC is right to avoid so labelling organisations, except in attributed remarks;

c) the BBC should continue to draw on international law and the United Nations Security Council in the choices it must inevitably make about the use of language and then be consistent in its use across its output. Though there will always be disagreement between the two sides about any such lexicon, certain usages (such as "occupied territories") are well established.

Recommendation 4

1.16 We recommend the BBC should make purposive, and not merely reactive, efforts to explain the complexities of the conflict in the round, including the marked disparity between the positions of the two sides, and to overcome the high level of incomprehension among the audience. BBC News viewers and listeners could be directed to the background and analysis pages on the BBC website in trails after transmission of major news reports. In addition, some of the educational concepts from the staff online training module could be made available on the BBC's public website. The BBC should consider the case for basing a correspondent in the West Bank to facilitate access, particularly once the barrier is complete.

1.17 The judgements made here, and the prescriptions proposed, may be seen by some as a counsel of perfection; and they are certainly demanding. The Review has looked at only one portion of a wide ranging and fast moving news and current affairs agenda. To some extent there is a risk of that in establishing reviews concentrated on single issues. It is also relevant that this Review has, at the request of the Governors, been completed relatively quickly, given the need for the Panel to see or listen to (and commission content research in respect of) current coverage.

1.18 We asked ourselves whether, if we had looked at a different period, one which would perhaps have been more typical, we might have made a different assessment. It may be so, but we think it unlikely. After all, both as viewers and listeners, and as part of this Review, we have seen a good deal of output from different periods. The purpose of the BBC is, we take it, to provide something which the market would not; something distinctive in range, quality and depth. (The diversity of stories and perspectives available is readily apparent: for example, from the reports of coverage in the local and international media which BBC Monitoring helpfully made available to us.) Of course, our proposals need to be seen in the round, and with a sense of proportion. Not every bulletin can bring new perspective, nor every item start at the Balfour Declaration or with a reference to the 1929 massacre of Jews in Hebron.

1.19 There are three other points to be made. First, if our approach is a demanding one, it is what the public deserves given the BBC's ambitions to be a premier broadcaster, the public service requirements imposed on it and the public resources it commands. Second, our Report acknowledges that much of the BBC's coverage is good, some of it very good. It is just that some of the deficiencies are serious and that it could be a great deal better: more distinctive, challenging and informative. The risk is that, without firm editorial grip, the BBC will produce,

on a massive scale, and through its many outlets, flat coverage following the agenda set by conventional wisdom. Third the gold standard by which our assessment has been made is that set by the BBC itself in programmes it has made, and continues to make, on this conflict, as on other matters.

2. THE CONFLICT AND THE MEDIA

The nature of the Conflict

2.1 The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is of long standing, is deeply felt and bitterly contested. Almost every apparent fact is disputed; and every event, past or present, is subject to polarised interpretations. The conflict has swept up everything in its path: politics, geography, culture, religion and, pre-eminently, history. As in other firmly established conflicts, there are to simplify, two mindsets with rival versions of reality, each competing for acceptance. In that sense, there are two stories and the media may need to present “dual narratives”.

2.2 On one level the conflict concerns land, on another it concerns legitimacy. From this derives the political significance of rival versions of history: which side had the primary claim to the land, and under what authority; which side initiated conflict at the key moments; and which side rejected claimed offers of a peaceful resolution. It has both a military or security, aspect (and indeed the present extent of Israel has been determined, at least proximately, by force of arms) and a political one; the two being largely intertwined. In the present situation, every security measure, and every challenge to it, has a political dimension. This is as true of the separation/security fence/barrier/wall, as it is of, say, the first Intifada. But it is also a political matter, in some cases with legal purpose as well, to seek to characterise each of these as wholly security matters; as it is, alternatively, to seek to characterise them as wholly political. Further, the political and strategic dimensions of the conflict can extend to attempts to influence the media coverage. The BBC has to be aware of these and resist them (see paragraphs 2.5-2.8 below).

2.3 There is another point about the nature of the conflict: namely that the two sides are not on equal terms. Indeed it is arguable that the most obvious and important feature of the present situation is its asymmetry. This is not a question of the respective merits of the two sides. It is simply a matter of fact that Israel is a functioning state with established democratic institutions, an advanced economy and a highly effective diplomatic, defence and intelligence capability. None of this is true of the Palestinian side. (This point is not invalidated by the fact that the Palestinians recently conducted elections widely accepted to have been free and fair.)

2.4 The asymmetry is most strikingly manifested in the fact of Occupation. One side is wholly under the occupation of the other and, however reluctantly, necessarily endures the indignities of dependence. As some of our witnesses noted, this fact itself poses a challenge to a media organisation like the BBC committed, as our terms of reference make clear, to fairness, impartiality and balance. (While fairness and impartiality are legal requirements, balance is a concept adopted by the BBC in seeking to give effect to them.) These objectives, especially balance, work most naturally where the parties to a dispute are on an equal footing. Indeed, without care, a formulaic application of these doctrines, and in particular that of balance, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could produce coverage which misleads from the outset.

The Role of the Media

2.5 One way in which the mass media can be drawn into the conflict and be made, wittingly or unwittingly, players in it is by arbitrating between competing characterisations of the kind described in paragraph 2.2 above and validating those, if any, chosen. The Panel was aware in several of the submissions received of the inter-relation of the religious and political basis for conflicting claims from the parties. In this way, and in others, the media themselves are part of the contested ground, and it is a strategic objective of the protagonists to secure coverage

which reflects and reinforces their version of reality. Since the conflict is not only local but engages also widespread international support and sponsorship, the BBC, which is highly regarded and influential internationally as well as in the UK, and the nature of its coverage, are important prizes.

The Conflict and the BBC

2.6 The BBC is well aware of these points and of the responsibility, and indeed of the pressure, which they impose throughout the organisation; this affects the reporter on the ground, programme producers, editors and those responsible for handling complaints and explaining the BBC's policies and practices centrally.

2.7 The BBC's task is to retain its integrity and independence by demonstrating, particularly in its news and current affairs, fidelity to the core standards of impartiality. The BBC's role is a journalistic, not a political or diplomatic one.

2.8 The BBC attracts closer interest, and probably more complaints, than many other news outlets because it is understood to be influential. Its influence is a function of the size and character of its audience, and the trust placed in it. That in turn depends on the quality, accuracy and originality of its coverage, and on its determination to report the key events and issues. (There are other organs with less challenging coverage, which attract few complaints and lack authority and influence.) In short, if the BBC fulfils its remit of producing distinctive and penetrating coverage, while meeting the required standards of impartiality, accuracy and fairness, it will command respect but also attention, some of it critical.

2.9 It follows from this that the BBC's performance should not be judged by the level of complaints. As some other news services demonstrate, complaints can be minimised, at least those coming from protagonists or their supporters, by bland coverage. That is not the purpose of the BBC as the Charter, and other founding documents, make clear.

2.10 There is another important preliminary point. The best news organisations, among them the BBC, set out to bring to their readers, viewers or listeners a full and accurate account of the world: a truthful presentation. Leaving aside the protagonists in a conflict, and their proxies, for whom the truth may be subservient to the cause, coverage is mostly judged by success in achieving this. But obviously there are exceptions and media outlets with different priorities. Some populist papers, indeed some BBC programmes outside news and current affairs present a largely imaginary view of life as a celebrity soap opera and are rightly appreciated for their fictive qualities. What they offer is a construct, consciously assembled, with the primary purpose of providing entertainment.

2.11 What is often less appreciated or acknowledged is that serious news or current affairs programmes, or organisations, wholly committed to reporting the real world accurately and impartially, equally offer a construct. Even when the coverage adheres to the highest standards of detachment, there must be a choice of subject, and therefore of others to be omitted, decisions about its presentation, the framework of the narrative, the extent of context setting and, literally in the case of television, the selection of angles of vision. Some make these choices with great care. Others, as they understandably see it, simply get on with the job under the pressure of events. Paradoxically, the more journalists, producers and editors are

committed to a serious attempt to report the truth and to reflect the world accurately, and work within an organisation like the BBC which shares the same commitment, the less conscious they may be of the artifice of the construct offered.

2.12 Just as an historian by his selection of facts necessarily gives his own account of the past, each work of history being the product of conscious enquiry, judgement and choice, so news organisations represent the present. Given the importance of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the influence of the BBC's coverage and the complex inter-relationship between the two, **it is important that the BBC as an institution, and all those within it with responsibilities for producing relevant programmes, should be fully conscious both that an account of events and issues - a human construct - is being created, and that they have a crucial interpretative role in that process.**

The Impact of the Conflict on the BBC

2.13 The conflict, by its nature, imposes some constraints and imperatives of its own. For one thing the Israelis are necessarily in the position of authority, while the Palestinians are frequently in the position of challenger.

2.14 There is an asymmetry of power between the two sides and this is reflected in a number of ways which impact on the journalistic enterprise. It is easier to gain access to Israeli spokespeople, and the Israeli authorities may be in a position to grant or deny permits to access Palestinian areas and spokespeople. As already discussed (paragraph 2.4 above) some witnesses expressed anxiety that, given this asymmetry, the BBC's concern with balance gave an impression of equality between the two sides which was fundamentally, if unintentionally, misleading.

2.15 The suffering on both sides is real, but both sides share an interest in establishing to the media their victimhood. (Some of our witnesses were candid about this.) Both sides suffer death and injury, though in recent years the figures show it has fallen disproportionately on the Palestinians. But the victimhood of each side typically occurs in different ways. When the Israelis suffer it is usually from a terrorist attack - that is from the deliberate deployment in pursuit of a political objective of violence aimed indiscriminately at civilians or non-combatants - which necessarily constitutes a newsworthy event. In addition, the Israelis feel under threat, not only from the Palestinians, but from some other countries in the wider Middle East which routinely assert their view that Israel should not exist. In recent years, many more Palestinians have been killed but usually in circumstances which are less dramatic and give rise to less striking images. Moreover, leaving aside death and injury, much of the Palestinian suffering arises from the situation of displacement and occupation, which does not generally lend itself to the newsworthy event. Given this asymmetry, providing a fair account of relative suffering is itself a challenge. Moreover, while the suffering is real and it is important that an account is given of it, graphic pictures on screen can produce a strong emotive reaction which can be seen as evidence of bias unless an even-handed approach is clear.

2.16 The conflict means that the reporters on the ground are operating under considerable pressure, and sometimes in danger. They are also conscious that their work will receive constant and remorseless scrutiny. Though the journalists on the ground are those most directly exposed, the pressure is felt throughout the organisation.

2.17 It is important that the Governors and senior management recognise this and ensure that the necessary structures and systems are in place so that their staff receive, and feel they receive, proper support. The correspondents we met said that they did so.

2.18 Another special feature of the conflict is that, because of the respective diasporas of the Jewish and Palestinian peoples, and the wider identification of others with each side, the BBC's overseas and domestic audiences include communities who feel a strong connection with those living daily with the conflict. Though the centre of the conflict is overseas, the BBC must cater for the fact that significant minorities of its domestic audience follow the conflict, and the part BBC coverage is thought to play in it, with the close concern of protagonists.

2.19 Accordingly, in common with other international conflicts, there may be a domestic effect and the BBC must be aware of anxiety that its coverage may impact on the personal safety of members of communities within the UK. Some of the most troubling evidence put to the Panel was the fear expressed by members of the Jewish community that inaccurate, tendentious or unfair reporting of the conflict could be reflected in increased anti-Semitic attitudes or behaviour in the UK. We did not find evidence that any increase in anti-Semitic behaviour could be attributed to BBC coverage. But the concern in the Jewish community, which is plainly and understandably deeply felt, is a salutary reminder that failing to observe the impartiality requirements could have serious practical consequences.

2.20 Although the evidence put to us by those supportive of the Palestinian side did not emphasise this point, it is easy to see that there is also the possibility of an adverse impact on Muslim communities.

Complaints

2.21 At the same time, because of the importance and scale of the BBC's coverage and the part, ancillary but significant, it plays in the conflict itself, it must continue to take the complaints it receives seriously and to handle them with care and sensitivity. It is clearly not enough to say that, as there are complaints from both sides, the BBC is presumably getting its coverage about right. This kind of complacency would not be acceptable and the Panel has not found it among BBC journalists or management. However, complaints do sometimes seem to be treated as a necessary nuisance and dealt with defensively. (Appendices F iii and G have some information about the complaints process.)

2.22 It is true that a disproportionate number of the complaints made to the BBC concern coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. No doubt this reflects in part the nature of the conflict and the interest in it among sections of the BBC's audience. But, having reviewed data on the complaints, and their handling, and in the light of the evidence we have received, we are also clear that it reflects real anxiety and depth of feeling about the BBC's perceived deficiencies. A significant number of emails and letters to this Review originated outside the UK, in particular from Israel and the United States. (In the case of email it was not always clear what was the country of origin.) In many of these it is likely that the correspondent's main experience of the BBC was by listening to the World Service, watching BBC World or accessing BBC Online. The World Service and BBC World lie outside the terms of reference

of this Review.

2.23 The nature of the conflict, and the breadth of support for each side among its audience, means that the BBC cannot expect to avoid complaints. But it should not respond to them defensively, rather seeing them as providing helpful evidence of how its product is received by its customers. Indeed there should be, as there is not now, a systematic feedback mechanism to ensure that those involved in the programme which gave rise to the complaint are aware of it and its outcome. Where appropriate the BBC should readily acknowledge any mistakes made without resisting every charge until the last ditch; and of course every complaint should be promptly acknowledged. (Some of us tested the BBC's claims in this respect and found that our correspondence was not acknowledged promptly.)

2.24 The BBC has taken a number of steps to improve its system for handling complaints. Further changes are out for consultation. We commend the efforts put into refining the BBC's responsiveness to complaints. Nonetheless it is right to acknowledge explicitly that, however hard it tried, the BBC could not satisfy every complainant because some wish the BBC to take sides. Ultimately its function is to report events, not to seek to play a part in them.

2.25 The BBC's most important features are its independence and integrity. Accordingly when, after proper consideration, it is satisfied that its coverage meets the requisite standards it should be robust in its own defence. More important, it should remain robust in providing distinctive and challenging programmes, including where appropriate trenchant professional analysis from its experienced journalists. In our view the interests of the licence fee payer and the audience generally, are best served in this way. **There would be greater risks in the BBC becoming more cautious under the pressure of interested parties, than through its maintaining and developing its commitment to high quality and diverse programming.**

3. THE PANEL'S APPROACH TO ITS TASK

3.1 In September 2005 the BBC Governors appointed the Panel to undertake an impartiality review, as one of its ongoing programme of such reviews, of BBC coverage of the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. Appendix B has the paper giving the terms of reference and the prescribed methodology. The terms of reference are to assess the impartiality of BBC news and current affairs coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with particular regard to accuracy, fairness, context, balance and bias, actual or perceived. The Governors asked for a report by Spring 2006.

3.2 The prescribed methodology involved the appointment of a Panel, independent of the BBC, to conduct the Review, with the assistance of an independent consultant to manage the project. (Appendix B sets out the membership of the Panel.) **The Panel would like to express its thanks to Lea Sellers, our independent consultant, for all her guidance and support. She worked hard to ensure that our visit to Israel and the occupied territories was successful. We were very well served by her knowledge of the subject, her tireless efforts on our behalf and by her hard work and cheerful good humour.**

3.3 The prescribed methodology also envisaged inviting evidence from relevant organisations and interested members of the public and commissioning two pieces of research: one on audience views and the other systematically analysing programme content.

3.4 When the Panel was appointed, we issued invitations, both to specific individuals and organisations and at large, for those interested to submit written evidence. We made it clear that, in the light of the written evidence, we would invite some witnesses to meet us to give oral evidence.

3.5 In the event, we were grateful to receive a great deal of written evidence, ranging from well considered memoranda to brief emailed comments. We received written submissions from around 20 organisations and some 800 letters and emails from individuals, not all of them from the UK. The submissions were, for the most part, thoughtful, often with detailed concerns about BBC coverage, and often written with deeply felt conviction. We have taken all of it into account in reaching our conclusions.

3.6 We set aside 3 days in January 2006 to receive oral evidence, though we met many others informally, in the UK, Israel or the occupied territories, throughout our Review.

Earlier Reviews

3.7 We also had the benefit of reading a number of earlier reviews:

a) Chatham House: in 2003, the BBC Governors commissioned an Impartiality Review from the Royal Institute for International Affairs on coverage of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. It concluded broadly that "BBC coverage was impartial and accurate." It also included this observation:

"The mechanism used to ensure balance in the coverage of violent events is to juxtapose statements from an Israeli official on the one hand and a Palestinian on the other. This mechanism becomes so mechanistic as to lack news value and it reinforces the notion of a vicious cycle and irreconcilable positions, since they always talk past each other or flatly contradict each other." ;

b) "Bad News from Israel" (Pluto Press 2004): Greg Philo and Mike Berry of the Glasgow Media Group at Glasgow University co-authored this book reporting on a study of TV news coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This found, among other things, that audience interest in the conflict was a function of their understanding of it, rising when given more information, context and history in intelligible form; that audience identification with the protagonists in violent events in the conflict was influenced by the perceived legitimacy of the violence used, and that this was influenced by TV news presentation. The study also suggested that "News frameworks and presentational structures were most likely to highlight the Israeli perspective". It was read by all members of the Panel. Greg Philo gave both written and oral evidence to the Panel;

c) Other Reviews: a number of individuals have also undertaken systematic or more impressionistic exercises monitoring BBC output. These include reviews by Trevor Asserson and Yisrael Medad, each concluding that the BBC is biased against Israel. These reports were also read by the Panel and they met both people, informally in Israel in the case of Yisrael Medad;

d) Balen Report: the Panel was given, in response to a request, an unpublished internal report prepared for BBC Management by Senior Editorial Adviser on the Middle East Malcolm Balen in 2003. This was helpful to us but we say no more about it as it was given to us on confidential terms. A number of its recommendations have been implemented.

Audience Research

3.8 In the Autumn of 2005, research was carried out by Opinion Leader Research, selected after a competitive process, into audience attitudes and perception of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Report is attached as Appendix C.

Content Analysis Research

3.9 This research was conducted by Loughborough University Communications Research Centre, selected after a competitive process. The research, which had both a quantitative and qualitative component, was conducted on news output from August 2005 to January 2006 and current affairs programmes from January 2005 to January 2006. It therefore included both the most recent output available and some retrospective output. Its report is attached as Appendix D.

Complaints

3.10 The Panel reviewed the complaints logs and analysis on Israeli-Palestinian coverage for each month from August 2005 to January 2006. We are grateful to BBC Information for providing this analysis especially for the Panel. We also examined a few complaints case studies, concerning cases which had reached the Governors' Complaints Committee level, to see how they had been handled and resolved.

BBC

3.11 Between us, we had a number of formal and informal discussions with BBC journalists, producers and senior managers, including those involved with, or responsible for, news and current affairs, complaints, the College of Journalism, Analysis and Research Department and central editorial policy. We also visited BBC News and attended some of the regular daily round of meetings for planning and management of news output.

3.12 We were also able to spend a good deal of time with the correspondents and other staff of the Jerusalem Bureau during our visit to Israel and the occupied territories (see below). The head of the Bureau, Simon Wilson, escorted us on much of this visit, which included the Jerusalem office, and those in Ramallah and Gaza. We were impressed by what we saw and by those we met. We are grateful for the help the Bureau, and in particular Simon Wilson, gave us.

Visit to Israel and the Occupied Territories

3.13 In February 2006 most of the members of the Panel paid a brief, but informative visit to Israel and the occupied territories. We are grateful to the BBC Governors for agreeing to this, as it had not apparently been envisaged when the Review was established. A number of those who gave evidence did, on the other hand, urge us to pay such a visit. One of the main reasons for our wanting to make this visit was to see the BBC operation on the ground and to meet the members of the Bureau (see paragraph 3.12). In addition we gained some impressions, necessarily superficial, of the places and people. We were able to meet a number of non-BBC foreign correspondents, some Israeli journalists and officials and some community leaders and officials in the occupied territories.

Middle East Experts

3.14 Five British academics, each with well known expertise in their fields, were good enough to join us for an informal seminar. We are very grateful to Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Professor Frederick Halliday, Dr George Joffe, Dr Neill Lochery and Dr Beverley Milton-Edwards for sharing their knowledge and ideas in a wide-ranging discussion.

Literature

3.15 Between us, we read widely books and articles on the history and context of the conflict, the role of the media generally in conflicts, and the nature of news and the concept of impartiality.

Report on International Law

3.16 It was evident from much of what we read, and from the evidence we received, that international law was thought to play a significant part in the conflict. More particularly, a number of our witnesses suggested that international law provided the answers to a number of the vexed issues of terminology; for example the competition between "occupied territories" and "disputed territories" (the latter preferred by the Israelis). Equally it did not prove possible to identify an existing publication providing a brief, reliable and accessible summary of the main points, where there were settled points and where issues remained in contention. This had to be prepared in a very short time if it was to assist us in meeting the timetable set by the Governors. We were fortunate that Noam Lubell, an academic international law consultant, specialising in human rights and humanitarian law, with both British and Israeli citizenship, was able to take this on. His report is at Appendix E. The Panel is grateful to him for this admirably clear account, provided to meet a demanding timetable. While no account in this contentious area could be definitive or free from challenge, at the least this provides a useful, cogent and penetrating summation of the issues.

Viewing and Listening

3.17 Although the members of the Panel ranged widely in their viewing and listening we decided that all of us would receive recordings of the same selection of output comprising a sample of BBC news and all BBC current affairs programmes dealing with the conflict. We also looked at BBC Online and some output from other British TV outlets. The Panel was also grateful to receive specially prepared digests from BBC Monitoring to see how the conflict was reported in other countries.

4. ASSESSING THE EVIDENCE AND THE IMPLICATIONS

4.1 As should be clear from Section 3, the Panel was able to draw on a wide range of evidence including:

- a) the views of those who submitted written and oral evidence. This evidence was very helpful to us in discharging our task and we are grateful to all those who submitted it;
- b) those we discussed the issues with informally, including at our seminar with Middle East experts, here and in Israel and the occupied territories;
- c) our discussions and other exchanges with many in the BBC, both here and in the Jerusalem Bureau;
- d) the two pieces of academic research commissioned for the Review;
- e) Noam Lubell's work on international law;
- f) our impressions during our visit to Israel and the occupied territories;
- g) our shared review of programmes;
- h) the reports of earlier reviews and research;
- i) our reading round the relevant subjects, including Middle East politics and history.

Audience Research

4.2 The full report of the research conducted by Opinion Leader Research is in Appendix C. The purpose of the research was to explore how licence fee payers perceive the BBC's coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in terms of the extent to which the coverage is perceived as impartial; the level of accessibility of the BBC's coverage to a wide audience; and the differences that may exist across different news and current affairs formats – television, radio, online. The qualitative phase consisted of 10 group discussions across the UK. The quantitative phase was a telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults.

4.3 The Executive Summary records the main findings, the headlines of which are:

- a) the British public is being increasingly exposed to news and current affairs;
- b) however, coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not top of mind;
- c) there is low understanding of the conflict;
- d) impartial coverage of the conflict is a high priority but difficult for audiences to evaluate;
- e) however, no systematic bias is perceived;
- f) the BBC is a trusted source and is perceived to be impartial in its coverage of the conflict amongst those able to volunteer an opinion on this issue;

The Panel noted that many in the sample expressed no view on whether the BBC's coverage was impartial.

4.4 Among the Conclusions, the report says:

"To demonstrate impartiality to audiences it is critical to be seen to 'report the facts', 'to be fair to both sides' and 'provide a balance of views'. It is also important for broadcasters not to 'promote personal opinions', nor to be 'sensationalist'. Additionally, because of the audience's lack of knowledge on the conflict, 'explaining the context' and 'showing historical background' is required by audiences to better equip them to make informed judgements on the subject and its coverage.

There are also a number of more implicit factors which can contribute to reports being perceived as more or less impartial:

- *The language used - emotive or loaded words can be seen as indicators of bias*
- *The images chosen - audiences want to see images that are appropriate to the story and not gratuitous*
- *Balance - both in terms of affording each side equivalent airtime and also ensuring spokespeople chosen to represent either side are equally strong*
- *The summation of a report - the section of a report that usually contains journalistic interpretation of events must be fair*

After detailed deliberation on the subject in the qualitative research, audience members took the view that it is difficult for each and every report on the conflict to be completely impartial. This is due to the polarised nature of the conflict meaning that individual reports will necessarily often focus more on one side than the other.

What is important to participants is that overall, on balance, coverage should be impartial. In the main the BBC is achieving this, but it must continue to strive for the best possible output."

4.5 It was evident that the views of the audience, as reported in this research, were markedly different in tone and substance from most of the evidence submitted by interested organisations and individuals. These findings informed our assessment of the BBC's coverage and are to some extent reflected in our recommendations.

Content Analysis Research

4.6 The full report of the research conducted by the Communications Research Centre at Loughborough University is at Appendix D. The research included both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis. The sample for the content analysis was 1 August 2005 to 31 January 2006 for BBC news output, January 2005 to January 2006 for BBC current affairs programmes and two periods (1 October 2005-23 December 2005 and 3 January 2006 -31 January 2006) for non BBC output (ITV, C4 and Sky News). The research noted that coverage of the conflict in this period was largely concentrated into two months: August 2005, when the dominant story was the Gaza disengagement, and January 2006, when there were two dominant stories: Prime Minister Sharon's stroke and the Palestinian elections. The

research also analysed the unique text content of the BBC news website.

Quantitative

4.7 Among the findings from the quantitative content analysis which the researchers judge to be most important for the Panel are these:

- that there were significant differences across BBC news programmes and services in the allocation of talk time ("talk time" is the amount of time an "actor" is heard speaking or quoted) and appearance of actors ("actors" are individuals or institutions whose actions, opinions or existence are mentioned directly by the journalist during the course of an item);
- that there was broad parity in BBC coverage taken as a whole in the amount of talk time given to Israeli and Palestinian party political actors;
- that a disparity (in favour of Israelis) existed in BBC coverage taken as a whole in the amount of talk time given to non-party political Israelis and Palestinians;
- that a disparity (in favour of Israelis) existed in BBC coverage taken as a whole in the amount of talk time given to Israelis and Palestinians;
- that there was a broad parity in BBC coverage taken as a whole in terms of the appearance of Israeli and Palestinian party political actors;
- that a disparity (in favour of Israelis) existed in BBC coverage taken as a whole in terms of the appearance of non-party political Israeli and Palestinian actors;
- that a disparity (in favour of Israelis) existed in BBC coverage taken as a whole in terms of the appearance of Israeli and Palestinian actors;
- that aside from Israelis and Palestinians, talk time was given largely to either UK or US political or non-political actors. Third party positions either from the Middle East or from the rest of the world were marginalised in comparison to the presentation of UK and US perspectives;
- that some important themes were relatively overlooked in the coverage of the conflict, most notably in the recent period, the annexation of land in and around East Jerusalem;
- that BBC journalists generally did not provide historical context in their reporting of the conflict;
- that BBC broadcast news reported Israeli and Palestinian fatalities differently in that Israeli fatalities generally receive greater coverage than Palestinian fatalities (see paragraph 4.9 below).

It is relevant that two of the major stories covered in the sample period (Gaza disengagement and PM Sharon's strokes) were treated largely as internal Israeli stories which might have affected the balance of coverage.

4.8 Some of these indicators are clearly relatively crude. For example greater talk time may mean more time subjected to hostile interrogation. And to qualify as an "actor" it is enough to be referred to by a journalist. But the apparent neglect of some themes and the marked lack of historical context are suggestive. The lack of historical reference is entirely consistent with what many witnesses, from both sides of the conflict, put to us. It is obvious enough, as our witnesses and other commentators insist, that only limited understanding of the conflict can be reached without a good deal of historical background and context.

4.9 The research also included an analysis of the coverage of the fatalities in the conflict. In the research period, it appears from the most commonly used data (provided by the Israeli Government and by the human rights group B'Tselem) that the death of an Israeli killed by the Palestinian side was more likely to be reported by the BBC than the death of a Palestinian killed by the Israeli side. In the relevant period, the researchers found that there were some 20/23 Israeli fatalities and 98 Palestinian fatalities.

4.10 The researchers say:

" From our small sample of 'specific number' reports, we can make five tentative observations: that generally the killing of more than one Israeli by Palestinians either by gun or bomb were reported on by national broadcast programmes; if one Israeli was killed, the killing was generally not reported; that 'targeted killings/assassinations' of Palestinians by Israelis and Israeli air or ground raids were generally not reported on by national broadcast programmes but were reported by BBC News online; that specific numbers of Palestinian fatalities were generally not reported by broadcast news programmes; and that, if B'Tselem figures are correct or if BBC News online reporting provides a more comprehensive account of Palestinian fatalities, a small percentage of Palestinian fatalities were reported by broadcast news."

Analysis of emails and Letters from the Public.

4.11 We received more than 700 emails and around 80 letters from members of the public between 3rd October and 25th November 2005. As in the case of other evidence, this correspondence fell into two distinct categories: those who said the BBC was biased towards the Israeli side and those who said it was biased towards the Palestinian side. Some individuals sent multiple missives, some were duplicates and there was clear evidence of pressure group mobilisation.

4.12 There were many emails from abroad, mostly from North America but also from Israel and Europe. Pressure group activity could be seen in the number of identical letters or parts of letters. A large number of pro-Israel supporters emailed from the United States, often with the same complaint, on the same date and/or from the same state.

4.13 Many from the pro-Palestinian side referred to "Bad News from Israel" (see paragraph 3.7 above). Some of these sent a pro-forma letter, a summary of the book's findings and a link to the Glasgow Media Group website. The Muslim Public Affairs Committee website had a page urging people to write to us.

4.14 Not too much can be made of this, but more people thought the BBC was anti-Israel. However, if the emails and letters which could be identified as coming from abroad are excluded, the opposite is true: more people thought the BBC anti-Palestinian or pro-Israel.

Analysis of Written Evidence from Organisations and of Oral Evidence

4.15 Most, but not all, the written evidence from organisations and from those we invited to give oral evidence, was plainly expressed as supportive of one side or other in the conflict. The submissions were thoughtful and informative and, in many cases, deeply, even bitterly, felt. Like the conflict itself, it was deeply polarised. Among the points most often made are those summarized in the Table below.

Pro-Israeli	Pro-Palestinian
Palestinian narrative is favoured	Israeli narrative is favoured
Israelis portrayed as aggressors	Palestinians portrayed as aggressors
Palestinians portrayed as victims	Israelis portrayed as victims
More attention given to Palestinian casualties	More attention given to Israeli casualties
Palestinians are said to ‘respond’ to attacks	Israelis are said to ‘respond’ to attacks
No positive stories about Israel	Hardship of Palestinians under-covered
Security issues not recognised	Occupation not recognised
Palestinian killings are ‘terrorism’	Israeli killings are ‘state terrorism’
No moral equivalence between accidental and deliberate killing of civilians	No moral equivalence between occupier and occupied
No such thing as ‘Palestinian land’	Palestinian right of return ignored
‘Disputed territories’	‘Illegally occupied territories’
‘Security barrier’	‘Separation wall’
Coverage leads to anti-Semitism	BBC afraid of anti-Semitism charge
Too much focus on Israel	Israeli lobby is very strong
Israel surrounded by hostile states	West Bank correspondent needed
Israel is an advanced democracy	Palestinians are resisting occupation
Aggressive interviewing of Israelis	Not enough Palestinian spokespeople

4.16 Taking the evidence we received as a whole, and the other inputs, there is **some common ground**, though it is not universally shared. With some exceptions, there is general acceptance that the BBC is not deliberately or systematically biased. There is however, among our witnesses, a commonly held view that the coverage is in fact biased and unfair, at least to some extent. As has been seen, our audience research does not suggest that the audience generally, at least within the UK where this research was conducted, shares this judgement.

4.17 This bias is variously attributed to shortcomings in management or in the editorial and commissioning process, or to the personal views or lack of experience or knowledge of individual journalists or to an unconscious institutional mind set. On the last point, it was

suggested by some that the BBC may be systemically predisposed intellectually or culturally to a set of liberal Western values. Even if true, this could incline it to favour an Israeli state seen as democratic and governed by the rule of law, or to question all the more vigorously the democratic pretensions of such a state. We heard both claims from witnesses.

4.18 However the evidence we received was divided, with striking symmetry, on the question of which side was thought to benefit from the perceived bias.

4.19 There was, in the evidence, widespread, though not universal, appreciation of the existence of two ways of looking at, and presenting, events; two rival narratives. Almost all of those who saw things in this way acknowledged, in some cases, including that of the representatives of the Israeli government, very readily, that the BBC must be expected to give a full and accurate account of the rival narrative. The general complaint was that the BBC failed to give a full and fair account of their favoured version.

4.20 The Panel does not believe that the BBC should, or does, take comfort because this view is urged from each side. Both may be right in saying that their narrative is deficiently exposed. In the end, the BBC's task is not simply to satisfy the protagonists in the conflict or their supporters, but to give a fair account for the benefit of the licence fee payer and the audience generally. **However, the Panel believes that this end would be served if the BBC more consciously worked, as it already does to some extent, to set out the rival narratives (often in practice more than two) fully and fairly.** Indeed it should emphasise, for the benefit of the audience, the extent to which there are competing versions of events, and of history, and that attempting to ensure supportive media coverage is part of the politics of the conflict itself.

4.21 None of this should preclude the BBC, and its journalists, from setting out their own analysis of the implications. But the task might sometimes be made easier by acknowledging the existence of the protagonists' competing views of the matter.

Specific Concerns about BBC Coverage

4.22 Those expressing concern about the BBC's coverage focused on:

- a) the way stories or issues were framed ("newsframes"). Should, say, a bombing incident in Israel be presented as a murderous and criminal challenge to the rule of law maintained by a democratic state or as part of the resistance mounted by a people under occupation seeking freedom in order to establish a polity of their own? It may be both, but could be presented as either. Similarly, many incidents could be presented either as a new move by the instigator or as a response, or retaliation, to an earlier action;
- b) the selection of what event or issue is to be covered, and in what detail, and what is omitted. There were complaints both about what was covered (for example, too much violence) and what was omitted (for example, not enough about civic life, not concerned with the conflict, in Israel or everyday life in the occupied territories);
- c) the tone in which something is reported or discussed; in particular the extent to which the coverage appears to convey understanding, sympathy or disdain;

d) the language used. For example, a major concern on one side was with the BBC's policy of avoiding the expression "terrorism" and its derivatives (discussed in paragraphs 5.32-5.39), and on the other the BBC's perceived failure consistently to describe settlements in the occupied territories as illegal. Similar issues arise over the separation/security fence/barrier/wall;

e) the need for current events to be given more context and background, including historical background;

f) perceived imbalances; for example in the number of spokespeople chosen for each side, the length of air time each receives, the relative dignity of their surroundings and their treatment by interviewers; or in the number of programmes (in particular, documentaries) seen as favouring one side or the other.

4.23 The Panel agrees that these are among the main issues needing to be addressed. The recommendations we make are relevant to each of them.

Our Review of TV and Radio Programmes and of BBC Online

4.24 One of the most important parts of the evidence was our review of a sample of recent and current output from the BBC and, for comparative purposes, from others.

News coverage

4.25 During the period of our sampling there were three major news stories.

a) Israeli withdrawal from Gaza

The BBC's Jerusalem Bureau was reinforced with extra staff and equipment to cover events as Israel carried out Ariel Sharon's policy of withdrawing from settlements in Gaza. The local and international media had expected that the withdrawal would require Israeli troops to come into conflict with their own citizens by forcibly evicting from the settlements. As it turned out the conflict was much less than forecast.

The Panel sampled the considerable amount of hour by hour BBC reporting from the settlements. But we also looked for the explanation and analysis which BBC correspondents offered and whether it informed their own narrative reporting. And we looked at the equivalent coverage from non-BBC UK broadcasters.

The Panel considered the context within which the events were reported in particular whether the withdrawal was covered as solely an inter-Israeli issue or one with wider consequences for the conflict;

b) Ariel Sharon's illness

The Israeli Prime Minister's stroke happened during a relatively quiet news period at the end of the Christmas/New Year holiday in the UK and commanded considerable space in news

programming.

Much of it was inevitably devoted to his medical condition. When it became clear that Mr Sharon was unlikely to recover sufficiently to resume his post broadcasters began to transmit profiles of him.

The Panel considered the way in which Mr Sharon was portrayed in these BBC reports. Because these reports often depicted his departure from active politics as significant for the future of the conflict we also looked to see how widely other voices, such as Palestinians, were heard in this debate;

c) Palestinian elections

If the Gaza withdrawal and Mr Sharon's illness were seen by the international media as primarily Israeli stories, the Palestinian elections were seen as primarily a Palestinian event. But Hamas's success inevitably created a need for Israeli reaction.

In the coverage by BBC and non-BBC outlets the amount of corruption in the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority was mentioned regularly as one of the reasons for Fatah's defeat and Hamas's success. Therefore the Panel looked back over earlier BBC coverage of Palestinian affairs to see if this issue had been explored;

d) Violence

By contrast with the years of Intifada, there were comparatively few 'suicide bombings' during the period of this Review. Israel continued its 'targeted killings' of Palestinian militants and it made other military attacks on the Palestinian side. The Panel looked for any differences in the way deaths on the two sides were reported on the BBC;

e) Life in the occupied areas.

Occasionally BBC News stood aside from the daily news agenda to report on longer-term developments. We looked at the coverage of Israel's construction of a barrier and at a report on how a modern-day traveller might undertake a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem;

Current Affairs

f) Television

The most significant part of the television current affairs programming was the three part series on BBC Two 'Israel and the Arabs - Elusive Peace'. This was commissioned by the BBC from the independent producers Brook Lapping who have made a number of historical series for the BBC since they established the format with 'The Death of Yugoslavia'.

The BBC Two series 'This World' showed two programmes about the conflict. 'Inside Israel's Jails' had special access to Palestinian prisoners and Israeli guards. 'The Last Stand' was filmed over 18 months with, and sometimes by, an Israeli settler family planning to resist forced withdrawal from their home;

g) Radio

'A Year in the Arab Israeli Crisis' was a four part series presented by Edward Stourton on Radio Four. For twelve months he monitored attempts at a peace agreement and then produced four programmes which were transmitted in the spring of 2005. They focused mainly on the diplomatic and political manoeuvrings.

The most regular current affairs output about foreign affairs on BBC television and radio is the weekly 'From Our Own Correspondent' (FOOC) on Radio Four. This provides an opportunity for BBC correspondents to go beyond the main news agenda and to report entirely in their own words. A number of FOOC reports transmitted in this time period were about Israel and the occupied territories;

Online

h) In addition to monitoring the news pages of bbc.co.uk we looked at the background and analysis available in the special section 'Israel and the Palestinians' with its associated People and Country Profiles, Key Documents and web-links to relevant sites in the region. The section also includes photo-journals and an audio slideshow in which an Israeli Arab woman describes her life.

5. THE MAIN ISSUES

5.1 As will be seen, the evidence before us came from a variety of sources and was diverse in nature. Much of it is now, or was (like the programmes we reviewed), in the public domain. We attach the two main pieces of research commissioned for this review, and Noam Lubell's account of international law. Although we are not ourselves publishing the written evidence submitted to us, or a record of the oral evidence, we do list the main organisations concerned,

many of which would no doubt be happy to share the evidence they gave. Accordingly others, including the BBC itself, may want to draw on this material to reflect further on a range of issues.

5.2 The evidence, taken as a whole, touches on many issues of interest, perhaps particularly to the BBC, some of them going much wider than its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We, for our part, have concentrated on the assessment we have been invited to make and recommendations arising from, and relevant to, that. Even so, as will be seen, because our work has been confined to one small but sensitive portion of a much wider news and current affairs agenda, almost inevitably our recommendations would, if acted on, have implications, at least within the BBC, for other matters.

5.3 Accordingly in this section we discuss impartiality, our assessment of the BBC's success in meeting the impartiality requirements in its coverage of the conflict, the shortcomings we detect, and the possible remedies.

Impartiality

5.4 Our principal task was to assess the impartiality of the BBC's news and current affairs coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with particular regard to accuracy, fairness, context, balance and bias, actual or perceived.

5.5 On this, we took the view that the impartiality requirements are best taken together as a package. The BBC Governors have separately commissioned a review of these ideas and, partly for that reason, we did not feel it helpful or necessary to subject them to the doctrinal exegesis to which they have sometimes given rise. There are however a number of points to register. First, seen in the round, they demand as full and fair an account of matters as possible. (In this sense, the opposite of impartiality is partial coverage, that is, coverage which fails to mention relevant events or issues.) As such, an assessment needs to take account not only of an attempted calibration of bias or balance, the issue which preoccupied many of our witnesses, sometimes with scholastic exactitude, but also of the quality of the programmes: the extent to which they were comprehensive, penetrating and illuminating. Second, it follows that accuracy, clarity and precision of the language used is crucial: both in avoiding bias, but also in providing comprehension.

5.6 Third, as is apparent in our terms of reference, the BBC has incorporated "balance" as part of the impartiality doctrine, although this is not a legal requirement like those for accuracy, fairness and due impartiality. While this is understandable, it can, as some of our witnesses suggested, produce misleading coverage when, as in the case of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the two sides do not enjoy "equality of arms" (actually or figuratively). Fourth, the requirement on the BBC for impartiality is subject to a "democratic saving" in that paragraph 5.5 of the Agreement between the government and the BBC makes clear that "due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue or detachment from fundamental democratic principles".

5.7 A good consideration is whether a reasonable and attentive viewer or listener could, on the basis of the BBC's coverage of the conflict, including, importantly, such analysis and interpretation as it offers, come to an informed and independent judgement of the issues and of

the respective merits of each side's story. In short, the impartiality requirements should not be seen as constituting a straight-jacket inhibiting distinctive or original programming. On the contrary, meeting them requires coverage that is not only fair but also creative and challenging.

Our Assessment

5.8 As the discussion above makes clear, we take the view that the impartiality requirements should not only or mainly be applied negatively, that is to establish that there has been no bias, but positively to mean that a complete and fair account should be offered. In practice, that test could not be met merely by passive reporting without obvious bias. It will require a purposive project of enquiry and, at some level, a firm editorial grip to ensure that the output as a whole covers all the significant events and issues and presents them in perspective. It will also require, as is argued below, a degree of self consciousness about the news and current affairs output as a construct requiring intentional selection and design. If it is not conscious and intentional, the selection and design, for example on the crucial question of how a story is "framed", will be done by default, the probable result being that an interpretation of events is conveyed which may be misjudged or misleading. This can be illustrated by two fictional headlines: "Israeli PM's Stroke Deals Peace Process Blow" and "Arafat's Death Gives Hope of Palestinian Reform". Similarly, the choice of pictures can be crucial in determining the way a story is understood. The point is not whether either of these is right or wrong, but that each relies on many assumptions, each of which is open to challenge. Analysis is being conveyed in the guise of reporting. This may be right but it had better, at the least, be consciously designed and subject to an editorial guiding hand. The way the story is "framed" is likely, in particular if it is part of a pattern repeated over weeks of reporting, significantly to shape the views of the audience.

5.9 Our assessment is that:

- a) apart from individual lapses, sometimes of tone, language or attitude, there was little to suggest systematic or deliberate bias; on the contrary there was evidence, in the programming and in other ways, of a commitment to be fair, accurate and impartial;
- b) the news reporting from location, particularly that from the Jerusalem Bureau, is of high quality, particularly when account is taken of the tensions and complexities of the conflict and the pressures brought by interested parties;
- c) there are outstanding examples of current affairs programmes and the BBC has used its website to provide historical and analytical background to the conflict;
- d) the BBC has made considerable efforts through the Journalism Board, enhanced dialogue with representative organisations from both sides and the work of the Senior Editorial Adviser on the Middle East to improve its output on the conflict;
- e) nonetheless, and taking account of the consideration in paragraph 1.6 above, there are identifiable shortcomings, particularly in respect of gaps in coverage, analysis, context and perspective, the consistent maintenance of the BBC's own established editorial standards, including on language, and arising from the elusiveness of editorial planning, grip and oversight. In summary, the finding is that BBC coverage does not consistently constitute a full

and fair account of the conflict but rather, in important respects, presents an incomplete and in that sense misleading picture.

5.10 More specifically, these shortcomings include:

a) deficiencies in output: given that the BBC has more news airtime and resources than any other UK broadcaster and probably more than any other European broadcaster there were several deficiencies in the broadcast news output. These included an absence of historical background and deficiencies in the provision of other contexts (such as the role of the wider Middle East in the conflict), and insufficient analysis and interpretation of some important events and issues, including shifts in Palestinian society, opinion and politics. There was little reporting of the difficulties faced by the Palestinians in their daily lives. Equally in the months preceding the Palestinian elections there was little hard questioning of their leaders. The broader themes covered in current affairs programmes only partly offset these shortcomings.

b) elusiveness of editorial planning, grip and oversight as evident in imbalances in coverage (e.g. in the menu of current affairs programmes, on the background of commentators relied on, spokespeople interviewed or on the implications of the Gaza disengagement for the Palestinians), insufficient diversity of stories, and of perspectives. This elusiveness is also manifest in the failure to achieve the ideal of a consistent exposure of both the Israeli and Palestinian view (the "dual narratives") and the lack of a self-conscious address to the important issue of how stories are framed ("newsframes").

c) imprecision and inconsistency in the use of sensitive language and terminology. Although this is, rightly, an issue to which the BBC and its senior managers have given much thought, there is significant scope for improvement, particularly in reporting terrorism. The fact that these issues are difficult to get right makes it vital that, when the BBC does reach a considered view on terminology, it is consistently followed in practice.

d) reactive journalism, instead of a purposive effort to tell a complicated story in the round and to remedy the well-attested incomprehension of the generality of viewers and listeners (incomprehension further evidenced in the research commissioned for this Review). One important feature of this is the failure to convey adequately the disparity in the Israeli and Palestinian experience, reflecting the fact that one side is in control and the other lives under occupation. Although this asymmetry does not necessarily bear on the relative merits of the two sides, it is so marked and important that coverage should succeed in this if in nothing else.

The Editorial Function

5.11 Some of these shortcomings may in part be a function of the high degree of **editorial delegation** in the BBC. In practice some decisions taken by reporters on the ground, as well as by journalists compiling stories from their input, are editorial in character. In addition, those responsible centrally for news and current affairs, for particular channels and for particular programmes or items in programmes all play an important editorial role. There is much to be said for this: it is right that the cadre of high quality producers and journalists should have much discretion; and it would be undesirable to try to secure an imposed uniformity of approach. In any case, some delegation may be necessary given the scale of the BBC's news

and current affairs operation and the volume of its output. (Paradoxically, this degree of delegation can lead to remarkably similar coverage across all output, for example on the Gaza disengagement, when in principle a more centralised operation could orchestrate greater diversity. The fact that most of the international media fell in with similar coverage and the prospect it offered of action pictures should not absolve the BBC from failing to bring a more instructive perspective.)

5.12 The BBC news and current affairs operation is very large and has grown considerably in recent years. Even leaving aside BBC World and the World Service, there are a number of continuous news services, as well as BBC Online. These are sleepless beasts which must be constantly fed. Certainly it is not easy to discern how command, control and accountability operate on a day to day basis in the production and oversight of coverage of the conflict. It is not that everyone evades responsibility; rather that too many people claim or appear to have claims, to have direction of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for it to be wholly credible. Tracking quite how and where what appear to be editorial policy decisions are taken is not easy.

5.13 On the other hand, there are many hands working energetically and enthusiastically; there is a highly developed culture of intercommunication; a shared commitment to the BBC's core values including impartiality; few people we spoke to internally thought organisational structures produced any difficulty; and, finally and most importantly, a great deal of material is produced, much of it of great quality and reliability. That said the present arrangements make it difficult to rebut all the criticisms of this kind that we received in our evidence; or indeed for us as a Panel to be clear how our recommendations, if accepted, would be implemented.

5.14 Our overriding concern can be expressed this way: coverage of the conflict necessarily involves continual editorial decisions, whether made consciously or by implication. Some of these amount to significant policy decisions: for example to declare that there is no peace process, or to frame an incident as part of the global war on terror or as part of a local struggle for independence against occupation. From the evidence available, it was not clear to the Panel that such decisions are brought out for consideration in the most coherent way, or that they are implemented consistently.

5.15 Many of the issues mentioned in our evidence, in complaints and in our own deliberations, concern the exercise of the editorial function. For example, it is essentially an editorial decision, though in a particular case it may be taken by the journalist on the ground:

- which stories should be selected for coverage;
- what mix should make up the package: for example, agency or BBC footage, which if any graphics, interviews with official spokesmen, comments from bystanders (vox pops), analysis by experts, comment by the journalist on the ground, interview between the anchor and the journalist (the "two-way");
- how the story is framed and established in the wider context of the flow of events;
- the tone and character of the presentation;
- whether the overall balance of documentaries made or commissioned is fair, or tilts too far in

favour of one side or the other;

- whether the respective narratives have been fully and fairly exposed;
- whether the overall interpretation and analysis of the event or issue is the best available;
- and whether the BBC's output, taken in the round, accurately and fairly represents the realities, properly set in context.

5.16 The BBC successfully produces, and therefore edits, many hours every day of news and current affairs on many channels, each tailored to differing audience profiles. **Nonetheless we found the conscious exercise of the editorial function somewhat elusive, both conceptually and organisationally.** By "conceptually elusive" we mean that we found some difficulty in securing acknowledgement that the kind of editorial decisions we have identified above require self conscious exercise. By "organisationally elusive" we mean that we found it difficult to identify where responsibility lies, or a clear line of accountability. On the contrary, we were unclear of the allocation of responsibility among the bureau chief in Jerusalem, the newly appointed Middle East Editor, programme editors, managers of BBC Newsgathering and other senior BBC News executives.

5.17 The BBC's culture is deeply committed to the attainment of the objectives of the accurate, impartial, fair and balanced representation of news. This may, however, have the result that, as an institution, it is less self conscious about the extent to which its product is a construct. However much it strives for the truth, its coverage is necessarily the outcome of a series of choices, whether or not articulated and expressly made. But, because it is less self conscious about the nature of this editorial activity than it might be, **it has undeveloped systems to manage and monitor its performance in this respect. The Panel noted that quality control varies across channels. It was told that output from the Jerusalem Bureau was double checked for accuracy and impartiality before transmission to London. The same rigorous oversight did not appear to apply to coverage about the conflict on BBC News 24 and BBC World generated in London. The Panel became aware that questions have been raised within the BBC about the quality of this output.**

5.18 Accordingly there seems to be, for example, no clear policy on how news frames are selected, and no mechanism to monitor the results; there is no systematic way of monitoring the balance achieved by documentaries across the full range of BBC output; and there is no central log of the external experts deployed in programmes, and no coherent effort to ensure that their qualifications and antecedents are properly exposed to the audience. **While some editorial decisions are small, for example whether to use a vox pop on a particular story, others are of great significance, for example to assert that there is no longer a peace process, or to frame a story on the hypothesis that the obstacle to peace is the need for Palestinian reform. These are plainly significant policy decisions and should be explicitly settled as such.**

5.19 More generally, though many individual journalists, editors and producers are alert to the issue, there is no systematic address to the question whether either or both of the main narratives of the protagonists are fully and fairly exposed.

5.20 Among the issues for consideration in respect of coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian

conflict are:

- a) whether the balance between the central editorial and policy making effort, itself dispersed among several points, and those responsible for news gathering and programme making, is appropriate;
- b) whether responsibility for making, managing and monitoring editorial policy is clear and well understood within the organisation;
- c) or whether, rather, important issues of policy and performance are missed or assumed or settled arbitrarily and then inconsistently observed.

5.21 In practice issues of this kind go much wider than the conflict with which this Review is exclusively concerned. But if our recommendation (see paragraph 1.14 above) for more secure editorial planning, grip and oversight is acted on these issues will also fall to be considered.

Language

5.22 Language is an issue at the heart of impartiality. This is because words can convey judgement and value separate from or additional to, their apparent or surface meaning. Some words become over-familiar, or abused or irretrievably loaded. (One can see that this is so without taking the further absolutist position that no value free communication is possible or that impartiality is unattainable both in principle and in practice. The Appendix to the attached report of the Loughborough research has a discussion of some of these issues.) As such, they cannot help in the task of conveying a clear and exact account of events and issues. Such words have become a barrier to understanding. Rather than conveying information about the matter described or discussed, they serve mainly to characterise the views of the person using them, to the detriment of any claim to impartiality.

5.23 The BBC is well aware of this issue and many senior people wrestle with it because of its importance. The BBC has to look at the problem world-wide and, if it were ever possible, it can no longer attempt to compartmentalise its domestic and international audiences. If it appears to adopt one policy in covering terrorist attacks in London, or Madrid, it must expect to face questions if it appears to take a different line in Israel.

5.24 For an organisation committed to impartiality, as governments and other political actors are not, finding the right terminology is a constant challenge. This is especially so in the case of the deployment of force or violence to advance an ideological, religious or political cause; whether in claimed defence of an established political arrangement or other authority or in an attempt to change or challenge it. This is an issue at the heart of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the trajectory of which has, since 1917, been determined by the deployment of force and violence. The issue of the use of the term "terrorism" and related words is discussed below.

5.25 There are two issues:

- a) getting the terminology right;
- b) consistency in using the preferred terms.

Getting the Terminology Right

5.26 In evidence, BBC practice on language was challenged in respect of a number of matters central to the conflict and in particular on terminology for:

- a) the security/separation fence/barrier/wall;
- b) the territories, including East Jerusalem occupied by the Israeli authorities since the 1967 Six Day War;
- c) the intentional killing, without judicial process, of identified individuals by Israeli forces;
- d) the settlement communities established by Israeli civilians in territory occupied by the Israeli authorities in 1967;
- e) events which would be understood to constitute terrorism, and their perpetrators.

5.27 The BBC has established positions, and has developed guidance for journalists and editors on these issues, though they remain contested. A number of witnesses suggested that the BBC should be guided by international law (which no doubt the BBC also had had in mind in developing its guidance). As mentioned earlier, we commissioned a review of the relevant provisions of international law, with clarification on where matters seemed firmly established and where uncertain, partly for this reason and partly because of its bearing more generally on an assessment of the BBC's output. Noam Lubell's report is at Appendix E. He helpfully draws from his analysis what it implies for terminology.

5.28 As will be seen, he suggests that the best general term for a) above is "barrier" though it could also be referred to as a "separation barrier". Equally the relevant parts of the barrier could accurately be described as a wall or a fence. On b), he suggests that "occupied territories" is appropriate and correct in law; but that the term "illegally occupied territories" can be misleading and should preferably be avoided. On d) above, he suggests that the settlements are correctly described as "illegal settlements", though this does not make the settlers "illegal persons".

5.29 On each of these matters, Noam Lubell's advice is consistent with the existing BBC guidance as expressed in their internal Key Points Guide for journalists. We support the BBC's position on these points. (It is not always consistent, however, with BBC practice and we return to that issue under the heading **Consistency** below.) We also agree with the BBC position that the usage "Palestinian land" to refer to the occupied territories is appropriate.

5.30 On c) above, Noam Lubell suggests that the best expression, hallowed by usage among the international legal community, is "targeted killing" because it fits the policy of deliberately killing specific individuals, but without the term itself containing a determination of its legality or illegality, which in practice is likely to turn on the precise facts of each case. The expression "extra-judicial executions" would not, he suggests, be appropriate as it predetermines the illegality of the action. On this matter, the BBC guidance takes a slightly different view and

suggests that the word "assassinated" (if the victim is a senior figure) is generally preferred to "murder" but the word "killed" or "killing" on its own may be perfectly adequate.

5.31 The same is not true of e) namely **terrorism** and associated words. This is the most difficult language issue facing the BBC. Representatives of the Israeli Government told the Panel that its most serious concern was the way terrorism was covered, and the risk of legitimising it. Other witnesses also expressed concern on this point.

5.32 The BBC's position on this is set out in the Editorial Guidelines, which are published:

"We must report acts of terror quickly, accurately, fully and responsibly. Our credibility is undermined by the careless use of words which carry emotional or value judgements. The word "terrorist" itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. We should try to avoid the term, without attribution. We should let other people characterise while we report the facts as we know them."

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/assets/advice/guidanceontheuseoflanguagewhenreportingterrorism.doc>

5.33 The BBC's position does not, then, amount to an absolute ban on the expression. Indeed the fact that it was readily used in respect of the tube and bus bombs in London on the 7th July 2005 has added to disquiet in respect of its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict where "militant" is the preferred term. Sometimes the BBC has used the term "militant" when reporting, in indirect speech, comments by the Israeli Government, causing further friction, since they use the term "terrorist", as did the outgoing PLO-led Palestinian Authority, at least on occasion.

5.34 Noam Lubell's report discusses this issue at some length. He suggests:

"Avoiding any use of words with the 'terror' root might be seen as shying away from determinations that at least in some cases seem resolutely unquestionable, and legally correct. All approaches are likely to lead to criticisms of sorts. Ultimately, while there might be agreed (even if not unanimous) ways to describe 'terrorism' and therefore use that term, as long as there is no clear definition and universal agreement on usage of the term 'terrorist', use of the latter remains a policy choice. Whatever exact definition of terrorism is used and the terms chosen to describe the perpetrators, the key would be to maintain consistency, both within a given conflict situation, and also across conflicts, applying the same definitions and terms equally to all situations and circumstances."

5.35 The test applied by the BBC - namely whether the expression is an aid or barrier to understanding - is the right starting point. It seems clear that there is a risk that describing actors as terrorists may obscure meaning both because the pejorative weight carried by the word is so great, and also because the designation may become permanent. In fact the commission of a terrorist act, however reprehensible, may be the work of a moment, and it is a truism that many who have carried out terrorist acts have subsequently become respected politicians, even statesmen. (This is as true of those active in the Zionist movement before the foundation of the state of Israel as in others.) For similar reasoning, it would be a mistake to use the expression "terrorist" in respect of organisations, even though the terrorist act was carried out at their instigation.

5.36 However, it is less easy to sustain the argument that to describe an action as "terrorism" or as a "terrorist act" obscures meaning. Terrorism is normally regarded as having three elements; its technique is the application of force or violence to cause death or injury; its target is civilians selected indiscriminately or randomly; and its objective is political or purportedly political. It seems clear, for example, that placing a bomb on a bus used by civilians intending death or injury in supposed furtherance of a cause is a terrorist act and no other expression conveys so tersely and accurately the elements involved in the action. In evidence to the Panel, Israeli Government representatives acknowledged that a definition on these lines, which they commended, could apply when warranted to state actions.

5.37 It is true that it has not proved possible to secure a general international agreement on the definition of terrorism. (Though the Israeli Government, they told us, did reach such an agreement with the Palestinians, with Senator Mitchell's help, at Sharm el Sheikh. The resulting definition is to be found in Noam Lubell's report.) But the difficulty in fact seems to arise not from uncertainty about what the expression means as from reluctance to acknowledge that when it is used in support of favoured causes it constitutes terrorism. But the BBC need not be inhibited by that; its concern should be with the clarity and precision of language. If others find it uncomfortable to have methods they deploy or support correctly so described they should consider using different techniques.

5.38 The BBC is right to avoid terms which are a barrier to understanding, and should use words which best express the desired meaning clearly and effectively. The term "terrorism" should accordingly be used in respect of relevant events since it is the most accurate expression for actions which involve violence against randomly selected civilians with the intention of causing terror for ideological, including political or religious, objectives, whether perpetrated by state or non-state agencies. While those immediately responsible for the actions might be described as terrorists, the BBC is right to avoid so labelling organisations, except in attributed remarks.

5.39 This approach, which the BBC has considered itself (as can be seen from the BBC's Editorial Policy discussions <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edpolmeet>), is not without its complications and difficulties. As the BBC knows well, and as Noam Lubell also acknowledges, there is no perfect answer to this issue. Nonetheless we believe it would be an improvement on the present position and consistent with a policy of using the words which most clearly and exactly convey the intended meaning

Consistency

5.40 Equally important, in our view, is the need for the BBC, once it has come to a clear view on sensitive language issues of this sort, to **ensure that it is followed consistently across channels and across conflicts.** (It would no doubt be sensible for the BBC to establish an accepted usage to refer to Hamas, as it does not yet seem to have done. A great variety of descriptors can be heard, including four different formulations on one recent Today programme.) This would imply writing its guidance in more direct and less permissive terms and incorporating it in a brief and accessible form appropriate for hard pressed journalists and editors.

Looking Ahead

5.41 There are a number of developments in prospect which may affect the BBC's position in the Middle East. In addition to the existing availability of the two English language services, BBC World Service radio and BBC World TV, and BBC Online in English and Arabic:

- the BBC is preparing to start transmitting a British Government funded TV news channel to the Arabic speaking world

- simultaneously the BBC is expanding access to its Arabic language radio service by acquiring FM licences around the Middle East. It recently received an FM licence to transmit in Gaza.

- the third leg of the BBC's offering, its website services in English and Arabic, will continue to develop as more and more homes in the region get internet access. Moreover the BBC intends to develop its video-on-demand online service giving users round the world even more access to video reports filed by BBC correspondents in English and Arabic.

The net effect of these developments is that the BBC will become an increasingly important player in the region and make both the Israeli and Palestinian authorities even more alert to and sensitive about BBC coverage.

5.42 A separate development is the growth of interactive services on TV and the internet which allow viewers and listeners in the UK and abroad to express their own views in polls, message boards etc. The BBC has developed a service for many of its outlets called 'Have Your Say'. As our Panel discovered, some licence fee payers already take offence at what other licence fee payers say on those services and blame the BBC. Simultaneously the international growth of what the BBC calls 'user-generated content', also known as 'citizen journalism', will mean that broadcasters such as the BBC will have increasing responsibilities as moderators and facilitators of inter-user (sometimes known as peer- to -peer) content.

5.43 These developments in the BBC's ability to distribute its coverage of the story mean that there are not only more possible problems ahead but also more opportunities. Among other things, this is likely to require regular reviews of the impact of the logistics on the coverage as events develop. It may also require a renewed focus in BBC management on the opportunities and challenges of being uniquely a mainstream broadcaster in both the UK and in the Israeli-Palestinian region in a digitally interactive world.

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