

BBC Impartiality?

Trevor Asserson

UK Solicitor and Member of the Israeli Bar;
Senior Partner and Founder of Asserson Law Offices

The title “BBC Impartiality” may sound unlikely, or even comic. Presented here for the first time is an analysis of BBC Arabic. BBC Arabic has been broadcast for some time on radio and in March 2008 went live on television. Key to BBC Arabic’s perspective is that the only people who can understand it, and therefore are likely to criticize it, are Arabic speakers. The number of these in the West is relatively small, and probably the amount of those inclined to criticize its content is smaller still. This article will present an analysis of the material being broadcast on BBC Arabic, its trends and bias.

The corpus for this analysis is the interviews conducted with guest speakers on the main BBC news program and broadcast over a period of four weeks during the Second Lebanon War. These have been translated and classified according to whether their approach to the conflict takes a specific side or is neutral. For the most part this is straightforward – for example if one takes a spokesperson from the Israeli Foreign Ministry, one can assume that he is pro-Israel, while a spokesperson from Hizbullah is presumably pro-Hizbullah, although some cases are slightly more complicated.

On one BBC Arabic program, Hizbullah and Iranian representatives were interviewed seventeen times during the Second Lebanon War, while Israelis were interviewed five times.

Prior to presenting this analysis, it is important to take into consideration a particular element of the BBC guidelines. The BBC claims that it has an obligation to neutrality. However, this claim has no basis in fact. Its guidelines state that due impartiality does not require absolute neutrality on every issue, or detachment from fundamental democratic principles. In other words,

there is not necessarily moral equivalence between a terrorist attack and a sovereign state employing its right to self-defense. It would seem reasonable to expect the adherence to fundamental democratic principles to express itself in the approach to Hizbullah and Iran (the former recognized by the UK government as a terrorist organization, the latter probably the greatest existential threat to the West today in terms of its genocidal ambitions), on the one hand, and Israel (a country with all the elements of democracy, representational government, an independent judiciary and a free press), on the other. However, when analyzing the number of representatives invited to be interviewed on a specific program, the statistics are very revealing: Hizbullah and Iran had seventeen representatives, Israel had five representatives. More than three times as many representatives of undemocratic perspectives than democratic ones were interviewed.

More significant than these statistics are the topics discussed. The following is a representative sample of the anti-American, apparently anti-Western, views expressed:

“The Bush government wanted to have complete control over the world.”

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

“There is a kind of vision in the American government to crush the Palestinians completely and take all their lands.” (attributed to Condoleezza Rice)

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

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

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

In terms of the delegitimization of Israel, the following is a representative sample of the attitudes to Israel being broadcast by the BBC. These quotes are not all from the same person but taken from different speeches. They are never contradicted by the interviewer:

“Israel is said to have evil objectives.”

“The Israeli military machine works to a great extent on hatred.”

“Israelis are violating all international law. It turns out every single one. They’ve carefully gone through and they’re violating every international law.”

The language used escalates the levels of excitement and hysteria, including language such as the “barbaric Israeli attack,” “the barbaric Israeli army,” and the “barbaric war.”

“They are destroying villages completely.”

“They are racist and barbaric.”

“We are facing a monster that does not care about the law or about morals.”

“A killer monster.”

Israel is portrayed as a deadly and destructive monster which kills Palestinian children as a form of collective punishment. Other statements are pure fabrications, mentioning massacres which the international press seemingly neglected to report:

“They are committing massacres.”

“The atrocities we have seen in Lebanon so far from Israel, including all of their massacres...”

“There’s a need for insurance against further Israeli massacres.”

Other comments border on the absurd, describing Israel’s colonialist ambitions, making historical comparisons with no factual basis (for example, comparisons with the Holocaust), or even basic errors (Israel attacking the whole of Lebanon, not just Hizbullah targets in the south).

“Israel is a country that wants to expand and they have a plan to force on Palestine, Lebanon and even Egypt.”

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

“Barbaric Israeli attacks which kill everybody everywhere. We should be very grateful we’re still alive.”

“Israel is extensively targeting every part of Lebanon.”

“These are crimes unprecedented historically.”

A further interesting historical comment was made by Dr. Anwar Ashki, the director of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Saudi Arabia: “We faced Israel in 1967 and won militarily.”

These views, and others, are not being expressed by Al-Jazeera, or another Arab broadcaster, but by the BBC, funded by billions in British taxpayers' money every year. The BBC is the most powerful news organization in the world. Precisely because of its legal obligation to be fair and impartial, it has such considerable weight. Yet it is adding this weight to extreme views.

The BBC is funded not only by the British taxpayer, but also partly by the Foreign Office. As such, it would be reasonable to expect comments made on BBC radio to be in tune with British foreign policy. Yet the following comments are highly inconsistent with current British policy: “I hope that Iran has something to scare Israel. As an Arab citizen from the Middle East I wish that all Arab countries would have nuclear weapons,” or “I would ask Iran and all Arab countries to have nuclear weapons.”

Television is far more powerful than radio. Aside from a very small number of neutrals, the views expressed on BBC Arabic TV can be divided into pro-Hizbullah – 82% and pro-Israel – 18%, once again contradicting the BBC's commitment to fundamental democratic principles. However, non-Arabic speakers can never be aware of this.

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Another study which provides a perspective on how BBC journalists think is an analysis of a minor section of the BBC website, “In Pictures.” At the end of each morning meeting a journalist is asked to put ten to twelve pictures on the website which reflect interesting developments worldwide and summarize events of international significance. This particular analysis took into consideration pictures chosen during a six-month period a number of years ago, identifying all pictures related to Israel, Palestine, or Iraq specifically. Following this study, the head of the website was asked if these pictures are monitored for bias. He could not see any reason to monitor a tiny segment of the website that is the work of a different individual journalist every day. He concluded that it is impossible to monitor everything.

The analysis of these pictures provides a glance into the soul of the journalists responsible for selecting them and the way that these journalists think that the world should be presented. The ethnic cleansing, massacres, forced exile of millions, and government-sponsored attacks on individuals in Darfur received one picture in the entire period. When little was happening in Israel, the intifada was over and Israel was preparing to withdraw from Gaza, Israel received as much attention as the war in Iraq at its height, and about twenty times more than Darfur. Excluding the neutral pictures, the figures are consistent with the above analysis of BBC Arabic radio's bias: 20% of the pictures were pro-Israeli and about 80% were pro-Palestinian.

An analysis of the “In Pictures” section of the BBC website found that 20% of the pictures were pro-Israeli and 80% were pro-Palestinian. Palestinian men are mostly depicted as unarmed and elderly and often at prayer, while Israel is depicted almost entirely by pictures of armed men.

In theory it is not always easy to tell whether a picture is for or against any particular group. In reality it is quite simple. Palestinian men, for example, are mostly depicted as unarmed and elderly and often photographed at prayer. Even more frequently, the pictures show women and children clutching photographs of their loved ones – brothers, fathers, or husbands – who have been incarcerated for no apparent reason by the ghastly Zionist entity. The ongoing theme is one of separation – attractive, beautiful faces, pathetically clutching photos. No hint is present as to why these men have been imprisoned. On the other hand, Israel is depicted almost entirely by pictures of armed men, very often their faces obscured. The symbols of Israel are the anonymously held gun, an Israeli soldier behind sand bags, his helmet positioned so that his features cannot be seen, or Israeli soldiers outnumbering Palestinians. One example of this is a picture of five armed Israeli soldiers surrounding one Palestinian woman.

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The one typically pro-Jewish picture is, of course, connected to the Holocaust, usually produced to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day. Generally this requires a picture of a pathetic, sometimes dead, persecuted, homeless, and stateless Jew in order to arouse sympathy. Representations of Palestinians in beautifully staged pictures, the light just shining upon dignified, harmless, elderly gentlemen in impoverished surroundings or of a Palestinian holding a pitchfork, evoke the imagery of a harmless, charming, rustic people. When comparing the two, the stereotypical image of the pathetic Jew is not as pro-Jewish as it may at first seem.

Finally, it is necessary to add a comment on something seemingly unrelated – the Malaysian elections. The manner in which the Malaysian elections were portrayed by the BBC in pictures also sheds light on the BBC's representation of Israel. One picture showed an apparently Malaysian woman walking past a wall of four posters depicting peace in Palestine. On closer examination of the posters, in the top left corner of each one are two little children holding hands with an Israeli tank moving towards them. The picture below is of two other Palestinian children sitting on a heap of rubble, presumably the remains of their house after the tank has done its work.

It is in these ways, through radio and images alike, that the BBC portrays Israel. It uses its great power to create a recurring, negative image of Israel as an aggressor. It is through quotations such as those cited above and highly charged images that the BBC “impartially” presents events in the Middle East. These actions clearly contribute to the public perception of Israel and its delegitimization on an international level.