

## Exert 4

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### **Additional Content samples: October - December 2001, March - April 2002**

Here, we analyse a series of additional content samples of TV news, using the same methods as above. The purpose is to examine whether the trends which we have identified thus far are continued in later coverage. There were a number of specific areas of news content, which we wished to identify and analyse for purposes of comparison with the earlier samples. These included news on the origins and history of the conflict, the reasons for the fighting, the rationales of the two sides, descriptions of motives and coverage of casualties. We chose these additional samples of news from periods where there was extensive media coverage of the conflict and analysed early evening and late bulletins from BBC1 and ITV. The sample dates from which the bulletins came were 17<sup>th</sup> October – 13<sup>th</sup> December 2001 (47 bulletins) and 2<sup>nd</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> March 2002 (21 bulletins) and 9<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> April 2002

(30 bulletins). We also wished to identify any new themes or issues, which had emerged in these periods. These later samples came after the events of 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, the attack on America, which changed the international climate in which acts of violence and 'terrorism' were discussed. Within Israel, Ariel Sharon, the right-wing politician who had played such a role at the outset of the intifada, was now elected prime minister. There were also changes in the manner in which the Israeli/Palestinian conflict was fought. In 2001, the Israelis had begun a series of military incursions into areas, which had been under local Palestinian administration, and some Palestinian groups were engaging in the extensive use of suicide bombs. The incursions were reported as involving attacks on refugee camps and the demolition of Palestinian homes as part of a new plan announced by Ariel Sharon to deal with the revolt against the Israeli occupation. As we have noted, this was a period of extensive settlement and military development in the occupied areas and it was reported that the Israeli army had 'uprooted thousands of olive trees and vast tracts of farmland in Gaza' (*The Guardian* 12 April 2001). In our analysis of news content above we noted the dominance of Israeli perspectives and how this in part reflected the success of their public relations output. In on-screen appearances/interviews, Israelis had twice as much coverage as Palestinians. To develop this analysis further in these samples, we analysed all reported statements as well as interviews. We counted all the coverage given to statements from each side, and found that the Israeli dominance was sustained, notably in BBC coverage. (1)

In our first sample, we found that there was very little coverage of the history and origins of the conflict or discussion of the nature of the relationship between the two sides - that one was subject to military control by the other. The same was true of our later samples - we found nothing on the history and origins of the conflict. As before, there was extensive coverage of the violence and there was sympathy expressed for those caught up in it, but very little analysis of its nature and causes. We did however find that such issues were discussed more directly in other media and interestingly within

Israel itself. In March 2002, Michael Ben -Yair, who was the Attorney General in Israel between 1993 and 1996, wrote in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* that:

The intifada is the Palestinian people's war of national liberation. We enthusiastically chose to become a colonialist society, ignoring international treaties, expropriating lands, transferring settlers from Israel to the occupied territories, engaging in theft and finding justification for all these activities...we established an apartheid regime.

(quoted in *The Observer*, 31 March 2002).

Because such perspectives on the history and nature of the conflict were substantially absent from TV news, the practical effect was to remove the rationale for Palestinian action. Much of the news implicitly assumed the status quo – as if trouble and violence ‘started’ with the Palestinians launching an attack to which the Israelis ‘responded’. The lack of commentary on the nature of the occupation is clearly one dimension to this. Another is that there is little discussion of the possibility that actions by some Israeli groups might be designed to provoke a Palestinian response. We did however find that this was a subject taken up in the Israeli press. For example, in November 2001 the *Guardian* reported that Israeli newspapers were being very critical of the assassination policy pursued by Ariel Sharon's government. In November 2001 the military commander of Hamas in the West Bank had been killed shortly before the arrival of two US peace envoys. This, said the Israeli commentators had increased the threat of suicide bombing. As one noted in Israel's largest daily paper, *Yedioth Ahronoth*:

Whoever gave the green light for the assassination operation knew full well they are actually breaking, with a single blow, the gentleman's agreement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority of refraining in the coming days from perpetrating terror attacks.

The Israeli paper also criticised the army for planting an explosive device, which had killed five Palestinian children, noting that:

The act of revenge now hovering in the air has complete legitimacy, both on the Palestinian street and in the Palestinian Authority, in the light of the deaths of five children by an Israeli Army bomb.

(quoted in *The Guardian*, 26 November 2001)

Other Israeli commentators have suggested that the policy of 'targeted killings' by the Israelis was being used to provoke the Palestinians. A spokesman from 'Courage to Refuse', an organisation of dissenters from the Israeli Army, commented that:

Any suicide attack within Israel, deplorable as it is, is used by Sharon as a pretext for inflicting ever-increasing misery on the 3.5 million inhabitants of Palestine. And if suicide attacks are not forthcoming, you can count on Sharon to provoke them with his so-called 'targeted killings'.

(*The Guardian*, 5 July 2002)

It has also been argued that the reason for such 'provocation' is that some powerful political and military groups did not want a peace with the Palestinians, which involved an independent Palestinian state. They would prefer a completely subordinate Palestinian population or another diaspora in which Palestinians move into other countries. The Israeli peace activist, Uri Avneri, has commented on Ariel Sharon that:

From the day he took power, his agenda has been to erase the Oslo accords and dismantle the Palestinian Authority and its armed forces. He believes that ultimately the Palestinians will flee, as they did in 1948, or agree to be herded into a few isolated bantustans.

(quoted in *The Guardian* 11 January 2002)

David Hirst makes a similar point in an extended analysis of the Middle East crisis:

Ostensibly [Ariel Sharon] wants to return to the peace process. In reality he never did. For this was a war, which he and like-minded soldiers and politicians long anticipated; and once he got this war he did everything to fuel and perpetuate it. It was never a secret: he always opposed the Oslo Accord, and the historic compromise it involves, a Palestinian state on 22 per cent of original Palestine. From the outset, this was his war to destroy any idea of Palestinian self-determination on any portion of Palestinian land, and any legitimate institution in power to bring it about.

*(The Guardian, 22 February 2002)*

It can be seen that from a Palestinian perspective, the issue is not simply that the Israeli authorities may be acting 'first' in the sequence of violence, It is also that the Israeli 'response' is less about catching 'terrorists' than about destroying the possibility of a Palestinian state. The Israeli historian Avi Shlaim has argued that Ariel Sharon pursued this objective by linking his own actions to the American 'war against terror':

Ever the opportunist, Sharon was quick to jump on the bandwagon of America's "war against terror" in the aftermath of September 11. Under this banner Sharon has embarked on a sinister attempt to destroy the infrastructure of a future Palestinian state. His real agenda is to subvert what remains of the Oslo Accords, to smash the Palestinians into the ground and to extinguish hope for independence and statehood.

*(The Observer, 14 April 2002)*

As we will see, the news coverage in our samples was not normally informed by such perspectives. It tended rather to focus on the narrow reporting of violent events within a framework of Palestinian 'action' and Israeli 'retaliation'.

### **Sample Two October – December 2001**

#### **Motives, Retaliation and Response**

In analysing what we call the rationales of action, it is not our intention to legitimise or justify any killings. It is clear that people from both sides in this conflict met terrible fates. But in explaining the construction and development of public understanding, it is important to show any differences that exist in descriptions of the motives of different parties and in the consequences of their actions. As we have indicated, there are very distinct and different perspectives, which exist on the nature of this conflict and the motives of those involved. The Israeli authorities and much of the Israeli population see the issue in terms of their security and indeed the survival of the state in the face of threats from terrorists and hostile neighbours. They present their own actions as a response or retaliation to attacks. In contrast, the Palestinians see themselves as resisting or responding to a brutal military occupation by people who have taken their land, water and homes and who are denying them the possibility of their own state. Our analysis suggests that the news framework and presentational structure, which was most frequently used in reporting events, tended to favour the Israeli perspective.

In this sample we found that Israelis were said to be 'retaliating' or in some way responding to what had been done to them about 6 times as often as the Palestinians. This was a period of very intense conflict, including Israeli incursions into Palestinian towns and villages, suicide bombs and other attacks. In summarising the period on BBC News 24, a journalist commented that:

This cycle of violence began six weeks ago when an Israeli cabinet minister was shot.

(BBC1 News 24, 2 December 2001).

This is also how the Israelis presented the sequence of events. The Palestinians, however, regarded the killing of the Israeli minister as a 'response' to the assassination of one of their political leaders. The *Independent* described the sequence as follows:

The most notorious assassination came at the end of August when Israeli helicopters hovering over the West Bank town of Ramallah fired two missiles through the office windows of the leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Abu Ali Mustafa, 64, decapitating him as he sat in his swivel chair. As the leader of an established PLO faction, who according to Palestinians, was a politician rather than a member of the PFLP's military wing – he was the most senior figure to be picked off by the Israelis. Seven weeks later the PFLP sought revenge by infiltrating a Jerusalem hotel and assassinating Israel's tourism minister, Rehavam Ze'evi, whose support for ethnically cleansing the West Bank and Gaza of Arabs had long made him an enemy of the Palestinians.

(9 November 2001)

The Israelis frequently referred to the killing of their own minister and gave it as their reason for the incursions/ attacks on Palestinian towns and villages. The news then commonly reported this view without commenting on the Palestinian perspective on the sequence of events:

Israel has been under intense pressure from the Americans to pull out of Palestinian areas it occupied last week *following the killing of the* Israeli tourism minister.

(BBC1 late News, 26 October 2001 – our italics)

A tribute to the minister assassinated one week ago today, Ariel Sharon says he has now captured some of the men involved, the reason he gave for his incursions into the West Bank.

(BBC 1 late News, 24 October 2001)

The assassination of an Israeli cabinet minister *led to the reoccupation* of Palestinian areas.

(BBC News 24, 3 November 2001 – our italics)

Israeli forces have withdrawn from the town of Ramallah. Ramallah was one of six Palestinian towns which were occupied *after the killing of an Israeli cabinet minister*.

(BBC Radio 4, 7 November 2001 – our italics)

The Israeli incursions/attacks were reported to have resulted in the deaths of 79 Palestinians in three weeks and other casualties plus the extensive destruction of homes and property (*The Guardian*, 8 November 2001). Yet the pattern is persistent, that Palestinian attacks are rarely referred to on TV news as a ‘response’ or ‘retaliation’ to Israeli action. This structure can be seen clearly in the reports of a Palestinian attack and an Israeli ‘retaliation’:

Ten people have been killed and thirty injured after Palestinian gunmen opened fire on an Israeli bus travelling to a Jewish settlement in the West Bank. The bus was attacked as it approached Immanuel, north of Jerusalem. Tonight, *Israeli warplanes have retaliated* with air strikes against Palestinian targets in Gaza and Nablus.

(BBC1 News, 12 December 2001 – our italics)

Ten Israeli settlers were killed and up to thirty wounded in an attack by the Palestinian terrorist group, Hamas, on a bus in the West Bank. *Israeli responded with air raids* on the West Bank and Gaza.

(ITV main News, 12 December 2001 – our italics)

There is a much smaller number of references from journalists to the possibility of Palestinian counter-attacks and future action, as in these:

The Israeli cabinet is meeting tonight and are planning more tough action but the lesson from the past is that Israeli strikes are met by Palestinian counter-attacks. The future is already written here and it holds a lot more blood.

(BBC1 main News, 12 December 2001)

The bitter experience of the past fifteen months suggests that the Palestinians will not regard this strike as a salutary lesson, but as a provocation.

(ITV main News, 4 December 2001)

The BBC also describes how the actions of both sides are generating more hatred. A report notes that Israeli tanks have moved in on the headquarters of Yasser Arafat ‘following the latest attacks on Jewish settlers’. A journalist then goes on to describe the attitudes on both sides:

If Arafat falls, his successors could be more extreme – the UN warning of chaos. Israel isn’t listening; it’s consumed by rage and grief. This woman, burying her husband today, one of ten people killed near a Jewish settlement last night by men Arafat did not jail.

Israel now punishing innocent Palestinians. We found troops stopping May, her sister Rena,  
and sick mother from driving to their home. Israel generating more hate.

(BBC1 early evening News, 13 December 2001)

Such references suggest that one reason for the continuing violence is its self-perpetuating nature – that it is a cycle of ‘tit for tat’ action. We saw this explanation in the first weeks of the intifada. There is however an apparent move in this later period towards the Israeli perspective that it is Palestinian action which is driving this cycle. The assumption is revealed in an extraordinary exchange between a journalist and an MP, interviewed on Radio 4 about his recent visit to Egypt. The MP is asked: ‘What can the Egyptians do to stop the suicide bombers – because that in the end is what is cranking up the violence at present?’ The MP then replies: ‘Well that is one view, the Israeli view’ (Radio 4, 5 p.m. News, 1 April 2002). One consequence of the adoption of this view by journalists was that of the dominant pattern of action/retaliation which we have described. This was especially so in the headlines and in the introductory phrases of news stories. On the first and second of December 2001, there were reports of suicide bomb attacks in Israel which killed twenty-five people and left hundreds injured. On the third and fourth, the BBC News reported Israeli attacks on Palestinian areas as follows:

Headline: No mercy – the Israelis *hammer the Palestinians after the weekend bombs*. The West Bank and Gaza under attack tonight, a moment of truth says Israel. Israel *has hit back* with maximum force against Palestinians after the bomb attacks at the weekend which left twenty-five dead and hundreds injured. Israel’s *payback* to Yasser Arafat – at sunset Apache helicopters move in ... Palestinians claim two were killed during Israel’s *retaliation*.

Up sum: Israeli missiles have pounded Gaza city and the headquarters of Yasser Arafat, the Palestinian leader, *after the bomb attacks of the weekend* which left twenty-five dead and hundreds injured. The Israeli cabinet meeting in emergency session this afternoon said the attacks were a clear message to Mr Arafat to deal decisively with the problem of Palestinian terrorism.

(BBC1 early evening News, 3 December 2001 – our italics)

Headline: Second day of *Israeli’s retribution* – Palestinian targets are hammered again.

It’s the second day of raids *in retaliation* for the Palestinian suicide bomb attacks in Israel over the weekend.

Two people were killed and many injured. This is all part of Israel’s *furios response* to the weekend’s suicide bombings, which killed so many Israelis.

Interview question: We’re into the second day of *retaliation*, is there any end in sight to this series of attacks that we’ve seen?

(BBC1 early evening News, 4 December 2001 – our italics)

On ITV news it was reported that:

Israel gave the Palestinian Authority another humiliating reminder of its military power today with more attacks *in response* to the weekend's suicide-bombings.

Up sum: Israel launched more attacks *in response* to the suicide bombings of the weekend.

(ITV main News, 4 December 2001 – our italics)

This is a pattern, which was apparently used quite extensively. These are from programmes outside our main samples:

Dozens of Palestinians and Israelis have been killed in a relentless round of suicide bombings and *Israeli counter-attacks*.

(BBC2 *Newsnight* 22:30, 13 December 2001 – our italics)

The Israelis had carried out this demolition *in retaliation for* the murder of four soldiers.

(Channel 4 News 19:00, 10 January 2002 – our italics)

Five Palestinians have been killed when the Israeli army launched new attacks on the Gaza Strip *in retaliation for* recent acts of terrorism.

(Radio 4, 07:30, 6 March 2002 – our italics)

Such formulaic reporting excludes at least two key 'alternative' perspectives on the motivations of those involved in the conflict: (1) that Palestinians may be seen as resisting or responding to Israeli military control and the occupation as well as reacting to specific events such as attacks and assassinations, (2) that Israeli actions may be designed to destroy the possibility of a Palestinian state as well as to attack the 'terrorist infrastructure'. At one point the BBC does touch on the future of the Palestinian Authority, which is responsible for the local administration of the Palestinian areas. On the 13<sup>th</sup> December there was a report on Israeli attacks on the Authority's buildings in Gaza and the West Bank. Israelis are said to be, 'smashing [Arafat's] institutions one by one, bulldozing his territory into rubble...' A UN Middle East envoy says on camera, 'if the Palestinian Authority crashes, then Oslo is over' (meaning that the peace process is over). But what is the rationale for the destruction of these institutions? We do not hear the view that Sharon has always been against the Oslo agreement or the suggestion that he has provoked Palestinian action to make sure that it fails. Following the comments

of the UN envoy, we hear only that, 'Israelis say it's over already, they are consumed by rage and by grief.' (BBC1 late News, 13 December 2001). This does not mean that the rage and grief are not genuine, but to see the destruction of the potential Palestinian state as simply a 'grief stricken response' is only one view of what this conflict is about.

#### Endnotes

1. In the sample from October – December 2001 the figures were: on BBC1 – Israeli 140.75 and Palestinian 53.25, on ITV – Israeli 38 and Palestinian 35.5. In the sample from March 2002 the figures were: on BBC1 – Israeli 22.25 and Palestinian 9, on ITV – Israeli 15 and Palestinian 6. In the sample from April 2002 the figures were: on BBC1 – Israeli 89.25 and Palestinian 50.25, on ITV – Israeli 64.5 and Palestinian 35.5. ( all measured as lines of text) Taken together the figures were: for the BBC1 – Israeli 252.25 and Palestinian 112.5, and for ITV – Israeli 115.5 and Palestinian 77.
2. Measured in terms of the references, the figures were: Israeli 41 and Palestinian 7. For Sample Three (March 2002) the figures were Israeli 28 and Palestinian 9. (Both BBC1 and ITV together)

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#### Response and Retaliation, Who Starts the Violence? (Audience Studies)

We showed in our content analysis of TV news that a consistent pattern existed which emphasised Palestinian action and Israeli response and retaliation. This apparently affected how some people saw the conflict and how they allocated 'blame' for the violence. As one student from the above focus group commented:

Female Speaker: You always think of the Palestinians as being really aggressive because of the stories you hear on the news. I always put the blame on them in my own head.

Moderator: Is it presented as if the Palestinians somehow start it and then the Israelis follow on?

Female Speaker: Exactly, I always think the Israelis are fighting back against the bombings that have been done to them.

(Student group, Glasgow)

Another student answering a questionnaire believed that ‘a lot more Israelis’ had been killed than Palestinians and wrote that: ‘The Palestinians trigger every incident which makes the Israelis retaliate’. The news presentation of Palestinian action and Israeli response was clearly seen within the groups as in these comments:

First Speaker: They [the Palestinians] killed that minister earlier in the year and that sparked reprisals...

Second Speaker: There was bombing today of the Palestinian areas and the linkage was made absolutely with that bombing by the Palestinians.

(Middle-class male group, St Albans)

The second of these speakers commented of the Israelis ‘they are so vulnerable’. But another speaker in the same group questioned the relationship as portrayed on the news:

You hear it is always the Israelis holding back a bit and then they do the reprisal, but it has been going on so many years it could be anyone starting it.

In another group, a middle-class male from Glasgow offered this critical view of TV news:

The Palestinians are always regarded as terrorists, Israel is the ideal State which is being attacked by the terrorists...if it wasn’t for the Palestinians and their suicide bombs, the thing would run perfectly well.

There were often mixed views within the groups. For example, in the group of women from Paisley, three stated that they did see the Israelis as ‘responding’ to what was done to them by the Palestinians, but then a fourth woman used the phrase ‘retaliate’ while speaking and then paused, saying that she was surprised at herself as she did not see the Israeli actions as justified.

Another participant raised a further important point. He argued that although the structure and language of news might favour the Israelis, the visual images of Israeli dominance may lead viewers to criticize them:

The reporting of the Palestinians, of the atrocity of the car bombs, of suicide bombings by Hamas is clearly reported as being a dreadfully wrong thing and an atrocity. I think the reporting of the Israeli army in the Palestinian territories is not so clearly put across as Israel are in the wrong, but just the repetition, the sheer volume of images of Israeli dominance in Palestinian territories puts across the idea that Israel is wrong in that context.

(Middle-class male group, London)

Another person from the same group thought that the news was biased against Israel exactly because it did show images of boys throwing stones against soldiers and tanks. He thought that these would necessarily prejudice the viewer against Israel:

How anybody could think that the images of tanks smashing down buildings, of Israeli soldiers armed against boys throwing stones is sympathetic to the Israelis defies logic.

This does raise an interesting question which the moderator noted, which is that if such events are occurring in the conflict, then what would constitute 'bias', on the part of the broadcasters? Would it be to show the images or to avoid transmitting them, so that audiences could *not* see them? Another speaker in the group raised a more crucial point, which is that images alone are unlikely to convince an audience on the legitimacy of either side in a dispute. As he pointed out, in the case of Northern Ireland, British audiences became accustomed to seeing young people throwing stones at troops, but it did not follow that the audience sympathized with the stone-throwers. As he said: 'We generally believed that the British army and the British government was right'. In the same way, in the Gulf war of 1991, the Iraqi army was clearly the 'under-dog' in terms of military power but audiences in the West did not identify with the cause of Saddam Hussein. In the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Israel argued that Palestinian children were being deliberately exploited by mendacious

leaders and had been incited to attack the troops. For people who believe this, it might well affect how they perceive the actions of the Israeli army and the causes of the violence. In a Glasgow group, some participants had accepted the TV account of the sequence of the violence and concluded that the problem could be resolved if the children stayed in their houses and did not throw stones:

Moderator: Did you ever see one side as starting the trouble and then the other one...?

First Speaker (Female): All the wee guys with all the wee bricks.

Moderator: All the wee guys with the wee bricks?

First Speaker (Female): They are usually the ones that are usually standing there flinging them and then the army comes in.

Moderator: They start it?

First Speaker (Female): Yes, and then the army comes in.

Moderator: OK, anybody else have that image, that it started with the people throwing the stones and bricks and then the others retaliate?

First Speaker (Female): I think it starts that way. They fling the bricks and then they start flinging them and before you know it a fight breaks out.

Moderator: When you watch that do you ever think that they oughtn't to be throwing the bricks in the first place?

First Speaker (Female): Yes.

Moderator: You do think that?

Second Speaker (Male): Yes.

Moderator: You have that feeling?

First Speaker (Female): Oh aye, if they went into the house and never minded, there wouldn't be any fighting. It wouldn't be so bad.

(Low income group, Glasgow)

The important point here is that the image of inequality in the conflict does not necessarily result in the audience identifying with one side or the other. It might be that there are some images from war and conflict which are so grotesque that it would be difficult to find any way of justifying them. But as can be seen, the bulk of what we are shown is contested in terms of what it is to mean and signify about the actions of the two sides. In this country much of what the TV news audience hears is dominated by the official Israeli perspective and this does seem to have had some affect on audience beliefs. There was little knowledge of alternative accounts of the origins or causes of the conflict which might have been used in questioning such a perspective. The key source of what was known about the conflict was very often the television news. As we will see next, group members sometimes showed a remarkable ability to reproduce what they have seen.