

June 26, 2007

Editorial Complaints Unit (ECU)
BBC, Media Centre, Media Village
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To Whom It May Concern:

On June 8, 2007, we submitted an online complaint regarding Jeremy Bowen's June 4 website piece, "How 1967 defined the Middle East." BBC's June 15 reply failed to address the main points raised in the original complaint. (The original complaint and reply are enclosed.)

The crux of the complaint was that Bowen's article misleads readers with false information, and by focusing on certain aspects of the war while ignoring other essential aspects.

Our complaint focuses on the following points:

- 1) The article's omission of key context about the causes of war — that Egypt expelled United Nations troops from the Sinai Peninsula and massed its own forces near the Israeli border with plans and intent to attack; that Egypt blocked the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, a *casus belli* under international law; that Jordan and Syria attacked Israel before Israel "smashed" their armies — paints a skewed picture of Israel as the aggressor and Arabs as mere victims in 1967.
- 2) While this key omission absolves Egypt, Jordan and Syria of their responsibility for the situation, other bizarre points of focus wrongly suggest that Israel was itching for a war of expansion.

First, there is the outrageous assertion that Israeli generals "had been training to finish the unfinished business of Israel's independence war of 1948 for most of their careers." This assertion is outrageous not because the Israeli army had not trained in preparation for possible war. As all armies, they did train. The outrageous aspect of the passage is that the desire "to finish the unfinished business" of the 1948 war describes the openly-avowed stance, in reality, of the Arab world. Shortly before the war, for example, Iraqi president Abdel Rahman Aref declared: "The existence of Israel is an error which must be rectified. This is our opportunity to wipe out the ignominy which has been with us since 1948." For the BBC to suggest that *Israel* was looking to go back to war to take care of "unfinished business" — Bowen never explains what Israel supposedly saw as its unfinished business — while ignoring the stated Arab desire to do this very thing is not consistent with the organization's editorial guidelines calling for truth, accuracy, and impartiality.

The article further paints Israel as a land-hungry aggressor when it refers to "Zionism's innate instinct to push out the frontier." Considering that Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol took pains to avoid war and hoped not to fight on the Jordanian front even once the war began, and in light

of the fact that Israel offered to return almost all of the territory it conquered in exchange for peace, it would be much more fair and accurate if the article had noted that the Pan-Arab movement was intently focused on expanding their frontier by destroying Israel. That the article focuses on Zionism's (supposed) "innate instinct" to expand the frontier while ignoring *a*) Israel's requests that Jordan refrain from joining the fighting, *b*) its offer to return territory after the war, and *c*) the Pan-Arabist desire to expand the frontier by destroying Israel is not consistent with the BBC's editorial guidelines.

3) The article suggests that the Israeli public feared for their safety only because Israeli leaders did not share with the public their sense of confidence:

The Jewish Goliath had never been in better shape, and knew it, or rather its leaders did. In 1967 Israel was a fortress society in a way that it is no longer. There was no television, and generals and politicians did not leak their business to their favourite journalists as they do today.

Israeli civilians, especially in the crisis that led to war, were left to their own fears, which for many people were considerable. ...

Israel's generals were not taken in. They all knew that the only way that Israel would lose the war would be if the IDF did not turn up.

These statements leave the unmistakable impression that Israel exaggerated the threat to its security and imply the country did not need to go to war. But they do not accurately reflect the reality of the period.

The article's suggestion that Israel's leaders and top brass were all sure of their "inevitable victory" is a highly misleading exaggeration that ignores the serious fears harbored by Israel's political and military leadership. During the run up to the war, Eshkol stated that "[t]he first five minutes will be decisive. The question is who will attack the other's airfields first." If Egypt destroyed Israel's air force, Israel's leaders felt that the war would be much harder and longer, with massive, catastrophic Israeli casualties. Israel's chief of intelligence General Aharon Yariv felt that Egypt might bomb Israel's strategic site in Dimona, and that if Israel didn't act, the combined Arab armies could push Israel to, or beyond, the UN Partition lines. If Israel didn't respond to Egypt's acts of war, he said, the country would lose its deterrence and its neighbors would "threaten her security and her very existence." The country's general staff determined that "every delay is a gamble with Israel's survival." Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin did predict an Israeli victory, but he also foresaw a "terribly hard war with many casualties." As Egypt was building up its forces in the Sinai, Rabin told his generals that "[i]t is now a question of our national survival, of to be or not to be." The stress of the situation would eventually cause Rabin temporarily to suffer from a nervous breakdown — hardly something one would expect from the "hugely self confident" generals described by Bowen. The sense of fear among Israel's public and leadership is further minimized by the Bowen's strange decision to mention only belligerent and threatening statements by an Egyptian radio personality while ignoring similar statements repeatedly trumpeted by the leaders of Arab countries. Readers will rightly see threats by radio

personalities as much less serious than threats by Arab leaders, who have at their disposal modern weapons and armies.

4) The article's treatment of the post war period again implies Israel aggressiveness and ignores that of the Arabs. Bowen writes:

Four days after the war ended, US Secretary of State Dean Rusk warned that if Israel held on to the West Bank, Palestinians would spend the rest of the century trying to get it back.

Forty years on, Israel has settled around 450,000 people on land occupied in 1967, in defiance of everyone's interpretation of international law except its own.

Unsaid is that for a majority of those 40 years the PLO refused to recognize Israel's right to exist and swore to violently destroy the country. (It wasn't until 1974 that the PLO agreed to accept a state that didn't include all of Israel. The Palestinian state, they said, would be used as a base from which to continue attacking Israel, with the ultimate goal of destroying Israel.) Also ignored is the Khartoum summit of 1967, in which Arab states vowed not to negotiate with, recognize, or make peace with Israel. Despite this, Israel sought to give Palestinians a significant degree of autonomy just after the war, and only a few years ago offered to remove most settlements from the West Bank and turn over the entire Gaza Strip and nearly all of the West Bank to the Palestinians; the offer was rejected. Readers cannot even begin to understand why the West Bank remained under Israeli control for 40 years without knowledge of the PLO and Arab stance for much of that time.

5) The statement Israeli settlements defy "everyone's interpretation of international law except its own" is incorrect, and violates the BBC's editorial guideline calling for accuracy.

Non-Israeli experts in international law, including Julius Stone and former U.S. Undersecretary of State Eugene Rostow, have argued that Israel's settlements are legal. Moreover, successive American governments (with the exception of the Carter administration) have not declared that Israel's settlements are illegal under international law, and Reagan explicitly asserted that they are "not illegal." This material error should be corrected in line with the BBC's guidelines, which note:

We should normally acknowledge serious factual errors and correct mistakes quickly and clearly. Inaccuracy may lead to a complaint of unfairness. An effective way of correcting a mistake is saying what was wrong as well as putting it right.

BBC's Reply

BBC's reply of June 15 does not address these major points.

It asserts that "the intention of the article was not to provide a detailed history of the war and its causes." It further notes that the piece was "part of a wider range of coverage." While these assertions may be true, they of course do not free the BBC of its obligation to ensure that it's

history — however undetailed — is still in accord with its editorial guidelines calling for truth, accuracy and impartiality. That the BBC covered the Six-Day War in other articles as well certainly does not suggest that the article in question is objective, fair, and accurate. (Nor does it suggest that the other articles are objective, fair, and accurate.)

The reply also notes that the BBC received a number of complaints about its assertion that there were “two Goliaths in the Middle East in 1967.” It argues that the article cites British and American assessments of Israeli strength, and that the author separately has pointed out that Yitzhak Rabin himself argued months earlier that Israel “enjoys superiority over her enemies which seems to be assured for many years to come.” But if Rabin’s statement in March 1967 is seen as reflecting Israel’s views at the time, surely his statements in May-June 1967 should be seen as reflecting the country’s views during the Arab military buildup. As we noted above and in our initial complaint, Rabin foresaw a “terribly hard war with many casualties,” and told his generals that “[i]t is now a question of our national survival, of to be or not to be.” Other Israeli political and military leaders made similar statements. Moreover, the British and American military assessments do not change the fact that Israeli leaders and generals — and not only its ignorant masses — were indeed extremely concerned for the security of the country and its residents during the run-up to war.

Finally, the BBC reply states that the article “is based on the author’s long-standing experience in the region and knowledge of the subject” Our complaint is not that the author was inexperienced, but concerns specific misrepresentations that need clarifying.

We thank you in advance for your investigation of this matter and for your reply.