

To Whom It May Concern:

Although the opening paragraph of Jeremy Bowen's 4 June story, "How 1967 defined the Middle East," states that "to understand what is happening between Israel and the Palestinians now, you have to understand what happened in the Middle East war of 1967," the BBC's version of "what happened in the Middle East war of 1967" is marred by serious omissions, exaggerations, and outright anti-Israel bias.

In the second paragraph, Israel "smashes" the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria; but there isn't the slightest mention of the Arab aggression that caused this result. Neither in this paragraph nor in the rest of the piece do readers learn 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; or that Egypt blocked the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, a *casus belli* (an act that justifies war) under international law. Nor are readers informed that Israel did not "smash" Jordan and Syria until those countries first attacked Israel. These major omissions are sure to skew readers' understanding of "what happened in the Middle East war of 1967."

The third paragraph states: "The war made 250,000 more Palestinians — and more than 100,000 Syrians — into refugees. No peace is possible in the Middle East without solving their problems." Not a word is devoted to the thousands of Jews who were forcibly expelled from their homes in Arab countries as a result of the war.

The next paragraph is short and to the point. It states only: "Israel became an occupier."

These points, of course, are true. Israel did win a convincing victory; the war did result in the displacement of Arabs; Israel did occupy disputed territories. But BBC's focus on these specific aspects while omitting context paints a highly misleading picture of Israel as the aggressor and the Arab world as victims in 1967.

Later in the piece, BBC continues what seems to be its attempt to rewrite history with Israel as the powerful aggressor of the Six-Day War. The article refers to the idea that the Israeli David defeated the Arab Goliath as "the myth of the 1967 Middle East war." Bowen goes so far as to suggest that the existential fear felt by Israeli civilians existed not because there was any real danger, but rather because Israeli leaders hid from the public their confidence in the country's position. Israeli generals, Bowen adds, "all knew that the only way that Israel would lose the war would be if the IDF did not turn up." They "had been training to finish the unfinished business of Israel's independence war of 1948 for most of their careers."

It is nothing short of shocking to read this last quote on the Web site of a mainstream media organization, as it absolutely turns reality on its head. It was not Israel, but rather the Arab world which by its own admission had sought to take care of the "unfinished business" it had failed to achieve in 1948 — the destruction of Israel. This view was epitomized by Iraqi president Abdel Rahman Aref, who shortly before the war 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."

Nowhere does Bowen explicitly clarify what he regards as Israel's supposed unfinished business; but he seems to subscribe to the view promoted by anti-Israel activists that Israel is inherently expansionist, making a reference in the piece to "Zionism's innate instinct to push out the frontier." What about the fact that Israel decided immediately after the war that it would give up the Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula, by far the vast majority of the land it conquered during the war? What about the fact that Israel had hoped not to fight on the Jordanian front? (Israel sent a message to Jordan's King Hussein assuring him that Israel wouldn't fight Jordan unless Jordan attacked first. It was only because Hussein ignored that message and attacked Israel that the West Bank ended up in Israel's hands.) These points, which suggest that from Israel's perspective the Six-Day War was a fight for the defense of the country rather than a war of expansion, are ignored by Bowen and the BBC.

As to the story's claim that Israeli leaders were all sure of their "inevitable victory," this, too, is a great (and highly misleading) exaggeration. True, some of Israel's top brass felt assured in their army's capabilities. But the pervasive sense of fear before the war was hardly limited to Israel's general public. Prime Minister Eshkol and many others felt that Israel's ability to win the war depended on an Israeli first strike. During the run up to the war, Eshkol stated that "the 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 "it 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 suffer from a nervous breakdown — hardly something that one would expect from the "hugely self confident" generals described by Bowen.

Bowen closes the piece by ignoring everything that happened between the end of the war and today, writing:

"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.) 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 stance for much of that time.

As to Bowen's claim that settlements are illegal under "everyone's interpretation of international law" except for Israel's, this hyperbole is demonstrably false. 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." The BBC is not expected to subscribe to this view, but it is expected to avoid reporting as fact simplistic and inaccurate hyperbole about the legality of settlements.

Thank you for your consideration of this complaint.

Sincerely,

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