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BBC Backs Report that Omitted Killings of Palestinians During Gaza Truce

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Global Research, November 23, 2017
The Electronic Intifada 22 October 2014

Region: Middle East & North Africa
Theme: Media Disinformation, US NATO War Agenda
In-depth Report: PALESTINE

The BBC's obliviousness to the reality of Israeli aggression against Gaza has been staggeringly highlighted in a BBC Trust ruling issued at the beginning of October that endorses a report that completely ignored Israeli violence against Palestinians, including multiple killings of civilians.

The ruling relates to a BBC Online article published on 22 November 2013. The date marked a year and a day since the signing of a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, which ended an eight-day Israeli assault on Gaza.

On the anniversary of this agreement, BBC Middle East correspondent Yolande Knell wrote an article headlined "Tensions high between Israel and Gaza a year after truce."

The article begins:

> "One year on from a ceasefire that ended eight days of violence between Israel and Islamist militants in the Gaza Strip, the truce often looks shaky."

"There are frequent breaches of the agreement," the article continues, before going on to give Israeli army figures for the number of rockets fired from Gaza into Israel during the twelve months under examination.

Knell also notes the fears of Israeli civilians as they are "forced to run for cover whenever the 'red alert' siren sounds," and she quotes Israeli army officers who claim that "Hamas is digging tunnels, putting IEDs [improvised explosive devices] near the fence, trying to get over to harm civilians here in Israel."

She also notes their concerns that "militant groups in Gaza have managed to rearm since last year's conflict."

No mention of Israeli attacks

What Knell failed to do in the original article was to give even one mention of Israel's own frequent breaches of the agreement, despite the fact that two days after signing the truce Israeli forces killed a young Palestinian in Khan Younis.

Between 22 November 2012 and 7 July this year, the date Israel's latest assault on Gaza began, Israel violated the ceasefire far more frequently than Palestinians and with far more

lethal effect.

Out of Israel's 191 violations, ten percent resulted in death and 42 percent in injuries or detentions; while out of the 75 Palestinian violations, just four percent resulted in injuries and none in death.

During the first three months of the ceasefire alone, four Palestinians were killed and 91 were injured in Israeli attacks in Gaza. During the same period, not one rocket was fired from Gaza.

Hiding Palestinian fatalities

When challenged on this by Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), BBC Online added this single line to the nine-hundred-word article:

> "Palestinians point to air strikes and other military action by Israel since the truce was signed as evidence that it has breached it multiple times."

There is no more on the Israeli violations of the ceasefire and even that one line is inserted nearly five hundred words into the report and comes across as a Palestinian claim rather than hard, verifiable fact.

And yet, during the first twelve months of the so-called truce, Israel's numerous breaches had included the killing of ten Palestinian civilians in Gaza. That is, ten clear violations of the truce during the twelve months under the BBC spotlight.

And while concealing this information, Knell included this self-congratulatory quote from Israeli army spokesperson Peter Lerner:

> "This year has seen a great improvement as far as the security and safety of the Israeli communities around the Gaza Strip."

PSC has spent the last ten months contesting with the BBC over this travesty of an article which presents itself as looking at why tensions are high a year on from the signing of a truce, but only gives readers one side of the story.

And, as usual, the side of the story given is the Israeli one. The Palestinians are positioned as aggressors, the Israelis as defending their civilians. The killing of Palestinian civilians doesn't warrant a mention and Knell even downgrades Israel's land blockade of Gaza to mere "border restrictions."

Staggering lack of impartiality

Some of the most astonishing replies from BBC executives over the course of 2014 related to PSC's argument that omitting Israel's killing of Palestinians during the truce while detailing Palestinian rocket fire gave a false and inaccurate picture of the twelve months being reviewed.

On 27 February, Richard Hutt, the BBC's director of complaints, sent PSC an email to say:

> "Reviewing the matters which you have said should have been included, I am afraid I do not feel able to conclude that in their absence the piece was materially misleading."

Hutt's belief that a BBC article about "frequent breaches of the agreement" which fails to mention ten fatal breaches by Israel, or any Israeli breaches at all, while highlighting Palestinian breaches, is not "materially misleading" was backed up in May by the BBC's senior editorial strategy advisor Leanne Buckle.

In an email to PSC on 28 May, Buckle "concluded the article gave due weight to the scale of the breaches on each side and the number of Palestinians killed in the 12 months would not in itself be a material fact which required to be included."

So, despite the fact that the scale of Israeli violations over twelve months was incomparably greater than Palestinian violations, Buckle feels that "due weight" has been achieved by adding a single sentence about Israel's breaches in an article which devotes paragraphs to what is presented as Palestinian aggression.

The lack of impartiality is staggering, but perhaps not surprising. It is Buckle after all who has previously told PSC that Israel's *de facto* control over Jerusalem entitles BBC journalists to refer to it as an Israeli city, notwithstanding international law.

BBC vindicates journalistic failings

Buckle's apparent deep internalization of the Israeli government's narrative also comes across in her email of 28 May. Responding to PSC's argument that Knell's article should have made clear that Gaza is under Israeli occupation and siege — as opposed to "border restrictions" — Buckle claims that "given the long-standing nature of the conflict, there would be likely to be a pre-existing knowledge by the audience of some key facts."

One of these key facts, she says, is that

> "Hamas and other militant groups fire rockets into Israel and … Israel has retaliated with considerable force on an ad hoc basis and occasionally with sustained campaigns."

But this is not a "key fact." It is Israel's version of events that Palestinians fire rockets first and that Israel merely retaliates. For a senior BBC executive to cite this Israeli propaganda as fact is highly disturbing.

In September 2014, following a final appeal by PSC, the Editorial Standards Committee of the BBC Trust upheld Hutt and Buckle's findings, and published the ruling three weeks ago.

Knell's journalistic failure to paint the whole picture of the twelve months she was writing about and her inability to reflect the true state of the ceasefire were vindicated at the highest level of the BBC.

And, tellingly, the one question the BBC failed to answer during ten months of correspondence with PSC was this: if ten Israelis had been killed in Palestinian attacks during the twelve months in question, would Knell have left that fact out of her article?

The answer is fairly obvious – Palestinian fatalities can be ignored with impunity by BBC journalists; Israeli fatalities never are. That, unfortunately, is what the BBC must mean by balance.

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