

Zionist Federation of Australia

Behind the News complaint, 25 May 2021

On 19 and 25 May, Behind the News (BTN) aimed to explain Hamas–Israel violence by providing a history of the dispute and the immediate context of the violence. Through key omissions, factual inaccuracies, the choice of background imagery, and the emphasis of the Palestinian narrative over the Israeli narrative, the effect of the stories was to undermine the willingness or ability for BTN’s target audience (children) to accept or consider Israel’s side of the story. We have received reports that children experienced antisemitic bullying and intimidation as a result of the screening of these stories at their schools.

This complaint only addresses the [25 May story](#).

ABC Editorial Policies contravened: “Do not unduly favour one perspective over another”; “Present a diversity of perspectives so that, over time, no significant strand of thought or belief within the community is knowingly excluded or disproportionately represented.”

The title of the episode goes against the ABC’s ‘Israel/Palestine cheat sheet’, which recommends against using the term ‘Palestine’.

The following are examples of bias.

0:28

‘Israel has an anti-missile system... but Gaza doesn’t’

BTN didn’t specify that Iron Dome was developed because of many years of indiscriminate rocket fire into Israeli neighbourhoods. It didn’t mention that Hamas fires from and stores rockets in civilian areas (or the Israeli claim that this is to maximise Palestinian civilian deaths for propaganda purposes). It didn’t mention that Israeli strikes are targeted and designed to stop rocket fire (as opposed to Hamas objectives of trying to intimidate and kill Israeli civilians). It didn’t mention the tens of kilometres of reinforced tunnels Hamas has created (or that Hamas doesn’t allow civilians into these tunnels).

The effect is to strip the reasoning for each side firing into the other’s territory (thus making both sides equally bad), and then ignore the reasons why more Palestinian than Israeli civilians are killed.

1:32

‘Not every country recognises Palestine as a separate state’

Palestine is manifestly not a state, but the BTN story would lead viewers to believe it is. Some countries recognise Palestine as a state for diplomatic or political reasons, but this doesn’t make it a state.

1:45

'Before 1948 there was no Israel, all of this area was known as Palestine'

This implies to otherwise uneducated viewers that Israel replaced the country of Palestine. The following part also included a factual error; the area was not called Palestine by the Ottoman Empire (the UK was the first ruler to call the area Palestine since the Romans). The Arabs in the area did not call themselves Palestinians until the British named the area Palestine (Ghada Talhami, "Palestinian Nationhood to Palestinian Nationalism", *Arab Studies Quarterly* (vol. 8, no. 4, 1986), pp. 349-350). A correct statement would have been, 'Before 1948, there was no state of Israel nor a state of Palestine. Instead, the British controlled the area, after having captured it from the Ottomans in 1917. The British named the area Palestine.'

2:10

'After the First World War, Jews started to migrate to Palestine'

Mass immigration of Jews to the area began well before the First World War. What is known as the 'First Aliyah', when approximately 35,000 Jews moved to the area, took place in the last 20 years of the 19th century. The Second Aliyah, when approximately 40,000 more Jews moved to the area took place in the ten years until 1914. BTN accurately mentioned that Jews lived there during the Ottoman period, but omitted the continuous, recorded, Jewish presence in that land for almost 3000 years.

2:41

'The UN voted to divide Palestine'

This misleads the viewer into thinking that a) there was an independent country called Palestine, which the UN divided; b) that the UN vote was because of the Holocaust; and c) that it was because of the Jews that the British Mandate of Palestine was divided. This is all incorrect.

a. As above, Palestine, so named between 1917 and 1948, existed as British-held territory, not an independent state. Before then, it had not been called Palestine since antiquity.

b. In 1922, the League of Nations voted to create a Jewish homeland; the British Mandate was established to implement that decision. When Britain determined it was unable to fulfil this mandate, it went to the UN. Thus, the 1947 UN decision to create a Jewish state was not due to international pity over the Holocaust.

c. Until the UN decision, the consensus of the international community (and binding obligation upon the British government) was that the entire area would be for a Jewish homeland. The incorrect impression given by the BTN story was that the UN decision to create a Jewish state was a novel idea.

BTN also said that the land the UN granted to the Arab state was less than half of the total. True, but it omitted that, ten years earlier, the Palestinian Arabs had rejected a British proposal where the Arabs would have obtained much more than [half](#). Further, BTN omitted that 60 per cent of the land apportioned to the Jewish state by the UN was desert, where few people lived and few crops were [planted](#).

3:06

'Fighting broke out'

This sentence prevents the viewer from understanding who launched the fighting, and the objectives of each side. Jewish leaders accepted partition. The newly declared State of Israel was attacked by Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq and Egypt. They were aided by Palestinian militias. The stated objective of the Arab parties was to destroy the newly-established state of Israel ([the Arab League declaration](#))

4:07

'Israel controls Gaza's borders'

This is only partially correct. Israel AND EGYPT control Gaza's borders. [Israel has no control over the Egypt-Gaza border](#). The Israeli (and Egyptian) blockade of Gaza began in 2007, after Hamas took control of the area from Fatah. Only mentioning Israel makes it seem that Israel is alone in seeking to isolate Hamas. Mentioning Egypt as well would allow the viewer to understand that Hamas is a violent actor, isolated by Israel AND (most) Arab states.

3:43

'On the other side'

Here, the Palestinian narrative is given over five times the length of the Israeli narrative. From 3:43 until 3:57, the story stated that 'Since then [1967], there have been times of violence. There have been some steps forward, when it seemed like the two sides would work together to find a solution, and some steps backwards'.

From 3:57, there are 28 seconds describing the Palestinian narrative, followed by five seconds describing the Israeli side ('On the other side, Israeli Jews say they face a constant threat of violence'). This is true. However, a key part of the Israeli narrative is that Palestinians were offered a state four times this century and refused to accept or negotiate these offers. These rejections of peace offers, plus the constant threat of violence has led many Israelis to give up on Palestinian peaceful intentions.

Most of the Palestinian narrative consisted of statements of fact; the Jewish narrative is relegated to opinion ('Israelis say'); this further undermines the Israeli narrative.

Most background imagery during the Palestinian narrative is of peaceful Palestinians or aggressive Israelis. During the Israeli narrative, it is of aggressive Israelis.

4:31

' Hamas doesn't recognise Israel's right to exist'

This neutral phrasing misleads viewers. Hamas has pledged to destroy Israel. This is repeated in its constitution, and by its leaders. Hamas's violence against Israel is not an outcome of it not recognising Israel, but an outcome of it being dedicated to destroying Israel. [Here](#) are some excerpts from Hamas's constitution:

'Israel will exist, and will continue to exist, until Islam abolishes it, as it abolished that which was before it';

'The initiatives, the so-called peace solutions, and the international conferences for resolving the Palestinian problem stand in contradiction to the principles of the Islamic Resistance Movement [Hamas]';

'There is no solution to the Palestinian problem except by jihad. Initiatives, proposals and international conferences are a waste of time and a farce';

'The Prophet, Allah's prayer and peace be upon him, says: 'The hour of judgment shall not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and kill them, so that the Jews hide behind trees and stones, and each tree and stone will say: 'O Muslim, O servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me, come and kill him'.'

Most of these above examples, by themselves, display bias against Israel; together the story is very biased. Additionally, because of the age of the target audience and, in particular, key omissions that would have provided balance, the cumulative effect of this story is to undermine Israel's moral right to defend itself and, indeed, to exist, in the eyes of Australian school children.

BTN stories on 19 May 2021, in 2017, 2014 and 2012 also clearly favoured the Palestinian perspective. There have been no BTN stories that clearly favour the Israeli perspective.

This story represents a clear breach of the ABC's obligations.