



Arab Media Watch
for objective British coverage of Arab issues

BBC & Al Jazeera Coverage of Israeli-Palestinian Violence

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Introduction

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is often in the news, and violence is one of the most reported aspects of that conflict. As such, how that aspect is covered is extremely important, as it shapes public understandings and perceptions of the peoples involved.

The BBC and Al Jazeera are two of the world's biggest broadcasters. Arab Media Watch monitored how their respective English-language websites reported acts of violence between Israelis and Palestinians for four months, from 1 February to 31 May 2009.

AMW analysed the prominence of each side's viewpoint and version of events by monitoring how many words were devoted to quoting and paraphrasing Israeli and Palestinian sources, and in what order they were reported. AMW also analysed the prevalence with which each side is portrayed as instigating or responding to violence.

The results are startling, not just due to the one-sidedness of BBC coverage, but also because Al Jazeera fared little better.

Summary of Results

- While every BBC article included Israeli sources, 35% had no Palestinian sources.
- While every Al Jazeera article had Israeli sources, 11% had no Palestinian sources.
- 82% of BBC articles containing sources from both sides devoted more words to Israeli sources.
- 69% of Al Jazeera articles containing sources from both sides devoted more words to Israeli sources.
- Of the articles containing sources from both sides, the majority for both the BBC and Al Jazeera reported Israeli sources first: 59% and 53%, respectively.
- When articles contained more words for Israeli sources than Palestinian, the BBC averaged 3.3 times more words for Israeli sources per article, while Al Jazeera averaged 3.4 times more words.
- When articles contained more words for Palestinian sources, both broadcasters averaged 1.8 times more words for Palestinian sources.
- The BBC published four pictures with captions citing Israeli sources. Al Jazeera published five. Neither news organisation had any pictures citing Palestinian sources.
- The absence of Palestinian sources and viewpoints, and the predominance of those from the Israeli side, go against the editorial guidelines of both broadcasters.
- Both broadcasters used words that unequivocally portrayed Israeli violence as a direct response to Palestinian violence. The BBC did so six times, Al Jazeera three times. On no occasion did either portray Palestinian violence as a direct response to Israeli violence.
- The BBC and Al Jazeera overwhelmingly reported Israeli violence as following Palestinian violence: 10 times and seven times, respectively. Only once did the BBC report Palestinian violence as following Israeli violence. This was one occasion more than Al Jazeera.

Methodology

Articles included

AMW first monitored the BBC website, focusing only on news articles (not analysis pieces or features) whose primary topic was a current act of violence by Israelis against Palestinians, and vice versa. Articles on inter-Israeli or inter-Palestinian violence were excluded, as were those on violence between Israel and other Arabs, and articles referring to past violence.

AMW then gathered the corresponding articles on Al Jazeera's English website, so that direct comparisons could be made. Articles that did not correspond directly to those of the BBC were excluded.

Source prominence

AMW calculated the word space given to each side by counting the number of words used to quote or paraphrase Israeli and Palestinian sources. Examples include:

- *Quote*: "I suggest Hamas doesn't fool around with us," said Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak. (14 words)
- *Paraphrase*: The Israeli army said the raid, in the town of Rafah, had targeted gunmen who had fired two mortar bombs that landed in Israel. (24 words)

Prominence was also judged by which side's sources were quoted or paraphrased first.

Instigating & responding to violence

The extent to which each side is portrayed as either instigating violence or responding to it was analysed in two ways: direct and implied.

Direct examples involve the use of words that unequivocally portray one side as responding to the other. Such words that appeared during the monitoring period include "responded", "responds", "fired back", "in response", "in retaliation" and "deterrent against."

Implied examples involve reporting one act of violence as following another, thus suggesting that the latter incident was instigated by the former.

AMW only included portrayals of response by the authors of the articles, not the sources cited by them.

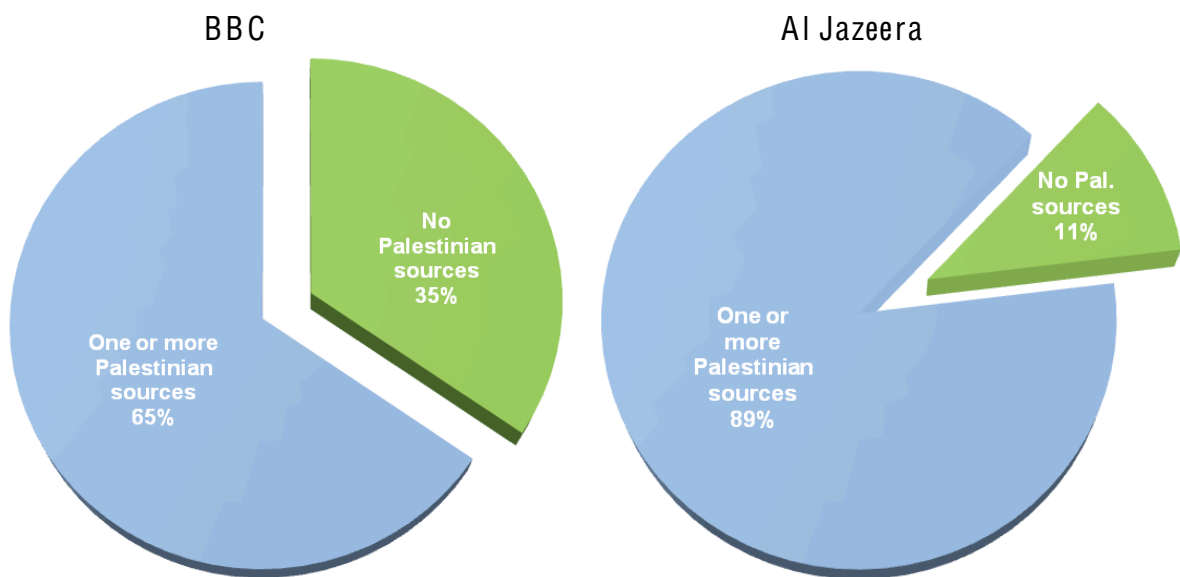
Sources

BBC Online produced 26 relevant articles during the monitoring period. There were 18 corresponding articles on Al Jazeera's English website.

Absence of Palestinian sources

One of the most striking results is that while every BBC article included Israeli sources, Palestinian sources were absent in 35% of them. Al Jazeera fared considerably better: while all its articles contained Israeli sources, 11% had no Palestinian sources. Nevertheless, this is still an imbalance.

Percentage of articles without Palestinian sources



The fact that the Al Jazeera articles monitored correspond to those of the BBC means that the latter could have included Palestinian sources in at least some of the cases where it did not. One example was when a Palestinian was shot dead in Jerusalem in March for reportedly driving a tractor into two vehicles.

Al Jazeera quoted Hamas as saying his action was "a natural response to aggression against our people," and Israel "should realise that they alone bear the responsibility for displacing our people in Jerusalem and for the killings in Gaza and the West Bank." The BBC article did not contain these statements.

Likewise, when a Jewish settler was killed in April, Al Jazeera reported the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade as claiming responsibility, citing Israeli "crimes of occupation." This statement did not appear in the corresponding BBC article.

Another example was Israeli airstrikes in Gaza in February. The BBC article had no Palestinian sources, even though the attacks took place on Palestinian soil. In this case, Al Jazeera quoted more Palestinian sources than Israeli, and gave the former more word space, showing that Palestinian viewpoints were readily available.

Other articles in which the BBC did not include Palestinian sources covered the following events:

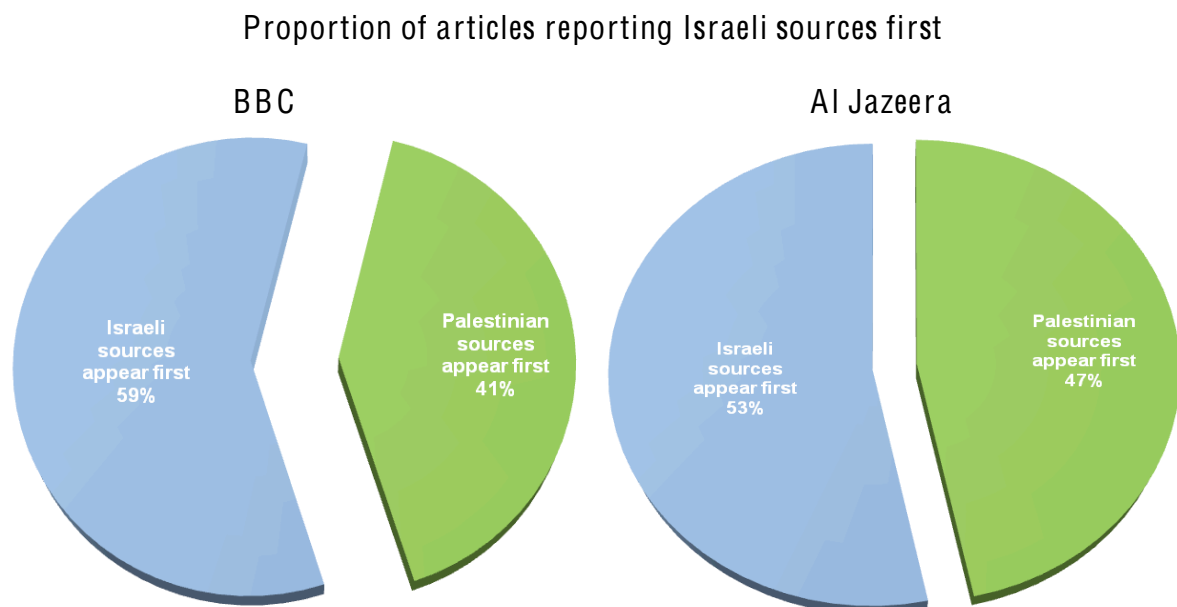
- Two Israeli airstrikes in Gaza
- Rockets fired into Israel from Gaza (also reported by Al Jazeera without Palestinian sources)
- A Palestinian shot dead in East Jerusalem (also reported by Al Jazeera without Palestinian sources)
- A boat exploding off Gaza
- Two Palestinians killed in the West Bank
- Israeli police shutting down a Palestinian theatre in East Jerusalem

All these incidents directly involved Palestinians and their territory, so it is inconceivable that they had nothing to say, or nothing to say that was worth reporting.

Please see Appendix 1 for a list of articles containing no Palestinian sources.

Prominence of sources

Of the articles containing sources from both sides, the majority for both the BBC and Al Jazeera reported Israeli sources first: 59% and 53%, respectively.

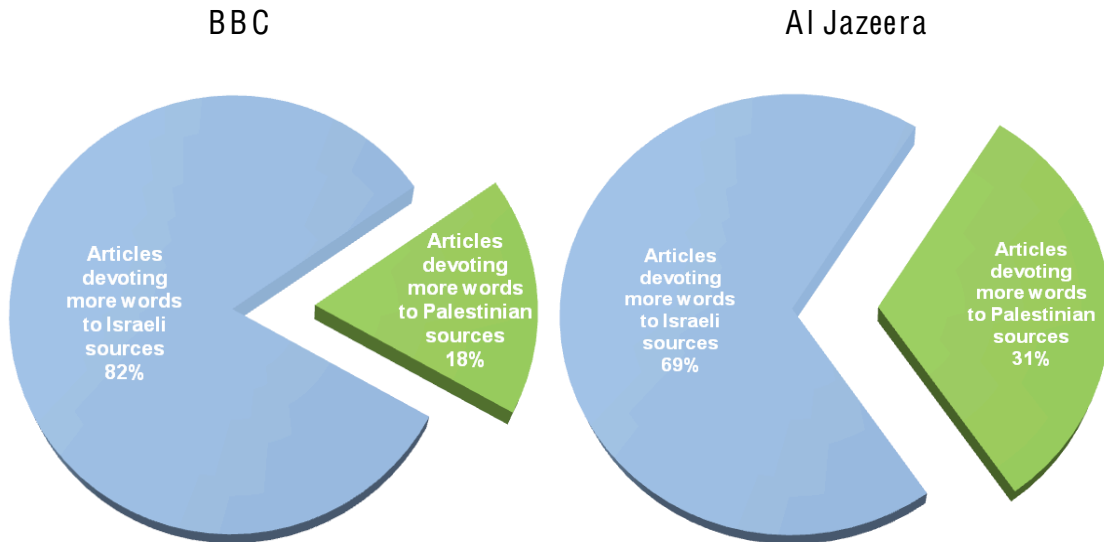


Please see Appendix 5 for a list of articles reporting Palestinian sources first, and Appendix 6 for those reporting Israeli sources first.

Word space for sources

The BBC published 17 articles containing both Israeli and Palestinian sources; Al Jazeera published 16 corresponding articles with sources from both sides.

Proportion of articles devoting more words to Israeli & Palestinian sources



A staggering 82% of BBC articles containing sources from both sides devoted more words to quoting and paraphrasing Israeli sources than Palestinian. On top of the fact that more than a third of BBC articles contained no Palestinian sources whatsoever (while all contained Israeli sources), this is a woeful imbalance.

Al Jazeera did little better, with 69% of articles giving more words to Israeli sources. A further breakdown raises more concern. The articles in question are either attributed to "agencies," or "Al Jazeera and agencies." Of the articles attributed solely to agencies, 57% devoted more words to Israeli sources. However, the figure jumped to 78% for articles attributed to "Al Jazeera and agencies."

Please see Appendix 2 for a list of articles containing more words for Palestinian sources, and Appendix 3 for those containing more words for Israeli sources.

When articles contained more words for Israeli sources than Palestinian, the degree to which this was the case was considerable: the BBC averaged 3.3 times more words for Israeli sources per article, while Al Jazeera averaged 3.4 times more words.

The greatest imbalance in this respect was in a BBC article that contained 11.6 times more words for Israeli sources. The greatest discrepancy for an Al Jazeera article was 5.2 times more words for Israeli sources.

When articles contained more words for Palestinian sources, the ratio was significantly lower: both broadcasters averaged 1.8 times more words for Palestinian sources. The greatest discrepancies in this respect were 2.8 times more words for Palestinian sources in a BBC article, and 3.3 times in an Al Jazeera article.

Picture captions demonstrate another area of glaring imbalance. The BBC published four pictures with captions citing Israeli sources, while Al Jazeera published five. Neither news organisation had any pictures citing Palestinian sources.

Please see Appendix 4 for articles containing picture captions citing Israeli sources.

In terms of pullout quotes, the BBC had one, from an Israeli source. Al Jazeera also had one, but from a Palestinian source.

Editorial guidelines

The absence of Palestinian sources and viewpoints, and the predominance of those from the Israeli side, go against the editorial guidelines of both broadcasters.

The BBC's guidelines state (click to access relevant BBC page):

"...we must ensure we avoid...an imbalance of views on controversial subjects."

"...when covering controversial subjects dealing with matters of public policy or political or industrial controversy we should...fairly represent opposing viewpoints when appropriate."

"...we strive to reflect a wide range of opinion and explore a range and conflict of views..."

"We must ensure a wide range of significant views and perspectives are given due weight in the period during which a controversial subject is active."

Al Jazeera's guidelines state (click to access full editorial page):

"Adhere to the journalistic values of honesty, courage, fairness, balance, independence, credibility and diversity..."

"...giving full consideration to the feelings of victims of crime, war, persecution and disaster..."

"Present diverse points of view and opinions..."

Adherence to the above-mentioned journalistic values is the first point mentioned in Al Jazeera's editorial guidelines.

Instigating / Responding to Violence

Both the BBC and Al Jazeera overwhelmingly portrayed Israeli violence as a response to Palestinian violence, directly and indirectly. The effect of this is to legitimise and justify Israeli violence, while portraying Palestinians as the instigators of violence that has no explanation or cause.

Direct response

Both broadcasters used words that unequivocally portrayed Israeli violence as a direct response to Palestinian violence. The BBC did so six times, Al Jazeera three times. On no occasion did either portray Palestinian violence as a direct response to Israeli violence.

Examples from the BBC (click to access full article):

"An Israeli soldier was killed in a bomb attack on the Gaza border last Tuesday. **Israel responded** with air raids and a brief ground incursion by soldiers and tanks."

"Missiles are regularly fired by Palestinian militants, albeit mainly into open areas, and **the Israeli air force responds** with air strikes."

"...dozens of rocket strikes and other attacks from Gaza have been reported...apparently involving smaller militant groups. **Israel has responded** with air strikes."

"**Police responded** by firing more than 20 bullets into the windscreen, killing the man in Sur Baher village."

"...about 50 Palestinians threw stones at **police**, who **fired back** with tear gas and stun grenades."

"Since Israel and Hamas, which controls Gaza, declared unilateral ceasefires on 18 January, **Israel has carried out several air strikes in response** to rocket attacks."

Examples from Al Jazeera (click to access full article):

"**Israel has carried out air raids** in the south of the Gaza Strip in **retaliation** to a rocket fired into its territory."

"**Israel has responded** with air raids targeting suspected smuggling tunnels on the Gaza-Egypt border."

"Heavy security had been deployed in the area while the part of **the family home** in which Husam Dweiyat had lived **was demolished as a deterrent against future attacks on Israelis.**"

Implied response

Implied examples involve reporting one act of violence as following another, thereby suggesting that the latter incident was instigated by the former. The BBC and Al Jazeera overwhelmingly reported Israeli violence as following Palestinian violence: 10 times and seven times, respectively. Only once did the BBC report Palestinian violence as following Israeli violence. This was one occasion more than Al Jazeera.

Examples from the BBC of Israeli violence following Palestinian violence (click to access full article):

"The raid came after a rocket fired from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip hit the Israeli city of Ashkelon."

"Israeli jets have bombed tunnels on Gaza's border with Egypt, after two rockets were fired at southern Israel."

"Two rockets fired from Gaza landed in Israel on Monday morning, the Israeli military said. Several hours later, Israeli jets bombed a border area in the southern Gaza town of Rafah."

"Israeli jets have attacked parts of southern Gaza, after Palestinian militants fired a mortar at Israel."

"Two militants were killed and another died later after they had reportedly fired a rocket-propelled grenade at Israeli soldiers across the border."

"The driver of a construction vehicle in West Jerusalem has been shot dead by police after he rammed a police car."

"...clashes broke out as dozens of young, male Israeli-Arab counter-demonstrators, some with their faces covered with Palestinian scarves, began pelting the police with rocks."

"The BBC's Katya Adler reported from the scene that the troops were trying to push back a group of rock-throwing young Palestinian men."

"The air raids came hours after Palestinian fighters in Gaza fired rockets into southern Israel, with no reported injuries."

"Shortly after, Israeli warplanes bombed the tunnels near the town of Rafah, close to the Egyptian border."

The only example from the BBC of Palestinian violence following Israeli violence (click to access full article):

"Clashes erupted in the area after the shooting, as about 50 Palestinians threw stones at police..."

Examples from Al Jazeera of Israeli violence following Palestinian violence (click to access full article):

"The attacks on the Gaza border followed the firing of two rockets from the northern Gaza Strip into southern Israel early on Monday by Palestinian fighters."

"A Palestinian was shot dead in July after he killed three Israelis and wounded 45 others by ramming a bulldozer into buses and cars in central Jerusalem."

"Three weeks later 16 people were hurt in a similar incident, in which the attacker was also killed."

"...another Palestinian driving a digger injured 16 people in west Jerusalem before being killed by police."

"In the latest such attack last month, a Palestinian was killed after his vehicle crushed a police car and hit other vehicles. "

"The settlers from Bat Ayin, where a Palestinian killed a young settler last week, attacked cars and homes in the village of Safa on Wednesday."

"The bombing came shortly after three mortar rounds were launched into Israeli territory from the northern Gaza Strip, causing no casualties."

Appendix 1

Al Jazeera articles (two) with no Palestinian sources (click to access full article):

- Gaza rockets target Israeli town
- Israeli police kill Palestinian

BBC articles (nine) with no Palestinian sources (click to access full article):

- Israel strikes at Gazan tunnels
- Israeli jets strike Gaza tunnels
- 'Five rockets' fired into Israel
- New digger attack in Jerusalem
- Israeli child killed in West Bank
- Palestinian 'attacker' shot dead
- Boat explodes off coast of Gaza
- Two killed in West Bank violence
- Police shut Palestinian theatre in Jerusalem

Appendix 2

BBC articles (three) with more words devoted to Palestinian sources (click headline for full article):

Headline	Words for Pal sources	Words for Israeli sources
Israel air strike hits Gaza Strip	105	37
'Two dead' in Israeli air strikes	97	72
Israel army kills Hamas commander in Hebron	53	38

Al Jazeera articles (five) with more words devoted to Palestinian sources (click headline for full article):

Headline	Words for Pale sources	Words for Israeli sources
Israeli air raids hit Gaza	131	113
Palestinians killed in Israeli raid	57	40
Israel arrests Hamas members	139	74
Settlers attack West Bank village	63	19
Palestinians shot dead in West Bank	193	155

Appendix 3

Al Jazeera articles (11) with more words devoted to Israeli sources (click headline for full article):

Headline	Words for Israeli sources	Words for Pal sources
Israel bombs Gaza targets	409	128
Israeli air raids hit Gaza Strip	119	27
Israel attacks south Gaza tunnels	133	28
Israel bombs Gaza targets	155	81
Jerusalem 'tractor attacker' killed	183	66
Israeli police killed in West Bank	141	36
Clashes erupt in Israeli-Arab town	29	13
Israeli boy killed in axe attack	206	46
Israeli police kill armed Arab girl	183	35
Two die in air raid on Gaza tunnels	88	82
Israeli troops kill Gaza fighters	127	37

BBC articles (14) with more words for Israeli sources (click headline for full article):

Headline	Words for Israeli sources	Words for Pal sources
Israel hits Hamas targets in Gaza	153	98
Israeli air strike on Gaza Strip	126	58
Israeli planes hit Gaza tunnels	103	28
Fresh violence shakes Gaza Strip	62	25
Air raids kill militants in Gaza	110	86
Israeli police officers shot dead	80	17
Israel seizes West Bank Hamas men	153	44
Clash in tense Israeli-Arab town	111	56
Israelis shoot armed woman dead	44	18
Villagers hurt in West Bank clash	183	94
Palestinian 'knife man' shot dead	116	10
West Bank man killed at protest	109	79
Settler injures West Bank youth	46	20
Israeli troops 'kill two Gazan attackers'	108	21

Appendix 4

BBC articles (four) containing picture captions citing Israeli sources (click headline for full article):

- Israel hits Hamas targets in Gaza
- Israeli police officers shot dead
- Clash in tense Israeli-Arab town
- 'Two dead' in Israeli air strikes

Al Jazeera articles (five) containing picture captions citing Israeli sources (click headline for full article):

- Israel bombs Gaza targets
- Israeli air raids hit Gaza Strip
- Israel bombs Gaza targets
- Jerusalem 'tractor attacker' killed
- Israeli troops kill Gaza fighters

Appendix 5

BBC articles (seven) citing Palestinian sources first (click headline for full article):

- Israeli air strike on Gaza Strip
- Israel air strike hits Gaza Strip
- Israeli police officers shot dead
- West Bank man killed at protest
- Settler injures West Bank youth
- 'Two dead' in Israeli air strikes
- Israel army kills Hamas commander in Hebron

Al Jazeera articles (seven) citing Palestinian sources first (click headline for article):

- Israel bombs Gaza targets
- Israeli air raids hit Gaza
- Israel bombs Gaza targets
- Palestinians killed in Israeli raid
- Israel arrests Hamas members
- Settlers attack West Bank village
- Two die in air raid on Gaza tunnels

Appendix 6

Al Jazeera articles (eight) citing Israeli sources first (click headline for full article):

- Israeli air raids hit Gaza Strip
- Israel attacks south Gaza tunnels
- Jerusalem 'tractor attacker' killed
- Israeli police killed in West Bank
- Clashes erupt in Israeli-Arab town
- Israeli boy killed in axe attack
- Israeli police kill armed Arab girl
- Israeli troops kill Gaza fighters

BBC articles (10) citing Israeli sources first (click headline for full article):

Israel hits Hamas targets in Gaza
Israeli planes hit Gaza tunnels
Fresh violence shakes Gaza Strip
Air raids kill militants in Gaza
Israel seizes West Bank Hamas men
Clash in tense Israeli-Arab town
Israelis shoot armed woman dead
Villagers hurt in West Bank clash
Palestinian 'knife man' shot dead
Israeli troops 'kill two Gazan attackers'