

BBC bows once again before the pro-Israel lobby

By Jean Shaoul
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Last week, the BBC Trust bowed before its pro-Israeli critics by accepting the validity of criticisms of two articles by its Middle East editor, Jeremy Bowen.

Its report found that Bowen had breached BBC rules on impartiality and accuracy in his reporting on Israel. The complaints had been filed by a member of the Zionist Federation. They relate to an article dealing with the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbours and another on the Israeli settlement, Har Homa, in East Jerusalem.

The decision of the BBC Trust's Editorial Standards Committee was grist for the mill to the pro-Israel lobby, which said that the decision was proof of the BBC's "bias" and called for Bowen's dismissal. The report, in fact, testifies to the BBC's willingness, in the face of powerful political and corporate interests, to fall dutifully into line with the British government's support for the US and Israel—up to and including the suppression of dissenting opinion in its own ranks.

The BBC said that it would amend the web site article but would take no disciplinary action against Bowen. Nevertheless, the report will undoubtedly make it even more difficult for the BBC's journalists to raise any criticisms of Israel's actions against the Palestinians.

Bowen has authored a book on the 1967 war. He joined the BBC in 1984 and has covered conflicts around the world. He became the BBC's Middle East correspondent in 1995 and its editor in 2005. His two disputed articles were historically accurate and the comments criticised entirely correct.

The BBC had received two lengthy complaints, including one from the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America, about "How 1967 Defined the Middle East," written by Bowen in June 2007 to explain the legacy of the 1967 war.

While it rejected the majority of the criticisms, the BBC Trust report upheld three elements: Bowen's reference to "Zionism's innate instinct to push out the frontiers," a reference to Israel's "defiance of everyone's interpretation of international law except its own," and the statement that "the generals ... had been training to finish the unfinished business of Israel's independence war of 1948 for most of their careers."

Each one of these assertions is historically accurate. Israel's

expansionist ambitions and land grabs have been documented extensively by Israeli as well as international historians and human rights groups.

When the United Nations voted in 1947 for the partition of British-controlled Palestine between the Zionists and the Palestinians, who formed more than two-thirds of the existing population and owned more than 90 percent of the land, the Zionists employed terrorism to drive the Palestinians from their land. The massacre of Palestinians at Deir Yassin in April 1948 was only the best known example.

Israel subsequently used the war that broke out with the Arab states in May 1948 to expand Israel's borders beyond those determined by the UN. Towns and villages were built on land expropriated from their absentee owners and later from some of those Palestinians who remained.

The sabre-rattling of Egyptian President Nasser in May 1967 (Nasser had expelled the UN forces from Gaza, which Egypt then administered, and closed the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping) was in no small measure provoked by Israel's attacks on Syria, Egypt's ally, earlier in the year. This provided the opportunity for Israel to put into practice the plans it had developed in the 1950s to capture East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and Syria's Golan Heights.

Israeli, US and British intelligence had assured the Israeli government that it had overwhelming military superiority over all the Arab countries, as the BBC Trust's report acknowledges. Israel knew that Egypt had no intention of attacking.

Nevertheless, Israel launched a dawn raid, wiping out Egypt's air force, and went on to defeat Egypt, Jordan and Syria and capture parts of their territory, creating a new wave of refugees and more abandoned homes and land. Levi Eshkol, Israel's prime minister, had originally opposed the attack on Egypt on the grounds that "we were brought up not to wage pre-emptive war."

Within days of the 1967 war, contrary to international law, Israel annexed East Jerusalem, and not long after the first settlements in the West Bank began to take shape. Today, more than 450,000 Israelis live on land captured in the 1967 war.

UN Security Council resolutions 238 and 242 called on Israel to withdraw from territories it had captured in the 1967 war,

but Israel refused to do so and has remained in breach of these resolutions ever since.

More recently, Israel's wall surrounding the West Bank, deemed illegal by the International Court in The Hague, has encroached still further on Palestinian land. It has eaten up 10 percent of the 22 percent of land formerly administered by Britain that was due to become a Palestinian state under the 1993 Oslo Accords.

There are not a few ultra-right-wing forces that would like to see Israel's borders expand even further to include the East Bank of the Jordan. On its northern borders, the Litani river has long been seen within the Israeli establishment, going back to Ben Gurion, as a desirable border. The 1982 war and subsequent occupation of Lebanon were pursued with that end in mind.

Thus, not only is Bowen's claim of Israel's expansionary aims true, his additional reference to Israel's "defiance of everyone's interpretation of international law except its own" is also. So too is the third claim—that Israel's generals were completing "unfinished business" in relation to Israel's borders.

Despite the wealth of evidence supporting Bowen's statements, the BBC Trust said that his article breached BBC rules on impartiality and accuracy. "Readers might come away from the article thinking that the interpretation offered was the only sensible view of the war," it said. "It was not necessary for equal space to be given to the other arguments, but ... the existence of alternative theses should have been more clearly signposted."

Such a position would make serious analysis or commentary on any issue all but impossible. Is there no such thing as objective truth in the BBC's view of the world?

The BBC had also received a complaint about Bowen's January 2008 report broadcast on Radio 4, claiming that it was biased and inaccurate. The BBC Trust argued that Bowen should have provided evidence to prove his point that the US administration believed the Har Homa settlement in East Jerusalem to be illegal under international law.

The committee accepted that Bowen was using his professional judgment, but said he should have sourced his comment, even though a spokesman said the "committee accepted that the Middle East Editor had been informed that that was the American view by an authoritative source." Such sources usually speak off the record and cannot therefore be cited.

Har Homa was built on the village of Abu Ghnaim, which was forcibly expropriated from its Palestinian owners. The latter unsuccessfully challenged the takeover in the Israeli courts. In 1997, the US, Israel and Micronesia were the only UN member states to oppose a UN resolution condemning the construction of Har Homa on Palestinian land against the wishes of its owners.

While the US vetoed the resolution, as is the norm, the

Clinton administration said publicly that the veto should not be taken to mean that the US supported the construction of Har Homa, only that the UN was not the place to discuss the "peace process." Bill Richardson, then the US ambassador to the UN, said, "Such interference could only harden the position of both sides" and that "the decision to build the settlement was regrettable." Condoleeza Rice was critical of settlement expansion after the Annapolis conference in November 2007.

The censure of Bowen is the second occasion in recent months in which the BBC has cited the need for "impartiality" to placate Israel, the US and the British government.

In January, the BBC refused to show an appeal for humanitarian aid for the people of Gaza put out by the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) of aid charities. BBC Director General Mark Thompson claimed that airing the DEC appeal would put the corporation's impartiality at risk by giving the impression the BBC was "backing one side" over the other.

Over 11,000 viewers contacted the BBC to complain about its refusal to air the appeal. Labour MP Gerald Kaufman said the BBC had responded to "nasty pressure" from "very active and not very pleasant Israeli diplomatic representation in Britain."

Former BBC journalist and independent MP Martin Bell noted in the *Guardian* that the BBC's "senior journalists feel betrayed, but dare not speak out because of their terms of service." An unnamed BBC news source stated, "Feelings are running extremely high and there is widespread disgust at the BBC's top management. There is widespread anger and frustration at the BBC's refusal to allow people to speak out about it."

The BBC used the same pretext of maintaining impartiality in relation to an appeal for aid to Lebanon in 2006 following the Israeli war against Hezbollah.

Robert Fisk in the *Independent* on April 16 described the Trust's report on Bowen as "pusillanimous, cowardly, outrageous, factually wrong and ethically dishonest." He added that the Trust had "collapsed, in the most shameful way, against the usual Israeli lobbyists who have claimed—against all the facts—that Bowen was wrong to tell the truth."

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