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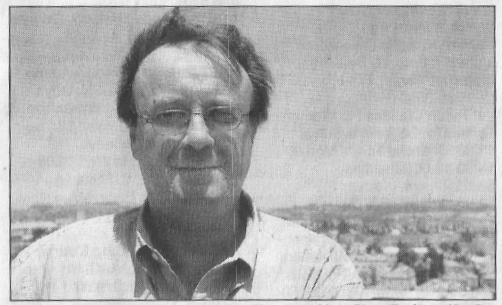
# BBC's Middle East bureau chief denies charges of anti-Israeli bias

*By Daphna Berman*

Standing in the basement of a Jerusalem synagogue this week, the bureau chief of the BBC's Middle East desk acknowledged that he was entering a lion's den. As an invited guest for a forum on his network's Israel coverage, Andrew Steele pointed to a booklet prepared by the other invited speaker, entitled "The BBC – A Danger to Democracy?" and said, "It's obvious, isn't it?"

Steele, who defended the BBC's coverage of Israel to a less-than-welcoming crowd, said, however, that the findings of the Hutton report will certainly affect his bureau's editorial guidelines.

"The Hutton report did find clear problems with the managerial and reporting system at the BBC," he said. "But it will take two to three months to go through the report to see how we can improve our lines of communication."



*Haaretz archives: Pierre Terdjman / BauBau*

**Steele: 'A conspiracy is far beyond the efficiency of the BBC.'**

Steele also said that he was under "strict instructions to say as little as possible" about the report, which was released last month and found fault with the BBC's editorial guidelines.

Pointing to the network's appointment last year of Malcolm Balen as an editorial adviser who would ostensibly monitor journalists' objectivity in the region, Steele insisted that the BBC was actively working to achieve balanced standards of reporting.

Audience members, most of whom remained highly critical, attacked the BBC for its reluctance to use the word "terrorist" in reporting on Palestinian attacks. They also accused Steele of an anti-Israel bias for his network's use of the term "occupied territories."

"The BBC is enormous [and] we try our hardest," Steele replied. "I've never been anywhere where so much care is put into the words we use and the balance we seek."

BBC journalists, he added over a collective groan from the audience, are united by a "love of truth."

Steele emphatically denied suggestions that the BBC was anti-Semitic or that it had colluded with Palestinians to create a biased account of the situation here. "I take solace in the fact that [U.K. Chief Rabbi] Jonathan Sacks has also been described as anti-Semitic," Steele said. A conspiracy, he later joked, "is far beyond the efficiency of the BBC."

Sponsored by the British Israel Group, the forum drew an audience of 300, most of whom, with the exception of a few members of the foreign press, were British immigrants to Israel. Sharing the platform with Steele that evening was Trevor Asserson, a London-based lawyer and harsh critic of the BBC. Asserson has written several reports on the BBC, accusing them of "continuous partiality in favor of the Palestinian narrative."

"The BBC is not the worst news provider on the planet [and] they do make genuine efforts to be impartial," Asserson said. "They're trying, but they're not trying hard enough, and they continue to fail."