

# COMMENT & OPINION

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## The BBC meets its match

• By MANFRED GERSTENFELD

In the last three months British litigation lawyer Trevor Asserson's Web site, www.bbcwatch.com, recorded one million hits. It contains his three well-documented reports systematically demonstrating the BBC's anti-Israel bias.

A few days ago the BBC suddenly created a senior editorial post to advise on its Middle East coverage — an unprecedented appointment. Malcolm Balen, a former editor of the BBC's 9 o'clock news, was selected. His terms of reference and the methodology he will apply have not been published, not is it certain that his findings will be made public.

Observers attribute this appointment to several factors: The Israeli government's refusal to cooperate with the BBC; the emergence, during the recent Hutton enquiry, of many shortcomings in BBC reporting of the Iraq war; and *The Daily Telegraph's* running — over two months — of the *Reeb-watch* column scrutinizing BBC reporting. Asserson preceded them with his original methodology of systematic analysis of BBC bias.

Criticism of the BBC has come a long way in 10 years since I interviewed the late David Bar-Illan for my book *Israel's New Future*. Even back then he said, "the BBC is by far the worst offender" among foreign media in Israel.

Bar-Illan told how, at the first intifada's peak, an Arab coffee-house in Jerusalem collapsed due to structural problems. Jews and Arabs cooperated to save lives. The BBC, however, labeled it a bomb explosion rather than

stressing the cooperation. Bar-Illan added: "From the political sphere, there are hundreds of examples of BBC malice."

Bar-Illan provided qualitative examples while Asserson quantifies them. The BBC's monopoly derives from a legally binding contract with the British government. Asserson explains how it is breaching this with its biased reporting on Israel. As a lawyer, he wanted to analyze it in a way that would stand up as evidence in court.

ASSERSON DEFINED the BBC's 15 independent legal obligations under its charter. These include: fairness, respect for fundamental democratic principles, not broadcasting its own opinions on current affairs or public policy, ensuring opposing views are not misrepresented, and not letting the audience gauge reporters' personal views. He recorded the BBC's broadcasting on the Middle East over three periods of several weeks, the first one being at the end of 2001. Asserson identified many events where the BBC breached multiple guidelines, in some cases even most.

One typical example was when suicide bombers killed 26 Israeli civilians in Jerusalem and Haifa in December 2001. The BBC only used the word "terror" when describing Israel's retaliatory attacks on Palestinian targets. In another, Palestinians attacked a bus in

Emmanuel, killing 10 civilians and wounding dozens. Thereupon Israel attacked a Palestinian police station without serious casualties, which the BBC reported very dramatically. The Palestinian attack was mentioned with minimal detail of its brutality.

When Asserson sent the BBC his report with the comprehensive examples of its guideline breaches, its news director denied them without providing a detailed response. Asserson conducted a second study in May-July 2002. He gave many new examples of how the BBC "only reports the Palestinian side, suppresses news stories, fails to explain Israel's mistrust of the Palestinians and uses pictures out of context."

The Iraqi war enabled Asserson to compare, in his third study, the BBC's reporting on British soldiers in Iraq and Israeli troops in the conflict with the Palestinians. He wrote: "Coalition troops are described in warm and glowing terms, with sympathy being evoked both for them as individuals and also for their military predicament. By contrast Israeli troops are painted as faceless, ruthless and brutal killers with no or little understanding shown for their actions."

Asserson illustrated how the BBC goes to considerable lengths to "explain, excuse and lessen civilian deaths at the hands of coalition troops while mitigating arguments are brushed aside or scorned if

voiced at all where Israelis are concerned."

Asserson also explains how the BBC is turning from a reporting body into a news manufacturer.

US President George W. Bush's speech of June 24, 2002, for example, was entitled on the White House Web site, "President Bush calls for new Palestinian leadership." Nineteen of the 28 paragraphs addressed Palestinian leadership and institutional reform. Bush said that Palestinian authorities are encouraging terrorism; Israeli policy was criticized in two or three paragraphs. The BBC was the only news body which presented the speech as criticizing Israelis and Palestinians equally.

In passing, Asserson also illustrates the anti-Israel atmosphere among BBC journalists. One, Ian Haddow, signed in his private capacity an anti-Israel e-mail petition. He added the words "save us from Israel!" after his name.

Both scenarios for the BBC's future are better than the status quo, either it balances its reporting, or Balen's appointment will be exposed as another BBC effort to gloss over the truth. That will not help its attempt in 2005 to renew the charter giving it a monopoly. Beyond that, Asserson's seminal methods can probably be used against many other government-owned media in the democratic world.

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### How a crusading lawyer forced a media behemoth to examine itself