



Is It Possible to Curb the Extreme Bias of the BBC?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: For decades, there has been a steady stream of complaints about the BBC's anti-Israel bias. Yet other than criticize the BBC publicly, there was little anyone could do. That may have changed. In June 2020, Tim Davie became the BBC's new director general. He wants to make the BBC's reporting impartial. This would be a good occasion for the publication of the secret 2004 Malcolm Balen report about BBC reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Former Israeli ambassador to the UK Zvi Shtauber told me in an interview in 2005:

The BBC is a problem in itself. Over the years I had endless conversations with them. Any viewer who looks at the BBC's information on Israel for a consistent period gets a distorted picture. It doesn't result from a single broadcast here or there. It derives from the BBC's method of broadcasting. When reporting from Israel, the mosque on the Temple Mount is usually shown in the background, which gives viewers the impression that Jerusalem is predominantly Muslim.

Shtauber summed up his remarks by saying it was almost a daily task for him to react to BBC distortions about Israel.

There has been a steady stream of complaints for decades about the BBC's anti-Israel bias—more than enough to fill a book. Camera UK maintains a special monitoring site solely to focus on the BBC's anti-Israel bias.

Here are a few recent examples. Senior BBC producer Rosie Garthwaite is working on a new documentary critical of Israeli actions in East Jerusalem. She has admitted to sharing inaccurate pro-Palestinian propaganda on social media. She deleted a false map from her personal Twitter account that greatly

overstated alleged Palestinian land loss to Israel, and she has been accused of sharing other false or controversial claims about Israel on social media. Garthwaite has wrongly suggested that Gaza has only one border, and that that sole border is controlled by Israel. This is just a sampling of her anti-Israel propaganda.

Senior BBC journalist Nimesh Thaker used the Twitter account @notthatbothered to belittle antisemitism. He promotes extremists like Jackie Walker, who was expelled from the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's chairmanship due to her antisemitism. Thaker has also used an anonymous social media account to support a text against Jewish presenter Emma Barnett after she spoke out about the personal impact of antisemitism on her life.

Jewish activist David Collier wrote that one need not wonder why the leftist fringe group Jewish Voice for Labour is so often given BBC airtime. He added that people like Thaker write the news that millions of people read each day. He concluded that nothing in Britain bears more responsibility for the spread of the false anti-Israel narrative than the BBC.

One can go on and on. As Ambassador Shtauber observed, "Several key positions in the BBC are held by extreme leftists." He added that the BBC publishes its personnel advertisements in the left wing daily *The Guardian*.

With so many biased journalists, it is not surprising that many cases of one-sidedness—including those not related to Jews or Israel—occur. Yet up to now, there was little anyone could do other than criticize the BBC publicly.

Previous Conservative governments have ignored the problem of BBC bias, but the situation may now be changing. In June the British government appointed Tim Davie as director general of the corporation. He has criticized the BBC's lack of impartiality in terms similar to those of many of its critics. At a BBC staff meeting in early September, Davie made the striking statement: "If you want to be an opinionated columnist or a partisan campaigner on social media then that is a valid choice, but you should not be working at the BBC."

The big question is whether and to what extent a director general can turn a body permeated with biased journalists like the BBC into an impartial one.

British Jewish lawyer Trevor Asserson, now living in Israel, invested his own money from 2000 to 2004 in four well-documented studies detailing the BBC's systematic bias against Israel. He concluded that the BBC's coverage of the Middle East is infected by a widespread antipathy toward the country. This distorted reporting creates an atmosphere in which antisemitism can thrive.

Asserson noted that the BBC's monopoly derives from a legally binding contract with the British government. He defined the BBC's 15 legal obligations under its charter and then showed instances in which the BBC breached many to most of the guidelines.

In his first report, Asserson wrote that at the BBC, "Vitriolic comments are part of facts or unattributed quotations." He analyzed two extremely biased portraits of Sharon and Arafat that had appeared on the BBC's website, noting, "An unattributed comment implied Sharon uses unbridled violence"—a charge Asserson exposed as a lie. About Arafat, he noted that the BBC website described him as heroic, selflessly devoted to public duty, hard-working, and the possessor of natural leadership skills. Arafat's lifelong engagement in terrorism was overlooked.

After Asserson published his report, both portraits were removed from the BBC website.

In his second report, Asserson provided evidence that the BBC failed to give adequate prominence to many topics that would give a negative image of the Palestinians.

In his third report, Asserson compared the BBC's reporting on British soldiers in Iraq to that of Israeli troops in the conflict with the Palestinians. He wrote that in Iraq, "Coalition troops are described in warm and glowing terms with sympathy being evoked for them both as individuals and for their military predicament. In contrast, Israeli troops are painted as faceless, ruthless and brutal killers." He and his coauthor showed how widespread the BBC bias was by offering a large number of widely diverse examples.

Asserson's reports had some effect. In November 2003, the BBC created a senior editorial post to advise on its Middle East coverage. A former editor of the BBC's 9:00 News, Malcolm Balen, was selected for the position. The then-head of BBC News, Richard Sambrook, told Asserson that his reports contributed to the decision to create the position.

In 2004, Balen undertook an internal inquiry into the BBC's coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The report was never released, which led to a series of legal battles. After eight years, the Supreme Court decided that the Balen report is exempt from The Freedom of Information Act. The BBC had, however, to disclose its legal costs on the matter, which were about half a million dollars at the time. One wonders why, if the inquiry found that its reporting was impartial, the BBC would spend so much to keep it secret.

It would be helpful if sources in the Jewish community availed the new director general with all of Asserson's material. It may save him much time trying to understand the manipulations of part of the BBC staff.

Honest Reporting was one of those who at the time made a major unsuccessful effort to get the Balen report published. It could now suggest to Mr. Davie to retrieve this report from the BBC's safe and finally make it public. It may show that the BBC heads, already more than 15 years ago, knew that their company was biased in its Mid East reporting.

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