

## After the Storm

### TV News Middle East Coverage Since the Gulf War

How have the TV networks covered the search for lasting peace in the Middle East? During the eight months from the end of the Gulf War through the Madrid Peace Conference, the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts featured 2048 stories on the Middle East, with a combined airtime over 51 hours. We analyzed evaluations of the countries and individuals involved in the region, the Arab and Israeli peace proposals, and the visual images of the war's aftermath. This issue also tracks political humor directed at the Middle East on late-night TV talk shows.

#### Major findings:

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■ **Arabs vs. Israelis** Arab proposals dominated the news. Most sources endorsed "land for peace" but rejected Israel's ouster from the occupied territories. *Page 4*

■ **Allies vs. Iraq** The U.S. and its allies were criticized almost as heavily as Iraq. Yitzhak Shamir's level of bad press was exceeded only by Saddam Hussein's. *Page 3*

■ **CBS vs. Bush** CBS gave the worst press to George Bush's Middle East policies. *Page 3*

■ **ABC vs. CBS & NBC** ABC aired the most support of Arab peace proposals, and the most criticism of Israel and the U.S. military. *Page 5*

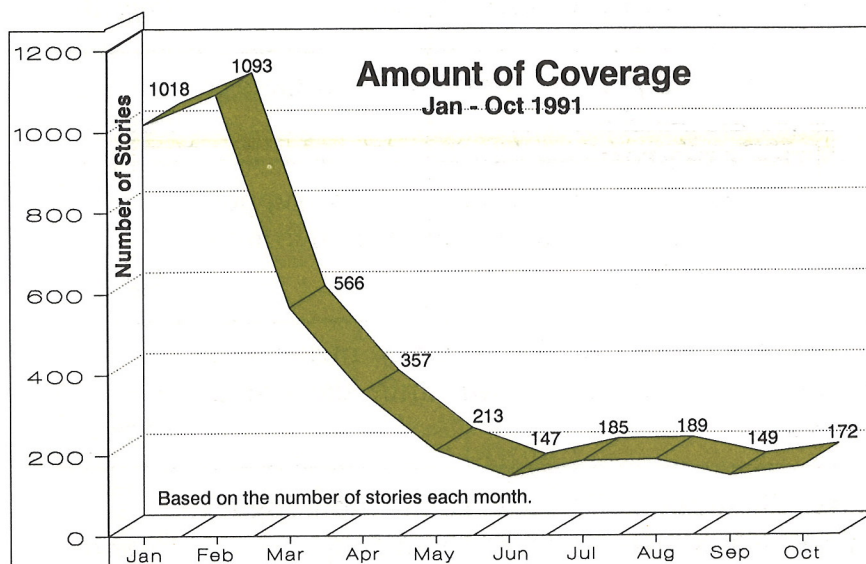
■ **Words vs. Pictures** Nearly as many pictures of casualties and wreckage were shown after the war as during the war. *Page 5*

■ **Leno vs. Saddam** TV talk show monologues average more than a joke per night about Iraq. *Page 6*



The Middle East was by far the biggest TV news story of 1991, as intensive coverage of the Persian Gulf War and its aftermath was followed by the hunt for a settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict. During the six weeks of armed conflict in January and February, the three major network evening newscasts broadcast an extraordinary 1,733 Gulf-related stories, the most intensive coverage of any story in television history. The cease-fire slowed but by no means stopped the flow of Middle East news. From the end of the Gulf War (February 28) through the Madrid Peace Conference (November 1), the three network evening newscasts aired 2048 stories on the Middle East, with a cumulative airtime of more than 51 hours. ABC led with 725 stories and more than 18 hours of coverage. CBS broadcast 664 pieces (15 hours), while NBC devoted fewer stories (659) but more airtime (more than 17 hours) to the region.

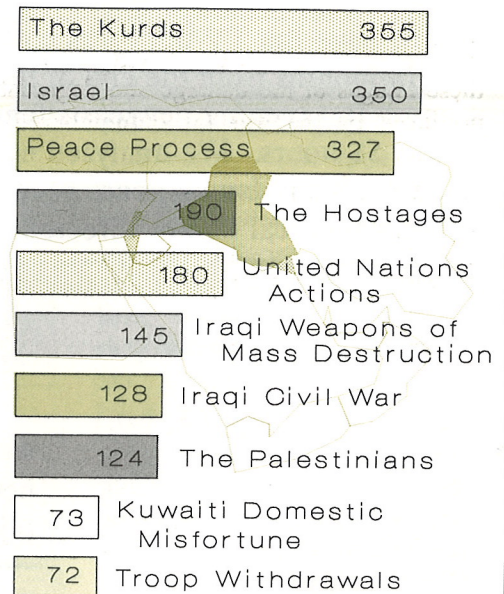
The coverage was heaviest immediately after the war, with 566 stories in March, followed by 357 stories in April, as attention turned to the plight of the Kurds in Iraq. The amount of coverage varied little thereafter, averaging about 150 to 200 stories per month. The U.S. military's effort to provide a safe haven for the Kurds, the Middle East peace initiative and the release of Western hostages all contributed to coverage of the region.



## The Big Three

Three issues dominated coverage of the Middle East after the Gulf War, accounting for one-third of all news topics. The unsuccessful Kurdish revolt against the Iraqi regime generated the most news, with 355 stories. U.S. and Allied efforts to provide a safe zone for Kurdish refugees contributed 139 of these stories.

### Topics



Based on number of stories.

Coverage of Israel followed close behind, with 350 stories discussing such issues as the building of settlements in the occupied territories, a quarrel with the Bush administration over loan guarantees, and Israel's position on a regional peace settlement. The possibilities for peace and the subsequent Madrid Peace Conference rounded out the top three topics, accounting for 327 stories. Contributing to this number was the U.S. effort to exploit a perceived "window of opportunity" to establish a peacekeeping structure for the region.

A second tier of topics included the Western hostages in Lebanon (190 stories) and the actions of the United Nations (180 stories). The U.N. was instrumental in the continuing embargo against Iraq, inspections of Iraqi nuclear weapons plants, and mediating the hostage situation. Also included in the top ten topics:



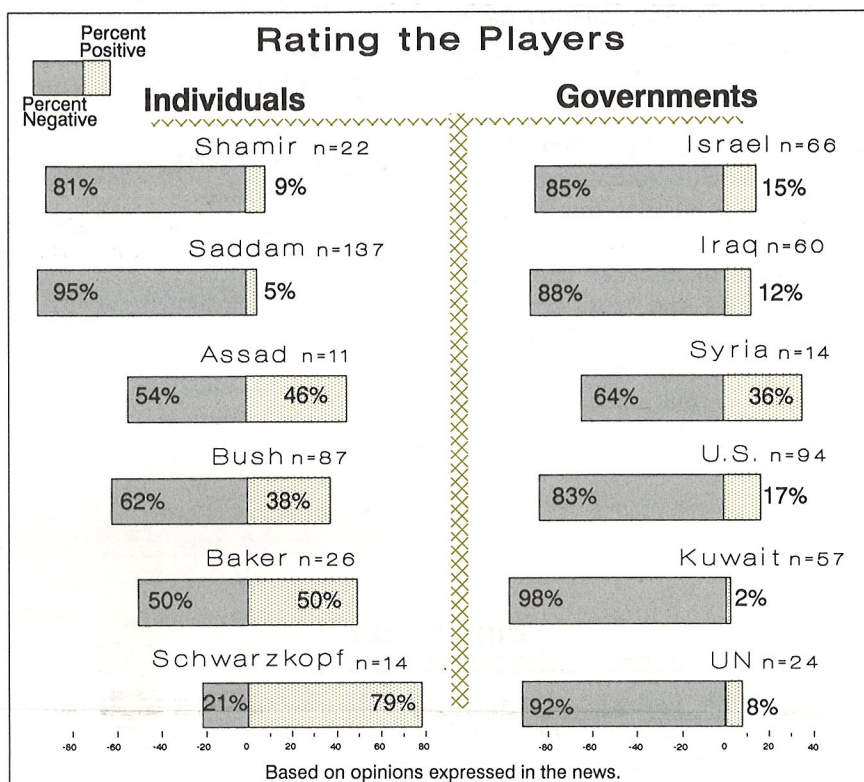
The hunt for Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (145 stories), the Iraqi civil war (128), the Palestinians (124), the destruction visited on Kuwait in the Gulf War (73), and the withdrawal of U.S. troops from the Middle East (72).

## No Heros

The afterglow of the allied victory over Iraq faded quickly. Every government and head of state involved in the postwar search for Middle East peace came under heavy criticism in the media. Not surprisingly, the worst press for any individual went to Saddam Hussein, who was criticized in 19 out of every 20 opinions. For example, NBC's Fred Francis quoted an unnamed White House official who described Saddam's postwar policy as one of "cheat and retreat." (9/26) But Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir fared almost as badly as Saddam, with a ten to one negative rating. Thus, ABC quoted a Palestinian activist who denounced Shamir's position at the Madrid Conference: "It reflects the attitude and tone of an occupier, of a brutalizing authority." (10/31) The only head of state who even approached a balanced media profile was Syria's President Hafez el-Assad, whose evaluations were 46 percent positive. For example, ABC's Barrie Dunsmore observed, "President Assad is one of the masters of survival in this region and a cagey negotiator." (7/18)

Meanwhile, George Bush's positive media image became a casualty of the quest for peace. Wartime praise for Bush's leadership gave way to criticism of his postwar policies in nearly two out of three opinions. For example, a Kurdish leader complained, "We can no longer trust President Bush." (NBC, 4/20) And an American policy expert criticized Bush's refusal to enter the Iraqi civil war, "He is... helping to preserve Saddam Hussein's regime.... that is a fundamental, unequivocal mistake." (NBC, 3/29) Bush's chief diplomatic and military subordinates fared better than their boss. Secretary of State James Baker received balanced coverage, while four out of five evaluations hailed General Norman Schwarzkopf as a conquering hero.

The criticism of Bush was heaviest on CBS, which has consistently been the American president's harshest critic among the three networks (*Media Monitor*, 11/91). Three out of four evaluations (74%) on CBS were negative, while the other two networks aired identical proportions of 57 percent negative to 43 percent positive evaluations. For example, CBS correspondent David Martin charged that, "the president left Saddam with weapons he is now using to slaughter his own people." (3/29) When evaluations of Bush and Baker are combined, the difference is even sharper -- about evenly balanced (49% positive) on ABC and NBC combined, compared to the same three-to-one negative ratio on CBS.



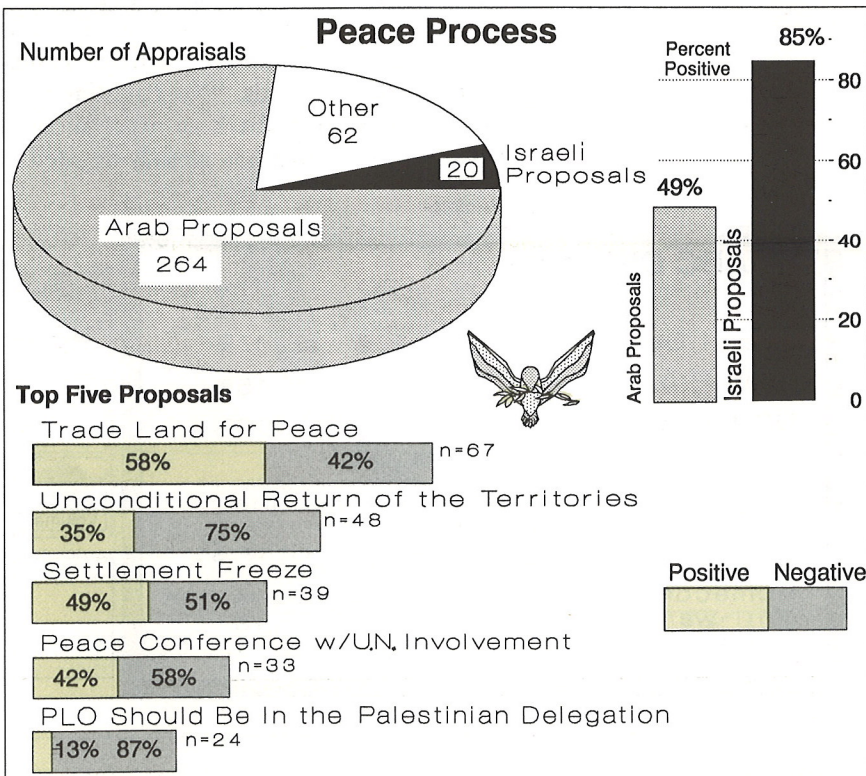
This pattern of across the board criticism encompassed not only the leaders but also their governments. The bad press was so all-inclusive that the U.S. and its Middle East allies fared nearly as badly as Iraq. Combined evaluations of the U.S., Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Israel were 88 percent negative, only slightly better than Iraq's 92 percent negative rating. The ratio of bad to good press was five to one for the United States, six to one for Israel, and an overwhelming 24 to one for Kuwait. The Kuwaiti government was frequently criticized



for the incompetence of its postwar reconstruction efforts. On ABC, a Kuwaiti opposition leader said the regime's policies amounted to "a big fat zero." (3/18) The Israeli government was criticized on numerous fronts. For example, Baker criticized the settlement policy, "It substantially weakens my hand in trying to bring about a peace process and creates quite a predicament." (NBC 5/22) Only Israel's handling of the hostage issue was portrayed favorably. The U.S. government's media image suffered as critics began to charge that its military mastery during the war gave way to diplomatic bungling after the cease-fire. For example, a political scientist told CBS, "even though we achieved the objectives we officially set for ourselves, we couldn't cope with the aftermath." (6/10) The best press (though it amounted to faint praise) went to Syria, whose 36 percent favorable rating was more than twice as high as that of either the U.S. (17%) or Israel (15%).

## Peace Proposals

Media attention soon began to shift from the war's aftermath to the quest for future



peace in the region. Much of the news revolved around U.S. efforts to induce negotiations among Arab and Israeli foes, spearheaded by Secretary of State Baker's shuttle diplomacy. This new focus produced frequent debate over the various peace proposals that came out of this process. News coverage focused almost exclusively on proposals originating in the Arab world. Evaluations of Arab proposals outnumbered those of Israeli proposals by a 13 to one margin. Overall, debate on the Arab proposals was evenly balanced (49% support vs. 51% opposition). The rare assessments of Israel's proposals were usually (85%) positive.

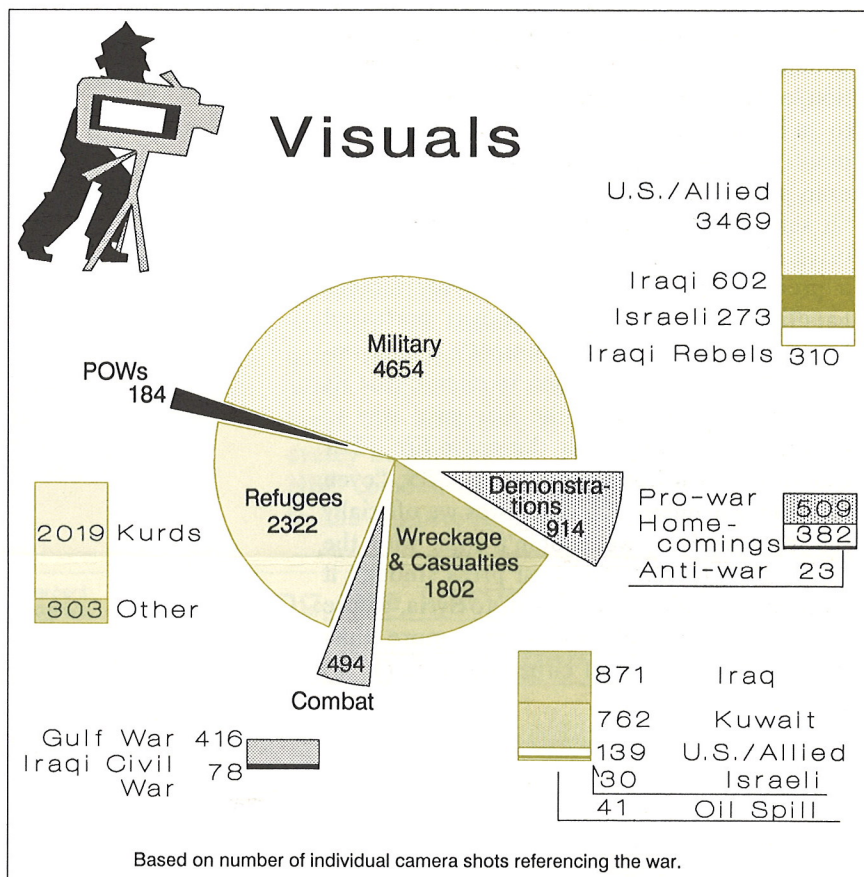
The substantive debate centered on three controversies: the general principle of trading "land for peace," specifically demands that Israel unconditionally give up its occupied territories, and the continued building of new settlements in those areas. By far the most frequent debate concerned the land for peace tradeoff, which was endorsed in nearly three out of five opinions. For example, ABC's Barrie Dunsmore reported, "the Arabs and the U.S. say negotiations should be based on the formula of land for peace." (7/8) Calls for a freeze on new settlements in the occupied territories produced balanced coverage between supporters and opponents, while demands that Israel give up those territories were rejected in nearly two out of three assessments. Thus, Prime Minister Shamir told CBS, "It's my land, it's our land. How can we give up this land?" (10/29) Two other frequently debated issues were procedural matters regarding the peace conference. A majority of opinions rejected calls for a U.N. role, and seven out of eight said the PLO should not be represented in the Palestinian delegation.

## Afterimages

During the Gulf War, critics accused the networks of showing Pentagon-produced pictures of successful combat missions but few images of subsequent civilian damage, wreckage, and human misery. The criticism was never entirely valid (*Media Monitor*, 4/91).



After the war, moreover, the networks responded with a profusion of images documenting the damages. Indeed, the evening news shows aired nearly as many visuals (individual camera shots) of casualties and wreckage after the war (1802) as they had during the war (1922). Damage to Iraq was pictured more often than damage to Kuwait, and almost as often as all Allied damage combined (871 vs. 931 visuals). The misery produced by the war was accentuated by an even greater number of pictures of refugees (2322), including more than 2000 shots of Kurdish refugees. In addition, 494 combat visuals appeared, nearly half as many as the network aired during the actual fighting (1177). All these images of the damage and degradation produced by the war far outnumbered the "triumphalist" footage of domestic celebrations (509 shots) and joyous homecomings of U.S. troops (382). Overall, nearly one-third of all visuals aired on the Middle East since the war have featured military or war-related subject matter, a continuing grim reminder that wars do not end when the shooting stops.



## The ABC Difference (continued)

During the Persian Gulf War, our content analysis identified a distinctively anti-war profile on the ABC evening newscast (Media Monitor, 4/91). Compared to CBS and NBC, opinions expressed on ABC were the most critical of U.S. and Israeli policy and of the war itself. ABC also ran more stories on anti-war demonstrators and cited more Iraqis and fewer Israelis than its competitors. ABC's postwar coverage of the Middle East continued this distinctive profile with heavy criticism of Israel and the U.S. military, while featuring more support for the Arab peace proposals.

Although all coverage of the Israeli government was highly critical, opinions expressed on ABC were seven to one negative compared with five to one at the other networks. For example, Dean Reynolds quoted an Israeli peace activist who condemned "a major

drive by the Israeli government... to block any peace process." (3/28) By contrast, nearly three out of five ABC assessments (58%) supported the various Arab proposals, compared to a minority (45%) at the other networks. For example, activist Hanan Ashrawi told Reynolds, "No Palestinian, no Arab is willing to embark on negotiations or a peace process that has already negated its

The ABC Difference				
	ABC % Pos	Others* % Pos		
Israeli Government	12%	17%		
Arab Proposals	58%	45%		
US Military Performance	61%	100%		
Pictures of Homefront Reaction				
	ABC	Others*		
Homecomings	94	144		
Anti-war Demonstrations	14	5		

\*Combined averages for CBS and NBC.



own legitimacy by excluding Palestinians from East Jerusalem." (7/25)

ABC's postwar coverage of U.S. Middle East policy, while 80 percent negative, was surpassed by CBS's 94 percent negative evaluations. But ABC continued to provide the least supportive images of U.S. military. Opinions on both CBS and NBC gave the U.S. military a 100 percent positive rating, compared to 61 percent positive on ABC. Thus, all 14 criticisms of the military that were broadcast appeared on ABC. For example, in a story questioning the "stealth" technology touted by the Pentagon for its contribution to the victory over Iraq, Bob Zelnick noted, "Many wonder whether the B-2 has the radar technology to perform one of its key missions -- attacking mobile missiles." Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) then complained, "We had stealth bombers trying to find the Iraqi missiles totally unsuccessfully." (6/11) ABC also aired more visuals of anti-war demonstrators than CBS and NBC combined. By contrast, ABC showed only two-thirds as many homecoming scenes of U.S. troops as did each of the other networks.

## Punchlines

The Middle East was a hot topic not only on the evening newscasts but also in the monologues of TV's late night comedians. Most of their barbs were directed toward Iraq and its leader Saddam Hussein. From January 1 through September 30, Saddam was the target of 160 jokes, more than any other individual so far in 1991. (Dan Quayle is a distant second with 106.) Overall 282 jokes were aimed at Iraq and its leader, an average of over one per night. Many of these targeted Saddam's bombast and the fighting spirit of his troops. During the fighting, Arsenio Hall joked that, "Saddam is an Arabic word for Joe Izuzu." (2/13) After the surrender, Jay Leno related an ad in "Guns and Ammo" magazine: "For sale -- 80,000 Iraqi rifles -- never fired, only dropped once." (3/25) More recently,

Leno revealed that, "Saddam is preparing for another Gulf War. This time he's gluing the rifles to the soldiers' hands and stealing their underwear so it's harder for them to surrender." (9/26)

Other countries and leaders in the region cropped up as well. Most prominent was Kuwait, whose uncertain process of reconstruction was a source of numerous punchlines. When Kuwait's monarch returned, Carson quipped, "I understand that Bush sent a letter to the Emir of Kuwait today. It said 'Congratulations on the U.S. saving your homeland -- second notice.'" (3/22) And when harsh sentences were meted out to suspected Iraqi collaborators, Hall noted, "One man got twelve years for carrying a key chain around with Iraqi bullets. Another got fifteen years for wearing a Saddam Hussein T-shirt. There's a lesson to be learned here. When you are in Kuwait, don't shop at that Iraqi souvenir stand." (8/28) Continuing around the region, Leno uncovered a little known fact: "Do you know there are an estimate, 6500 princes in Saudi Arabia but no frogs?" (3/5) Leno also noted that, "Iran is still trying to promote tourism. Iranian airlines has an offer where terrorists under twelve fly free." (7/22) David Letterman reported that, "Israel has said yes to a Middle East peace conference, but there are some conditions. One of those conditions is that Yasser Arafat must get himself freshened up." (8/2)

The U.S. military became fair game after reports that 36 female crew members became pregnant while the U.S.S. Arcadia was stationed in the Persian Gulf. Leno mused, "So I guess it's true what they say in the commercial: 'We do more before 8:00 a.m. than most people do all day.'" (5/14) Finally, there were some domestic tie-ins, as when Letterman claimed, "the U.N. Security Council has announced they are sending forces to stand around the clock watch. Not to the Persian Gulf but to the Kennedy compound in Palm Beach." (4/5)

