

Israel vs the Palestinians

TV News Coverage of the Second Intifada

Major findings:

■ Bad News For:

Israel: 4 out of 5
sources were critical.
Page 3

Palestinians: 9 out of 10
sources were critical
Page 3

Bush: 4 out of 5 sources
were critical of US policy
Page 4

Arafat: he was criticized
far more often than Sharon
Page 5

■ Give War a Chance

A majority of sources on
both sides supported the use
of force
Page 4

■ Give Peace No Chance

Nine out of ten sources were
pessimistic about the future.
Page 6

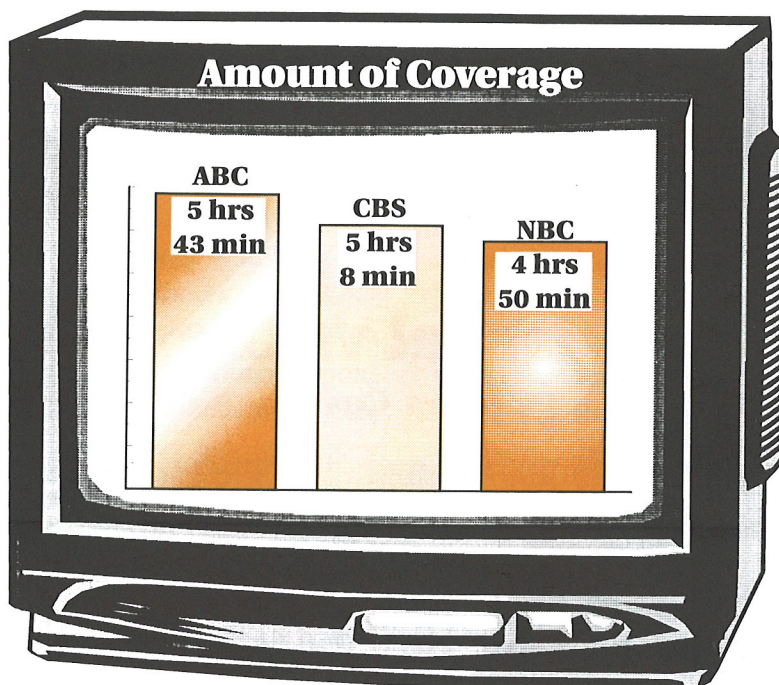
The renewed conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been one of the most intensely covered news stories of 2002. It has also been one of the most controversial, with partisans on both sides claiming that the media is biased in its reporting. This issue of Media Monitor examines how the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs covered the conflict during the three months after a deadly suicide bombing in Netanya on March 27 prompted the Israelis to launch a military assault against the West Bank and Gaza. We also look at how the network news has covered the Bush administration's response to this escalating crisis in the Middle East.

In the wake of Ariel Sharon's controversial visit to Jerusalem's Temple Mount in September 2000, the launch of a second Palestinian Intifada ended prospects of a return to settlement talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. With the more hawkish Sharon succeeding Ehud Barak as prime minister, and promising to protect Israel from terrorism, both sides retrenched in an atmosphere of increasing enmity, punctuated by sporadic car and suicide bombings. As violence simmered through 2001 with little U.S. diplomatic interest in brokering new peace talks, coverage of the conflict on U.S. television news waned. That changed in March 2002 when a new wave of suicide bombings culminated in an attack on a Passover seder that killed 29 people. In response, Israel launched Operation "Defensive Shield," a major assault against militant Palestinian groups in the West Bank and Gaza. Israeli soldiers stormed the Palestinian Authority headquarters in Ramallah and surrounded Arafat's compound. In Bethlehem, they laid siege to the Church of the Nativity after armed Palestinians barricaded themselves inside.

(continued on page 2)

From March 27, the day of the Passover bombing in Netanya, through June 30, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dominated the network evening news. The ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts broadcast a total of 525 stories - an average of over 6 stories a day. This amounted to 15 hours and 41 minutes of airtime. Among the top ten stories, that is over one hour more than the networks gave to the next nine biggest news stories combined during these three months. By comparison, there were 135 reports on the second most heavily covered story, the sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, amounting to 4 hours and 14 minutes of airtime, and 119 reports on the third-ranked story, the war in Afghanistan, totaling 2 hours and 24 minutes of airtime.

ABC provided the most coverage, with 204 stories totaling 5

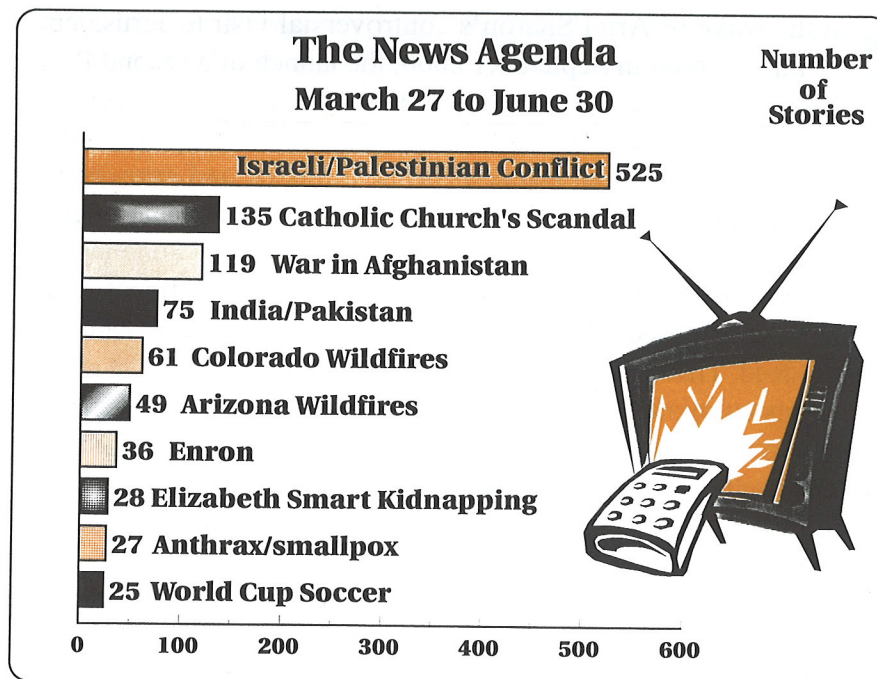


hours and 43 minutes of airtime, while CBS aired 183 stories for 5 hours and 8 minutes, and NBC logged 138 stories totaling 4 hours and 50 minutes of coverage. In part, CBS and NBC trailed ABC due to their coverage of sports on weekends. Despite its third place finish, NBC

actually gave 20 percent more time on average to each story than did either ABC or CBS.

Focus on Israel

During the time period of our study, Israeli incursions into Palestinian controlled territory were the most heavily covered topic on the networks (239 stories). These included the standoff at the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem (49 stories) and the siege of Yasser Arafat's compound in Ramallah (32 stories). The networks devoted 118 stories on Palestinian suicide bombings, including 10 stories dealing with the Palestinian Authority's backing for these attacks. The disparity between coverage of Palestinian violence and the Israeli military response results both from the extent of Israel's military operation and its initial suc-

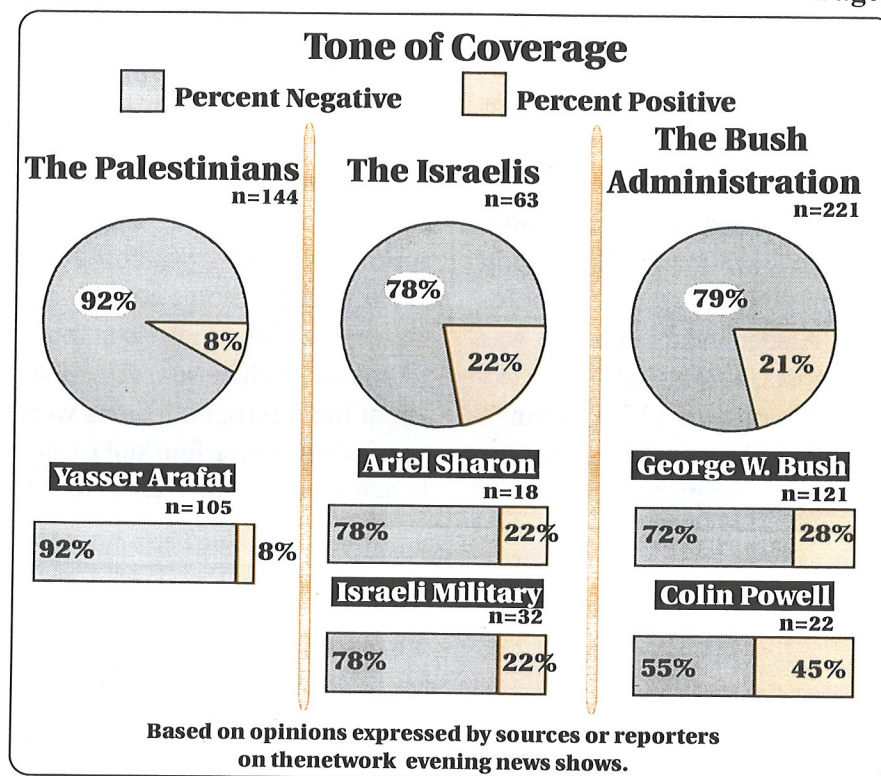


cess in curtailing suicide bombings (there were 2 such incidents in April compared to 10 in March). The third most heavily covered topic was the role of the United States in the peace process, with 82 stories. Twelve of these focused on U.S. plans for a Palestinian state.

Tone of Coverage

We calculate good and bad press by tallying every positive or negative evaluation of a newsmaker's actions, policies, or views. Our tallies include all on-air opinions expressed by reporters and sources. We do not include statements about the success or failure of a newsmaker's policy.

No matter what the story or the angle, the coverage of the conflict on the evening news shows was overwhelmingly negative. Overall the Palestinians received the most criticism. Ninety two percent of all on air evaluative comments were negative. Among these, opinions directed specifically to-

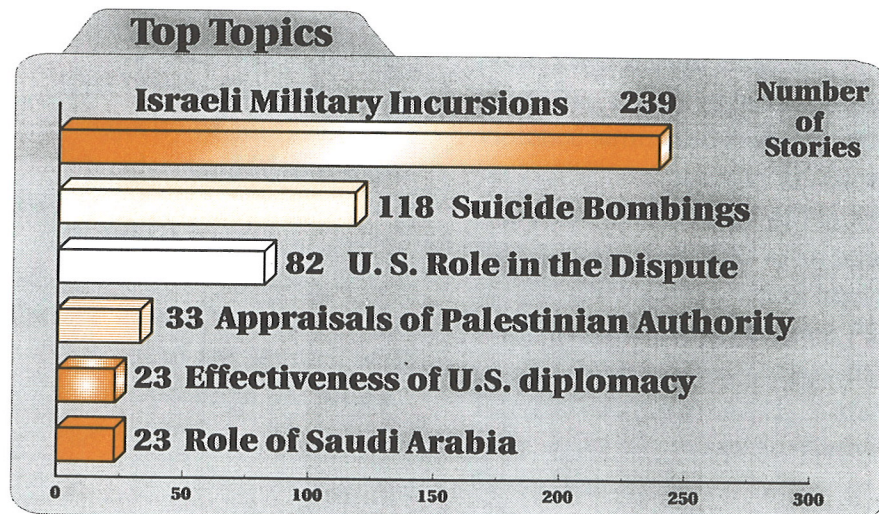


wards Yasser Arafat were just as critical (92 percent negative). As the Israeli politician Dan Meridor told CBS, Arafat "is the villain in this story. He is the one attacking us. We are killed in the streets every day" (CBS News 4/1).

The Israelis didn't fare much better - 78 percent of sources quoted in the coverage were critical of

Israel, with opinions about Ariel Sharon equally negative (78 percent). As with Israeli comments about Palestinians, some of the most heated criticism of Israel came from Palestinian sources. In an interview with ABC's Charlie Gibson, Palestinian spokesperson Hanan Ashwari said of Sharon, "The only language he knows is violence, bloodshed, and massive killing. After all, he is a war criminal. I don't mince words" (ABC, 4/1). The sheer volume of criticism was heavier toward the Palestinians, however, because their actions were more frequently the object of on-air debate. For example, Arafat was either praised or criticized over five times as frequently as Sharon - by 105 to 18 evaluations.

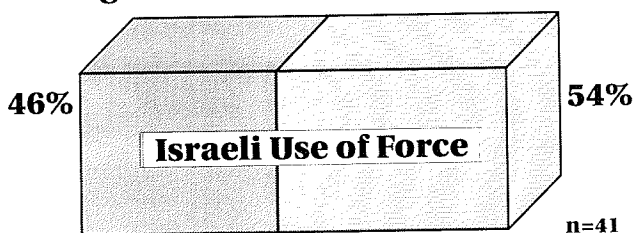
The negative coverage carried over to coverage of the Bush



Views on the Use of Force

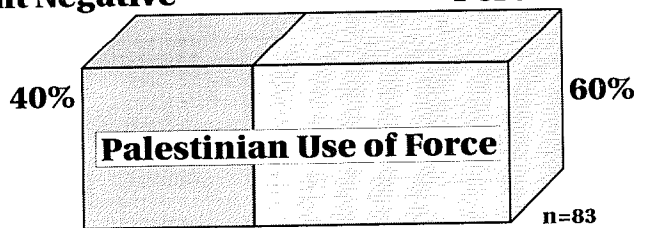
Percent Negative

Percent Positive



Percent Negative

Percent Positive



(60) (40) (20) 0 20 40 60 80

Based on opinions expressed by sources or reporters
on the network evening news shows.

administration's role in the crisis. Only 21 percent of comments about Bush administration policy were positive, while 79 percent were negative. As James Zogby of the Arab-American Institute told NBC news, "The response of the administration publicly up until now has been both achingly inadequate and has been perceived both in Israel and in the Arab world as giving Ariel Sharon a green light" (NBC, 4/3). President Bush's role was viewed negatively by 72 percent of sources. Protests even came from those who normally support the president. As William Bennet told NBC, Bush is "taking a posture of moral equivalence in the Middle East between a friend, an ally, a

democracy - Israel - and a sponsor of terrorism, Mr. Arafat" (NBC, 4/12).

Assessments of the success or failure of the administrations efforts to promote peace in the region were even more critical (84 percent negative). Hardly anyone supported President Bush's efforts to use his bully pulpit to get the sides back to the negotiating table as a success (94 percent negative). As Tom Brokaw put it, "President Bush has been conspicuously unsuccessful in getting either the Palestinians or the Israelis to listen to him despite day-to-day demands on Arafat and Sharon" (NBC, 4/9). Secretary of State Colin Powell's mis-

sion was described as a failure by 80 percent of sources. For example, ABC's Martha Raddatz concluded, "Secretary Powell had no success with the Palestinians. Today's meeting with Yasser Arafat ended, by most accounts, in disaster" (ABC, 4/17).

Use of Force

The two most heavily covered themes in network news coverage were the treatment of Palestinians by the Israelis, and the use of force by both sides. Comments on Israel's overall treatment of the Palestinians were overwhelmingly negative (96 percent negative) with the three networks carrying roughly equal amounts of criticism (a departure from a previous CMPA study in 1991 which showed ABC to have been more critical of Israel than either CBS and NBC - see *Media Monitor*, December 1991). Ironically, the only policy to receive a majority of positive coverage was the use of force. Each side was given airtime to justify its own use of force and criticize the other's. As a result, 54 percent of all sources supported the use of force by Israel and 60 percent supported the use of force by the Palestinians.

Origins and Outlook

When a source or reporter assessed responsibility for the current crisis, a majority (53 percent)

blamed groups or individuals associated with the Palestinians, compared to one-third (33 percent) who blamed the Israelis. All other actors, from the U.S. government to terrorist groups worldwide, accounted for the remaining 14 percent. (In the May 1988 Media Monitor we reported that television coverage of the first Intifada distributed blame more evenly, with 33 percent citing the Israelis and 31 percent the Palestinians.)

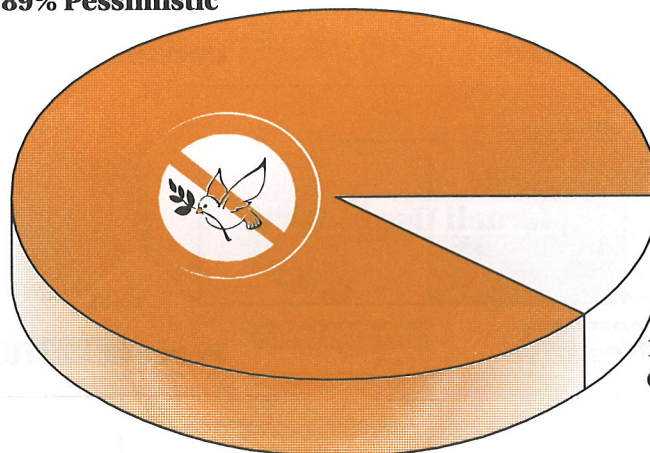
The party singled out most often for blame was Yasser Arafat, who was named 50 times, compared to 15 instances in which Ariel Sharon was accused. Thus responsibility was personalized on the Palestinian side but institution-

alized on the Israeli side, with most sources blaming the Israeli government (23) or military (16).

The three major actors in the conflict were called upon to take action with similar frequency. The

Prospects for Peace

89% Pessimistic



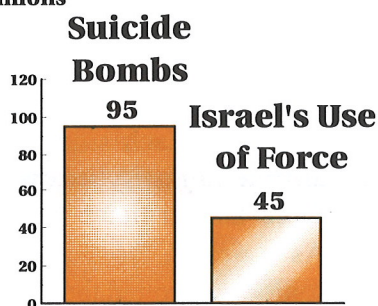
11% Optimistic

Based on opinions expressed by Israelis (n=27) or Palestinians (n=26) on the network evening news shows.

Origins and Outlook

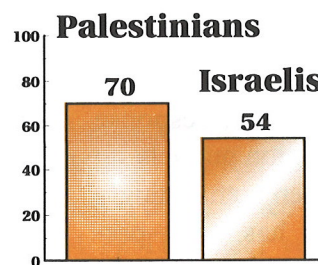
Number of Opinions

What is the cause?



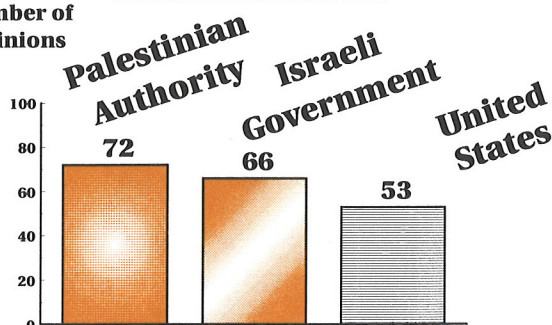
Number of Opinions

Who is to blame?



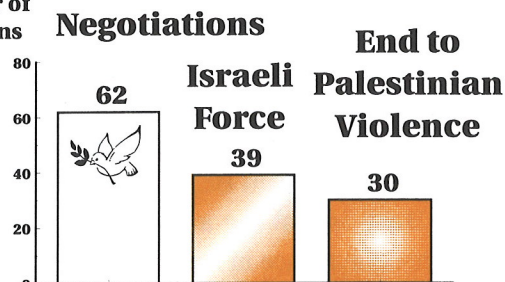
Number of Opinions

Who should act?



Number of Opinions

What is the solution?



Based on opinions expressed by sources or reporters on the network evening news shows.

Palestinian Authority and chairman Yasser Arafat were most likely to be urged to resolve the conflict (32 percent). The United States was named by 29 percent of sources as needing to take action. Finally, 24 percent called upon Sharon and the Israelis for solutions. A negotiated settlement was the most favored solution expressed on-air (27 percent). However, 17 percent of source comments supported the use of

Israeli military force as a means of ending the conflict. Thirteen percent of sources believed that it would take a cessation of Palestinian violence to bring about peace. Despite frequent calls for action, however, watching the evening news shows could make viewers feel that there is no hope for peace. When sources spoke about the future, both sides were pessimistic. Over four out of five Israeli sources took a dim view of

the future, with only 15 percent expressing optimism. Even fewer Palestinians - only four percent - expressed hope in the possibility that the hostilities between the two peoples would end. For example, a Palestinian businessman in Ramallah described the mind set of a suicide bomber, "There is no future for them. There is nothing to see that there is a normal life for them." (NBC, 4/1/02)

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