

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing to express my dismay at the biased – and therefore inadequate – coverage by the BBC of the Israel–Palestine conflict, the latest example of which was the Newsnight item on 19 January with Colonel Tim Collins. Many major and very newsworthy events have taken place recently in Palestine which the BBC has virtually ignored. The Viva Palestina Convoy of humanitarian aid to Gaza, for example, led by British MP George Galloway which had minimal coverage on the BBC website but no national television or radio coverage worthy of the name. Even the savage attack by Egyptian riot police was ignored, as were the resultant casualties. The incidents were covered by other news stations such as Al-Jazeera and Press TV but the BBC seemed to have an official news blackout about the convoy.

Similarly, last week a delegation of 60 Parliamentarians from across 12 European countries went to visit Gaza, led by Sir Gerald Kaufmann, MP, to see for themselves the devastation wrought by the Israeli attack and ongoing siege on the region; the BBC – our national broadcaster again remained silent.

Last night's Newsnight item was filled with bias and inaccuracies. In his introduction Jeremy Paxman set the tone for the piece, claiming that "thirteen hundred Palestinians were killed" in Israel's attack on Gaza last year, when the consensus based on all sources of data – including the UN's Goldstone Report – is that the figure was more than 1400. I am sure that you will agree how unsettling it is that the lives of 100 people can be dismissed as just another statistic.

I remain uncertain about the aim of the item, pegged as it was a couple of days before the anniversary of the Israeli withdrawal a year ago. Despite being told that this would be a "soldier's view of the conflict" it gave the impression of an attempt to justify Israel's military crimes as "mistakes". The Goldstone Report included conclusions prepared by a retired Colonel of the Irish Defence Force, Desmond Travers. His conclusion was that during their 22 day offensive Israel committed what amount to war crimes. Alternatively, Newsnight could have chosen to interview any of the 54 Israeli soldiers who contributed to "Breaking the Silence" in which their personal testimonies about those war crimes are documented.

Why did Tim Collins only go into one mosque destroyed by the Israelis? Because it had, in his opinion, "clear evidence of secondary explosions... it's my opinion that the only thing that could have caused this was if explosives had been stored here... in my opinion that is the only logical explanation." Surely this demonstrates ably the danger of partial reporting; he could have gone into the other 47 mosques destroyed by Israel; were they all storing explosives? The Goldstone Report found no evidence that weapons were stored in any of the mosques.

He was also very discriminating with his conclusion about "indiscriminate" weaponry, choosing to denounce as thus the rockets fired by the Fatah off-shoot while excusing the Israeli tank crews whose shells killed the daughters and niece of a Palestinian doctor while he was at work in an Israeli hospital. "It would be difficult at this range even through optic sights to make out clear targets so you'd only see shadows," said Colonel Collins. "I can see how they may have felt threatened given they are on high ground and couldn't clearly make out what was happening."

Astonishing. And forgive me if I am wrong, but wasn't Tim Collins an infantry officer? Perhaps he was imagining himself in a dugout on the hill when he said that the tank squadron "may have felt threatened". And threatened by what? Rockets that cannot be aimed properly? The Palestinians have no anti-tank weapons, nor any other high-tech weaponry that threaten tanks and their crews. As an officer and, I presume, a gentleman, Col. Collins should have known this and had the decency to mention it.



When he discussed the tunnels, their only use was made out to be the smuggling of weapons, not acting as “the lifeline” for the people of Gaza for food and medicine because of Israel’s blockade.

When he was in Sderot to see how badly the population had been affected by the rockets from Gaza, I waited in vain for the images of the mass destruction. Collins could have mentioned, of course, the fact that Sderot is built on the site of a Palestinian village from which the population was ethnically cleansed by Jewish militias in 1948. But he didn’t, choosing instead to express his sympathies, having grown up in “Belfast during the troubles”. He made no attempt to empathise with the reason for the rockets, or the illegal military occupation that keeps the people of Gaza in refugee camps. As an ex-SAS man, what he would do if his home is ever occupied by a foreign nation? Curl up in the corner? Collaborate? Somehow, I doubt it. Even when the separation wall was seen during his helicopter flight to Gaza we heard only that the wall is there “to protect the road from snipers”. No mention of the theft of Palestinian land for its construction, or the hardships caused by its route around, through and between Palestinian villages. (And flying from Jerusalem to Gaza via Qalqilya? What was the pilot drinking that day? He obviously didn’t want to miss another propaganda photo-op.)

Collins didn’t meet any victims of “the rockets”, only some of the men who fire them; interestingly, from an off-shoot of Fatah, not Hamas. Did he meet any of the victims of Israeli bombs and rockets? If so, why were they not shown as well. Such omissions meant that the whole piece lacked any real context and thus allowed him to make a very questionable conclusion.

Humanising the good guys and demonising the enemy is, of course, a well-established propaganda ploy, and Tim Collins didn’t disappoint; who cares if the Israeli police inspector was “brought up in North London and is inevitably a Tottenham supporter” unless we are meant to identify with him; he’s one of us. Of the 1.5 million Palestinians he could have spoken to in order to understand the conflict, we were shown to a dingy bunker under the cover of darkness to speak to some anonymous men, two of whom had their faces covered, to look at a single crude rocket. If he wanted to see the weaponry brandished by both sides, why did he not move on from there and go to visit one of Israel’s nuclear weapons facilities or one of their F16 hangars or a warehouse where they store their white phosphorous supplies which they fire so readily at civilians? The decisions made as to who to meet and what to discuss were clearly intended to place Israel in a more positive light.

I would hope in the future that your programme will offer more than one perspective on the issue and try to put events into context, something that was sadly lacking last night.

Dr Daud A. Abdullah
Director
Middle East Monitor

