

The BBC's pact with Israel

Money and ideology behind BBC's decision not to broadcast Gaza humanitarian appeal

By a special correspondent

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The BBC's refusal to broadcast a humanitarian appeal for Gaza on behalf of a group of charities is motivated by a desire to appease US advertisers for its commercial TV channel and website, and by Mark Thompson's own political proclivities.

Many people have been shocked and bewildered by the BBC's refusal to broadcast a national humanitarian appeal for Gaza on behalf of the [Disasters Emergency Committee](#) (DEC), an umbrella organization for 13 humanitarian aid agencies.

However, the decision by the BBC's director-general, Mark Thompson, not to broadcast the appeal should have come as no surprise. In fact, media observers have been witnessing a steady tilt by the corporation towards Israel since the turn of the millennium.

According to our sources, there are two fundamental reasons for this. The first is the need to boost advertising revenue for the debt-ridden [BBC World News](#) television channel, which cannot be seen in the UK. This channel relies heavily on advertisers from the United States who we understand have told the BBC in no uncertain terms that they would advertise with it only if the corporation changed its editorial line on the Arab-Israeli conflict in favour of Israel.

Related to this is the decision by the BBC to [introduce advertising](#) on its news website for users outside the UK, [bbc.com](#). Although this had been in the planning since at least 2000, it was introduced only in November 2007. However, we understand that throughout this period BBC executives argued that the corporation must make further changes to its coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to insure that it is on the right side of US advertisers when [bbc.com](#) goes commercial.

Thus came the first of a couple of humiliating concessions to Israel by the BBC. In November 2003, the then director of the BBC World Service, Mark Byford, [paid a visit](#) to Israel which culminated in "a joint declaration on a commitment to objective coverage of Middle East events" and the appointment by the corporation of a special adviser on Middle East affairs, Mark Balen, to insure that Israel's viewpoint was always represented, if not given primacy, in news and current affairs coverage. In return, and to save the BBC's face, Israel agreed to lift a boycott it had instituted after the corporation screened the programme "[Israel's Secret Weapon](#)," about Israel's un-inspected nuclear, biological and chemical weapons capabilities.

Before leaving Israel, Mr Byford assured his new Zionist friends that this was not a one-off concession by the BBC. "We will maintain an ongoing dialogue, at senior levels, with all the sides, including the Israeli government, with regard to our coverage," he told his hosts.

Two years later, in November 2005, the director-general of the BBC, Mark Thompson, visited Israel where he held a face-to-face meeting with its then prime minister, Ariel Sharon. According to [Guy Adams](#) of the *Independent*,

Although the diplomatic visit was not publicised [in the UK], it has been seized upon in Israel as evidence that Thompson, who took office in 2004, intends to build bridges with the country's political class.

Sources at the Beeb also suspect that it heralds a "softening" to the corporation's unofficial editorial line on the Middle East.

"This was the first visit of its kind by any serving director general, so it's clearly a significant development," I'm told.

So, it was not without reason that British Health Minister Ben Bradshaw – of all people – [urged](#) the BBC to stand up to the Israeli authorities occasionally" and to broadcast the charities' appeal for Gaza.

Nor was it fantasy on the part of Tony Benn when he said:

I never thought I would live to see [the BBC] refuse to broadcast a humanitarian appeal on the grounds that it was controversial. I know why it is – because [Tzipi] Livni, the Israeli foreign minister, has said there is no humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

But what kind of management would sell the soul of an internationally-respected broadcaster such as the BBC for the sake of a few advertising pennies?

This brings us to the second fundamental reason for the BBC's tilt towards Israel. That is perhaps where Mark Thompson's ideology – or bias – comes in. According to a BBC insider quoted in the *Independent*, "Not many people know this, but Mark [Thompson] is actually a deeply religious man. He's a Catholic, but his wife is Jewish, and he has a far greater regard for the Israeli cause than some of his predecessors."

There you have it!

But where does this leave the BBC? Mr Thompson's refusal to let the BBC air a non-political, humanitarian appeal by a group of charities on behalf of the destitute of Gaza has profoundly, and probably irreversibly, damaged the reputation and integrity of the BBC. Furthermore, by placing the BBC firmly on the side of Israel and its lobbyists in Britain and the US, Mr Thompson has made the BBC and its staff a target for reprisals against Israel's atrocities in Gaza.

This is particularly bad news for the BBC World Service's two flagship television channels, BBC Arabic and BBC Persian – the first struggling for a place in the crowded Arab satellite broadcasting environment and the second already facing accusations by the Iranian authorities that it is an agent for subversion.

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Any self-respecting man would resign. But what self-respecting man would put a great British institution in this position in the first place?

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