

Accuracy in Israel/Palestine Reporting Preliminary Report San Jose Mercury News April - September, 2002

Introduction

Beginning in 2003, If Americans Knew¹ will issue a report card to major media across the country on their coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The San Jose Mercury News is the first publication to receive a preliminary report, covering the 2nd and 3rd quarters of 2002.

Given that the media have a desire and a responsibility to cover this topic accurately, we provide these reports in the hope that our analyses can assist them in this goal.

In addition, we are making these reports public, as a way to help readers evaluate for themselves the reliability of their sources of information on this issue.

The goal of this report is to

- Establish agreed-upon standards for assessing accuracy in reporting
- Provide, in a consistent format, an assessment of the publication's accuracy in reporting on the Israel/Palestine conflict.

In the future, we will also compare the publication's current and past assessments, in order to measure any improvement or setbacks in performance.

¹ If Americans Knew is dedicated to providing full and accurate information to the American public on topics of importance that are underreported or misreported in the American media. Our primary of focus at this time is the Middle East.

Yardstick for Measuring Accuracy

We recognize that reporting on Israel/Palestine has been an exceptionally controversial topic. Therefore, while there are many potential yardsticks for measuring accuracy, for this initial report we chose criteria that could not be construed as at all subjective. We counted the number of Israeli and Palestinian deaths the San Jose Mercury News reported *in the headlines on the front page*:

- In absolute numbers, and
- As a percentage of total deaths for Israelis and Palestinians respectively.

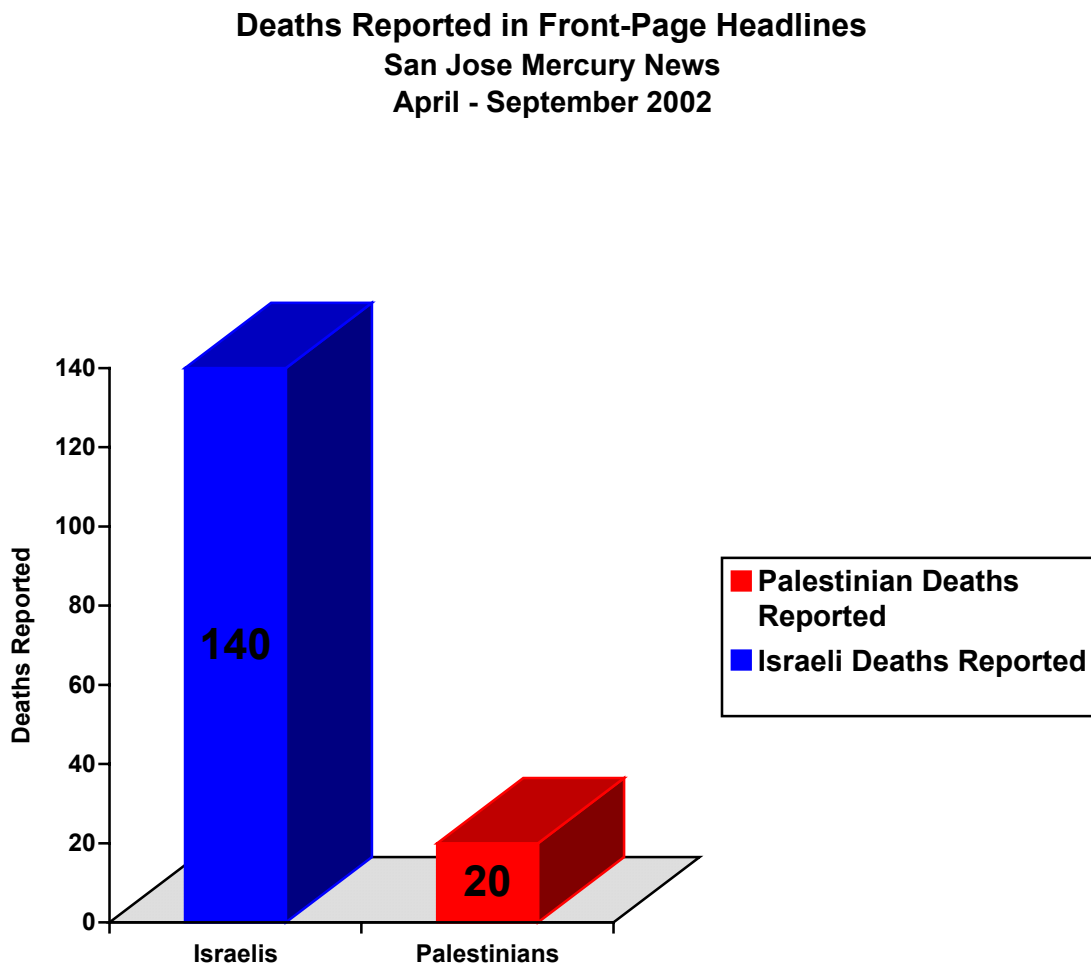
We chose this yardstick because it is simple, quantitative and relatively immune to subjective interpretation. In addition, we wanted to discover whether the San Jose Mercury News demonstrates even-handed respect for human life, regardless of ethnic or religious origin. Finally, because front-page headlines are often among the most prominent aspects of coverage that the reader absorbs, we believe they play a disproportionate role in generating an overall impression about the conflict and the relative consequences for Israelis and Palestinians.

Beginning next quarter, we will expand our analysis to include other criteria. These are described on page 5 under “Next Steps.”

Key Findings: April to September, 2002

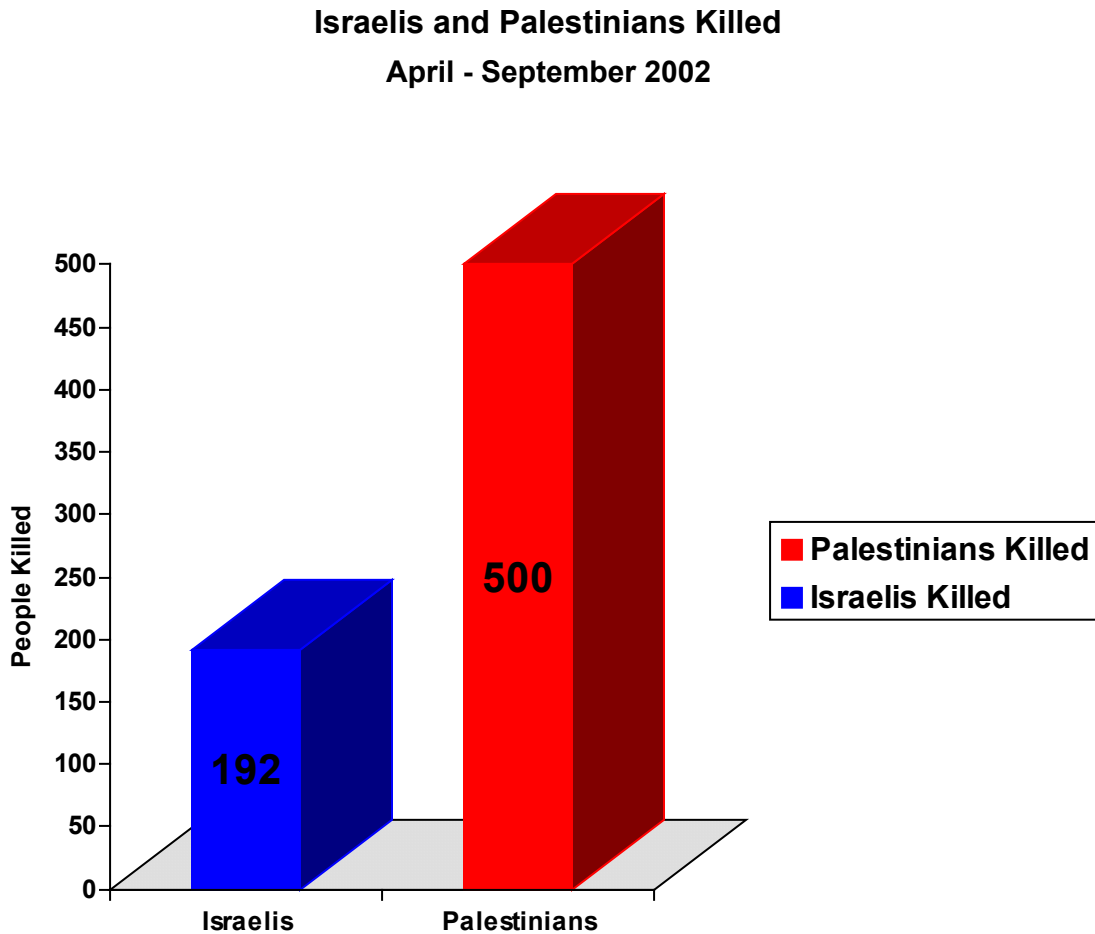
For the six-month period, 140 Israeli deaths were reported in San Jose Mercury News front-page headlines, compared with 20 Palestinian deaths.

Figure 1



During this time, there were 192 actual Israeli deaths, compared with 500 actual Palestinian deaths.² These total death figures were obtained from the Israeli human rights organization B'Tselem.³

Figure 2

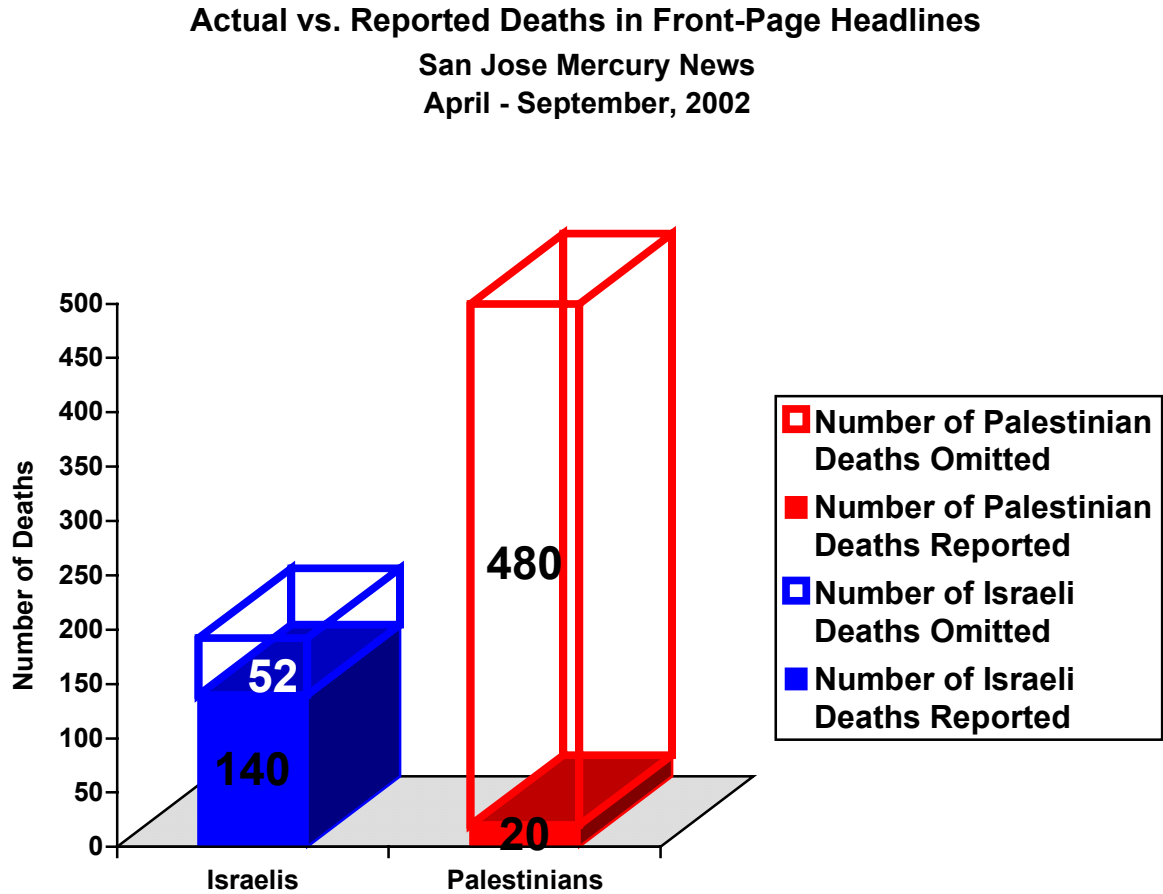


² The figure for Palestinian deaths is a conservative one, since it does not include civilians who died as a result of inability to reach medical care due to Israeli road closures, curfews etc.

³ For more information about this organization, visit their website at www.btselem.org.

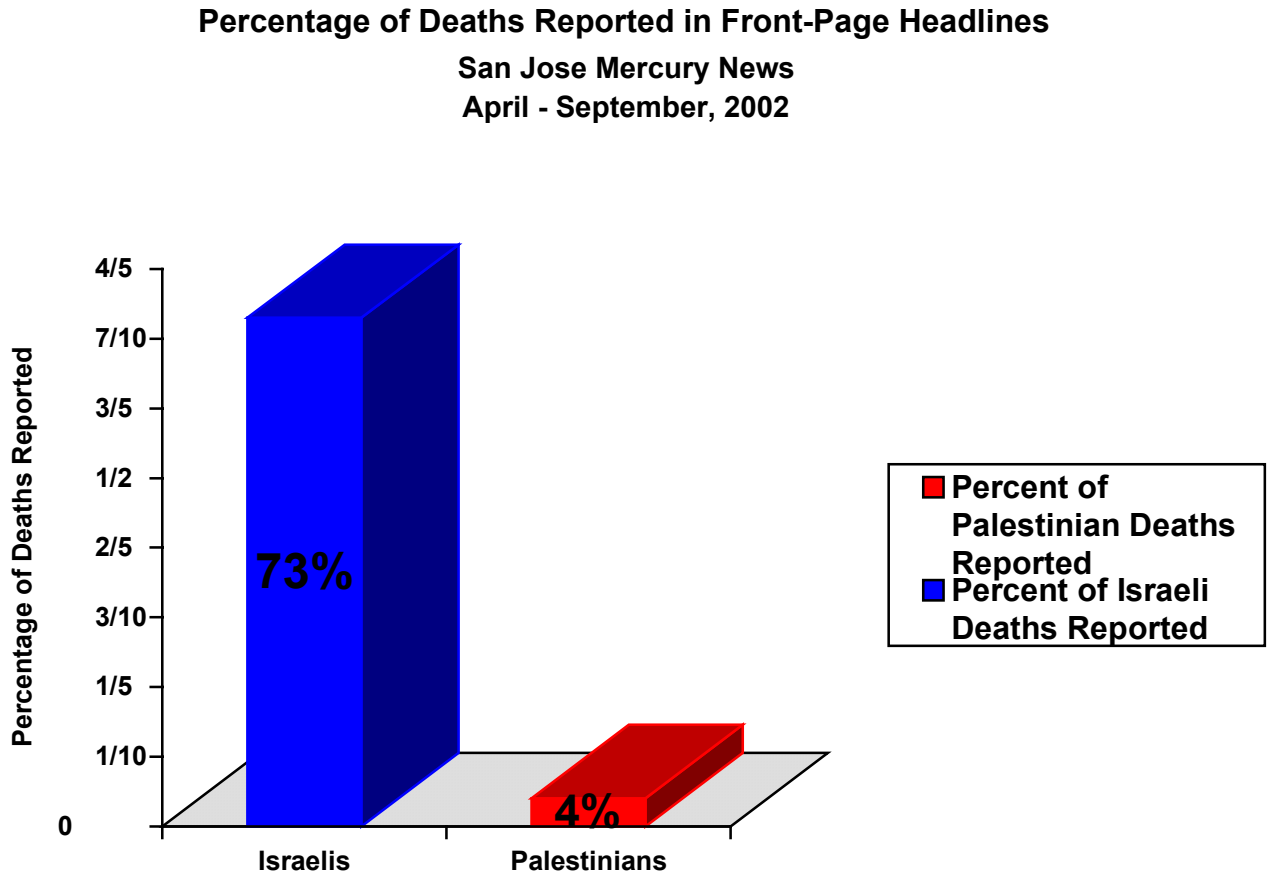
The next chart summarizes the reporting for April to September in total. It compares the number of deaths reported in front-page headlines to the number of deaths omitted, for Israelis and Palestinians respectively.

Figure 3



In other words, 73% of Israeli deaths and only 4% of Palestinian deaths were reported on San Jose Mercury News front-page headlines.

Figure 4



Next Steps

In order to better understand reporting on this topic, we will conduct a deeper investigation in the future, while maintaining our objective of using yardsticks that are simple to understand and least open to subjective interpretation. They are

- Count number of deaths reported in the first paragraph, as well as the headline. Include stories from the entire news section, not just the front page.
- Examine the sources for each story. We will count the number of
 - Column inches devoted to statements from officials⁴ on each side
 - Times each side's officials are quoted first
- Determine whether the specific American connection to the conflict – U.S. aid to Israel – is covered fully and accurately. We will
 - Count the number of times U.S. aid to Israel-Palestine is mentioned
 - Evaluate the accuracy of this number. How often does it include both major segments of U.S. aid -- military aid and foreign aid – as well as additional subsidies such as loan forgiveness programs.

Conclusions

We are concerned about the results of this preliminary examination. We believe the readers of the San Jose Mercury News, as well as all Americans, are entitled to full and accurate reporting on all issues, including the topic of Israel/Palestine.

We assume that the San Jose Mercury News is as disturbed as we have been to find these shortfalls in its quest to provide excellent news reporting to its readers. Now that it has been alerted to these distortions in its Israel-Palestine coverage, we encourage the Mercury News to undertake whatever changes necessary to provide accurate news coverage of this vital issue. We hope that our next quarterly report will be more positive. We will be pleased to report this to the public.

⁴ Officials are defined as representatives of the Israeli government and Israeli diplomats -- as well as representatives from the Palestinian Authority, Palestinian diplomats, Hamas and other Palestinian opposition groups.