

# The Electronic Intifada

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## BBC's pro-Israel training is nothing new

Martin Asser The Electronic Intifada 7 January 2026



Protest outside the BBC in London against the corporation's anti-Palestinian bias, May 2025.

Abdullah Bailey Avalon

For those with deep institutional memories, the announcement in December of compulsory anti-Semitism training for BBC staff recalls a time 20 years ago.

Then, there was another debatable pedagogical activity which took place against a backdrop of relentless pro-Israel pressure – one which, as a former BBC journalist, I'm revealing in this article for the first time.

No question, anti-Semitism is a vile and unconscionable hatred, but one would think it's hardly the most pressing threat to BBC culture in 2026.

Unless there are other motivations for the training – “educational” objectives such as removing the word “Zionism” from critical discourse of Israel perhaps?

“Many Jewish people consider themselves to be Zionists,” a leaked text of the recent course states, while “anti-Semites frequently use the word” referring to Jews.

Therefore, it argues, if people “claiming to be ‘anti-Zionist, not anti-Semitic’ ... have no intention to offend Jewish people, they should criticize ‘the Israeli government,’ and not ‘Zionists.’”

The full course, prepared in collaboration with two overtly pro-Israel organizations – the Community Security Trust and Antisemitism Policy Trust – has not been published, so we don't know if the words “Zionist” (and “Zionism”) are out of bounds per se.

But is a ban necessary when the “Z words” are explicitly branded as anti-Semitic in certain contexts? And as George Orwell taught us, it becomes impossible to criticize a political ideology if you can't put a name to it.

On reflection, cultural constraints on criticizing Zionism have long existed at the BBC – but it seems to have moved to official policy now that the Community Security Trust and Antisemitism Policy Trust have taken the editorial reins.

## **Flashback to the mid-2000s**

The announcement by Tim Davie, outgoing director general – who was ousted after a leaked internal memo alleging, among other things, anti-Israel bias at the BBC – has strong echoes from a period when I was a writer on the BBC News Online Middle East desk in the 2000s.

We were constantly buffeted by allegations of bias from Zionists offended that the BBC didn't take their side after the collapse of the Oslo “peace process” and as dead bodies piled up (some Israeli, but more Palestinian) during the Second Intifada.

The stock response was to commission a review, often followed by new training. Many remember the internal 2004 Balen Report. The document was never published and was only revealed last year by former BBC journalist Tim Llewellyn, writing for The Electronic Intifada.

That era also gave us the Hutton Inquiry, foisted on the BBC by Tony Blair, who was determined to exonerate himself from accusations of faking intelligence in the build-up to the 2003 Iraq war.

The BBC then commissioned the Ronald Neil Report to patch up reputational damage from Lord Hutton's hit job, which had ousted an earlier director general, Greg Dyke, and paved the way for (committed Zionist) Mark Thompson to take over.

In 2006, we had the Sir Quentin Thomas Report commissioned to adjudicate specifically on the impartiality of BBC reporting of Israel and Palestine after a slew of complaints and concocted scandals.

Before the Zionist takeover of the BBC, the Thomas Report was a comprehensive and balanced affair.

How things have changed – I'm thinking of the recent, dire, Prescott memo.

The Thomas Report had concluded that there was no systematic pro- or anti-Israel bias, but identified “gaps in coverage, analysis, context and perspective” which resulted in the BBC failing to “consistently give a full and fair account of the conflict.”

Buried in Thomas’ recommendations, and almost entirely forgotten today, are references to a “staff online training module on the conflict,” which the panel thought so highly of they said it should be made available to the public.

The module never made it to the public. I kept a copy however, and can share for the first time some of its highlights – or, more accurately, its lowlights.

## **Multiple-choice madness**

The 2006 “Middle East module” was mandatory training for everyone in BBC News and remained so for several years.

It consisted of 18 quiz questions visiting some of the history and political dynamics of the Israel-Palestine struggle, with video explainers and two training “scenarios.”

Superficially, the multiple-choice questionnaire seemed a reasonable effort to educate the uninitiated. But there’s a whiff of subterfuge: the more you look for it, the more you see it.

Question 1 read: “Which country was responsible for the area commonly known as Palestine between the two world wars?”

The answer read, in part:

The British mandate period was an unhappy one, partly because of the conflicting promises made by the British to the Arabs, Jews and France (with whom it divided the Middle East). After attempting, but failing to resolve the competing claims of Zionism and Arab nationalism the British government referred the problem to the United Nations in 1947. The UN ... plan proposed the partition of Palestine into an independent Arab state and an independent Jewish state, with Jerusalem given special status. It was reluctantly accepted by Zionists but rejected by Arabs.

Question 2 read: “It was the year that Israel declared its statehood and the Palestinians call al-Nakba – the Catastrophe. When was it?”

Part of the answer to this question read:

The modern-day state of Israel was proclaimed on 14 May 1948 in Tel Aviv, with a declaration that referred to its Biblical past ... As soon as Israel declared its statehood the forces of Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iraq invaded, with Egypt and Jordan undertaking most of the fighting. Israel defeated the armies and captured land that was originally allocated to the Palestinian Arabs ... Hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs fled or were forced to flee Palestine at this time, in what they call al-Nakba – the Catastrophe ... The reasons why they left are still disputed.

Course designers have included elements that could be construed as objectively factual, even favoring a Palestinian perspective, for example:

- Spotlighting the name “Palestine” which many Zionists argue “never existed”
- Acknowledging Britain’s malign imperial role
- Naming the “Nakba,” a little-known concept in western discourse at the time

- Acknowledging that Palestinian refugees were forced out

But just consider what's been sanitized or left out: Most brazenly, "Arabs and Jews" are spoken of without identifying which group was indigenous and which had mostly arrived as colonial settlers.

There's more: No mention of the origins of Zionism in late 19th century Europe.

No mention of the disproportionate allocation of land (55 percent) to a Jewish state whose beneficiaries made up less than a third of the 1947 population, even after decades of colonization.

No mention that Zionist forces started ethnically cleansing Palestinian population centers well before the Arab armies mobilized to defend Arab territory in 1948.

After acknowledging the refugees were "forced to flee" (passive tense, not saying who forced them), the text reclaims the field for Israel's hasbara maestros, whom I firmly believe were a guiding hand in this masquerade of impartial training.

By 2006, historians had long debunked the Zionist myth that Palestinians left of their own accord, or were instructed to do so by their leaders. Yet the BBC kept the myth alive, implied by those weasel words "still disputed."

Every inconvenient truth undermining the nobility of Israel's foundational narrative is erased in these first two questions.

Yet Israel's supposed "Biblical past" made the cut! Is BBC News telling us it endorses the validity of the Torah narrative and God's covenant to Abraham?

## **Distortions and red herrings**

These first two questions set the tone for the rest of the gaslighting training module.

Some questions seem reasonable: *What was the outcome of the Six Day War in 1967? When did the PLO formally recognize Israel? What is the Right of Return?*

But answer after answer pays lip service to the broad Palestinian perspective, while lacing it with Israeli propaganda and pro-Israel distortions.

Israel's triple-front assault in 1967 is described as purely "pre-emptive," "believing" Egypt, Jordan and Syria were planning to "invade Israel."

The same answer then falsely connects the 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza with compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 242. It even smuggles through the classic hasbara claim that 242 only called for withdrawal from (some) "territories occupied in the recent conflict," not (all) "*the* territories occupied" (emphasis added) – giving Israel a freer hand.

It falsely claims Yasser Arafat "explicitly affirmed the right of Israel to exist as a Jewish state" in December 1988 – he did nothing of the kind as you can easily check.

The Right of Return is characterized as a "Palestinian demand, supported by the UN," not an inalienable right under international law.

And with some significant chutzpah, after discussing UN General Assembly Resolution 194 and Israel's opposition to it, the text continues: "Israel also has a Right of Return (set up by the 1950 Law of Return) – the mechanism by which Jews are allowed to settle in Israel and receive Israeli citizenship."

The last three questions' intentions are more puzzling as to their educational value.

*What percentage of Israelis describe themselves as Jewish?* (Answer: 76.4 percent, but it “forgets” to mention that almost all of the non-Jews are Palestinian.) *Are the majority of Palestinian Muslims Sunni or Shia?* (What?) *How many Christians are living in Israel and the Occupied Territories?* (Answer: 193,000, but no word on the percentage this time).

## **Good luck!**

The two “scenarios” are multimedia content, featuring clips by then-Middle East editor Jeremy Bowen, and they fit nicely into this toxic mix.

Scenario 1 focuses on (of course) reporting a suicide bombing killing Israeli civilians. Scenario 2 requires the trainee to choose a guest for a TV package. You won't be surprised to learn the correct choice is none other than Israeli government spokesperson Mark Regev!

And Bowen's opening monologue? I kid you not: he's sitting in a café discussing how both Israelis and Palestinians claim hummus and falafel as national dishes! A perfect metaphor for the entire train wreck.

Trainees were meant to set aside a couple of hours to get through the course, at the end of which Bowen pops up with this cheery video message.

“Well done, you got to the end of it ... A lot of people feel they have a stake in the Holy Land, so we can't afford to make mistakes. The most important thing for journalists covering Israel and the Palestinians is to understand the fundamental issues ... Good luck. If you're not sure about something, ask. We've got some great people in the BBC and they'll give you the answers.”

They'll give answers alright, just not always the truthful ones. Good luck indeed!

*Martin Asser is a freelance journalist. He worked for 22 years with the BBC (1995-2015 and 2022-2024) with a stint between the two as head of communications at the American University of Beirut.*