

'Nightline': between the Arabs and Israelis

Koppel program travels to Israel, airs seven-and-half hours in series on Arab-Israeli problem; brings together 500 Israelis, 150 Palestinians in auditorium for 'town meeting'

If things have gone as planned, Ted Koppel and his wife are in Hong Kong this week celebrating their 25th wedding anniversary, but perhaps not too energetically. *Nightline's* anchor could use some rest. "I'm one tired puppy," he said on Wednesday night. He was preparing for his regular *Nightline* and completing work on the first of what will be a series of quarterly one-hour, prime-time *Koppel Reports*. The inaugural, to be broadcast on May 12, will deal with a subject with which Koppel has become familiar through a number of *Nightline* programs—televangelism. All of that, mind you, after *Nightline's* week in Israel.

That week, in Koppel's view, produced the kind of journalism he had hoped it would. "It sketched out the dimensions of the Arab-Israeli problem," he said. It did not satisfy the hopes of those looking for diplomatic breakthroughs; Koppel said the week produced no movement toward a solution of that problem. But that had not been the aim or expectation. "We wanted to give context," he said.

And there was plenty of that in the more than seven-and-a-half hours of *Nightline* in the Holy Land. The assassination of a leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization by what was assumed to be an Israeli commando team caused the cancellation of appearances by Yasir Arafat and King Hussein of Jordan. Israel's leaders—Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin—did participate, and the Palestinian point of view was represented.

The extraordinary town meeting, on Tuesday, attended by some 500 Israelis and 150 Palestinians and featuring panels of three prominent Palestinians and four members of the Israeli Knesset, that ran for over three hours, beginning at 11:30 p.m., NYT (6:30 a.m., local time), was not only the high point of the week. It also was an illustration of the balance the Koppel crew managed to achieve. Some feeling for the intractability of the problems in the Middle East was evident in what was said—Koppel noted that the groups talked "at and past each other"—as well as in the symbolism: The wall that the Palestinians insisted be located on the stage between the two panels as a sign they were not there to negotiate with the Israelis.

Yet, the 600 telephone calls ABC News received as a result of the program were all favorable. "That never happens," said Koppel. "It may be the first time it did in the history of ABC News."

Producing the town meeting was one of the week's monumental headaches. The makeup of the Palestinian panel kept changing, as personalities would agree to participate and then, presumably for political reasons, renege. The final panel contained only



Koppel at the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem

three members because of one last-minute dropout that was attributed to the "flu." So uneasy were the ABC News people about the possibly incendiary mix of Palestinians and Israeli Jews in one hall—the program was done in the Jerusalem Theater—that those entering the auditorium were obliged to walk through metal detectors, and a squad of private security people hired by ABC News for the occasion was on hand in the event trouble broke out. None did.

Koppel was disappointed more Palestinians did not appear; he had expected as many as 250. But getting even 150—they were bussed in from the West Bank and Gaza—presented a problem, particularly for

those traveling from Gaza. Because of the distance and the roadblocks between Gaza and Jerusalem, the Palestinians had to leave at 2 a.m. to arrive at the theater on time. And a curfew would have prevented them from crossing into Israel until 3 a.m. Koppel and ABC News President Rooney Arledge, who spent the week in Israel with the *Nightline* crew, discussed the problem with Defense Minister Rabin at breakfast, after Koppel had taped an interview with Rabin. "I asked for Rabin's cooperation, and he said there would be no problem," said Koppel. There wasn't.

"I felt very good," Koppel said of the final product. "We did what we set out to do." □

McDonald leaves TVX

President quits for personal reasons following completion of financing for purchase of Taft stations; his successor is John Trinder, executive VP

Tim McDonald resigned as president of the TVX Broadcast Group last week to pursue "personal goals and interests" now that TVX has completed a proposal for the financing of a short-term \$248-million bridge loan with Salomon Brothers. That loan was made to finance the purchase of the five independent TV stations it acquired in April 1987 from Taft Broadcasting.

John Trinder, executive vice president and chief operating officer at TVX, was named as McDonald's replacement by the TVX board last week. Trinder said that since he and McDonald have worked so closely since 1979 there would not be much of a "transi-

tion" in the way the group of 11 independent (10 UHF, 1 VHF) is run. TVX was founded in 1979.

Trinder is a board member of the Association of Independent Television Stations who spent 10 years with Landmark Communications prior to joining TVX.

As the president of the 15th-largest broadcast group, McDonald has a reputation within the broadcasting industry as a flamboyant "dealmaker." McDonald got TVX involved with Fox Broadcasting Co.'s prime time programming service at its inception last year. All the TVX stations, except those in cities where Fox owns stations (Dallas, Houston and Washington), are FBC affiliates, and McDonald is secretary of the FBC board of governors. He is also on the Robert Halmi Inc. board of directors.

Prior to TVX, McDonald worked for television stations in San Francisco, New York, Boston, Washington and Norfolk, Va. He became president of TVX in 1982.

As part of its announced intention to sell some of its 11 stations to help finance the Taft station purchase, TVX announced the sale of WCAY-TV Nashville to Southwest Multimedia Corp. for \$5.8 million last week (see "Changing Hands," page 64). TVX is reportedly attempting to sell other stations, including WTVZ(TV) Norfolk, Va.; WMKW(TV) Memphis, and KRRT(TV) Kerrville, Tex. (San Antonio). □



McDonald