

Media Regulation and Censorship in Occupied Palestine



Photo: Palestine Monitor

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Abstract

The following essay will try to describe the characteristics of the Palestinian media in the Occupied Territories, with a special focus on media regulation. The occupation of the Palestinian territories is not only felt via the illegal Israeli settlements, the restriction of movement in all of the Occupied Palestinian Territories as well as physical violence perpetrated by the Israeli military, police forces and settlers, but also through censorship imposed by the authorities – both Israeli and Palestinian – and the somewhat alarming state of freedom of speech.

In the first part of the essay I will recapitulate some of the most relevant topics of the current political situation in Israel-Palestine. In addition, I will concentrate on the working conditions of the Palestinian media as well as the freedom of the press. Finally, the essay introduces the different media institutions working in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

A glance into the political context

Historical Palestine is the territory located on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. It borders Lebanon in the north and Egypt in the southwest as well as Jordan in the east. Today about 4 million Palestinians – the original inhabitants of the territory before the Zionist immigration – live in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. These areas were occupied by Israel during the 1967 War and have since been referred to as the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the definition used by the International Court of Justice, the highest judicial body in the world. In addition to this Palestinian population that has remained in their land of birth, approximately 5 million Palestinians¹ live abroad in exile. Their plight is described by the UN as the world's most protracted and serious refugee problem.²

The political and economic situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is highly unstable. The two intifadas, for example, were born out of frustration from the Israeli occupation on one hand, and out of the discontent for the Palestinian leadership on the other.³ The first intifada began in 1987 and lasted for six years. In October 2000 the second intifada (or Al-Aqsa intifada) began as a result of Ariel Sharon's (the then leader of the Likud party and soon to be Israeli Prime Minister) intentional provocation, as he visited a religious site of great importance for the Muslim world, accompanied by roughly one thousand Israeli police.⁴

Israel has strong control over the occupied areas and has imposed restriction of movement on the Palestinians. Israel has built, for instance, a wall in the West Bank, which has been deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice and which unlawfully annexes about nine percent of the West Bank.⁵ The 1.4 million Palestinians living in Gaza are forced to live in extreme poverty, especially after the assault on Gaza in the winter of 2008–2009 and due to the continuing Israeli blockade of the strip. According to UNRWA, roughly 52 percent of the households in Gaza live below the poverty line.⁶

Israel is one of the most militarized countries in the world, ranking sixth, according to the CIA, in military expenditure as a percentage of GDP. Israel is one of the few countries in the world that have legalized torture and hostage taking. Human rights organizations have reported about a routine procedure of people being held in custody for indefinite periods of time without trial.⁷

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) made its Declaration of the State of Palestine in

1988, agreeing to form a Palestinian state in the Gaza strip and West Bank. Until now, 139 countries have recognized Palestine's sovereignty, but Israel has yet to agree to the Declaration.

Media workers' difficult access to news sites, continuous harassment

The working conditions for the media and journalists are dangerous, as both the Israeli government and the Palestinian leadership practice censorship and harassment by targeting media workers and journalists. Additionally, the news sites often involve shootings, violence and attacks, which puts reporters and journalists in jeopardy. The Israeli army has systematically denied journalists access to combat areas. As the Palestinian Center for Human Rights reports:

Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) has continued to attack journalists despite the protection extended to them under international law. Journalists have been subjected to various kinds of attacks in apparent attempts to prevent media coverage of human rights violations perpetrated by IOF against Palestinian civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT).⁸

Besides journalists working at their own peril, getting to the news sites in the first place is an everyday challenge. After the second intifada had erupted, the Israeli army split the West Bank into six separate sections (with numerous subsections) controlled by checkpoints.⁹ Palestinians need

specific documentation whenever passing a checkpoint and are often forced to wait for hours to cross. At the moment, Palestinian journalists need an Israeli Government Press Office (GPO) assigned press card. The cards are only valid for the territories and do not grant the holders automatic access to Israel.¹⁰



In 2007, a Palestinian photojournalist, Mohammed Omer, won the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism for his war reporting in his homeland Gaza. According to the foundation, the prize is granted yearly for exposing establishment propaganda or 'official drivel' (www.marthagellhorn.com).

Photo: Electronic Intifada

The siege of the Gaza Strip makes the realization of sufficient news coverage a near impossibility for foreign news media.¹¹ In order to receive a press card to Gaza, journalists need to undergo a security check and sign a censorship form agreeing to submit their security-related articles to the Israeli government.¹²

A 2007 study on the media mechanisms seeking to “delegitimize” [*sic.*] the Palestinian people notes that Israeli media and news production constantly serve to portray the Palestinian populations in a negative light. These effects take an especially concrete form during times of social conflict or political tension.¹³ As the author of the study K. Rinnawi describes, the threat posed to the Israeli society is exaggerated in Israeli print media, and Palestinians are often pictured simply as enemies rather than a disadvantaged people under military rule.¹⁴

Consequently, the audience gets rarely information presented in a way that truly challenges the dominant group’s perspective, or any representation of events that reflects the disadvantaged group’s view... When covering incidents of violent confrontation between the state and disadvantaged groups, journalists rely primarily on official security and government sources for information.¹⁵

Freedom of the Press

Another study which Rinnawi co-authored with Nossek discusses the issue of censorship in Palestinian media. They find that both the Israeli occupation forces as well as the PA have practiced censorship.¹⁶ When Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, it immediately established laws restricting the freedom of the press.

Legally, two significant regulations on the Palestinian media date back to the British Mandate period. The earlier of the two, the Press Ordinance, was enacted in 1933, and the latter was included in the Emergency Regulations of 1945.¹⁷

Due to the Press Ordinance, a license from the Israeli government was needed to publish a newspaper in the West Bank and Gaza strip. Censorship was implemented post facto, and newspapers were closed down if they were deemed harmful to Israeli state security as defined by the Israeli authorities. The 1945 Emergency Regulations increased the support of censorship laws in the Israeli Supreme Court and legitimized censorship towards Palestinian media.¹⁸



Since 2007, the political tension between Hamas and Fatah is also felt in media loyalty and news propaganda. Media organizations without political affiliation are under pressure from both sides. Photo: Al Jazeera

After the Oslo Accords of 1993, the Palestinian Authority (PA) assumed control over the Gaza Strip and Israeli forces withdrew to the borders, still continuing to control all access to the Gaza Strip by land, sea and air.¹⁹ The PA never passed censorship laws, but the habit of self-censorship became normalized, which is dominant in Palestinian news houses and today a characteristic of Palestinian media in general. The PA's 1995 Press Law was to replace the military regulations earlier imposed by Israel, but being only vague and open to interpretations, it gave authorities the possibility to inhibit the transfer of information.²⁰²¹

Since 2007, the Palestinian media has split into those loyal to the Palestinian Authority and others loyal to Hamas. Journalists face arrests and questioning by both Hamas and Fatah, often accused of partial reporting, some of those detained being forced to serve lengthy prison sentences. The distribution of newspapers affiliated to one of the two parties can be banned by the other one, as was the case in Gaza in the summer of 2008. As a Palestinian journalist told the Jerusalem Post in July, "we are under heavy pressure from both governments in Ramallah and [in] Gaza."²² Many journalists say their affiliation is made out of necessity for their own safety.²³

Furthermore, these practices have increased self-censorship: today Palestine ranks 161st of the 175 countries in the Reporters Sans Frontiers statistics in freedom of the press – closely followed by the most authoritarian countries in the world, such as Somalia, Yemen, Burma and North Korea.²⁴ Israel, which is often yet misleadingly portrayed as an exemplary case of open democracy and freedom of press, ranks in the same statistics no less than 93rd. In comparison, other Middle Eastern countries, such as Lebanon (61st) and Kuwait (60th), are now considered to be better off in this respect.²⁵

Freedom House, a Washington-based and US government-funded institute, changed in 2009 Israel's press freedom status: "Israel's status declined from Free to Partly Free due to the heightened conflict in Gaza, which was reflected in increased travel restrictions on both Israeli and foreign reporters and official attempts to influence media coverage of the conflict within Israel."²⁶ The Occupied Palestinian Territories remained "Not Free" and "press freedom in the Palestinian territories deteriorated in 2008 following an escalation of factional hostilities and increased restrictions imposed by Israel."²⁷

In fact, controlled media is quite naturally seen by the general public as a tool of the regime in power, and thus other information sources – those challenging the official view or presenting events from a more objective angle – become more popular among the society.^{28,29}

The Reporters Sans Frontiers and Freedom House figures are easily explained: the power struggle between Hamas and Fatah has added pressure on journalists, who were already vulnerable to abuse by the Israeli army. The high number of media workers killed and arrested is a result of the daily violence experienced in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Journalists continuously remain targets of intimidation, assault and unfair arrests.³⁰

A number of media workers note about the missing universal code of ethics.^{31,32} The lack of resources affects professional education including the creation of good journalistic traditions, creates shortage of proper equipment and increases dependency on advertising. Without the ethics code and strong professionalism, social censorship becomes dominant.³³ It is mostly felt in political issues, and especially in the coverage on the peace process and PA-Israeli agreements.

Television the most important medium

From 1967 to 1993 Palestinian media was limited to print³⁴, after which the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation was established in 1994. The three official newspapers are funded by the PA and have almost identical, "official" contents.³⁵ These three papers published in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are: Jerusalem-based Al-Quds, and Ramallah-based Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadidah. Al-Quds was the first newspaper established in 1968 and has since become the

dominant newspaper in the West Bank and Gaza strip.³⁶ Today it is privately owned, but still loyal to the PA, while the other two are directly funded by the PA.³⁷

The radio and television news media is a mixture of both private and public broadcasting.³⁸ About 90 percent of the domestic TV programmes come from Gaza.³⁹ Full coverage of news events is limited by restriction of movement, but also due to the lack of proper equipment. This is why Palestinian television cannot compete with pan-Arab channels, which have better coverage of Israeli news, let alone on international events.⁴⁰

The Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation was established in 1994, following the implementation of the Oslo Accords. It is controlled by the Palestinian leadership in Ramallah and it operates the Voice of Palestine radio station. It is the only public medium to have a correspondent in all Palestinian towns.⁴¹ The Corporation also has two television channels, Palestine TV and Palestinian Satellite Channel, which compete with the Gaza-based and Hamas-controlled Al-Aqsa TV. In addition to these there are smaller private TV stations, such as the Al-Quds Educational TV, Al-Mahd TV and Al-Majd TV.⁴²

The Ramallah radio station was almost completely destroyed in January 2002, when Israeli soldiers destroyed the main transmitters. On December 13th, Israeli forces started to demolish the transmission building and the retransmission antenna of Palestinian television and radio with bombs and bulldozers.⁴³ Because of the lack of resources, the radio transmitters have not yet been rebuilt, and Voice of Palestine continues to produce and broadcast its programming from privately owned radio stations.⁴⁴



Al-Jazeera's bureau in Ramallah.

Photo: www.csmonitor.com

At the moment TV news is the most important information source for the Palestinians.⁴⁵ Tens of television channels, the majority of them pan-Arab satellite channels, are broadcasting in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.⁴⁶ Qatar's Al-Jazeera and Al Arabia (Dubai, Arabic Emirates) are the most watched media.⁴⁷ Al-Jazeera played an especially important role at the beginning of the second intifada, spreading across the Arab world pictures of Palestinians demonstrating

against the occupation and the brutal response of the Israeli military. Palestinians trust in Al-Jazeera and often call its Ramallah bureau staff when something occurs in the West Bank.⁴⁸

Internet news sites are very popular, remain relatively unfiltered⁴⁹ and provide up-to-date information for Palestinians living in diaspora. For example The Alternative Information Center (AIC), the Electronic Intifada, the Palestine Media Center, the Palestinian Information Center and Friends of Al Aqsa have a far more critical approach than the Palestinian print media, trying to bring visibility for human rights violations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Thus, internet and satellite television provide alternative ways of information distribution, when other forms of media fall under censorship.⁵⁰

Political programs, such as interviews with the Palestinian leadership, leading public intellectuals or other commentators, dominate the news contents. Accordingly, Palestine being a society under military occupation, the news broadcasts show dramatic and violent footage on a daily basis. The remembrance of losses and past events plays a significant role on domestic channels.⁵¹



Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV started a new children's cartoon in 2010 portraying Israeli soldiers and PA authorities. Photo: southchild.com

The political power struggle between Hamas and Fatah and the continuing Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank are also visible in Palestinian children's programs, to the extent of quite open propaganda. A rather infamous case was reported in which a Mickey Mouse look-alike on Al-Aqsa TV encouraged children to the 'slaughter of Jews'.⁵²

According to the founder and director of a Palestinian media NGO Daoud Kuttub, Palestinian children tune into global, rather than local Palestinian television programming content.⁵³ A considerable amount of the programs distributed on pan-Arab channels are Japanese or other cartoons dubbed into classic Arabic, which is rarely understood by pre-school children.⁵⁴

Palestine gets material support from other Arab countries, which have a specific price policy for the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation.⁵⁵ Palestine media is also dependent on the efforts of citizens living in diaspora to maintain truthful information sources.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Media has the decisive role in distributing information and framing events which are subsequently interpreted by the audience. As duly noted in the field of media research, media content is never objective; there is always one view that dominates others.

As many Western media organizations do most of their reporting from outside the Occupied Palestinian Territories there is a belief within the territories that their agenda is being dominated by the view from Jerusalem and Washington. The depiction of Hamas as merely a terrorist group yet failing to apply the same approach when it comes to describing the Israeli actions is typical for the Western media and shows a lack of journalistic investigation and depth in the news stories.⁵⁷

Habib Battah, an Arab media analyst and blogger, criticizes the sources of information sources used by the major international news agencies:

A lot of the reports that are filed from the region come from Jerusalem - so you'll have a reporter in Jerusalem talking about events in Gaza or the West Bank. Obviously being so far away from the conflicts is going to influence the reporters and they are going to have access to the Israeli point of view more than actually being on the ground in the area.⁵⁸

According to Ullamaija Kivikuru, a Finnish media researcher at Helsinki University, Palestinian media is in great need of grassroots media contents produced by the people themselves. The expert talk that now fills political news feeds and current affairs programs needs to be challenged in order to increase the local media's credibility. In Kivikuru's opinion the general public would then feel itself represented and would turn to the television channel or newspaper giving them more accurate information.

Palestinian independent news media is considered open and liberal, and even in the most difficult phases of the conflict, Palestinian journalism has maintained a margin in which journalists and writers have been able to criticize the handling of issues related to the conflict.⁵⁹ Article 19 of the amended 2003 Basic Law of Palestine guarantees freedom of thought and expression and of the print and audiovisual media.⁶⁰ Still, censorship from both Palestinian authorities and Israeli occupation forces restrict this from being the case at the time speaking.⁶¹

For reasons that are nothing short of obvious, freedom of expression is only possible after the ending of the occupation.

Sources

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¹⁰ International Federation of Journalists: [IFJ Condemns Israel's Press Card Rules as "spiteful discrimination" Against Palestinian Journalists](#)

¹¹ As workers from BBC's World Service Trust claimed in their Palestinian media study, getting into Gaza posed a challenge, and once inside, traveling was not quite save either. Members of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) tell on [BBC's website](#) (updated on November 13th 2009), that "the team had to always travel in an armored vehicle, carrying their Personal Protection Equipment at all times".

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¹³ Rinnawi, Khalil: *Delegitimization Media Mechanisms*. International Communication Gazette Vol. 69 No 2, p. 151

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 153

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 154-155

¹⁶ Censorship tends to be in totalitarian regimes a mechanism of safeguarding the power elite, not necessarily the state or the society. It is practiced both internally and externally, and violations of "adequate" reporting are punished without exception. Nossek, Hillel & Rinnawi, Khalil: *Censorship and Freedom of the Press Under Changing Political Regimes*. International Communication Gazette Vol. 65 No 2, p. 184

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 190

¹⁹ Avi Shlaim: [How Israel brought Gaza to the brink of humanitarian catastrophe](#)

²⁰ Nossek, Hillel & Rinnawi, Khalil, p. 195

²¹ According to [Freedom House](#): "The Palestinian Basic Law and the 1995 Press and Publication Law provide for freedom of the press and freedom to establish media outlets, and state that there should be no censorship. However, the law stipulates that restrictions may be imposed if press activity threatens "national unity" and "Palestinian values." This vague terminology gives the authorities ample leeway to impede journalistic activity."

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- ³³ Palestinian media professionals can voluntarily join the Federation of Palestinian Journalists or the Union of Palestinian Journalists which protect journalists' rights and try to from ethics codes for Palestinian news editorials. Among those working in the media, many journalists are highly educated, but have not received basic journalistic training. The Birzeit University's Department of Media Studies is the most respected Palestinian school for journalists, offering bachelor degree education.
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