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THE PALESTINIAN MEDIA: AN OBEDIENT SERVANT OR A VANGUARD OF DEMOCRACY?

AMAL JAMAL

This article explores the prospects of democracy in a future Palestinian state through examination of the relationship between the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the media. After providing an overview of the media under Israeli occupation, the author examines their development and transformation under the PA, including the PA's means of control, both formal and informal. While noting the PA's vulnerability to outside pressures and the need for the press itself to be more assertive in claiming its freedom, the author concludes that the PA's record with the media thus far does not bode well for a democratic political culture in Palestine.

IN AN AGE OF COMMUNICATION, where information technology has multiplied along with methods of indoctrination and censorship, the tension between the media as a public space and the media as a tool of political control has become a hallmark of postcolonial states. This is true of Palestine as well, though the continuation of Israeli overall rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip make it a special case. The examination of the Palestinian national reconstruction led by the Palestinian Authority (PA) on the one hand, and the attempts to introduce democratic liberalization demanded by broad sectors of Palestinian society on the other, provide a contemporary example of the tension between the authoritarian and liberal dimensions of the state-building process. External pressures are exerted on the PA to prove its governing capabilities, while at the same time internal pressures by local groups demand open public space. Since this process is still ongoing, it is too soon to assess its results. Still, the current study seeks to shed light on future prospects through highlighting patterns of behavior and responses. The central issues in this context are the extent to which institutional pluralism in the Palestinian media mirrors real diversity and how the PA deals with the dilemma of the autonomy of and control over communications organizations.

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THE MEDIA UNDER OCCUPATION

Before the establishment of the PA in 1994, the Palestinian media underwent two distinct phases: from 1967 to 1972, and from 1972 to 1994. During the first period, when armed struggle was the PLO's main strategy of liberation and the role of information was marginal, the Palestinian media were weak. Israel, on the other hand, aware of the importance of information as a form of control, introduced to East Jerusalem in October 1968 a new version of the Arabic-language newspaper *al-Anba'* (The News) that it had launched in Jaffa in 1948, but the publication was shunned by the population and failed.¹ Nonetheless, the occupation officials were aware of the need for an open press to prevent the establishment of an underground press, and when Mahmud Abu Zuluf applied for a license to open a newspaper, permission was granted. *Al-Quds*, for some years the only daily in the occupied territories (and which remains to this day the most successful Palestinian newspaper), was based on the merger of two newspapers published under Jordanian rule, *al-Difa'* (The Defense) and *al-Jihad* (The Holy War). *Al-Quds*, which was run as a family business, adopted a pro-Jordanian line reflecting the worldview of the political elite then dominant in the West Bank.² Even after the Jordanian army's bloody defeat of the PLO forces and their expulsion from Jordan in 1970–71, and despite the rise of the nationalists in the occupied territories, *al-Quds* remained loyal to the Jordanian line concerning the political solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 1972, as a result of the Jordanian debacle as well as of changes in the regional political arena, the PLO began to focus more on the occupied territories and the need to mobilize the population there.³ This marked the beginning of the second stage in the experience of the Palestinian press under occupation, as the press was deemed a useful tool to reach the population.⁴ With PLO supporters in the occupied territories seeking to counter the influence of the pro-Jordanian *al-Quds*, two pro-PLO figures, Yusuf Nasr and Mahmud Ya'ish, applied for permits with the Israeli authorities to establish newspapers. *Al-Fajr* (The Dawn), a weekly, began appearing in mid-April and *al-Sha'b* (The People) on 17 July 1972. Despite differences between the two papers arising from their links to different currents of Fatah, they both adopted (in contrast to *al-Quds*) a clear national line espousing the PLO as the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people.

Al-Fajr and *al-Sha'b* represented the emerging national elite in the occupied territories. Though they were both privately owned, they constituted a "national press" insofar as they aimed at political mobilization and propagating the positions favored by the PLO leadership. They attacked pro-Jordanian figures in the West Bank and accused them of betraying the Palestinian national cause⁵ and felt called upon to reinforce national and cultural values considered necessary to confront the occupation. In line with this politicization, journalists and editors won their positions on the basis of political affiliations as well as professional criteria.⁶

The politicization of the press is best illustrated by its avoidance of established journalistic norms. Social issues were ignored on the grounds that in the prevailing situation of conflict the airing of sensitive problems could be manipulated by the enemy. Letters to the editor were rarely published. Criticism of the press was not given space. Editors perceived themselves as representative of the national leadership, which could not be wrong.

By the late 1970s, other weeklies and dailies had appeared on the scene. *Al-Mithaq*, for example, was said by the Israeli authorities to represent the political line of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), while *Huda al-Islam* represented the rising Islamic movement. Meanwhile, a new pro-Jordanian daily, *al-Nahar* (The Day), was established in 1986 in response to the new pro-PLO line adopted by *al-Quds*. Abu Zulf, seeing the changes in Jordanian policy in the territories, and particularly the crisis between the PLO and King Hussein of Jordan following the 1985 agreement, adopted a pro-PLO editorial line in order to ensure political survival. Jordan's cutting of political ties with the West Bank several years later showed Abu Zulf's ability to read the political scene.

Throughout the occupation, the Palestinian press was harshly censored by Israel. Newspapers were subject to closures, journalists and editors to detention and deportation. Akram Haniya, for example, the editor of *al-Sha'b*, was deported from the West Bank in 1986 for "affiliation with the PLO." Restrained in its ability to air political opinions, the press had to resort to news already published in foreign or Israeli newspapers. A new pattern of journalism emerged: Palestinian journalists with good stories would pass them either to Israeli or foreign journalists for publication, after which the item, translated back into Arabic, had a chance of running in the local Palestinian press.⁷ During the early days of the intifada, newspapers could publish almost nothing about the demonstrations and clashes; neither photographs nor information about casualties were allowed, and comments by PLO officials were censored. Under these circumstances, the most urgent issue for the Palestinian press was to inform the world of the population's plight. Most of the Palestinian press agencies focused on stories for the Arab countries and the international community.⁸ Journalists were caught between their personal feelings and commitments as Palestinians and their profession's demands and the imperatives of occupation.

THE PA AND THE PLURALIZATION OF INFORMATION SOURCES

The signing of the Oslo Accord and the establishment of the PA opened a new era for the Palestinian media, an era that was characterized both by structural pluralism, with a marked increase in the number and kinds of publications, and by new and different forms of control.

The PLO, which had hitherto focused its information efforts on mobilizing Palestinian society for the struggle against Israel, had to change its policy in response to the unfolding peace process. Early signs of change appeared

even before the Oslo Accord of September 1993 with the closing of the PLO's main information arm, *Filastin al-Thawra* (The Palestine Revolution) and the monthly *Shu'un Filastiniyya* (Palestinian Affairs), published respectively by the PLO Information Center and the Palestinian Research Center in Cyprus.⁹ The PLO's financial crisis following the 1990–91 Gulf War led to closures in the occupied territories, with the PLO ending financial subsidies to privately owned publications such as the daily *al-Fajr* and *al-Sha'b* and the weekly *al-Bayader al-Siyasiyya* (The Political Fields), which represented the political views of the main PLO faction, Fatah. The absence of public reaction to the closures reflected not only the artificial nature of these newspapers but also the psychological readiness of the Palestinian public for a new phase carrying the possibility of a peaceful settlement.

Two main newspapers remained after the closures, *al-Quds* and *al-Nahar*. In the interim before the introduction of new press organs several months later, these publications sought to test the margins of tolerance of the newly established PA and the extent to which the end of occupation would mark the end of interference in the press. They adopted a liberal policy of reporting, trying to reflect the public mood, focusing less on the policies of the occupation authorities, and carrying an internal debate on the process of state building and the characteristics of a sovereign Palestinian society.¹⁰

The limits of tolerance soon became clear. The pro-Jordanian *al-Nahar* criticized the PLO for compromising fundamental issues and for "selling out" to Israel as well as for the way Oslo was negotiated, particularly the PLO's failure to coordinate with the other Arab countries, especially Jordan. On 28 July 1994, shortly after the establishment of the PA Ministry of Information, *al-Nahar's* management was informed that the paper would not be allowed into the areas controlled by the PA. Technical reasons were cited—the paper had not applied for a permit to distribute in the autonomous areas—but the real reason was clear, and the message was not lost on others.¹¹ *Al-Quds*, which had supported the PLO unconditionally but nonetheless allowed dissidents to express their opinions in its pages, henceforth avoided any overt criticism of the PA. Its caution went so far as not to report the closure of *al-Nahar*. Except for a private initiative of one of the paper's journalists, Daoud Kuttab, no one at *al-Quds* wrote about this issue.

The establishment of the PA was followed by the introduction of two new newspapers, both of which reflected the official understanding of the new political reality. The first, *al-Hayat al-Jadida* (The New Life), appeared in November 1994 in Gaza. Published by Nabil Amro, a former PLO ambassador to Moscow, the new daily reflected the PA's position in all respects, virtually replacing the PLO weekly, *Filastin al-Thawra*, as the official mouthpiece of the Palestinian leadership.¹² Distributed free in government offices, it was patronized by the PA and highly politicized, simultaneously educating, domesticating, and mobilizing the Palestinian public. The second daily, *al-Ayyam* (The Days), began appearing in December 1995 and introduced new printing and layout technology. The new paper, a more sophisti-

cated version of the recently closed *al-Sha'b* and *al-Fajr* in terms of content and closeness to the leadership, hews to the PA line even while maintaining a critical distance. Its editor is Akram Haniya, a senior adviser to PA head Yasir Arafat who had been the editor of *al-Sha'b* until his deportation in the mid-1980s. While the very names of the new dailies symbolize the beginning of a new era, the role of the media was not fundamentally changed except insofar as the new project was a national one, the revolutionary aims being replaced by internal pacification and state building.¹³

In addition to the new dailies, the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), which was to be in charge of radio and television, was set up by Arafat even before his arrival in Gaza. At its head he appointed Radwan Abu Ayyash, a Fatah activist, Arafat loyalist, and former head of the Arab Journalists' Association. The radio began to broadcast from Jericho on 1 July 1994. By January 1996, 38 percent of Palestinians were listening to the station;¹⁴ a year later, another poll showed that 44.5 percent of Palestinians "trusted" the Voice of Palestine most (compared to Jordanian radio and Israel's Arabic service). The television station began broadcasting in 1996. Although television broadcasting is split between the West Bank and Gaza, the main decisions concerning news and its interpretation are made in the basement of Arafat's headquarters, where the television offices are located.

In addition to the official PBC, some eight radio stations and twenty-seven local cable television stations have been established in West Bank towns under PA jurisdiction, mostly in the northern areas and sometimes beyond the broadcast range of official transmission. The number of operating stations is not stable, with some closing or being closed and others opening. These stations are private enterprises whose main aim seems to be entertainment for the purpose of making money. Though often lacking basic equipment (their transmission is also affected by Israeli limitations on transmission frequencies) and not of the highest professional standard, they do allow diverse political, cultural, and social opinions to be expressed and to influence the public sphere.

Finally, numerous weeklies and other periodicals are also published in the PA areas. The most important in this context are the publications of the opposition. Hamas issued the weekly *al-Watan* (The Homeland), edited by Sayed Abu Musameh, until its closure following a series of Hamas bombings in Israel in early 1996. Since then, Hamas's affiliate, the Islamic Salvation Party, has been publishing *al-Risala* (The Message), which is critical of the PA in accordance with the party's positions. Islamic Jihad publishes *al-Ishtiqal* (Independence), a weekly that combines the party's ideas with strong criticism of the peace process and PA policies.

THE PRESS LAW AND "DISCRETIONARY POWER"

Upon their return to the occupied territories after Oslo and the establishment of the PA, the PLO leaders, having to act under the watchful eye of the

Israeli authorities and facing a growing Islamist opposition, sought to build a strong central authority. Quite naturally, this process of centralization included the media, which the PA sought to patronize, politicize, and harness to the goal of national reinforcement.

The importance the PA attaches to the media and information is clear from the fact that its Ministry of Information was established by presidential decree on 25 June 1994, even before the arrival of Arafat in Gaza.¹⁵ The ministry was entrusted with the task "of drafting media policy for the newly born Palestinian state to cope with the transitional period of the peace process" and became "primarily preoccupied with initiating the broad foundations for the rights of free press and expression to prevail."

A year after the ministry's establishment, in June 1995, the PA issued the press law, which replaced the Israeli military regulations in the occupied territories and defined the relationship between the newly established authority and society as a whole. The fact that the press law was among the first to be promulgated reflects the PA's sensitivity on the issue of freedom of expression. Article 2 of the law states that "Press and printing are free. Furthermore, freedom of opinion should be guaranteed to every individual who attains the absolute right to express his opinion in a free manner either verbally, in writing, photography, or drawing, as a different means of expression and information."

Moreover, the structural pluralism manifested in the variety of private newspapers, weeklies, and other print media (not to mention the score of private cable TV stations, in addition to the official PBC) reflects a degree of tolerance concerning various forms of expression. This idea was emphasized by a top Ministry of Information official who, with reference to local cable stations, spoke of the importance of plurality in the media so as to allow "people to express themselves in matters concerning their daily life. The authority should not monopolize information about cultural, intellectual, and political activities. This deepens democracy and the public freedom and creates a large space for argumentation between different ideas."¹⁶ Arafat himself, in an interview with Larry King on CNN, declared that the Palestinians have a free press able to criticize him and his government and that a free press is and must continue to be part of the Palestinian experience because "it is part of my power and part of democracy."

But despite the liberal spirit of the press law and the decisive language of Arafat and his officials, the gap between the declaratory policy and the reality is large. Since 1994, the Center for Palestine Research and Studies (CPRS) in Nablus has been running highly regarded opinion polls on a variety of issues, including PA governance. In a regularly recurring question concerning whether Palestinians feel they can criticize the PA without fear, the percentage of Palestinians answering No has ranged from 52 percent to 58.1 percent.¹⁷ It stands to reason that such fears would be all the more acute for opinions published or broadcast, and the detention of a number of journal-

ists and human rights activists clearly shows that there are definite limits on free expression.

In limiting freedom of expression and publication, the PA is able to call upon the press law itself. Paragraph 8 of the law requires journalists to uphold certain standards, including that they

- “respect the rights of individuals and their constitutional freedom and not infringe on their right to privacy”;
- “produce the journalistic work in an objective, full and balanced form”;
- “seek precision, honesty and objectivity in commenting on news and events”; and
- “avoid publishing materials that could encourage violence, extremism, and hatred or call for racism and religious extremism.”

Although these standards seem reasonable, they leave the door open to questions of interpretation and facilitate accusations of journalistic violations of law. What is the meaning of “objective” reporting, for example, and who decides what is objective and what is not? Who decides what constitutes “honesty” in commenting on the news, or what kind of reporting encourages violence and hatred? Such ambiguity places power in the hands of the authorities and can only encourage the prudent media to rely on official versions of the truth. Examples of interpreting the law strictly are not lacking. Besides major incidents in which newspapers were closed or restricted, many journalists have been arrested, detained, and tortured for violating the law. The Committee to Protect Journalists reports seventeen incidents in 1998 in which journalists were attacked, harassed, threatened, censored, or imprisoned by PA security forces.¹⁸ On 29 August 1998, for example, the journalist Munir Abu Rizk of *al-Hayat al-Jadida* was beaten by policemen at the Military Court in Gaza for attending and recording a trial.

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Furthermore, article 37.a of the law sets restrictions on publications that may “cause harm to the national unity.” While military censorship has been used in various ways even in modern Western democracies,¹⁹ such censorship has generally been limited to set periods of emergency, especially war, and not envisaged as a permanent administrative control. The Palestinian law, on the other hand, enables the authorities to censor the media all the time. Although the PA still views itself as waging a battle for national independence, many of the cases in which this restriction has been invoked cannot be said to involve “national security.” Mahir al-Alami, an editor at *al-Quds*, for example, was detained for five days at the offices of the Preventive

Security Forces in Jericho because he had failed to comply with their requests to publish a flattering story and photographs of President Arafat's meeting with the Orthodox patriarch. A month later, on 19 August 1995, the PA withdrew *al-Quds*' license to be distributed in the autonomous areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. After the newspaper's owners hastened to Gaza and met with Arafat, the paper's policy changed. Henceforth, *al-Quds* began to cover Arafat's movements in the world on its opening page and to report only on the positive dimensions of PA policies. Though the paper continues to publish indirect criticism of PA agencies, it generally does so modestly and briefly in the inner pages.

In keeping with the press law's provisions concerning threats to national unity, the PA closed eight private cable stations in February 1998 at the time of a new crisis between the UN Security Council and Iraq over the UN inspections regime. With the United States threatening the use of force if Iraq did not open presidential sites for inspection, spontaneous protests, rallies, and marches against American policy toward Iraq broke out in the territories. At some, American and Israeli flags were burned. Not surprisingly, the local private cable channels covered these events. As the demonstrations spread, the chief of Palestinian police sent an order to district police chiefs in the north demanding that "all stations must sign a written agreement not to broadcast any news dealing with illegal marches and demonstrations, and staying away from news that lead to incitement."²⁰ On 16 February, with the devastating consequences of Palestinian sympathy for Iraq in 1991 still clearly in mind, the PA closed the eight stations for incitement and for compromising "central Palestinian interests." Although, as mentioned earlier, the stations were not always of the highest quality, they were able to reach large numbers of people, some outside the PBC's broadcast range, which makes them extremely important for the public sphere. Though some were subsequently reopened, the fact that they can be closed at will has serious consequences for democracy.

PA officials also use the ambiguity of the press law against the opposition. Hamas's *al-Watan* was closed several times before closing for good in spring 1996.²¹ Its successor, *al-Risala*, which began publishing on 1 January 1997, learned from *al-Watan*'s experience (Ghazi Hamad, chief editor of *al-Watan*, became head of *al-Risala*) and now tries to avoid issues that may be considered too incendiary. Still, *al-Risala* has been closed several times, the longest being for three months as of 4 September 1997 because of an article on Egypt's financial support of the PA, which was deemed offensive to Egyptian president Husni Mubarak.²²

The Wye River agreement, signed 23 October 1998, has also become an instrument used against the press. On 19 November 1998, less than a month after the agreement was signed, Arafat issued a decree on incitement in fulfillment of the agreement's provision that "the Palestinian side will issue a decree prohibiting all forms of incitement to violence or terror, and establishing mechanisms for acting systematically against all expressions or

threats of violence or terror." Even before the decree was issued, Wye's impact was felt. At the time the agreement was signed, eleven journalists were arrested while interviewing Hamas's Shaykh Ahmad Yasin in Gaza.²³ On 18 December, eight journalists were arrested in Gaza after covering a PFLP demonstration in which Israeli and American flags were burned. The same day, the offices of Reuters and the Associated Press were shut down for twenty-four hours for having reported the arrests of the Palestinian journalists. The closure of several cable TV stations was also based on the decree. A recent example of the use of the incitement decree was the arrest on 15 September 1999 of Mahir Disouqi, host of "Space for Private Opinion," a popular *al-Quds* educational TV program. Detained without charge, Disouqi was released twenty days later after having been subjected to severe torture.²⁴

INFORMAL MECHANISMS

There are, of course, a number of mechanisms of control that do not involve outright coercion or intimidation. In the harsh economic conditions of the territories, for example, newspapers and magazines are a luxury. According to Hanna Siniora, publisher of the English-language daily *Jerusalem Times* and the monthly *Palestine Business Report*, the average newspaper purchased is read by eight people.²⁵ As a result, newspapers are money-losing ventures, making them vulnerable to political manipulation. In several cases, the PA subsidizes newspapers, often through subscriptions. *Al-Hayat al-Jadida*, for example, which loses large sums of money each month, is delivered free to all PA offices. According to journalist Said Ghazali, most individual journalists live below the poverty line.²⁶ This makes them easy targets for "patronage" in the form of gifts from high-ranking officials. In most cases, the aim of such gifts is to discourage journalists from reporting news not deemed sufficiently positive. Critical pieces about PA actions are held back until the misdoings are corrected and can be reported as examples of how effectively and conscientiously the authorities deal with citizens' complaints.

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The close relationship between news agencies and the political apparatus is another factor of control. As already noted, leading newspaper editors Nabil Amro and Akram Haniya had influential positions in the PLO apparatus and are still very close to the PA leadership, including the president. Their newspapers cannot but reflect these affiliations. On the positive side, their closeness to data sources enables them to provide more information and a more accurate interpretation of PA policies, both internal and external. *Al-Ayyam*, for instance, is more daring in its reporting than *al-Quds*. Its daring is based on the ability of its editors to sense the margins of freedom allowed by the PA president. Their close ties go beyond the veils of secrecy set by security services and enable them to feel what will be ignored by the authorities

and what will be viewed as provocation. The negative side of such an affiliation is that the press is turned into a seismograph, feeling the pulse of the authorities and publishing accordingly.

Unlike *al-Ayyam* and *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, the PBC is a public corporation, so the connection with the PA is more overt. The PBC headquarters are in Ramallah, but at Arafat's behest the television control room, where decisions about what to transmit and what not to transmit are made, was moved to Gaza,²⁷ thereby marginalizing the input of the television manager in Ramallah. The PA presidency's role in broadcast decisions is said to be very great (the television control room is in the same building), a role heightened by the president's closeness to Hisham Makki, the PBC general commissioner who in fact runs the television station in Gaza. Political affiliation and personal allegiance appear to be important factors in PBC staff appointments, and few decisions, even of a very routine nature, are made without direct authorization from the very highest levels.

The Ministry of Information's function of granting licenses for information media (including bookstores) provides another way of controlling news agencies and setting limits on their work. The fact that applicants for permits must provide a document from the Ministry of the Interior proving good behavior in itself deters some from the information field. Licenses can also be withdrawn—permanently, as was the case of the Hamas weekly *al-Watan* in 1996, or temporarily. Publications can also be controlled by blocking their access to government data. *Al-Risala*, for example, suffers from a boycott by PA officials. Supreme Court Chief Justice Qusai Abadallah was forced to resign in January 1998 for giving an interview to the newspaper.²⁸

SELF-CENSORSHIP AND ITS EFFECTS

It should be emphasized that censorship in the Palestinian context is not a set mechanism but a behavioral pattern.²⁹ Following several incidents in which the PA reacted severely, newspapers began to arrange their own censorship. As such, self-censorship has become a common phenomenon among Palestinian journalists. Besides the traditional Israeli restrictions on Palestinian press freedom—closure of newspapers, detention of journalists, denying journalists essential press cards or travel permits—new methods of control have found their way into newspaper rooms and especially into journalists' minds. According to a Palestinian human rights activist,

There are no "censorship officers" standing threateningly over editors' heads, ordering them what and what not to print. Yet, "a mean-looking officer" lurks constantly in each journalist's mind; a continual nightmare that forces every conscientious journalist to choose between bearing the full consequences of his "follies and smartness" or betraying his conscience by demonstrating national responsibility.³⁰

Self-censorship has become a common phenomenon as a result of the lack of clear rules, with journalists unable to anticipate the position of the PA, particularly on matters involving "national unity." In the words of journalist Walid Batrawi,

if the law says that nothing should be published against Palestinian national unity but does not define what national unity means, when I begin to write I have to think that maybe this sentence might harm the national unity. Ultimately, it leads you to self-censorship, which is an extremely dangerous thing. The PA does not ask you to submit your articles to the censor, but in one way or another, the Palestinian press law restricts you.³¹

A list of sensitive subjects that journalists shy away from in order to avoid detention or harassment include the following:

1. Any material that reflects negatively on Arafat or his family.
2. Criticism of the PA patronage system, especially favoritism and corruption.
3. Any subject concerning the lack of political, administrative, or financial accountability of PA officials.
4. Criticism of social and immoral behavior in society having to do with clan relationships, religious discrimination, or gender problems.

According to Palestinian journalist Said Ghazali, "Most Palestinian journalists speak in hushed voices about the bad treatment they have been subjected to. Most of them are aware that their Union is a political platform and cannot defend their rights."³² As a result of such conditions, journalistic reporting becomes little more than a rehash of what was said by this and that politician. Journalists admit that they "can only call politicians to get their political comments" and "attend meetings and seminars and write about their achievements."³³

The end result of these conditions is that the three dailies produced in the PA areas share the following characteristics:

Unbalanced coverage of human rights. While Israeli human rights violations are extensively covered, human rights violations by the PA are either not covered at all or downplayed, hidden in the internal pages of the paper.

Lack of critical coverage of PA policies on internal affairs. The three dailies give front-page coverage to events relating to the PA's foreign policy, especially the progress of the peace process and Palestinian diplomatic efforts. There is almost always a front-page story concerning Arafat. Internal affairs are dealt with in bland fashion, with little implication of infractions of

accepted social norms. Activities of the security forces, corruption of PA personnel, and the lack of accountability of PA agencies are rarely covered. According to a Palestinian journalist, coverage of egregious behavior by PA officials denotes either their lack of power in the political hierarchy or the desire of higher-ups (usually close to the president) to embarrass them.

Lack of coverage of the Palestine Council's (PC) discussions of sensitive issues, particularly those reflecting criticism of the PA executive. A case in point is that of Daoud Kuttab, a well-known Palestinian journalist and winner of the 1996 International Press Freedom Award, who heads the Modern Communications Center at al-Quds University. His independent television studio had routinely been broadcasting sessions of the PC when, on 20 May 1997, he was arrested after having filmed a session debating alleged PA corruption. Kuttab was held for over a week (initially, the police denied holding both to the media and to Amnesty International). According to journalist Walid Batrawi, "Daoud Kuttab was arrested because a few members of the PC were against live broadcasts because of a number of scandals that were taking place that they did not want people to know about."³⁴ While similar information about corruption and gross abuses is published by Palestinian human rights organizations in English and Arabic, their publications do not reach a wide public and therefore are tolerated (though researchers connected with such institutions are not spared the attention of the PA security services).

The mirror effect. An analysis of the three daily newspapers shows a striking similarity in the information they carry. All three run the stories of the news agencies, especially Wafa, the official Palestinian news agency. They introduce scarcely any changes based on their own investigations. They also repeat news from the Israeli press. The contributions of local journalists are therefore very limited, and in-depth investigations of issues of concern to the public are unknown.

The combination of restrictions and self-censorship has had a similar effect on broadcasting. Radio and television stations invariably open their news coverage with stories about the activities of the president. Programs dealing with political issues invariably reflect the standpoint of the PA and promote adherence to its orders. This applies to political programming on the private stations as well.

A clear example of "monopoly on meaning" and the setting of the public agenda is the PBC's coverage of the first Palestinian presidential and legislative elections in January 1996. An analysis of air time given to the various candidates shows a clear dominance of Fatah on the screen.³⁵ In the period between 15 and 25 December 1995, six different parties managed to reach the public, but Fatah occupied two hours twenty-two minutes of screen time while Hamas got only thirty-one minutes. The screen time given to the smaller parties hardly reached ten minutes. The same discrepancy emerged for independent candidates close to Fatah and others. The wide gap in party

coverage reflects the domination that Fatah has over the public space and its advantage in influencing public opinion.

DEMOCRACY AND THE "MONOPOLY ON MEANING"

The various forms of censorship exercised by the PA cannot be completely disconnected from the overall political context in which it must operate. The PA's dependency on Israel and the United States and its lack of sovereignty make it virtually incapable of resisting pressures to crack down on the opposition movements. For the sake of ensuring the continuation of the peace negotiations, the PA has willingly violated the democratic right to free expression. The Wye River agreement has institutionalized the situation by holding the PA responsible for "incitement" against Israel in the Palestinian press.

It was concern for Israeli and American reactions (and fears of being accused of supporting Iraq) that led the PA to close the cable stations covering the anti-American demonstrations in February 1998. This dynamic is even clearer with respect to the Islamist opposition. Hamas's opposition to reconciliation with Israel puts the PA in the unpleasant situation of having to choose between allowing the movement to express its positions freely, thereby inviting Israeli action, or violating the movement's freedoms at the price of being criticized for autocratic rule. The PA has chosen the latter course. Examples abound, from harassment of Islamist journalists to the closures of Islamist press organs. To cite just one, Ala'a Saftawi, editor of Islamic Jihad's *al-Istiqlal*, was summoned on 10 July 1998 by Tayyib 'Abd al-Rahim, head of the Presidential Office, and told that the PA had to close the newspaper "because the political atmosphere cannot allow it to continue and that this was the decision of the political leadership." During the meeting, it transpired that the Israelis had been pressuring for seven items, including the closure of the "center of incitement, *al-Istiqlal* newspaper."³⁶

Defenders of the PA attribute the PA's violations of press freedoms to its young age, its vulnerability to outside pressures, and the militancy of the Islamist opposition. They praise the existing space of freedom in the PA areas and point out that the situation in the Arab countries is not much better. In their view, PA excesses reflect its fear of losing control over events, and these excesses will disappear as the leadership gains confidence in its power and as the peace process moves forward. This assessment may be true, but the processes of centralization, the revival of patronage politics, and the corruption of many officials in the PA do not foster optimism.

Nevertheless, the game is not yet over. There is a large margin of maneuver. The transformation of the media's structural pluralism into a free public sphere depends not only on the behavior of the PA, but also on the media's own determination to help shape Palestinian society. The PA must accept the fact that criticism by the media does not mean betrayal of national interests, but the media cannot expect to have their freedom handed to them. If free-

dom of the press is an important principle for Palestinian society, people have to be willing to pay a price for bringing it about.

In order for the pluralism of print and broadcast media to provide the ground for true debate, both determination and professionalization are required. The Palestinian media still lack the basic professional qualifications needed to become a strong and coherent social force. The three dailies are little more than channels for conveying official information, lacking diversity of opinion on public matters: there is no balance between information and the space for expressing views. Most of the television cable stations have limited themselves to entertainment programs due to their inability to broadcast informative programs of a political nature. This self-censorship reflects the lack of willingness among the owners of these stations to play a role in advancing debate and democracy in Palestinian society. Stations that dared to express opinions or take initiatives were closed by the PA.

The media have played a major role in preparing the ground for their own submission to the will of the PA. There has been no solid and firm stand from the Palestinian media against the PA violations. Most of this work is done by foreign press and human rights agencies. It seems that the Palestinian media are not mature enough and do not view themselves as integral players in the Palestinian political game. They have chosen to sit on the fence. This posture enhances the suppressing hand of the Palestinian security forces and the ill-considered behavior of PA officials.

Formal and informal limitations on the media are exercised by PA officials in the name of national interest, but these policies are tainted by corruption, nepotism, and authoritarianism. The PA's attempt to secure a monopoly on meaning by silencing oppositional voices and utilizing an exclusionary nationalist discourse forms a suffocating ring around those seeking a free space for real argumentation and critique of the authorities. Despite improvement in the PA's treatment of the media in recent months, there is no indication that the dominant political elite will voluntarily permit a true debate that may set limits on its rule.

NOTES

1. Ali Khalili, *The Palestinian Press and the Intifada* (Jerusalem: General Union of Palestinian Writers, 1991), p. 8.

2. Moshe Shemesh, "The West Bank: Rise and Decline of Traditional Leadership, June 1967 to October 1973," *Middle Eastern Studies* 20, no. 3 (July 1984), pp. 290-323.

3. This policy was formalized at the 11th Palestine National Council convened in Cairo in January 1973.

4. Dov Shinar, *Palestinian Voices: Communication and Nation-Building in*

the West Bank (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1987).

5. *Al-Sha'b*, 6 November 1973; *al-Fajr*, 1 December 1973.

6. Ruba Husary, Ali al-Khalil, and Bas-sam al-Salihi, *The Palestinian Press Between the Present and the Future* (Ramallah: Muwatin, 1993), p. 38 [in Arabic].

7. Khalili, *The Palestinian Press*, pp. 12-13.

8. Rhanda Zaharna, "A Perspective on Communication in Palestinian Society,"

Palestine-Israel Journal 3, nos. 3-4 (1996 Summer-Autumn), pp. 124-28.

9. Both organizations had been headquartered in Beirut until 1992.

10. Imad Musa, "The Palestinian Media System" (MA thesis, University of Missouri-Columbia, 1998), p. 66.

11. *Al-Nahar's* editor, Othman Hallaq, met with Arafat thirty-six days after the closure and received a permit to publish, but the paper never regained its circulation and had to close permanently.

12. Considering that the salaries of several journalists working at *al-Hayat al-Jadida* are paid by the PA's Public Employees Department, the newspaper, though privately owned, could be considered a semiofficial publication. *Monitor* (a publication of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group) 3, no. 5 (November 1999), online at <http://www.phrmg.org/english/nov99/index.html>.

13. According to the Jerusalem Media Communications Center (JMCC), Poll No. 298, August 1998, newspaper readership in the territories is as follows: *al-Quds*, 61.3 percent; *al-Ayyam*, 19.2 percent; and *al-Hayat al-Jadida*, 13.7 percent.

14. JMCC Poll No. 12, January 1996.

15. Ministry of Information Web site at <http://www.pna.org/mininfo>.

16. *Al-Sahafi*, April 1997.

17. CPRS Poll 25 of 26-28 December 1996, and CPRS Poll 42 of 15-17 July 1999, respectively. An archive of CPRS polls is available online at <http://www.cprs-palestine.org/polls/index.html>.

18. Committee to Protect Journalists, Country Report, online at <http://www.cpj.org>.

19. See Deborah Holmes, *Governing the Press: Media Freedom in the U.S. and Great Britain* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986).

20. An original copy of the order was provided by Internews, East Jerusalem.

21. Hamas made a political decision not to invest its energy in trying to re-open *al-Watan*. Instead, it decided to

open a newspaper under the National Salvation Party, which was founded by Hamas to take over the movement's political activities and which maintains better relations with the PA.

22. *Monitor* 3, no. 5 (November 1999).

23. *Ibid.*

24. "The Yearly Report on Human Rights, 1999," *al-Raqib* (published by the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group) 4, no. 5 (January 2000), p. 19 [in Arabic].

25. Dawn Pick, "Dictatorship vs. Developing Democracy: The Case of the Palestinian Press," December 1997, p. 6, available online at <http://www.arches.uga.edu/~dpick/palpress.html>.

26. Said Ghazali, "The Best Journalist Is the Best Loyalist," September 1999, available at the Arabic Media Internet Network Web site at <http://www.amin.org/En/eyejrs/9910/frees-011099.htm>.

27. Author's interview with Radwan Abu Ayyash, president of the PBC, and Ali Rayyan, manager of the television station, in Ramallah on 8 February 2000.

28. Cited in Musa, "The Palestinian Media System," p. 86.

29. Ilan Peleg, *Patterns of Censorship Around the World* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), p. 4.

30. Khalid Amayreh, a document of the Palestinian Human Rights Group, East Jerusalem, reproduced in *Middle East International*, no. 542 (24 January 1997), pp. 18-19.

31. Walid Batrawi, "Palestinian Media: Pre-Intifada to the Present," *Birzeit News Report*, September 1997, p. 7.

32. Ghazali, "The Best Journalist," p. 2.

33. For more information, see *The PA after One Year, 1994-1995* (Amman: Middle Eastern Studies Center, 1996), pp. 74-109.

34. Batrawi, "Palestinian Media," p. 7.

35. Reporters Sans Frontiers, December 1995.

36. *Monitor* 3, no. 5 (November 1999).