

West Bank Media: Censorship and Citizens' Disregard

*By Hazem Balousha**

In the West Bank, the Palestinian media landscape is plagued by a shortage of professionalism and an excess of political interference. Ironically, the hardest-hitting talk show is broadcast not on private or non-governmental networks, but on the official Palestinian Authority (PA) network.

Haki Ala Al Makshouf (Speaking Frankly) began airing earlier this year, and is considered by many to be the first talk show on Palestine TV in the West Bank.

“This talk show can be bold, and it can put forward any case,” said well-known Palestinian journalist Maher Shalaby, who hosts the show. “But it’s successful because it is on the official Palestine TV, which has a wide viewing. Were it to be broadcast by another Palestinian TV channel, it would not succeed because journalists fear the Palestinian Authority’s media policy.”

The program deals with issues previously forbidden in the Palestinian official media. The show doesn’t shy away from hammering guests — typically Palestinian Authority officials in the West Bank and political rivals from other groups. Questions asked are critical and sensitive dealing with political, social and economic issues.

Shalaby thinks *Speaking Frankly* is the first political talk show aired on an official station in the Arab world that presents issues in a free manner.

It seems to represent the beginning of a very slow change to the Palestinian media, which have been haunted by governmental censorship, disguised by the excuse of national security because of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and a dearth of professionalism among journalists.

Different Types of Media, Same Challenges

The Palestinian media are divided into three categories: the official media owned by the Palestinian Authority (PA), the media run by different Palestinian factions and non-governmental organizations, and privately-owned media.

The PA’s media policy is influenced by the executive power responsible for its relationship with Israel, as well as the Fatah

movement that affects internal and civil issues. Along with other Palestinian factions, it wants control of the West Bank media.

A political split between the PA and the factions cause more media restrictions — more than those imposed by the Oslo Accords, which regulate “incitement and provocation.”

Khaleel Shahin, a news producer at *Al-Ayyam* Palestinian newspaper, says the Palestinian media tend to focus only on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, neglecting political and economic issues.

Moreover, the journalistic work often suffers from political interference. Shahin accuses the Palestinian Journalists’ Syndicate (PJS — *Naqabt Al-Sahfiyeen El-Felestinyeen*) of serving as a political hand for leaders. He says it uses the media as a tool that increases the internal split between Fatah and Hamas. He pointed to instances when the syndicate defended government media office shutdowns, or didn’t stand by jailed journalists.

Preference, Power and Professionalism

The sad truth is that Palestinian media do not have the reach of the large Middle Eastern TV networks of *Al Jazeera* or *Al Arabiya*.

A September 2010 poll by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Center (JMCC) shows that most Palestinians (33.9 percent) watch *MBC TV*, followed by *Palestine TV* (9.8 percent) and *Al-Jazeera TV* (9 percent). *Abu Dhabi TV* and *Al-Aqsa TV* round out the top five networks.

Most Palestinians (54.2 percent) say they get their television news from *Al-Jazeera*.

Poor funding and professionalism hinder the territories’ media. West Bank non-governmental organization media have limited budgets and Palestinian journalists say they suffer from a lack of resources that doesn’t allow them to collect enough news to satisfy the audience.

“The non-governmental media need strong funding, but this is not easy since the Palestinian economy is so weak and depends basically on the handouts,” said Ghassan Al-Khatib, director of the government’s press office in the West Bank.

In the West Bank, it’s a Sisyphean challenge to better the media — a challenge of political control, rather than journalistic professionalism. To begin with, there are no specific standards for media development. Currently, there is a move afoot to establish an official governmental commission responsible for media

licensing and permitting. This would eliminate the chances of making a completely free and uncensored media in the West Bank.

The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics shows that 45 media stations exist in the West Bank, including 25 radio stations, 17 TV stations, and three radio and TV stations that operate together.

Article 19, a human rights organization focused on freedom of expression and information, criticized the Palestinian Authority in 1996, saying Palestinian law imposes a strong restriction on the content of what's published under the excuse of "the public good," "public morality," and "shaking the confidence in the national currency."

The Palestinian society is a conservative one, and it is still stuck in the idea of tribalism, which limits the media's ability to tackle sensitive issues and to improve the society through a clear policy.

A 1995 Palestinian law for printing and publication is considered the controlling law for the Palestinian media in the Palestinian territories. This law greatly restricts freedom of expression and is confusing, says the Palestinian Center for Human Rights (PCHR).

Many Palestinian journalists are calling to modify the Palestinian law for printing and publication because it is limited to print media. It excludes broadcast (both TV and radio) and online media. With these exclusions, the law allows government officials to interpret freedom of expression as they see fit.

The AMAN-Coalition for Integrity and Accountability's Corruption Report 2009 states that the Palestinian media face many obstacles: There are no laws that organize the media sector; journalists face difficulties trying to get documents and information from official departments; journalists lack experience and professional skills; they fear for their safety when investigating stories; the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate is weak; and conventional wisdom is that news reports lack credibility.

Reporters Wear Two Hats

With West Bank media facing so many challenges, it is no wonder journalists lack credibility. Local journalists are considered spineless because of the years of ongoing self-censorship. But there is hope.

Many local reporters wear two hats: one as a local journalist, and one as freelancer for international media. Working for local media, journalists face censorship, but taste freedom when working for outside news agencies.

Reporter Nasser Abu Baker works for both the official *Palestine TV* and *Agence France-Presse*. “I have to follow up the rules of official *Palestine TV* when I am covering the internal issues. I am restricted by red tape,” he said. “But when I am writing for *Agence France-Presse*, I am freer. Professionalism is the only condition, in particular when we are covering the internal split between Fatah and Hamas, and the occupation issues.”

Al-Ayyam’s Shahin says that Palestinian politicians ignore local media, whether they are government-run or not.

“They prefer dealing with the foreign media, including the Israeli ones,” said Shahin. For example, politicians will give exclusive news related to negotiations with Israel to foreign media.

Al-Khatib partially disagrees that the Palestinian Government doesn’t pay much attention to the local media. He points out that officials do give interviews, especially on the prime minister’s weekly radio program.

While there is hope for the future, it is clear that it will take time and a lot of cooperation from all sides to open the territory up to a truly free and democratic press.

“The Palestinian media in the West Bank, in spite of recent developments, still haven’t reached the point of competitiveness that would give local media the credibility to fight corruption within the Palestinian Authority,” said Shahin. “It needs a long time and serious steps by all.”

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