The Palestinian Center
for Policy and Survey research

מרכז תמי שטינמץ למחקרי שלום
אוניברסיטת תל-אביב

the Palestinian Studies Program

Sponsored by the Ford Foundation, USA

The Palestinian Media

Seminar No. 1, February 7-8, 2003, Ma'ale Hachamisha

The Media Coverage of the Intifada

Dr. Mohammed Dajani

(Al Quds University)

I would like to analyze and discuss the nature of news reporting of the other in the Palestinian press and some of the problems that beset it. I will note some lessons that can be learned from such reporting, and will consider especially how the Israeli side is covered in the context of the Intifada.

The power of the press is reflected in its common description as the "fourth branch of government". It has, indeed, great influence in terms of shaping public opinion and changing people's attitudes, particularly in this era known as the information age. Thanks to satellites, the Internet, computers, faxes, television, radio, mobile phones, and so on, news moves very rapidly in today's world, and much of what we know, believe, or think is affected by the news we consume.

In the period from September 1993 to September 2000, before the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Palestinian news coverage of the symptoms of simmering, latent conflict not only failed to prevent its actual eruption but may have inadvertently accelerated it by widening the gap between the two peoples. From September 2000 when Al-Aqsa Intifada began to the present, news coverage has highlighted the mounting violence and the continued conflict. Violent news has become headline news, and conciliation news has become no news.

Indeed, a large part of why Oslo has failed in general is that the media did not get on board the peace process. Rather than promote the peace, it swayed public opinion away from peace. Thus for any future peace strategy to work, it is imperative that both

the Palestinian and the Israeli media get on board the peace wagon. The general attitude of the Palestinian media has been and still is, in fact, very anti-Oslo and anti-peace, highlighting the conflict issues rather than the issues both agree upon, and this needs to be changed if we are to have any peace vision for the future.

Indeed Palestinian coverage of "the other" has tended to be emotional, myopic and biased. This is in line with a culture that reflects little tolerance for the views and perspectives of the other. Indeed, could a conference similar to this about the media of the other be held in Ramallah, Jenin, Gaza, Nablus, or Hebron with Israeli speakers? To say this does not constitute self-flogging but rather self-appraisal and self-criticism. The Palestinians, as many other peoples in their situation, have, unfortunately, a feeling of monopolizing the truth: "We are right and our cause is just; they are wrong and their cause is evil!".

As the conflict with Israel continued to worsen, the two main newspapers in the Palestinian Territories—Al-Quds, published in Jerusalem, and Al-Ayyam, published in Ramallah—became a valuable source of information for Palestinians eager for news about the latest developments, along with the Arab satellite media. Throughout the Israeli military operations in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, both newspapers focused on Palestinian civilian casualties and the physical destruction that the Israeli onslaught wrought on the Palestinian territories. But sorting facts from emotional reporting and extremism proved difficult. Press coverage in general, and the editorials in particular, reflected a highly subjective outlook. As expected, the news reporting, opinion articles, and photos published in the Palestinian press were aimed at stirring Arab anger toward Israel and drumming up international support for the Palestinian cause. It focused on depicting the problem as it is unfolding on the ground but offered no solutions and no hope for the future.

In general, Palestinian news coverage of the Israeli operation in Jenin in April 2002 was emotional, exaggerated, inconsistent, and nationalistic. A distraught public was fed distorted information that kept conjuring up images of the Sabra and Shatila massacres. The media reflected what people suspected and feared, not what was actually happening in the field.

At least five factors damaged Palestinian coverage of the Jenin events:

The first was Israeli reluctance to allow coverage for security as well as public relations reasons. The way news is collected from the field determines what is later reported in the press. As of the first day of the operation, Palestinian coverage was restricted to the military confrontation between the Israeli army and Palestinian fighters. For the first ten days the Israeli army forbade journalists, reporters, and cameramen—foreign, Israeli, and Palestinian—from approaching the camp. An Israeli army spokesman claimed this was for the journalists' own safety. The result was that journalists relied on individuals from both sides who were involved in the events, and had an interest in portraying the other side as negatively as possible.

The second factor was the PA's desire to turn Jenin into an Alamo episode. Here, the Palestinian press was a more than willing partner in making Jenin a symbol of steadfastness and resistance.

Third, Palestinian editors were reluctant to publish information or photos not in line with this outlook. The Israeli press reported that the Israeli army made efforts to help civilians by (a) distributing food supplies, (b) providing oxygen and an electric generator to a Palestinian hospital, (c) transferring sick and wounded people to hospitals in Israel, (d) sending a technician to repair the damaged electricity network in Jenin, (e) repairing drinking-water pipes, and (f) operating a water well. No such items were reported in the Palestinian press. Instead, the Israeli army was portrayed as seeking to inflict as much senseless death, injury, humiliation, and physical destruction as possible. The questions this raise: Did these events not happen? Were they true or fabrications? Where is the truth in all this?

Fourth, Palestinian newspapers avoid publishing photos of Israeli victims, since the public might interpret this to mean they are sympathetic to the Israeli side. Whereas Palestinian victims of Israeli military operations were prominently covered with photos and detailed news coverage, Israeli victims of Palestinian violence were hardly reported and not covered on any human dimension. After the attack on the Passover seder in Netanya that precipitated the Jenin operation, not a single picture was published of a mourning Israeli relative of an Israeli victim or the faces of those killed in the attack to humanize the event. Rarely would the Palestinian press humanize Israeli victims of Palestinian attacks by giving their names, photos, backgrounds, and so on. The result was

that the Palestinian public did not empathize with Israeli suffering and loss, only with its own. After a suicide attack the Israeli press commonly shows pictures of, for instance, a paramedic evacuating one of the wounded, or a son crying over his father's coffin in a funeral, or a friend or wife grieving. But these are pictures the Palestinians do not see. The images Palestinians receive of suicide bombings are dehumanized and technical—the remains of a destroyed bus, or the rubble of a bombed site. The suffering of the other is not reflected at all in the Palestinian press; the other remains a statistical abstraction. For peace to become a reality, we need to bring tragedy and pain home to both peoples so that they will understand the absurdity of violence, since ultimately it is inevitable that we will be sitting at the negotiating table to reach a lasting comprehensive settlement.

Finally, the news coverage shows that Palestinian reporters were willing at times to use unreliable sources in reporting controversial news. For example, an exaggerated number of victims in the Jenin Camp were initially reported in the Palestinian press, using an unidentified Palestinian official as a source. Indeed, the alleged number of Palestinians killed in the Jenin refugee camp dropped from 5,000 to 3,000 to 500 to 300 to 100, and eventually to 58, nearly half of whom were armed fighters. This has resulted in a credibility gap even among Palestinians.

The upshot is that Palestinians now genuinely believe that there were massacres in Jenin. Books have already been published, and movies have been produced, that are based on that assumption. The Palestinians want to believe this and therefore do believe it, and to question this version of events is now taboo. What happened in Jenin is tragic and sad but reflecting the reality without the exaggeration would have been sufficient to draw international public support if that was the purpose.

In general, there is a tendency for Palestinian media to use sharp language and vivid descriptions, photos as well as editorial cartoons to give events a high emotional pitch. The aim is to influence Palestinian, Arab, and world public opinion. Overall this resulted in one-sided reporting.

I would now like to consider some of the mechanisms the Palestinian press has used. These mechanisms, in fact, fall into two categories: those used (a) when Palestinians are victims and those used (b) when Israelis are victims.

When Palestinians are victims, grief and suffering are highlighted. Headlines typically read, for instance: "'Martyrs and Wounded Are Everywhere': Eyewitness Tells of Jenin Camp Tragedy," or "Medical Sources Estimate the Number of Martyrs at over 100, of Wounded at about 200. The Number of Destroyed Homes May Rise to 50." Similar methods were used in the case of the Israeli assassination of Salah Shehadah in Gaza, which carried a toll of civilian casualties. To personalize the suffering, in such instances the names, ages, and close relatives of Palestinian victims are cited, and photos are used to further strengthen the impact.

Moreover, there is a tendency is to emphasize Arab and international solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Thus, typical headlines are: "More than One Million Moroccans Demonstrate in Solidarity with the Palestinians," or "Bahrain Decides to Send Urgent Aid Totaling $1 Million to the Palestinians for Food and Medicine," or "Indonesia Condemns Israeli Raid on Gaza." Also, Israeli solidarity is cited, as in this headline: "Arab-Jewish March in Solidarity with Jenin Camp Residents."

Another mechanism used when Palestinians are victims is to dehumanize the other. For instance, the Israeli army is portrayed very negatively in such headlines as: "IDF Shoots at Ambulances in Jenin Camp," "Remote-Control Bomb Weighing a Ton Was Used in Gaza," "Bulldozers of Israeli Occupation Continue to Demolish Schools, Shops, Clinics, Institutions, and Civilian Homes in the Camp." Terms like "criminal activity" and "unarmed" are used to connote a criminal assault on people who are defending their land and holy places.

A further common mechanism is to use quotes of Israeli sources in support of their views—as, for instance, in headlines such as: "An Israeli Military Source: 'Forbidding Medical Teams to Enter Jenin Camp Was a Mistake,'" or "Peres: 'Gaza Raid Was 100% Wrong and I Doubt Sharon's Commitment to Peace,'" or "Haim Ramon: 'Israeli Assassination of Salah Shehadah Has Damaged the Efforts to Reach a Cease-fire,'" or "Shulamit Aloni: 'Sharon and Mofaz Are Committing War Crimes.'"

A final mechanism used when Palestinians are victims is dramatization—as, for instance, in such reporting as: "At dawn on Tuesday in the Al-Darag complex in Gaza, there was a huge explosion, collapsing buildings, children flying out of their homes, screaming, blood, and death." The style does not befit a news item but, rather, a commercial for a

"sensational" movie.

When Israelis are victims, however, one common mechanism is to use the event to instill patriotism. Thus, a typical headline might be: "Hamas Military Wing Declares Responsibility for Successfully Executed Attack," and then the name of the bomber may be mentioned, adding personalization.

Another mechanism is to justify the violence against Israelis. In this context foreign sources may be highlighted, as in: "Blair's Wife: 'The Suicide Bombers Feel a Loss of Hope,'" or "Straw, British Foreign Minister, Declares: 'When youth sacrifice their lives, then we may feel sympathy for them. They must have been really desperate to reach that point.'"

Occasionally in the Palestinian press some degree of empathy for Israeli victims is expressed; such cases are, however, exceptions. A report on a bus bombing said that "one could see a corpse hanging from the crushed skeleton of the bus and also corpses on the ground." But nothing was mentioned about who these corpses were, nor were there any photos of them.

Another kind of exception is the occasional efforts by the press to suggest the futility of suicide bombings or of violence in general. Thus, there were headlines such as "Palestinian Leadership Strongly Condemns Suicide Operation in Netanya, Vows Severe Measures against Party Responsible." Last summer al-Quds published a full-page advertisement signed by many prominent Palestinian figures that condemned the suicide bombing and violence and called for an end to it.

In general, there are many problems in Palestinian news reporting. Any summary must emphasize the matter of "language use". Much dramatic vocabulary—such as "massacre," "horror," "aggression," "barbaric," "catastrophe," "atrocity," "criminal"—is used to describe Israeli actions. Palestinians "state" or "maintain" things, whereas Israelis make "claims." Religious terms like "martyr" are used to describe Palestinian victims, whereas Israeli victims are merely "dead."

A second overall problem is "accuracy". Thus, for instance, within a space of days the Palestinian press reported various numbers regarding homes demolished in Jenin. For example, on April 8, 2002, Al-Quds published a bulletin stating that the Israeli army had destroyed 51 homes in Jenin. On April 14, the number jumped to 1,400 homes.

Clearly, that much damage was not done in such a short period; the figure is obviously an exaggeration. Regarding the Shehadah assassination, it was reported the first day that "as a result of the bombing, more than 10 civilians were killed, among them a number of children, and more than 80 civilians were seriously wounded"; then later in the very same article, it was stated that 135 civilians had been wounded. On the first day after the raid, Al-Quds reported that Shehadah himself had not been harmed because he was not present at the time. The next day the headline spoke of "The Final 15 Martyrs, among Them the Military Commander of Hamas." In this case a correction was made because the individual in question was prominent; however, much inaccurate reporting goes uncorrected.

In another case, a headline read: "Ha'aretz: Peres Describes the Events in Jenin Camp as a Massacre." Yet the actual article in Ha'aretz stated: "a member of Peres's office explained that the foreign minister has expressed his fears of Palestinians trying to exploit the very fierce battles in Jenin to declare that the Israeli army committed a massacre." This kind of reporting affects the Palestinian readers, which tends not to read the detailed article thoroughly but to focus particularly on the headlines, photos, and editorial cartoons. A headline like the one just mentioned will instill in them a definite impression that Peres made such a statement.

The editorial cartoons, which happens to be very popular with the Palestinian public, tend to express anti-Israeli, anti-Oslo, and anti-American attitudes. On the other side it tends to be generally pro-Arafat, at times pro-reform, and consistently pro-Intifada. These, then, are the sentiments that the Palestinian public imbibes.

Attitudes routinely expressed in the Palestinian press include: "We are victims, they are aggressors"; "Our victims are a personal loss, their victims are statistics"; "Our actions are legitimate, their actions violate international law"; "Our aspirations are noble, their aspirations are despicable"; "Our cause is just, their cause is evil"; "We are peace lovers, they are warmongers"; "Our hands are clean, their hands are stained with our blood."

What lessons can be drawn from all this?

First, that what one reads in newspapers is not necessarily what happened, and one should treat the news with skepticism. News reporters and newspapers are not

perfect. Factual information as well as misinformation, accurate reporting as well as unfounded accusations and distortions, are printed regularly in the daily press (and are transmitted by TV and websites as well).

Second, access to news is directly related to the quality of the news. The more access a reporter has to the news, the better the coverage is likely to be. Undoubtedly, the processing of the news plays an important role as well.

Third, much of what we read reinforces the beliefs we already hold. Therefore, any news item that aims at changing our beliefs must confront not just political predispositions but cultural and social ones as well. The more evidence accumulates against our point of view, the more tenaciously we cling to it. To us, they are evil; to them, we are evil. There was no need for hard evidence to make the Palestinians believe that the Israelis committed large-scale atrocities in Jenin. Any evidence presented against Israelis only reinforced people's preexisting convictions.

What needs to be done? There are many things that Palestinian journalists could learn to do.

They should think in terms of accuracy, objectivity, clarity, and honesty in reporting the news. Respect for a newspaper is based on those qualities; whereas inaccurate, vague, and biased reporting, as well as efforts to de-legitimize the other, threaten a newspaper's credibility with its audience. A reporter should distance himself from his people and culture in reporting the news, because bias generates negative perspectives, stereotypes, and dishonesty.

Second, highly emotional terms such as "massacre," "catastrophe," or "atrocity" should be banished from the headlines or the text to avoid harmful effects that may lead to tragic consequences. The journalists should be aware of the potential harm that each news item may cause to the news audience. They should anticipate, based on their experience, that exaggerated terminology will intensify fear among the public and could prompt either panicked flight or violent revenge behavior. In general, stories involving high drama and violence should be filtered and toned down so as to prevent negative public reactions.

Third, the same caveat applies to the use of photos. It is notable that the day

before the lynching of the two Israeli reservists in Ramallah, the Palestinian papers published horrifying photos of a Palestinian tortured to death by Israeli settlers. In my view, much of the violence that has occurred later was greatly incited by such pictures.

Fourth, it is important that news sources be chosen very carefully, since the information they provide will not only be reported in today's press but will become tomorrow's history. Twenty or thirty years in the future, people will look back at the newspapers of today as a source of documentation for studies or books; therefore, we need to be careful about what we write today. This pertains all the more when dealing with conflict or crisis that is disconcerting or distressing.

Fifth, reporters should keep in mind the public's right to know when covering the news. To avoid reporting an event because it humanizes the other, or conflicts with public assumptions, will do more harm than good. Journalists need to be professional in the sense that they should report the facts as they see them, not only the negative facts. For instance, I am aware of cases where Israeli soldiers at checkpoints showed a human side, but such incidents are never reported. Once, on an Israeli news program, I saw a story about an Israeli military truck that had overturned in Anata near Jerusalem. Palestinians rushed to help the soldiers, carrying the wounded, calling for ambulances. But for the most part, coverage of such incidents is lacking in the media. Journalists, however, should not close their eyes on one dimension of reality. If they see something objectionable, they should report on it, but if they see an encouraging flash of humanity, they should also report on that as well. Otherwise they are not engaging in real, honest reporting. I am not speaking here of the spirit of Oslo, but rather of the spirit of journalism, of quality journalism. The press, however, has widened the gap between the two peoples and abetted the violence by reporting only on what is negative and violent. Let the Palestinian journalists convey the human story of the Israelis, and let the Israeli journalists convey the human story of the Palestinians. This may be idealistic, but it is necessary for democracy and peace.

Sixth, Palestinian journalists need to develop their competency and professionalism by attending training workshops and seminars. Good news reporting depends critically on the competence of the journalists. Yet the owners of the Palestinian newspapers are reluctant to send journalists to workshops because of the cost and time

involved. Given that these journalists are poorly paid for their work, another reason for that reluctance is the fear that if the journalist does receive good training and improves in quality, he will leave for a better job. These are realities that need to be changed.

Finally, reporters should reduce the emphasis on conflict in covering the news, and increase the emphasis on stories of conciliation, forgiveness, and tolerance. I myself am biased toward peace and conciliation; if it is traditionally not the role of the journalist to pursue those ends, I feel that it should become one. Although that does not mean journalists should refrain from reporting on crimes, the concept that "crimes are news that sell papers and good deeds are no news" seems to me totally absurd. Good deeds should be the news, the main news, and the crimes should jump to the fifth or sixth page, even if the public has high interest in them.

Let me conclude with this optimistic note, if we want to emerge from our crisis and achieve peace for our children, then we need to focus on conciliation, forgiveness, and tolerance in reporting the news.