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

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The Structure of the Palestinian Media

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Presenting an overview of the Palestinian media is a difficult task. It is complicated both for historical reasons and because we are now in a state of flux stemming from the general situation, especially during the last six months.

When Palestinians face difficulties, whether in daily life or with officials, and want to raise the issues in the media, they usually do not turn to the local media but rather to pan-Arab satellite channels. Those channels are, in fact, much more popular with the Palestinians than the local media, to a degree that is perhaps unique in the world.

Presumably, in a situation where the different institutions of the society have collapsed, there would be a high demand on the media. Yet people turn to the international media for the simple reason that they know they will not find a listening ear in the local Palestinian media. Given such a lack of trust, one might expect that the population in fact would not read or watch this local media. I believe that, generally speaking, this is indeed the situation in the Palestinian territories.

We have in the West Bank and Gaza, with a population of three and a half million, three daily newspapers: *Al-Quds*, based in Jerusalem; *Al-Ayam*, based in Ramallah; and *Al-Hayad Al-Jadida*, also based in Ramallah. *Al-Quds* is the largest and most popular, with a maximum daily circulation of twenty thousand. *Al-Ayam*'s daily circulation is about ten thousand, and *Al-Hayad Al-Jadida*'s is about

five thousand. Thus, between the three newspapers we are speaking of a total daily circulation of about 35,000 copies, perhaps rising to fifty thousand in special circumstances, for a population of three and a half million—which comes to about twenty copies per thousand households. According to studies by UNESCO and other bodies, this is very low—50 percent lower than in Uganda, for instance. Yet, paradoxically, people in the Palestinian territories are strongly interested in local issues and politics. But they rely little on their own media as a source of information.

The figures I mentioned represent a decline of about 30%-40% since the confrontation erupted in September 2000. Access to towns and villages is often blocked, and under such circumstances distributing newspapers becomes difficult or impossible. Sometimes the towns can be reached but not the villages. Thus, the circulation of these newspapers has dropped even lower during the recent period of confrontation.

A survey has also found that only about 12 percent of Palestinian adults rely on the Palestinian press as a source of information. This suggests that many of those who do buy the newspapers may be using them for other features, such as the horoscope, for example, but not as an information source. Moreover, only 7 percent buy newspapers on five or more days per week; most people buy them only one or two times per week.

There is no access to Jordanian newspapers in the Palestinian Authority, nor, for instance, to a London-based paper such as *Al-Hayad*. In addition to the local press there are only some Egyptian newspapers and magazines, mainly entertainment magazines.

Who owns the three newspapers? *Al-Quds* is owned, and also run, by a prominent Palestinian businessman named Mahmud Absulov. Because it is published in East Jerusalem, it still must undergo military censorship each day in Israel's Government Press Office, unlike the other two newspapers, which are published in the West Bank and are free of Israeli censorship. *Al-Quds* was established in 1968, one year after the 1967 war.

As for *Al-Ayam*, it is owned purely by private business interests in the Palestinian territories and abroad, and was established two months before the Israeli withdrawal from Ramallah and the other West Bank cities at the end of 1995. Thus, *Al-Ayam* is part of the new generation of the Palestinian press. Its content, however, does not differ from the Palestinian press before 1995 or even before Oslo. The old, pre-Oslo newspapers were mostly subsidized by the PLO, and most of them were closed during 1991-1992 as a result of PLO financial difficulties after the Gulf War. The only one of the old newspapers that remained profitable and survived was *Al-Quds*, which was not mainly dependent on the PLO subsidies.

Al-Hayad Al-Jadida is also new and is officially owned by the PA. All its employees are on the Authority payroll, though they have some autonomy in administrative matters. The editor in chief of *Al-Hayad Al-Jadida* also has the title of director-general of the Palestinian Ministry of Information. Although he has a certain room to maneuver, the PA sets the paper's official policy on external issues.

For the newspapers in general, there is a wide range of freedom on domestic issues, allowing the editor in chief to leave his stamp. There is no official PA censor who monitors what will appear in the newspapers the next day. That function was canceled by the Law of Press and Publishing enacted in May 1995. Nevertheless, the same red lines and the same overall PA policy pertain to all three newspapers, despite their varied ownership.

Greater freedom of the press, and democratization in general, is the task of the civil society, of the various organizations and political parties that believe in the need for democracy. Often, though, these bodies are not certain how to go about the endeavor. They tend to expect that Arafat himself will grant greater freedom. Sometimes Israeli or foreign journalists who cover the reality in the PA seem mystified as to why democratic freedoms are so limited, why we are not living according to the standards of Sweden. The simple answer is that we are three hundred years behind Sweden; we have not yet had the chance to develop the internal institutions that would enable

freedom of the press to become a reality.

Perhaps 70 percent of the content of the newspapers is about the global politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including statements made by Palestinian, Israeli, and American officials. There is never, however, coverage of such local problems as health services, social and family problems, crime, murders, and so on. Such matters simply are not covered in the Palestinian newspapers. For instance, the last PA budget that was approved before the confrontation began in September 2000, that is, the budget for 2000, was covered in one of the newspapers with only the smallest mention on the front page. But there was no discussion of what important areas were addressed by the budget, which indicated the PA's policy toward different parts of the population. The public could not discuss how much the PA had allocated for security, health, education, and so on, because the newspapers provided no information on such matters. Indeed, people generally do not have information about the potential candidates or existing members of the parliament; they have no basis on which to judge them in the elections. So they choose on the basis of personality, looks, clan affiliation, and so on, which is not helpful to the process of building democracy in the society. As for investigative reporting, it is totally absent from the Palestinian press, and there is no tradition whatsoever of investigative reporting.

Even with regard to the main focus, the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the perspectives presented still tend to be limited. There is a great deal of information about Israel—Israeli policies, Israeli officials, Israeli opinion, and so on. But I believe both societies still fail to perceive each other in human-interest terms, which leads to ever greater, mutual dehumanization. The Palestinian media have discussed the suicide bombings—their effects on Israel, on Israeli attitudes toward the Palestinians—but not from a human angle. It remains, in my view, a grave problem that the Palestinian press does not show the loss of life and tragedy, the human effects on the other side. The Palestinian newsrooms have held difficult discussions on the suicide bombings—whether they constitute martyrdom, whether they

are positive, and so on. Last summer a petition against the suicide bombings was signed by prominent Palestinian intellectuals and other figures, and it was published in the newspapers. But I, personally, do not think this is sufficient. I believe that unless and until the media of both sides can cover each other as human beings, we will have a serious problem.

Another factor affecting the Palestinian press is corruption. Although Palestinian society has a certain level of democracy and freedom of expression, it is mainly a freedom of flawed information. For instance, a newspaper may get a certain subsidy from the regime, in return for which it is expected to close its eyes and maintain friendly relations with the regime. For the owner of the newspaper, this becomes his interest as a businessman. Meanwhile, ethical standards of media are forgotten. Not much can be done about this at present. A solution might be to have alternative media that could challenge this businessman to produce better journalism. But who, in present-day Palestinian society, could create such alternative media? It would have to be those who believe in the need for more democracy and freedom of information.

Palestinian intellectuals have some access to the press, though generally they prefer to write for *Al-Ayam* even though *Al-Quds* has a far larger circulation. Since its inception *Al-Ayam* has sought to be the newspaper of the intellectuals and has cultivated a pool of intellectuals to write regularly for it. Nevertheless, the editor in chief exerts considerable control over what views can be published. I myself was a columnist for *Al-Ayam*, but ceased writing for it after some of my articles were simply canceled—and I was not writing about politics, only about local issues. Yet, notwithstanding, the intellectuals prefer to write for *Al-Ayam*.

Also worth noting is that because *Al-Ayam* has close ties to the Authority and *Al-Hayad Al-Jadida* is government owned, they feel that they know their limits better, and one can write in them more freely. But *Al-Quds,* which is privately owned, lives in fear. They do not want to have anyone calling them the next day to ask why a certain item was

published. *Al-Ayam* and *Al-Jadida*, however, know better how to protect themselves because they are within the system.

Neither *Al-Quds* nor *Al-Hayad* pays anything for an outside contribution. *Al-Ayam* has a small pool of five contributors who earn perhaps a thousand shekels for four articles a month.

Because of their bias and limitations, then, these newspapers are not widely popular among the public. A survey conducted in August 2000—before the confrontation, when the situation was still normal—showed that only 13 percent of Palestinians would rely on Palestinian newspapers as an information source for formulating their opinions on different issues, whereas 65 percent said they would rely on TV.

There are, in fact, some thirty TV stations in the West Bank and Gaza. And yet, in the same survey over 55 percent of the Palestinians said that they rely on non-Palestinian broadcast media. This comprised mainly the pan-Arab satellite stations, which are based in the Arab world or Europe, as well as the Israeli Arabic radio service, though not Israeli TV.

In other words, a population that has a strong need for information does not rely on its own media. This leads to a very difficult situation for the Palestinians in general. Although many people are interested in building democracy in the society, they do not rely on the local media and are not informed about their own local problems, which are not explored in the foreign media they consume. And the local media does not cover those problems in any case. Thus, what exists is a strange state of affairs in which the population is detached from its own issues that it needs to face.

Related to this is the fact that Ramallah has now become the center of the society, and journalists, and the population at large, who are outside of Ramallah feel that they are being ignored by that center. It used to be Jerusalem; after Oslo, it became Gaza-Ramallah; now it is Ramallah. And people in locations far from Ramallah feel that they have even less chance to be integrated into public discourse via the media. Although this situation partly reflects the closures and military restrictions, those living in Ramallah have a better chance to find work

in the newspapers or satellite stations even if they lower qualifications, and this breeds resentment elsewhere.

The boom in establishing different satellite stations began in 1991. The first was NBC, then DRT (Arab radio and TV), then some Lebanese stations that targeted the entire Arab world and not any one country in particular. Pan-Arab stations of that kind try to be more much more professional and more liberal than the local TV stations, which usually are heavily supervised by the local information ministries in the Arab countries. The pan-Arab stations have some impact in terms of widening the democratic tendency.

In the early 1990s, the local Israeli cable companies began to use the signals of the pan-Arab satellite stations to sell them as a package to the Arab Israelis. Palestinian companies in the West Bank followed suit, and began to retransmit the pan-Arab news and entertainment programs to the local audience. Such companies were able to manage financially by selling commercials to local businesses.

Notwithstanding the vague legal situation that prevailed between the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993 and the establishment of the PA in 1995, twenty local stations were established with the aim of transmitting pan-Arab satellite broadcasts. By early April 2002 there were thirty such stations, in addition to the PA governmental station and the PA satellite station.

But again, for the most part, these stations do not have the financial resources to produce their own programs about the local community. On the other hand, there are now a total of eighty-eight Arab satellite stations. The local population receives NBC, Al-Jazira, and other such channels through transmission by the local stations. Some of these local stations also present some limited information about the specific towns from which they broadcast. And there is one station, which is not owned privately but rather by Al-Quds University, that can be considered a community TV station and has a somewhat different agenda from the others. Most of these stations have encountered serious problems since the Israeli invasion of the West Bank in April 2002. Some of them were physically damaged in the

searches and hostilities, and some have been closed at times by the Israeli army. The difficult economic situation during the last two years, in which some of the stations have had to rely on local businesses that are themselves experiencing serious difficulties, has led some of these stations to close as well.

Undoubtedly, the combination of an abundance of local outlets, a paucity of national media that in any case is not trusted, and an abundance of international media has had an effect of fragmenting the society. This phenomenon is yet to be studied thoroughly, but it exists nonetheless. The only remedy would be a normalization of the situation that Palestinian society is living in. For example, from 1999 through the first part of 2000 there was an improvement in the economic situation that might have led to an improvement of the local media as well. Compared to previous years, local media began to flourish. But the resurgence of the conflict interrupted this process. In a normal situation, the media could establish its role in the society and deal with local issues. But instead the whole society is detached from its normal life, and lacks information about its daily reality as a basis for forming valid opinions about that reality, the political parties, the internal political processes, and so on. And such detachment leads, in turn, to fragmentation. Thus, for the past two years almost nobody from Nablus has been able to reach Ramallah, for political and security reasons. The two urban centers are like separate islands, with no public forums or deliberations that link them, and there have been no national elections that could unite these and other communities in common concerns.

In addition to the three daily newspapers and about thirty local TV stations, the Palestinians also have twelve local, privately owned radio stations that broadcast nationwide. For the most part they do not retransmit material from the satellite stations, relying more on songs and entertainment. They offer talk shows and press reviews, but no news per se. For news bulletins Palestinians turn to the government-owned Voice of Palestine and to Israeli radio in Arabic. There are also the BBC and Montecarlo services in Arabic, but the Palestinian and Israeli radio stations are the most popular.

There are also about ten to fourteen specialized press supplements in the PA that are not produced by the daily newspapers but rather by different NGOs. These NGOs focus on various fields including women's rights, the environment, human rights, and so on. The supplements are produced weekly or biweekly and are distributed mostly with *Al-Ayam*, and to a lesser extent with *Al-Quds*. Despite dealing with those important issues, these supplements tend to be unattractively designed and propagandistic and are not very popular.

Up to the invasion last spring there were also seven monthly or biweekly magazines, most of them belonging to different political parties. These, too, are propagandistic, and editorially old-fashioned. Generally the parties that own these magazines use them to preach to the converted, those who already support the parties. The magazines that are owned by opposition parties are not effective in challenging official policy, and do not engage in investigative journalism. After April 2002 these magazines fell into serious financial difficulties and ceased publication, but they may eventually recover.

As for the Internet, it is believed in the Arab world that the Palestinians have been the most successful in using the Internet for journalistic purposes. This does not involve mainly news but rather the expression of opinions. In the Arab world in general, the Internet is mostly used for business purposes. For the Palestinians there are some important websites where those who feel unable to publish viewpoints in the local Palestinian press can express them more freely. Only the elite, however, has access; the wide public still has no access at present.

Palestinian Islamic activists also use the Internet as a kind of information and propaganda network for themselves. There are no indications so far that this amounts to much more than preaching to the converted. Although at one point Hamas and Islamic Jihad obtained licenses to publish weekly newspapers in the West Bank and Gaza, these were subsequently shut down.

The situation of the Palestinian media, then, particularly the newspapers, TV stations, and magazines, is negative. One important

reason is that before 1995, all that the West Bank Palestinians had were several newspapers; nothing else was permitted. Therefore, traditions of professional journalism in general, and of professional broadcast journalism in particular, were unable to develop. When the first TV stations were established, simply finding people with sufficient know-how was a challenge.

As for the newspapers that existed from 1967 to 1995, to have a newspaper one first had to apply for a license to the Israeli military administration in Beit El, then to the Israeli civil administration. Acquiring such a license required a security clearance, and even after it was obtained, every night all the material in the newspaper had to be presented to the military censorship in West Jerusalem for approval. Hence those working for these newspapers lived with the fear of the censor, and internalized a self-censor to make their lives easier.

The Israeli censor, however, was not the only one. There was also an ideological, political censor in the minds of these journalists, since most of the newspapers were indirectly subsidized by the PLO. The journalists, then, had a mission, but not a professional one—rather, the political mission of disseminating the ideas of the PLO. In other words, they were political activists more than they were professional journalists. This meant that no true traditions of journalism, or serious understandings of the role of the press in society, were able to develop.

The other main factor is economic. To this day, the Palestinian media must function amid a very weak economy. A one-minute advertisement on a local TV channel costs just $5; an advertisement in a local daily newspaper, only about $70. Thus the income from advertising is quite low. This has been the situation not just since 2000, but in general; today it is all the worse. Newspapers are not able to hire full-time journalists who would work for one newspaper only, producing an article every one or two days. Although most Palestinian journalists work for the local press, they also freelance for newspapers based in the Gulf, Europe, or elsewhere. They work under time pressure and the material they submit is generally not of high quality. The average monthly salary for a full-time journalist with five to ten

years' experience comes to about two thousand shekels.

Given that most of the pre-Oslo Palestinian journalists were actually political activists, it is not surprising that upon the establishment of the PA they sought stable positions in the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Culture, and the like so that they could stop working as journalists. The new, post-Oslo newspapers, and media in general, sought a generation with a fresh perspective. Indeed, the training of journalists became very popular in the Palestinian territories in this period.

The main venues for training are the Media Institute of Bir Zeit University and the Modern Media Institute of Al-Quds University. For a while there were high hopes that the Palestinian training centers for journalists offered a solution to the problems of the Palestinian media. BA programs in these institutions were producing new journalists, and journalists already in the profession were learning new skills. Experts were invited from all over the world to lecture. The problem, however, was that once these journalists went to work in the PA, they encountered all sorts of professional limitations. This was true both for newspapers and TV. They found they had learned skills that they could not apply. True, some found themselves working as the freelance correspondent for, say, an Arab newspaper in the Gulf rather than as a reporter for *Al-Ayam*. But these people were not trained so as to improve the quality of media in the Gulf, but rather to cover the local issues in the PA, which by and large they are not doing.

Instead they had to cope with the new, difficult political situation in the PA. When the PA emerged, there was a conflict within it as well as a conflict between it and the society. The question was whether to move toward democracy or, as in most Arab countries, toward dictatorship referred to as democracy. The conflict within the Authority manifested itself when the same journalist would be arrested by the Authority and also protected by other elements within it, which in fact occurred several times.

There are, basically, two main generations of Palestinian journalists: those who previously worked with the PLO in the diaspora,

especially in Beirut and then Cyprus, and those who were under occupation. Those who were abroad were culturally open-minded because they were in contact with different cultures. Beirut was the center for Arab culture and also for interaction with Europe. Politically, however, those journalists were very much attached to the PLO line, and indeed were masters of propaganda. When they came back to the West Bank, this was all they knew of journalism and they continued in that mode. Journalism for them means writing about how great is the Palestinian cause and how evil is the occupation, without paying attention to information, evidence, and so on. They did not put a premium on political tolerance. On the other hand, those who grew up in the West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem and used to work for the newspapers supervised or subsidized by the PLO are less professional in terms of skills.

In any case, in the first year of the PA members of certain groups were liable to arrest by the authorities: those accused of collaborating with Israel; the Islamic opposition; and journalists, in that order. Indeed, twenty-two journalists were arrested in that year on various grounds. At the same time, journalists fought this trend along with liberal-oriented members of the regime. All of this led to the passing of the above-mentioned Law of Press and Publishing in 1995, which represented a compromise between different views of how much freedom the Palestinian press should enjoy.

Nevertheless, the reality of the arrests during the first year intensified the old self-censorship. Although the Press Law improved the situation, it did not suffice to eliminate anyone's self-censor. It was still up to each individual journalist to decide whether to resist the self-censor, whether to fight for democracy and risk being arrested.

A further problem was that the Authority, and especially President Arafat, would do favors for individuals who had long served them, whether abroad or in the territories, by giving them positions in Palestinian TV and radio even though they had no experience as journalists. This means that the Palestinian TV and radio outlets are partially staffed by unprofessional workers. There is, in fact, a bitter

joke among the Palestinians that Palestinian TV is watched only by Israel's General Security Service for purposes of monitoring the incitement against Israel—whereas the Palestinians actually spare themselves the experience of watching it.

The last thing I will mention is the social aspect. Generally speaking, social issues are absent from the Palestinian media. Why? It may stem from the fact that during the occupation in the 1970s and 1980s, the PLO subsidized the newspapers and determined their agenda. The subject was the occupation and what it was inflicting on us, and social issues were simply neglected. Over time people became detached from their own social issues, and that is still the situation that prevails today. As a corollary, there is no investigative reporting and no tradition of it. Instead there is the same news about the conflict, or nowadays about Iraq as well, that was shown yesterday on an Israeli or pan-Arab satellite station and nothing more.