

Fact Sheet 5: Integrity of the Press in the Middle East – a Survey

Introduction

In light of the treatment and actions of journalists during the Iraqi war, the Prism Group has conducted a survey on the overall integrity and freedom of the press in the Middle East. Our conclusions are that freedom of the press, a concept touted in much of the Western world, is sadly lacking in most of the Middle East. In some cases, some sources have suggested that given the difficulties of operating in largely non-democratic countries, leading Western news agencies themselves have failed to live up to western standards. Elsewhere, the right of freedom of the press is granted according to the law of the land, but is largely ignored in practice.

Journalists Located Overseas

At any given moment, there are more than 3000 foreign accredited journalists in the Middle East – approximately 600 in Israel and the Palestinian Authority areas alone (Tarik Kafala, [BBC online](#)). Today, journalists stationed in Middle Eastern countries can be found traveling in tanks, reporting from the front lines of a battle in progress, and even attending clandestine meetings of terrorist organizations.

Recent revelations into the actions of some multinational news agencies has damaged the industry and led to charges that priorities have shifted and that the desire to “get” the story has led to questionable actions on the part of journalists. In some cases, human rights violations have been ignored for fear that reporting such instances might jeopardize the news organizations right to continue operating in a country. For example, in a recent opinion piece in the New York Times, CNN executive Eason Jordan acknowledged that the network regularly covered up stories of Iraqi torture and atrocities. ([The News We Kept to Ourselves](#)).

CNN is not the only news organization to have its actions questioned. In a recent [National Review article](#), the integrity of The New York Times itself has been called into question. According to former London Telegraph Middle East correspondent Tom Gross, “The distortions of the media are depressing not only because they are untrue, but because they set back the day when there might be peace and coexistence between Israeli and Palestinian.”

Local Reporters

According to Middle East expert Daniel Pipes, journalists regard the Arab world as the “arc of silence.” (Daniel Pipes, *The Long Shadow: Culture and Politics in the Middle East*, NJ: Transaction Publishers 1990, p. 278.) This arc of silence extends itself to the severe limitation of freedom of movement and which results in the inability to accurately portray facts on the ground. The annual reports compiled by the US State Department support this claim, stating that most Arab states ‘deny their citizens basic freedoms of political expression, speech, press and due process’.([U.S. State Department](#), *Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999*.) The *Arab Human Development Report* published by Arab researchers from the UN concluded that out of the seven regions of the world, Arab countries had the lowest ranking for the media’s “voice and accountability” (*Arab Human Development Report, UN Development Report, 2002*, NY: UN, 2002).

Report card on the Freedom of the Press in the Middle East

This report researched the level of freedom of the press in seven different areas of the Middle East. In many of these places, freedom of the press may be guaranteed under the law, but non-existent in practice. In other places, the laws ignore the issue entirely. In most of these countries, merely criticizing the government can result in a jail sentence or worse. Following the Iraqi war, many stories have surfaced about people who were overheard criticizing Saddam Hussein and were then thrown into jail. Similar documentation can be found in the reports of Amnesty International, Transparency International and other leading monitoring organizations. Our sources for the following include the US State Department, Reporters without Borders and other organizations dedicated to monitoring and promoting freedom of the press.

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- ❑ Freedom of speech and of the press are guaranteed by the Constitution, but are often withheld in practice.
- ❑ The government owns and controls the three largest newspapers and holds a monopoly on printing and distribution, and punishes those who criticize them.

Iran

- ❑ After the election of President Khatami in 1997, the independent press played an increasingly important role, providing a forum to debate reform in the society.
- ❑ However, basic legal safeguards for freedom of expression are lacking, and the independent press has been subjected to arbitrary enforcement measures by elements of the government – such as the judiciary -- which see in such debates a threat to their own hold on power.

Israel

- ❑ Reporters Without Borders, the France-based, media organization funded primarily by the European Community, recently published its first [world-wide press freedom index](#). Despite the organization's negative attitude towards Israel, it did note that 'the (Israeli) government respects the local media's freedom of expression'.
- ❑ Israel is the only country in the Middle East, whose standards can be compared to Western countries in its treatment of journalists. ([Transparency International](#))

Lebanon

- ❑ The Constitution offers freedom of speech and the press; however, the government limits this right in practice, particularly by intimidating journalists and broadcasters into practicing self-censorship.

Palestinian Authority

- ❑ PA security forces have infringed on citizens' rights to privacy and restricted freedom of speech and the press by closing down media outlets, banning publications or broadcasts, and harassing or detaining members of the media. ([Reporters Without Borders Worldwide press freedom index 2002](#))
- ❑ Commenting on the lynching of two Israeli reservists inside a Palestinian police station in October 2000, Nasser Atta, a Palestinian producer with ABC, told Ted Koppel's "Nightline" how his cameraman was beaten and his crew prevented from filming the grisly murders. (Judy Balint, "Palestinian Harassment of Journalists," Worldnetdaily.com, February 25, 2001.)
- ❑ Palestinian security forces also surrounded a Polish TV crew who were beaten and relieved of their tapes. (*Ibid.*)
- ❑ Following the September 11, 2001, terror attacks on the US, an AP photographer's life was threatened by Palestinian officials for taking photographs of widespread Palestinian street celebrations. Arafat's Cabinet Secretary, Ahmed Abdel Rahman, reportedly said, "The Palestinian Authority cannot guarantee the life of the cameraman if the footage was broadcast." ("[AP protests threats to freelance cameraman who filmed Palestinian rally](#)," September 12, 2001.)
- ❑ According to the PA information minister, Abed Rabbo, "Palestinian national interests would come before freedom of the press." (*The Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs – 'The Influence of Palestinian Organizations on Foreign News Reporting' by Dan Diker Vol. 2, No. 23– 27 March 2003*)
- ❑ The well-known film of the supposed murder of 12-year-old Mohammed Jura near the beginning of the second Intifada has now been proven to have been tampered with. A thorough IDF investigation, which was issued three weeks after the incident (and confirmed later by a German TV crew), showed that the

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bullets fired at the boy had come from the direction of Palestinian gunmen who had attacked an Israeli guard post.

Saudi Arabia

- ❑ Freedom of speech and the press are severely limited.
- ❑ Criticizing Islam or the Royal family is illegal.
- ❑ Television, radio, internet and literature are all heavily censored.

Syria

- ❑ Freedom of speech and of the press are granted by law, but severely restricted.
- ❑ Any information published opposes "the goals of the revolution" is punishable by lengthy jail sentences.
- ❑ The state uses every means to control the media and stifle any dissenting voice (Reporters Without Borders Worldwide press freedom index 2002)
- ❑ All press industries are owned and operated by the government.

Summary

Some international news agencies have determined that being able to report from a certain country is more important than what is reported. This has led to the sad situation in which major stories are not revealed. The ethics and integrity of several well known journalists have been called into question as a result of their willingness to compromise on the truth, their desire to report some of the facts, knowing that reporting them all would result in their deportation, or worse.

Others have been accused of favoritism of one side or another, further calling into question their impartiality and ability to truly report the news in a fair and balanced manner.

It is hoped that the vast majority of the world really wants to be able to trust the media. For those people, and for all of us, the real question to ask now, as the Wall Street Journal put it on April 11th, 2003, is: (Now that we know that journalists often do not report accurately on events in the Middle East) "what are ... news organizations failing to tell us about other thuggish regimes, from communist Cuba to the Palestinian Authority?"

There is little freedom of the press in the Middle East, as judged by western standards. Based on our studies, freedom of the press in the Middle East ranges from countries such as Saudi Arabia and Syria, which practice severe censorship to the point of imprisonment to countries such as Israel where the values are similar to those of western countries such as England, the United States, or France.

The Prism Group is a non-governmental organization, founded in 2002 to help clarify issues dealing with the Middle East. The Prism Group is dedicated to presenting a spectrum of viewpoints, promoting a better understanding of the political and social realities in the region.