

How Much Don't We Know?

Government-Imposed Constraints on Middle East Media Coverage

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Brief Analysis

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Of the seventeen countries covered by the New York Times' Cairo bureau, only a few are accessible without constraints: Kuwait, Jordan, and, more recently and to a lesser extent, Lebanon and Bahrain. The most interesting countries in the region from a reportorial standpoint are Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and all of them have very restrictive visa policies. Entering these countries is not impossible, however. The question is how to deal with the authorities and how to write about what one has observed in a given country.

First of all, little words can make huge differences. During Israel's incursion in Lebanon in 1996, the lead sentence in my New York Times article read, "The Israeli army fired an artillery barrage into a United Nations peacekeeping camp today. The attack, which Israel said came in response to rocket mortar fire. . . ." In contrast, the Washington Post described "Israeli artillery shells fired in retaliation for a rocket barrage slammed into a UN compound." Evidently, the Post's wording upset the Syrians, and the author was banned from entering the country for years. In other cases, it was I who upset governments. While in Iraq, I visited a camp of the Iranian opposition group Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK). The rather light story I wrote about the visit upset the Iranian government, for Tehran considers MEK its number-one enemy. Consequently, I was banned from entering Iran for nearly nine months and could not cover President Muhammad Khatami's election. I was permitted to return only after writing a carefully drafted letter to the Iranian government in which I apologized not for writing the article, but for any misunderstandings it may have caused.

Even if foreign journalists are not banned from entering a particular Middle Eastern country, they may suffer harsh criticism in the state-affiliated media. This happened to me in Iran in 1998, when I was accused of being a spy and blamed for anti-Islamic attitudes.

All of these incidents demonstrate that journalists covering the Middle East should be very cautious. This does not necessarily mean that they should pull their punches. Rather, they must maintain a balance between writing interesting stories and avoiding negative consequences. Is any one story worth being barred from reentering a country and from further reporting? Although journalists need not restrict themselves to writing flattering stories, they can try to be polite and considerate toward governments by putting more official quotes into their articles. Host governments must be persuaded that they can get more positive stories than negative ones by granting entry to journalists. Hence, reporting on a Middle Eastern country is a question of tradeoffs. In the end, journalists have to decide for themselves, according to their own priorities, what to write about and what to omit.

Although journalists should not change what they write to suit a government, they may choose to wait until the right moment to report a particular story. For instance, it may be wise to delay writing about certain matters until one has left the country in question. Moreover, it may be inappropriate to report information if it could put lives at risk. In other words, the real challenge often arises after visiting a country. The guiding principle is to be extremely cautious

because missteps can have severe consequences.

KHALED ABU TOAMEH

The Palestinian Authority (PA) imposes constraints on media coverage in its territory. When the PA moved into Gaza and the West Bank in 1994, one of its first activities was to assume control over the media by cracking down on independent Palestinian media outlets (i.e., those not affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization). Some journalists were imprisoned; others lost their jobs when newspapers were shut down. PA restrictions on the media remain in effect, taking different forms (e.g., confiscation of videotapes or journalists' notes).

Nevertheless, the situation in the Palestinian territories is much better than that in many Middle Eastern states, particularly Syria and Saddam Husayn's Iraq. There are no restrictions on journalists' movements, in part because of the lack of Palestinian border enforcement. Yet, the Palestinian Ministry of Information closely follows the work of foreign journalists and even established an office at the Erez checkpoint for those entering the Gaza Strip (although this office is now closed).

Concern about the PA's reaction is not the main reason for limited reporting by Palestinian journalists on certain important developments in the West Bank and Gaza. Rather, such limitations are often imposed from within. Many Palestinian journalists see themselves as part of the national cause and hence do not report on matters that they think are irrelevant or harmful to that cause.

Foreign journalists face acute problems in the territories as well. Much of the reporting from the West Bank and Gaza is by foreign journalists. Indeed, my main activity is to take foreign journalists based in Israel or elsewhere on trips through these territories, showing them the relevant places, providing for translation, and making other necessary arrangements. In effect, foreign journalists are dependent on Palestinian journalists. Yet, the latter are often more vulnerable than the former. For instance, an article published by a foreign journalist after a visit to the territories can cause serious problems for those Palestinians who accompanied him or her, often unbeknownst to the journalist in question. Such problems may lead to a sort of Palestinian self-censorship.

Ironically, journalists in the West Bank and Gaza are probably more affected by Palestinian restrictions than by Israeli restrictions. The Israeli military has made a lot of progress on this issue; accredited Palestinian journalists have little problem reporting from wherever they want.

The situation for media in the West Bank and Gaza improved slightly in the wake of Israel's Operation Defensive Shield, perhaps due to the weakening of Palestinian forces. More Palestinians are now inclined to speak out. This does not mean that the Palestinian security apparatus has lost control over the media, however. The Palestinian media suffer from censorship, and foreign media are subject to various restrictive measures (e.g., confiscation of footage).

In short, there are many professional and qualified journalists trying to do their job in the territories, but they are afraid because of the pressures. In theory, the guiding principle is simple: journalists have to report the truth, which means they have to observe events and write or talk about them freely. In practice, however, the truth does not come through in much of the reporting on the Palestinian territories, whether because of intimidation or voluntary bias.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Michael Schmidmayr.

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