

15 July

Roundtable with a presentation by George Hawatmeh, The Jordan Times, Amman

Topic: Media and Jordanian-Palestinian Relations

Participants: PASSIA Staff; Maral Kaprielian, European Commission, Jerusalem; Dr. Riad Malki, Panorama Center; Hania Bitar, The Jerusalem Times; Terry Boullata, WATC; and Dr. Nazmi Al-Ju'beh, Birzeit University.

SUMMARY

George Hawatmeh started by stating that there has been a great deal of cynicism about Jordanian-Palestinian relations, especially in the international media. This may have made the conflict seem greater than it actually is. Yet the goals of the two sides have been complicated by the electoral victory of Netanyahu.

He noted the differences in the Palestinian and Jordanian media. The PLC discusses contentious issues frankly, but the media does not cover these discussions. Meanwhile in Jordan, the media, while ultimately subject to censorship, covers almost everything. Much of the censorship comes elsewhere as the parliament's discussions usually do not really address difficult issues. Much of the problem in Jordan is that the press sees itself as a reflection of society rather than as a watchdog: thus there is very little thoughtful, critical analysis.

As far as the question of Palestine, the Jordanian press has two issues. The first is that of the situation in Israel/Palestine and the second is that of the Palestinians in Jordan. On the first issue, the Jordanian press has largely had a neutral effect: it has not really worsened or improved relations between the two sides, both of which it theoretically has the power to do. On the second aspect, although Palestinians are proportionally represented in the media, there has been little effort to address the issue of the inequality Palestinians in Jordan suffer. This tends to increase the existing tension between the two groups.

George Hawatmeh summarized the Jordanian media as follows:

- *Al-Rai*: Largest circulation (70,000); 61% government-owned; mostly staffed by East Bankers and seen as reflecting the mainstream East Bank establishment; under increasing pressure to meticulously toe the government line.
- *Al-Dustoor*: owned by the Sharif family and thought of as generally reflective of the Palestinian-Jordanian point of view.
- *Al-Aswaq*: owned by a holding company headed by Palestinian-Jordanians who came from Kuwait.
- *The Jordan Times*: 61% government-owned.
- Tabloids: *Shihan*, *Al-Bilad*, *Al-Hadaf*, *Al-Sabeel* (Islamist), *Al-Majd* (Ahmad Jibril-leaning, Nasserist thought to have Syrian backing).

- Party weeklies: supposedly regular, but not so in practice.
- Radio/TV Jordan: in Arabic and English. There is talk of trying to privatize these, but this is rather unlikely.

George Hawatmeh noted the feasibility of a joint Palestinian-Jordanian English daily, in which European investors have expressed interest.

Hania Bitar questioned the viability of this, noting the many political and practical handicaps in both countries.

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi expressed his concern about journalism as a profession among Palestinians. He noted that there are few Palestinians who are well-trained or even seriously committed to journalism. They are rarely specialized in specific topics and are usually incapable of providing analyses or investigative journalism (as opposed to rote recording of events as presented to them). He wondered what steps could be taken to alleviate this problem, and asked if a special school should be set up.

George Hawatmeh agreed with this analysis and noted that in Jordan, also, most journalists simply transfer information from the wires or governmental press releases to the pages of the newspapers. However, he noted that the culture, politics, economics, and level of development, etc. all affect journalism, and there is no one source which can be cited as the reason for poor mass media. At the same time, the situation is vastly improved as compared with 25 years ago.

Dr. Abdul Hadi brought up the additional fact that people do not read critically either, being mainly concerned with the social announcements. *Hania Bitar* added that low salaries have driven any good journalists that exist to work as stringers for foreign media companies. *George Hawatmeh* also noted that the Israeli government effectively coordinates its activities with press coverage, while the Jordanians and Palestinians still view the press as a hindrance rather than a potentially helpful tool.

Maral Kaprielian noted that the above issues are subordinate to the real problem, which is that there is no real freedom of expression. The fear of people to criticize and voice their real opinions is the ultimate problem with the media, and this is the main area that needs to be addressed in order to see an improvement.

George Hawatmeh agreed in principle, but noted that in practice, good media is much more complicated than simply promoting freedom of expression: financial considerations, an interested and critical public, and capable and motivated people in the media industry are all essential prerequisites for a good mass media. For instance, *Al-Ahram* in Egypt could not provide its quality products without the resource base of the *Al-Ahram* institution.

Hania Bitar noted that the lack of a strong, universally-accepted union is a key problem in Palestine and asked about the situation in Jordan.

George Hawatmeh responded that the union in Jordan is a farce: the same people who control the union, control management of the media industry. Furthermore, the union comprises serious journalists as well as those who simply copy-edit official rhetoric. Thus those in the union do not really share mutual concerns.

Dr. Abdul Hadi stated that the closure of Jerusalem has crippled Palestinian institutions, adding that this should be a key issue for any Arab nationalist organization. He asked that *George Hawatmeh* take this message back to *The Jordan Times* and the Jordanian media in general.

George Hawatmeh pointed out that he had heard that 60 Palestinian journalists had recently been given permission to enter Jerusalem. Participants noted that this is mostly for purposes of Israeli rhetoric because the permits are subject to security checks on which the Israelis often drag their feet in order to limit the entry of journalists.