

INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF JOURNALISTS



Reporting Palestine: Journalism's Uncertain Future In the Danger Zone

Report of IFJ Mission to Jerusalem
And the West Bank, November, 2001

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INTRODUCTION

This report follows a visit to Jerusalem and the West Bank by the International Federation of Journalists, which has member organisations both in Palestine and in Israel.

For the past two years the crisis facing journalists caught up in the conflict has been in the forefront of the IFJ agenda.

The two key events that signalled the important role media play in the war of words and images and which have undoubtedly contributed to the recent hardening of official attitudes towards the work of journalists were the killing on October 1 2000 of 12-year-old Mohammed al-Dura, a shocking and tragic event, filmed by a Palestinian cameraman and subsequently broadcast around the world. This provoked enormous international sympathy for the Palestinian cause. A few days later, on October 12, a second global story presented a vastly different picture – the lynching in the West Bank city of Ramallah of two Israeli soldiers who had taken refuge in a Palestinian police station.

Since that time the conditions for journalists and media have deteriorated sharply. In December 2000 the IFJ Executive Committee adopted a comprehensive resolution over attacks on journalists and violations of press freedom in the Palestinian territories following the start of a new Intifada in September of that year.

Part of the resolution, which is attached (Appendix 1), concerned the sending of a mission of inquiry. During 2001 the IFJ Executive Committee meeting in Stockholm in October 2001 agreed the terms of reference of the mission. (Appendix 2).

Faced with this difficult and increasingly tense atmosphere, the mission's primary aim was to look for practical ways of helping colleagues and, in particular, to

- **Examine** the working conditions of local journalists and foreign correspondents and to recommend practical steps to improve safety, including the establishment of an IFJ project for a safety centre and training facility;
- **Discuss** with the Palestinian Syndicate of Journalists, a member of the IFJ, further steps to improve the level of organisation of this group;
- **Consider** with the Israel National Federation of Journalists, also a member of the IFJ, steps that are needed to promote the engagement of the Federation in practical actions to improve levels of safety, professionalism and dialogue between journalists' groups in the region;
- **Investigate** how to implement a wider dialogue involving Arab journalists and other groups within the IFJ as set out in the conclusions of the IFJ report on Media, War and Terrorism issued on 23 October 2001.¹

¹ *Journalism, Civil Liberties and the War on Terrorism* available from www.ifj.org

The members of the mission were originally Olivier Da Lage, nominated by the SNJ, France; Seamus Dooley, nominated by the NUJ, Ireland; Hans Verploeg, nominated by the NVJ, The Netherlands; and Aidan White, the General Secretary. Hans Verploeg withdrew from the mission in September 2001. Seamus Dooley at the last minute was unable to participate due to ill health and the NUJ nominated, first, Christy Loftus and, second, Paul Hardy, in his place. Unfortunately neither was able to join the mission.

The mission took place between November 1-4 and involved meetings in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, El Bireh and Ramallah. The mission members met with Palestinian and Israeli union leaders, working journalists from all sides in the conflict and with foreign correspondents and media experts and diplomats. It was not possible due to security conditions to visit Gaza. There were also meetings with two former Palestinian journalists' leaders; one is now a high representative of the Palestinian National Authority and the other the head of the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation. (The List of Interviewees is attached, Appendix 3).

FINDINGS OF THE MISSION

While the consequences of the events of September 11th 2001 remain unclear for most of the world, in Israel and the Palestinian territories they have accelerated a return to dark days of confrontation, street violence, and forms of political and state terror that have paralysed the peace process. Many thousands of people now experience the pain of a brutal military administration that threatens the fundamental notion of Palestinian co-existence with Israel. In the front line of this painful tragedy are Palestinian journalists.

We have found a spiral of decline that threatens to overwhelm progress towards professional independence and respect for press freedom. As the peace process begins to unravel, all sides, both Palestinian and Israel, see the manipulation of the media message as a strategic necessity. The abundant evidence of attempts to control media provides testimony to a profound crisis for press freedom.

In particular, we have found

- **Political interference** in media including confiscation of news material
- **Numerous** incidents of harassment and violence against journalists
- **Arbitrary** closures news organisations and small independent media
- **New rules** that discriminate against employment of Palestinian media staff and undermine the professional status of Palestinian journalists

It is an unprecedented crisis that requires international attention. Urgent action is needed to protect journalists and media staff, to reaffirm the principles of press freedom and human rights, and to promote a meaningful dialogue between media professionals of the west, Israel, and the Arab world.

ISSUES OF CONCERN

1. Pressure from the Authorities on Journalists and Media

Following the launching of a new Intifada in 2000 problems for media and journalists increased substantially. A report from the International Press Institute, one of a number of press freedom organisations monitoring the region, claims that more than 100 violations of press freedom had been recorded up to July 24th 2001.²

Of these violations 43 involved shootings of journalists and 87 per cent of the incidents were blamed on the Israeli authorities, including the Israeli Defence Force, and the remaining 13 per cent were carried out by Palestinians.

During 2001 three Palestinian journalists have been killed. Hisham Mekki, director of Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation, who was shot dead in Gaza City on 17 January by three masked men. A Palestinian group, the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade, claimed responsibility for the attack claiming he was a corrupt official. Two working journalists, Mohammad Al Bishawi, aged 27, a photographer for a local newspaper and Othman Abdel Qader Al Qatanani, a 24-year-old photographer for *Kona News Agency* died during an Israeli military strike on 31 July on a seven-floor apartment building, allegedly an office of Hamas which also contained a media research center on the second floor.

The events of September 11 in the United States, the subsequent military action in Afghanistan and the reoccupation by Israeli forces of six Palestinian towns in the so-called Area A – designated to be under full Palestinian control according to the formal peace agreements – following the assassination of Israeli cabinet minister Rehavam Zeevi on October 17 have added to the pressures on media. Palestinian journalists and foreign correspondents report numerous incidents of routine harassment and intimidation, which make the objective reporting of the unfolding events in the tragic conflict almost impossible.

Most of these incidents and earlier attacks on media been well-documented by human rights bodies in the region and press freedom groups. We have relied heavily upon corroborated information provided by the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York, Article 19 International Centre Against Censorship and the Paris-based Reporters sans Frontières, which, like the IFJ, have received information directly from journalists and human rights groups in the region.

On their side, the Israeli authorities challenge many of these findings saying that only nine of the many reported incidents can be attributed to their forces and worthy of investigation and of these, only one, according to the Government Press Office, has so far been acknowledged as directly their responsibility.

² Report available from www.freemedia.at

The new confrontation in September and October 2001, which has taken a heavy toll upon the civil population at large, has also precipitated a new and worrying hostility to journalists and media staff by the regular and irregular armed forces operating in the Palestinian territories.

It has always been argued, particularly, by the Israeli authorities, both military and civil, that actions to restrict the movement of journalists or that impede or interfere with the work of media are taken only for security reasons.

While these reasons are understandable, the conditions in which journalists, particularly Palestinians work, have deteriorated to an intolerable level, raising serious doubts about the argument that security alone is the rationale for arbitrary acts of discrimination and violence against media staff.

At the same time, the impulse of the authorities on both sides to limit the damage of bad publicity or to manipulate media coverage in their own interests, is more evident everywhere. Palestinian journalists believe strongly that the primary responsibility for their troubles lies with Israeli military personnel and authorities. A report of Israeli violations of journalists' rights has also been compiled by the Palestinian Syndicate of Journalists.

However, some journalists also question the actions and decisions of Palestinian officials concerning media that add to their difficulties. The brief closure by the Palestinian Authority of the West Bank office of the *Al-Jazeera* television office in March 2001 and the crackdown on *Al-Roa Television*, a private television operating in Bethlehem on the West Bank are two examples of actions that worry journalists.

This concern of local professionals was reflected also in the statement of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate protesting over attacks on foreign journalists in Gaza by Palestinian authority personnel.³

The re-occupation of Palestinian areas designated as solely under Palestinian control under the peace accords by Israeli troops has unquestionably further weakened the credibility of the ailing Palestinian Authority. This action has been accompanied by an unprecedented crackdown on the freedom of Palestinian journalists to carry out their work safely and professionally.

At the same time the Palestinian Authority, desperate to maintain its leading role before the international community, has succumbed to predictable and familiar political impulses to impede journalists from gathering any information that may reflect negatively on them when broadcast on the world's media networks.

The difficulties facing Palestinian journalists in their own areas are made worse by the fact that there are no clear rules and regulations covering media. There are more than 40 small community independent television stations and around 15 radio stations. They

³ Issued on 31 May 2001. PJS PO Box 219 Ramallah.

provide a useful local antidote to official broadcasting, although their programming is more often music and entertainment rather than news and current affairs. Most Palestinians, around 70 per cent, prefer to watch *Al-Jazeera* television rather than official Palestinian television. Radio is an important source of local news and information.

However, most of these stations work under interim rules and a media law has still not been adopted by the Legislative Council. Part of the draft law includes recognition of the rights of journalists and media professionals by ensuring that if they are to be detained for questioning this must be done with the authority of the Attorney General not the chief of police. While this limited right remains unrecognised, journalists continue to be at the mercy of local security personnel.

2. Derecognition of Palestinian Journalists

For many years, Palestinian journalists have sought professional recognition. Many of them have been granted the IFJ International Press card and have obtained the press accreditation of the Palestinian authority. However, the only card effectively recognised by the Israeli authorities is that issued by the Government Press Office (GPO) at Beit Agron.

For many Palestinians, this card has not been available, either because they have no clearly defined and acceptable media employer in the GPO's view, or because they have been unable to travel to Jerusalem, where GPO's offices are located. However, a significant number of them have for the past eight years been granted this official accreditation. However, that policy has now changed.

The GPO has announced that no new cards will be issued to Palestinian journalists working in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. In a telephone interview, Daniel Seaman, the Director of the GPO, said the decision was a formal decision of the government and was an "internal issue". Official Palestinian media organisations would not receive the card, even if they were designated to cover Israel. "These organisations are not engaged in journalism," he said, "they are engaged in propaganda and incitement to violence and killing of Israelis."

From the perspective of Palestinian journalists it is another act of discrimination. "We are no longer regarded as journalists, and are just seen as Palestinians and, therefore, a security risk," said one journalist in Bethlehem during the mission.

The loss of the GPO card is a serious blow to many Palestinian journalists. They will be denied access to areas where important news events take place and will not be able to work in areas under Israeli jurisdiction. It may also deprive them of something which, until now, has provided minimal protection against arbitrary acts of violence in their dealings with Israeli military personnel.

The move also threatens the work of foreign media in the region. Foreign correspondents say the Israeli action will deny them the services of Palestinian media support staff, such

as camera crews and freelance stills photographers who generally live in Palestinian areas around Jerusalem. These colleagues often possess precious local knowledge and expertise that is essential to the security and efficiency of media work in the Palestinian areas.

The new policy, which will come into effect officially at the end of the year, has led to a number of cases of instant confiscation of press cards being held by Palestinians by soldiers at road blocks and checkpoints.

The impact on Palestinian journalists will also be serious in terms of their capacity to work as freelancers for foreign media. Most Palestinian journalists are poorly paid and work in appalling conditions. For many this will be a new and devastating blow to their potential to earn a living. Working conditions for many journalists working both in the West Bank and Gaza areas are already intolerable because of widespread restrictions on freedom of movement caused by Israeli occupation.

The consequences for journalistic coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are also dire. Inevitably, when journalists are forced to rely upon telecommunications or other forms of second-hand eyewitness accounts of events, the quality of coverage suffers and the reliability of reporting is severely compromised.

Additionally, Palestinian media striving for independence and professionalism will be forced more than ever to rely upon mainly official and often unreliable Palestinian sources of information.

3. The Palestinian Syndicate of Journalists and Safety Concerns

The Palestinian Syndicate continues to operate although in much-reduced circumstances in the current crisis. The Syndicate is still developing its membership base and there is a discussion about extending its scope to cover many journalists working in the private sector of broadcasting. Much has to be done to ensure that the Syndicate has the full confidence of Palestinian journalists, many of whom see its professionalism compromised by the numerous political interests work in the region.

The Syndicate is aiming to strengthen its trade union activities and hopes to expand its work with an ambitious project to establish a Palestinian Media Centre in Ramallah. The IFJ should do what it can to facilitate the process of change.

As a priority, urgent action is needed to increase the capacity of the Syndicate to provide help and assistance to journalists at risk in the West Bank and Gaza.

The safety issue is also at the top of the agenda for foreign correspondents and most human rights groups. All Palestinian journalists in the field should, like most of their colleagues working for the international media, have access to bullet-proof vests, helmets and risk awareness training. This work can be facilitated quickly by involving relevant human rights organisations, the Syndicate and foreign correspondents and IFJ proposals for early actions will be welcomed everywhere.

3. The Role of Israeli Journalists

Like their Palestinian colleagues, Israeli journalists are under tremendous pressure to conform to follow the military and strategic lines of policy promoted by the authorities and supported in the main by the public at large due to the current widespread anxieties over the security crisis.

Since the beginning of the new Intifada there has been no clear line of support for Palestinian colleagues by their Israeli counterparts in marked contrast to the supportive actions of the Foreign Press Association and to the positive role that Israeli journalists have taken in previous years.

There is no doubt that internal difficulties within the National Federation of Israel Journalists have contributed to a lack of engagement with the IFJ and its work in the area. The IFJ must, as a priority, seek to encourage the fullest possible participation of Israeli colleagues in promoting professional solidarity and positive actions to improve the conditions of all journalists working in the region.

Additionally, organised journalists in Israel work under one of the toughest industrial relations regimes with employer hostility to trade union organisation very strong. The introduction of personal contracts and a tough management style – seen two years ago in the confrontation with journalists working on the *Jerusalem Post* – has weakened the union in some areas.

Although there is no evidence of formal contact between Israeli and Palestinian journalists groups there has been informal and useful collaboration organised either by individual journalists with Palestinian sources and contacts and some non-governmental organisations that have promoted dialogue and co-operation. While this is positive and worthwhile it is no substitute for institutional co-operation and solidarity.

4. Building Media Links and Structures for Dialogue

There is a profound lack of first-hand reporting on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict by Israeli correspondents. There is only one settled Israeli correspondent – Amira Hass, the *Haretz* correspondent in Ramallah – working directly from the Palestinian territories. Even taking into account safety and security reasons, as well as official regulations which insist that Israeli citizens, including journalists, are escorted when visiting the area, personal knowledge by Israeli journalists of the conditions in which Palestinian people and journalists currently live and work is worryingly absent.

The result is that Israeli media rely on Israeli governmental and military sources, international news organisations, and occasional Palestinian media contacts as their primary sources of information.

In recent years, Israeli and Palestinian journalists have maintained professional contacts, despite political and national differences between their leaders, their organisations, and themselves as individuals.

One damaging consequence of the recent escalation of tension has been the suspension of these even limited professional contacts. It should be noted too that a number of specific projects sponsored by the international community designed to promote cooperation between media on both sides have come to a halt.

An example is the *Israeli Palestinian Media Forum (IPMF)*, launched three years ago and supported by UNESCO, which was an early casualty of the new Intifada which began in October 2000. This modest project had already begun some ground-breaking work with the support of some leading Palestinian and Israeli media people, promoting professional exchanges and establishing a structure for dialogue. Today, the project is in hibernation. Its East-Jerusalem office remains empty but is ready to resume activities as soon as conditions permit.

A similar state of suspended animation has overtaken a number of media-related activities sponsored by the European Union and various foreign general consulates operating from East-Jerusalem.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Urgent actions are required by the international community of journalists to alleviate the current crisis facing journalists in the region. The IFJ, in cooperation with other non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies, should implement without delay the following:

1. **Establish a safety centre** to provide Palestinian journalists with practical materials including bullet-proof vests, helmets and a risk-awareness training programme to minimise the dangers media staff in the region face.
2. **Provide humanitarian help** to journalists and media staff who are the victims of violence by allocating specific resources from the International Safety Fund.
3. **Protest strongly** at and campaign vigorously against attempts to derecognise the professional status of Palestinian journalists and the withdrawal of the GPO press card.

At the same time, the IFJ must reinvigorate its work in support of its affiliates, both in Israel and in Palestine. The conditions facing Palestinian journalists are particularly difficult and require special attention. The nature of journalism in the region has evolved beyond the political character of its roots. Today, freelance and private sector media staff represents a significant part of the Palestinian community of journalists and more needs to be done to take their interests fully into account. Therefore, the IFJ should:

4. **Strengthen efforts** by the Palestinian syndicate of journalists to improve its levels of representation and effective trade union work in defence of journalists' social rights in the Palestinian territories.
5. **Support seminars and activities** to encourage professional solidarity. This work should focus on improving social conditions and broadening the membership base of the syndicate through, if necessary, revision of the Syndicate's constitution.
6. **Note the scheme** of the Syndicate to create a journalism centre in Ramallah, open to local and visiting journalists, and should do what it can to support this initiative.
7. **Urgently seek to engage** the National Federation of Israel Journalists (NFIJ) in work to promote the defence of colleagues who are the victims of violence or violations of press freedom, irrespective of their nationality. At the same time, the IFJ needs to examine how to strengthen the trade union work of the Federation.
8. **Discuss with the NFIJ** ways of strengthening the trade union and professional status of journalists in Israel and the need for professional solidarity with colleagues from Palestine, in spite of strongly held opinions and differences that may exist in the present political circumstances, which are both legitimate and perfectly understandable.

In the longer term, the IFJ should contribute to efforts that will improve understanding between journalists from the Arab world and their colleagues around the world. The mission noted a marked interest in the initiative of the IFJ's Executive Committee and broad support for its early implementation.

Based upon the findings and recommendations of this mission, the IFJ should immediately

9. **Initiate a dialogue** with appropriated political authorities both in Israel and Palestine, and within the international community, to ensure the issues set out here are promptly and effectively dealt with.
10. **Monitor carefully** the continuing crisis and continue to circulate information to member unions on violations of journalists' rights.
11. **Demand that the Israeli authorities investigate** the numerous cases of intimidation, harassment and acts of violence directed against journalists in recent months. The Israeli civilian and military authorities should, where appropriate, discipline or prosecute individuals who are guilty of violating the rights of journalists and media.
12. **Demand the Palestinian authorities take action** to protect the rights of journalists, lift restrictions on media organisations and discipline officials who

interfere with the work of media or individual journalists. In particular, the arbitrary seizure and confiscation of recorded material, which is a threat to press freedom, should cease.

Brussels

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