

Arab Reform Bulletin

نشرة الإصلاح العربي

Published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
Translated by Dar Al-Watan for Journalism, Printing and Publishing.

December 2004, Volume 2, Issue 11

Amy Hawthorne, Editor

Julia Choucair, Assistant Editor

Note from the Editor:

Arab media are in a state of change. The bold, often controversial programs of *Al Jazeera* and other private satellite news channels are drawing millions of viewers away from staid state-run television; independent newspapers are springing up across the region; the media sector is opening up to private investors; and the Internet is providing a new outlet for dissidents and many others. But whether these trends will lead to more democratic politics is not yet clear. This special issue of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* explores the role of Arab media in political reform with articles by leading experts on the impact of satellite television, Islamists in cyberspace, U.S. policy, the press in Iraq, Syria, and Morocco, and the politics of Egyptian cinema. The issue also includes media-related news from across the region and a roundup of recent writings on the topic.

This is my last issue as editor of the *Bulletin*. It has been my great pleasure to edit the *Bulletin*, and I thank all the contributors and readers who have made the publication possible, especially my colleagues at the Carnegie Endowment. Beginning with the February 2005 issue, Michele Dunne will serve as editor, ably supported by Assistant Editor Julia Choucair.

—Amy Hawthorne

The Arabic edition of this issue of the *Arab Reform Bulletin* will be available by December 22 at <http://www.alwatan.com.kw/arb>.

In this Special Issue on Arab Media and Reform:

Insights and Analysis

Shattering the "Politics of Silence:" Satellite Television Talk Shows and the Transformation of Arab Political Culture *By Marc Lynch*

Arab Satellite Television: Can It Rise Above Spectacle? *By Jon B. Alterman*

Privatization Alone Will Not Loosen Arab Governments' Grip on Broadcasting *By Naomi Sakr*

Cyber-Struggle: Islamist Websites versus the Egyptian State *By Omayma Abdel-Latif*

Washington and the Challenge of Arab Press Freedom *By William A. Rugh*

Iraq: Nightmare of Violence Dashes Hopes for a Free Press *By Borzou Daragahi*

Kurdish Media After the War *By Maggy Zanger*

Media Reform in Syria: A Door Ajar? *By Ammar Abdulhamid*

Still Shooting the Messenger in Morocco *By Aboubakr Jamaï*
Egypt: Political Films and the Politics of Filmmaking *By Walter Armbrust*

News and Views

Statistics on the Arab Media
Trends in Media Law Reform
Trends in New Arab Media
A Snapshot of the Iraqi Media Scene
Reports on Press Freedom in Arab Countries
Private Broadcasting in Palestine
Al Jazeera Initiatives
New Journalists' Associations
U.S. Funding for Arab Media
Views from the Arab Press

Read On

A roundup of new writings on Arab media and reform.

Subscriber Information

Insights and Analysis

Shattering the "Politics of Silence:" Satellite Television Talk Shows and the Transformation of Arab Political Culture

By Marc Lynch

In an appearance on Cairo's "Dream TV" in the spring of 2004, the eminent Egyptian journalist Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal broached the deeply sensitive topic of Gamal Mubarak's aspirations to succeed his father as president. For his efforts, Haykal was summarily banned from Egyptian broadcasts. While in the past, such a forceful state response would have been sufficient for the government to regain control of the public agenda, this time, Haykal quickly was able to sign a blockbuster deal with *Al Jazeera*, allowing him immediately to reach a much larger audience. He used his first show to expose the regime's clumsy effort to silence his dissent. The experience of the venerable Haykal demonstrates the difficulty of Arab states in maintaining control over the public sphere. By shattering state control over public debate, Arab satellite television, especially *Al Jazeera*, is building the foundation of a more democratic Arab political culture.

For many critics, *Al Jazeera*'s controversial coverage of Iraq, especially its airing of hostage videos and beheadings, overshadows whatever reformist potential the station might have. To be sure, *Al Jazeera* seems increasingly consumed by sensationalism. But such pessimism, like the earlier extravagant optimism that *Al Jazeera* would usher in quick democratization, is misplaced. The new Arab media has eroded state monopoly over information, embedding in its audience an expectation of choice and contention that undercuts authoritarian political culture. Satellite television stations are encouraging a pluralist political culture, one in which individual voices can be heard, disagreements openly aired, and nearly every aspect of politics and society held open to public scrutiny.

While *Al Jazeera*'s news coverage receives the most attention in the West, the station's live political talk shows have had the most revolutionary impact. These bare bones programs, which include Faisal Al Qassem's "The Opposite Direction" and Ghassan bin Jadu's "Open Dialogue," regularly attract an audience matched in size only by that of pop culture hits such as the reality show "Superstar," an Arab version of "American Idol." Almost every night, *Al Jazeera*'s guests from varying political perspectives face off and callers from across the Arab world have the chance to pose live questions. Competitors such as *Al Arabiyya* offer their own more restrained, but still popular, talk shows. Pre-recorded shows, like those featured on American-funded *Al Hurra*, attract far less attention. *Al Jazeera*'s estimated 30 million viewers now consider themselves part of a single, common, ongoing political argument, in which few views are off-limits and in which even the most powerful states must defend themselves before fearless criticism.

The talk shows offer a revealing portrait of what the new media consider vital "Arab" issues. The Palestinian conflict took up between a quarter and a third of the major *Al Jazeera* talk shows each year between 1999-2002. In 2003, the situation in Iraq consumed an astounding 44 percent of talk show material. But from its earliest days, *Al Jazeera* (and its competitors) have defined

democratic reform as a core Arab issue. *Al Jazeera* sought to give voice to a deep Arab frustration with the perceived failures of Arab regimes. In 1999 alone, almost a dozen *Al Jazeera* talk shows criticized the absence of democracy in the Arab world.

Long before the American invasion of Iraq, *Al Jazeera* railed against the repressive, corrupt Arab order, shattering what Iraqi dissident Kanan Makiya has called the "politics of silence" that stifles Arab intellectual and political life. Discussion of the war in Iraq actually reduced the amount of discussion of democratic reform on talk shows in 2002-2003. But by the end of 2003, despite Arab public suspicion of American initiatives and the plethora of urgent issues competing for public attention, they returned to the topic vigorously. Almost a dozen talk shows discussed American and Arab reform proposals between February and March of 2004, and half a dozen more addressed the Bush administration's Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative.

These programs reframe local issues in terms of a wider Arab narrative, so that a Jordanian clampdown on press freedoms and a Syrian campaign to arrest political dissidents cohere into a single story of the absence of Arab democracy. Virtually every Arab country has been discussed, as have contentious questions about whether this generation of Arabs might succeed at democracy where their parents failed; the state of women's rights in the Arab world; abuses in Arab prisons; and the spread of AIDS in the Arab world. It is this searing critique of the Arab status quo, which translates individual complaints and local experiences into a common Arab narrative, that makes Arab satellite media such a potent force for reform.

The burgeoning number of satellite stations is breeding greater competition for market share, which will increase the outlets through which reformers can be heard. *Al Jazeera's* main competitor, *Al Arabiyya*, has since its launch in early 2003 offered a platform to liberal reformers, with a tone tempered by greater restraint and sensitivity to the concerns of major Arab states. In stark contrast to isolated and embittered liberals, moderate Islamists who are ever more on the defensive, or entrenched authoritarian regimes that talk about reform only to deflect foreign criticism, Arab satellite television stations today represent one of the only truly vital forces demanding reform.

Marc Lynch is associate professor of political science at Williams College in Williamstown, MA. His second book, Iraq and the New Arab Public, will be published by Columbia University Press in 2005.

Arab Satellite Television: Can It Rise Above Spectacle?

By Jon B. Alterman

At a recent conference on the political effects of Arab satellite television, a prominent Arab talk show host called out from the back of the room, "I will tell you a secret about television. It is all about spectacle. It is about spectacle first, spectacle second, and spectacle third." Although the host is an outspoken advocate of democratic reform, his observation may help explain why the popular and raucous debates on pan-Arab satellite television channels so far have not translated into changes in Arab politics.

Arabs, and those who watch the Arab world, increasingly talk of how the satellite television age has spawned a body of discourse that scarcely existed before in the region. On the talk shows of pan-Arab television, clerics debate secularists, radicals debate moderates, and apologists for one regime lay into the apologists for another. Previously taboo issues such as opposition politics, sex, and religion have become staples of nightly programs.

When such broadcasts began in the mid-1990s, many saw them as a harbinger of a democratic opening. Censorship had been a pillar of authoritarian rule in the Middle East for decades, and satellite television was beginning to chip away at it.

Yet a decade later, not one Arab regime has fallen at the hands of its people, and few have taken meaningful steps toward democratization. Pan-Arab satellite television has brought more open political talk into studios, but not yet more open politics on the ground.

One reason is that debate in the Arab world is still largely about spectacle and not about participation. Nowhere is this more true than on Arab satellite television. To use the American metaphor, the debates generate far more heat than light. On a mass level, they generate little action other than fingers pressing a television's remote control.

What would make a difference? The efforts of Egyptian-born televangelist Amr Khalid offer an intriguing model of social change through mass media. Khalid, who started out in the early 1990s speaking in the country clubs and upper class living rooms of Cairo, became a media sensation due to his clear talk about how Muslims can—and should—sanctify the everyday. An accountant by training, Khalid adopted neither the hectoring tone often associated with clerics, nor the anger of militant Islam; instead, his style is empathetic and almost plaintive.

Through huge revival-style events in Egypt, and increasingly via satellite television broadcasts beamed throughout the Middle East, Khalid has created not just a community of viewers, but a community of participants. Khalid's followers do more than write and call in to his programs. His increasingly global audience participates in charity drives, organizes study groups, and seeks to apply his specific lessons to their daily lives. Indeed, in its early stages his audience has commonalities with the networks of the exiled Turkish religious leader Fethullah Gülen, which reach across Europe and deep into Central Asia. Gülen's followers participate in group study and action to use self-improvement as an avenue for strengthening their religious community.

Although Khalid is avowedly apolitical, he has successfully moved his audience to break out of passivity. Through participation in concrete actions—including but not limited to buying his books and tapes—his followers are moved to action.

For Khalid's followers, like Gülen's and participants in other modern social movements, the central organizing principle is bridging the communal and the individual. Millions watch the same program, listen to the same sermon or read the same book, but they also deepen and strengthen those experiences with personal relationships. What they see has some effect on what they do. Watching or listening to the same thing is not enough, except when it causes the

audience to act in unison.

A simple way in which communities of belief become communities of action is by adopting a common outward appearance. In recent months, some twenty million people around the world have purchased yellow "cancer survivor bracelets" from the Lance Armstrong Foundation, sending an important message of solidarity akin in a certain way to the adoption of particular styles of the veil by Muslim women in Cairo, Damascus, or Beirut. In this way, information becomes belief, and belief becomes action.

The challenge for the noisier Arab politics displayed on *Al Jazeera* and other satellite channels is to move beyond spectacle. Especially for those in the opposition, with little access to resources and shut out of power, the challenge will be how to prove their relevance to the everyday life of their followers.

Creating a personal connection to an audience, as Amr Khalid has done, is vital. Crucial as well is combining belief and action in some way that promotes a feeling of membership. Television has viewers, and politics has participants. Until Arab satellite television can turn the former into the latter, it will remain principally an instrument of entertainment rather than an engine for reform.

Dr. Alterman directs the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and is the author of New Media, New Politics? From Satellite Television to the Internet in the Arab World (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1998).

Privatization Alone Will Not Loosen Arab Governments' Grip on Broadcasting

By Naomi Sakr

When *Al Jazeera*, the Qatar-based satellite news channel, announced last July that it was adopting a formal code of journalistic ethics, reports also emerged that the network might soon transform itself into a publicly listed company. To many media-watchers, the two moves were linked. By emphasizing words like "credibility" and "independence," the code of ethics seemed to signal to potential shareholders that the channel could rank with global television newscasters and that *Al Jazeera* could make a profit and meet viewers' information needs at the same time. Doing both would represent a first in Arab broadcasting.

Historically, Arab terrestrial, or land-transmitted, television has been run by government broadcasting monopolies characterized by tight control over content and disregard for profit. Although Lebanese and Palestinian laws allowed private terrestrial channels, most private ownership has been restricted to satellite channels, with owners allied to regimes and seeking to advance their own political interests rather than to satisfy their viewers. In this environment *Al Jazeera*, founded in 1996, was an oddity. Subsidized by Qatar's reformist ruler, its uncensored coverage won huge audiences and should have attracted correspondingly large advertising

revenues. It failed to do so because advertising on Arab television, like programming, has followed the direction of censorious and self-seeking governments, not market forces.

Now, after a decade in which satellite television restructured the Arab broadcasting landscape by generating a degree of competition, there are fresh signs of structural change. Jordan and Morocco, led by kings of a younger generation, are ending their state monopolies on terrestrial broadcasting. In Egypt, where the state needs to offload some of the burden of paying 35,000 government radio and television employees, more liberal provisions for granting broadcast licenses have been drafted. In recent months new private channels have sprung up in Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia, although most play it safe by offering entertainment and religious programs rather than news. A raft of other channels, based in Baghdad, Beirut, Dubai, and London have been launched to target the newly-opened market in Iraq.

What is not yet clear is whether in reforming their media laws, Arab governments will allow independent watchdogs to regulate broadcasting, or simply appoint tame commissions to continue the censorship previously conducted by ministries of information. In Iraq, U.S. occupation officials created an independent entity, the National Communication and Media Commission, modeled on Britain's regulatory body, Ofcom, to ensure that Iraqi media would promote unfettered national debate. But almost as soon as the Iraqi interim government assumed power last June, it superimposed a Higher Media Council to do the prime minister's bidding and to expel or outlaw independent media operators it dislikes. So-called reform initiatives elsewhere in the region could end in the re-establishment of similar mechanisms of government control.

Meanwhile, editorial curbs on private broadcasters' content result not just from overt censorship but more subtly from the way the advertising industry works. When viewers' interests and financial profits are not the top priority, television owners have no incentive to measure their programs' relative popularity. Thus until recently, few companies have conducted viewership surveys and those which were conducted lacked credibility, tending to endorse a few officially approved stations and leaving companies unsure where to place advertisements for best results. Running them on a popular channel like *Al Jazeera*, which is subject to an advertising boycott backed by Saudi Arabia and other Arab governments opposed to its coverage, is a risky move in a region where most big businesses depend on the patronage of those who hold political power.

But as the number of satellite players has expanded, data collection has started to improve. With some thirteen Arabic-language news channels now available by satellite, and many others devoted to music and sport, more local companies are trying to prove their worth as pollsters. For example, the Amman-based Arab Advisors Group recently reported that 82 percent of Saudi households surveyed watched *Al Jazeera* and that 69 percent of respondents believed it to be trustworthy or very trustworthy, despite *Al Jazeera's* unpopularity with ruling regimes. The study also found that 11 percent of Saudi households watch *Al Mustaqilla*, a privately owned, London-based channel whose name means "The Independent."

Al Mustaqilla established a niche early on by focusing on human rights. Founded by a newspaper editor of Tunisian origin, it claimed to be different from private channels owned by government proxies or big business tycoons. Today a few more Arab broadcasters may be entitled to make

the same claim. Yet, in the face of persistent government pressures and distortions in advertising revenue, all still need deep pockets to survive. And even then, as Egypt's privately-owned Dream TV discovered, editorial independence may have to be sacrificed for survival. Dream's owner, Ahmed Bahgat, hired popular presenters with strong personalities to help his channel stand out from the crowd. But one by one, in response to government displeasure, Bahgat took Hala Sirhan, Ibrahim Eissa, Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal, and Hamdi Kandil off the air. Being outspoken had endeared them to viewers but not to those who decide whether Dream broadcasts or not.

Viewers, in other words, are still far from having the last word. Until Arab broadcasting is independently regulated, aspiring independent broadcasters will be buffeted on all sides. *Naomi Sakr is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Media, Arts and Design at the University of Westminster in the United Kingdom. She is the author of Satellite Realms: Transnational Television, Globalization and the Middle East (London: I B Tauris, 2001) and the editor of Women and Media in the Middle East (London: I B Tauris, 2004).*

Cyber-Struggle: Islamist Websites versus the Egyptian State

By Omayma Abdel-Latif

In the face of Arab governments' ongoing, heavy-handed efforts to control public debate, the Internet has emerged as a platform for voices—especially those of Islamists—denied a place in the mainstream, state-owned media. Contrary to the widespread Western perception that radical websites dominate Islamist cyberspace, groups embracing a moderate interpretation of the faith increasingly are launching websites to "break the monopoly of the state over the articulation of the political and social agenda," as one activist described it. These sites aim particularly to attract younger Muslims by addressing their concerns and providing an interpretation of Islam couched in modern lingo disseminated by modern technology. Egypt has been a key location for such cyber-initiatives.

"Does Islam only allow force in self-defense or can it also be used to remove oppression?" This is but one of the many questions on matters of politics, religion, love, marriage, and health that the Cairo-based Islamonline website [www.islamonline.net] receives on an hourly basis from Muslims across the globe. Part of a boom of websites offering new perspectives on the Muslim faith, Islamonline was launched in 1999 by a group of Egyptian Islamist intellectuals. In the words of its founders, Islamonline's main objective is "to work for the good of humanity and to support principles of freedom, justice, democracy and human rights." Besides its twenty-four-hour news service, the website provides a wealth of information on issues related to women, fatwas (religious rulings), interviews with Muslim scholars, and reflections on Islamic thought and jurisprudence.

Al Shaab newspaper, the mouthpiece of the Islamist-oriented Labor party (*Hizb Al Amal*), has also been a key cyber-player. When the Egyptian government banned the paper in 2000 following a heated controversy over a novel published by the Ministry of Culture that *Al Shaab* deemed offensive to Muslim sensibilities, cyberspace offered a much-needed platform to resume

publication. The paper went online, with editor Magdi Hussein publishing remarkably fierce criticism of the Egyptian regime. But the website could not escape the heavy hand of the state. It was censored twice and hacked many times, although the culprits were never identified, and is off-line for the time being.

Since 1995, when the government shut down the headquarters and newspaper of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest Islamist opposition group, the Brotherhood's website [www.ikhwanonline.com] has been its leading mass communication tool. The site provided an efficient instrument to connect the group to local and international audiences during the 2000 parliamentary elections in which the Brotherhood, technically illegal but sometimes tolerated by the regime, managed to field fifty-four candidates as independents. It reported police crackdowns on the group's sympathisers and disseminated electoral results and propaganda. The government's latest attempt to censor the website, in early September, was aborted by the group's team of technicians and the site is still operating. It will serve as the best outlet for the group's anticipated campaign in the November 2005 parliamentary elections and will continue to link the Brotherhood to followers outside of Egypt.

One of the most popular websites among young Egyptians is that of Amr Khalid, a young television preacher [www.amrkhalid.net]. Khalid seeks to address the concerns and aspirations of so-called born again or newly-religious Muslims by emphasizing social, ethical and lifestyle issues rather than direct political change or the creation of an Islamic state. The site's goal, according to one of Khalid's close aides, is to reconstruct popular attitudes toward Islam such that they embrace modernity.

The global reach of Khalid's website has built him a following across the Arab world and Europe. Although Khalid himself was a victim of a vile state campaign that drove him out of the country—he now moves between Beirut and London—his website has remained immune to government intervention and censorship thanks mostly to its lack of overt political content.

Some might question the influence of such websites in Egypt, a country with an adult illiteracy rate of nearly 60 percent and whose Internet users do not exceed 2.42 million people out of a population of 74 million. But it is the quality of users and not the quantity that matters most. The bulk of Internet users in Egypt are young, educated, and politically ambitious and have the ability—more than any other segment in the society—to change a stagnant political and social reality. They are attracted by Islamist websites' overarching message of defiance against an oppressive regime. The sites are proving that despite the popularity of satellite television, they can reach a mass audience, and that they can continue to outwit the state's attempts to censor them.

Omayma Abdel-Latif is a staff writer for Al Ahram Weekly in Cairo.

Washington and the Challenge of Arab Press Freedom

By William A. Rugh

It is no simple matter for the United States to apply its cherished press freedom principles in its Middle East policy, as recent experience with Iraq and Qatar illustrates.

After the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq ended Saddam Hussein's iron-fisted control over that country's media, the occupying Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA)—composed of officials from the United States and other countries that are proud of their press freedoms—quickly chose to establish a free and independent indigenous media network. The CPA outsourced the implementation of that task to a private American firm, the Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC), which specialized in supplying the Pentagon with advanced technologies but had no experience in the media field. SAIC created the Iraq Media Network (IMN), which included FM radio, a TV station, and a newspaper, *Al Sabah*.

But the IMN was hardly independent because the CPA, through SAIC, kept a close watch over its content. The project quickly ran into difficulties. When the television station went on the air on May 13, 2003, the Iraqi public, expecting great things from the Americans, was disappointed with the programs and eventually many Iraqi and even American staff resigned because of heavy-handed CPA influence. The CPA's own surveys showed that Iraqis preferred to watch *Al Jazeera* or even the Iranian channel *Al Alam* because the style of IMN television resembled a government-owned station. One report described it as "America's Pravda."

In January 2004 the Pentagon switched from SAIC to the Harris Corporation of Florida (a communications equipment company) to manage the IMN, and Harris in turn hired the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation to help out. The content of the TV station, by then renamed *Al Iraqiyya*, improved somewhat, using mostly material purchased outside Iraq, but it seemed to have a Lebanese tone and it still could not compete with non-Iraqi broadcasters.

In the meantime, the CPA allowed private Iraqi newspapers to emerge, and dozens did. But it also decreed that all broadcasters must be licensed and that licenses would be revoked for incitement and other political acts. It established a commission to draft media laws and issue licenses. The CPA shut down or suspended some newspapers and broadcasters for violating CPA standards, a practice that has been continued by the interim Iraqi government after the CPA was disbanded in June 2004.

U.S. ambivalence toward the idea of more open Arab media did not begin with the occupation of Iraq. While loudly championing the cause of Middle East freedom, the Bush administration has displayed great concern over Qatar's *Al Jazeera* satellite television station, the most free in the region. Washington took little notice of the channel, founded in 1996, until after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks when *Al Jazeera* carried statements by Osama bin Laden that were rebroadcast by American commercial networks. In October 2001, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell complained to Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani, that the station was helping bin Laden by broadcasting his messages uncritically. Sheikh Hamad deflected the complaint, saying it was misdirected because *Al Jazeera* was a private station. While this is technically true, he could have influenced *Al Jazeera* if he wanted to, because he subsidizes it. Because *Al Jazeera* has helped put Qatar on the global map, and because the station has rebuffed

complaints about its bold coverage from virtually every Arab government since it went on the air, Sheikh Hamad could not simply cave into American pressure.

Tensions increased after the U.S. intervention in Iraq, and Washington again complained to Qatar. Powell told the Qatari foreign minister in April 2004 that *Al Jazeera* was inciting Arab audiences to violence against American troops, and that its news coverage was undermining good U.S.-Qatari relations. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld accused *Al Jazeera* of "vicious, inaccurate and inexcusable reporting," and other officials echoed these charges. The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), appointed by the CPA, also denounced *Al Jazeera* and other Arab broadcasters operating in Iraq for their newscasts, some of which featured statements by Saddam before his capture and aired insurgents' messages. The IGC closed down their offices temporarily and banned their reporters from some press conferences.

It seems ironic that although the United States stands for freedom of expression, it often behaved like an authoritarian government in Iraq and it pressured the Qatari government to crack down on the region's most popular television station. Moreover, many who have watched the new U.S.-run Arabic language satellite television channel *Al Hurra* report that it resembles many state-run Arab television channels that carry only pro-regime propaganda.

These disconnects, which Arabs regard as evidence of an American double standard, illustrate that policy makers take many factors into account when making decisions. The application of a single principle—no matter how lofty—does not always work in practice. Press freedom has limits everywhere, and foreign policy goals combined with local conditions help determine the extent of those limits.

William A. Rugh, former U.S. ambassador to the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, is the author of Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004).

Iraq: Nightmare of Violence Dashes Hopes for a Free Press

By Borzou Daragahi

The 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and toppling of Saddam Hussein's government dangled the prospect of an Iraq with freedoms of the press unparalleled in the country's history and indeed in the Arab world. The fall of Saddam's regime spawned dozens of new publications and broadcast outlets staffed by Iraqi journalists. *Al Arabiyya*, *Al Jazeera* and other Arabic-language news channels descended on Iraq, hiring local talent and introducing new ideas and technologies. But the initial euphoria has faded as working conditions for Iraqi journalists have descended into a nightmare.

Under Saddam, most Iraqi journalists worried about trouble from the state security apparatus and from Saddam's psychotic and capricious son, Uday, who ran wide swaths of the official media. Nowadays, they are subject to violence and harassment from all directions: guerrillas who deem journalists Western propaganda tools, U.S. soldiers, who often view Arab media as mouthpieces

of the insurgency, and officials of the Iraqi interim government, who often do not respect the role of local journalists.

"We face different dangers now and there is no law to protect journalists in Iraq," says Hussein Muhammad Ajeel, the head of investigative reporting at *Al Mada*, a new Baghdad daily. "There are threats from three sides: the Americans might shoot you if they're ambushed; the Iraqi security forces might stop you or beat you if they suspect you're with the resistance; and the resistance might kill you if they think you're a spy."

According to Reporters Without Borders, the French media advocacy organization, at least 24 Iraqi journalists have been killed in Iraq this year. Among them were several likely killed inadvertently by American soldiers, including Iraqi freelance television cameraman Diaa Najm, killed in the crossfire between American soldiers and insurgents on November 1 in Ramadi, and *Al Arabiyya* correspondent Ali Al Khatib, killed amid American gunfire in Baghdad on March 18.

I first began to realize the troubles Iraqi journalists face while giving an informal talk on Western standards of accuracy and fairness to broadcast journalists in the central Iraqi city of Baqubah last January in a forum organized by an officer of the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division. During my talk, I spoke high-mindedly of balanced, impartial journalism. But during the question-and-answer session, Iraqis asked how to dodge political attacks and violence from militants and U.S. soldiers alike. They were concerned with mundane matters, like getting past U.S. checkpoints without getting hurt. "We're unable to get access to anybody," one journalist said. "We're frightened."

This was before the country was convulsed by the violent outbreaks of April and August, before the November confrontation between U.S. troops and fighters in Falluja turned Iraqi cities into ghost towns, and before a spate of cold-blooded killings of ordinary Iraqi journalists. All Iraqi journalists are targets, especially those brave enough to attend press conferences held by the interim government or the U.S. military at the Baghdad Convention Center just inside the Green Zone, the American-controlled administrative center of the country. "If the resistance sees you leaving the press conference, they might think that you work with the Americans and they might kill you," says Ali Khaleel, a reporter for *Azzaman*, a Baghdad daily.

But even short of street-side executions, such as that of *Al Sharqiyya* television reporter Likaa Abdel-Razak in Baghdad on October 27, or kidnappings, such as that of *Sada Wasit* newspaper reporter Raad Beriaej Al Azzawi south of the capital on November 26, intimidation is rife. One reporter at *Al Mada* was threatened with death after he wrote about alleged corruption in an Iraqi government ministry. Terrified, the reporter sought help from the Ministry of Interior, which advised him to leave Iraq or face death. He's now in Syria. Another Iraqi journalist reporting on police patrols in the town of Allawi was caught by the resistance. They took his notes and tapes and told him to get out of town. Instead of angry letters to the editor, Iraqi media critics launch rockets like the Katyusha that crashed through *Al Mada*'s offices earlier this year.

Adding insult to injury is the disrespect Iraqi journalists get from senior officials of their own government. Many blithely ignore any representative from the local media while welcoming foreign reporters with tea and sweets. Muhammad Abdullah Shahawani, head of Iraqi intelligence, boasted to a French researcher that he refused to speak to any Iraqi journalist. "I don't trust them," he said. "They're not serious, and they never use the information we give them well." One reporter said he was denied an interview with the Minister of Defense, Hazem Shalan, only to find out that the minister granted an exclusive to the *Washington Post* days later. Such disrespect for local media can only serve to undermine journalists' standing and to create an atmosphere that makes it easier for violent groups to act with impunity against reporters trying to do their jobs.

Borzou Daragahi is a journalist based in Baghdad and Tehran.

Kurdish Media after the War

By Maggy Zanger

With sanctions lifted, Saddam Hussein removed from power, and Kurdistan the most secure place in Iraq, Kurdish media have unprecedented potential to thrive. Kurdistan is experiencing an explosion of investment and trade, thanks to Kurdish businessmen returning from the Diaspora, Turkish and Iranian companies eager to enter a new market, and Baghdad businesses seeking a respite from kidnappings, car bombs and insurgent raids. Despite this seemingly favorable media environment, however, Kurdish journalism appears hobbled by an "old Iraq" mentality and has been slow to capitalize on new opportunities.

Kurdistan experienced the media free-for-all now sweeping the rest of Iraq after the 1991 Gulf war, when the region gained autonomy from Baghdad and a plethora of new publications burst onto the scene. Fourteen years later, the two main Kurdish parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), whose parallel administrations each govern about half of Iraqi Kurdish territory—dominate the broadcast and print media. In addition, the KDP and PUK subsidize smaller political parties and consequently control their media operations, as well.

The two parties publish the region's only daily newspapers, the KDP's *Khabat* and the PUK's *Kurdistani New*, and run vast publishing houses and terrestrial and satellite television channels that reach Kurds in Iraq and beyond. These outlets remain party mouthpieces: anything printed or broadcast is carefully checked for adherence to party interests. Moreover, party media journalists report that in addition to their long-standing hesitation to criticize powerful neighbors Iran and Turkey, now they also must take care not to publish anything that might insult the United States, Shiite Arabs, or nearby Kirkuk's many ethnic groups. One editor complained that Kurdish papers always must use the full title of Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric, "Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani," to avoid offending Shiites, while most of the Iraqi press simply writes "Al Sistani." Party media therefore still trade in the safe, "red carpet" style of journalism so prevalent in the Middle East, a style long on platitudes and short on substance.

Iraqi Kurdistan's nearly one dozen independent newspapers do not suffer from such editorial timidity. They are far more inclined to tackle sensitive social issues such as honor killings and to criticize Kurdish and national government policies. Readers turn to them for information they know the party papers will not print. Yet, like the party-affiliated papers, nearly all have a circulation of under 5,000 in a region with nearly four million Kurdish speakers. Most also tend toward sensationalism and often inaccurate reporting. They have bloated editorial staffs and, despite their nominally independent profiles, depend on direct or indirect financial support from the major parties and the Kurdish administrations.

An exception is *Hawlati*, an independent weekly based in Sulaimaniyah. The paper, now four years old, boasts a circulation of 15,000, the largest in Kurdistan. Its editorial board has gone to great lengths to maintain both editorial and financial autonomy. *Hawlati* recently became the first Kurdish paper to publish weekly several pages of news about developments in the rest of Iraq and in other countries, a move that has boosted its popularity.

The biggest challenge for independent media is financial stability. The notion that a newspaper, radio or TV station can turn a good profit is unheard of in Kurdistan. Moreover, to most Kurds, the purpose of media is to pursue political causes, rather than to inform the public. This mentality is a hangover from the past when all Kurdish media were in the service of "the revolution"—that is, resistance to successive oppressive central governments and overlords.

As a result, the Kurdish media have been slow to take advantage of the influx of new businesses and foreign investment. Billboards now crowd the roadsides of Kurdistan, but the concept of advertising in the media has not caught on, in part because local businesses and newspaper editors do not understand its benefit. In addition, for proud Kurds, soliciting advertising is considered tantamount to begging businessmen for money, and few media outlets are willing to subject their staff to such a humiliating endeavor. Instead of recruiting investors and building advertising and circulation departments, then, most small papers seek funding from international charities. They seem quite content to maintain a precarious financial status so long as they can struggle along on a shoestring budget.

Given the economic boom and relative political stability that Iraqi Kurdistan currently enjoys, independent media could free themselves completely from party support and catapult into a major news-providing role in Iraq. But first, they must make the difficult psychological shift from pursuing "the cause" above all else, to a broader conception of their potential role.

Maggy Zanger is a professor of journalism at the University of Arizona. From August 2003 to December 2004, she served as the Baghdad-based director of the Iraq program of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, a London-based nongovernmental organization.

Media Reform in Syria: A Door Ajar?

By Ammar Abdulhamid

The Syrian media have not shown any serious signs of change since the Baath Party assumed power in a 1963 coup. Indeed, Syria's media sector is one of the most tightly-controlled in the Arab world. The vast majority of publications are state-owned, and rarely express nonconformist opinions. The coming to power of young President Bashar Al Assad in 2000 raised hopes that the regime would loosen the reigns significantly. But after a brief period of decompression in 2001 known as the "Damascus Spring," Al Assad enacted a publications law that consolidated government control; he allowed the licensing of just one 'independent' political magazine, owned by the son of the Minister of Defense; and he cracked down hard on dissent.

Despite the overall gloomy picture, however, in recent months there are indications that reform-minded members of the regime are willing to allow the voicing of limited dissent in state-owned outlets, particularly in the print media.

The new "policy"—or, to be more exact, attitude—appears to be an extension of the regime's tolerance of Internet-based initiatives launched by opposition figures based in Syria and in exile. The initiatives, begun in the past two years, offer a platform for dialogue among reformers inside and outside the regime. For example, Ayman Abdelnour, an engineer with ties to President Al Assad, founded an e-mail service [www.all4syria.org] known as "Kulluna Shurakaa," or "All of Us Are Partners [in the homeland]." Although the Syrian authorities blocked the website earlier this year, Abdelnour continues to disseminate an electronic bulletin featuring articles by reformers of diverse political orientations, including, on occasion, government officials. Another such site is the Tharwa Project [www.tharwaproject.com], an electronic platform that aims to shed light on the concerns and aspirations of religious and ethnic minorities in Syria and other Middle Eastern countries.

The mostly calm and rational nature of this electronic dialogue, coupled with the growing realization by relatively progressive members of the regime that political reforms can help to deflect external pressures (especially those emanating from the Bush administration) seem to have encouraged the President and his advisors to contemplate bolder changes in the media sector.

For this reason, it seems, Al Assad appointed several reform-minded ministers in his October 2004 cabinet reshuffle. The new Minister of Interior, retired army-general Ghazi Kanaan, quickly pronounced the Syrian press "unreadable" and called for criticism of government performance to be expressed in the state-owned media. The task of modernizing the state media falls to the new Minister of Information, Mahdi Dakhallah, himself a journalist and the former editor of *Al Baath*, the Baath Party's official newspaper. In his last editorials before assuming his ministerial post, Dakhallah questioned the need for continuing the state of emergency, in place since 1963, and called for the adoption of serious democratic reforms, contending that there is no basic incompatibility between Baath ideology and democracy. Since his appointment, Dakhallah has supervised the restructuring of several state-owned media institutions with an eye toward making them more professional.

In the meantime, state-owned newspapers have published articles by well-known dissidents. Of particular note was a piece by Hakam Al Baba in the daily *Tishreen* that criticized the continuous

harassment of dissident journalists by the country's numerous security apparatuses. Al Baba cited his own experiences, and named Dakhallah as personally having instigated one such round of detention and questioning when he was the editor of *Al Baath*. The article marked the first time since the Baath Party came to power that the role of Syria's security apparatuses has come under such public scrutiny.

Yet, a genuine media "glasnost" requires more than these haphazard and anecdotal gestures, no matter how brave or promising they might seem. Without the state's clear and public commitment to open up the media sector, to permit truly independent newspapers and other outlets, and to cease harassing journalists and activists, such informal moves will never acquire the necessary credibility among the ranks of the country's dissidents nor among international observers who continue to denounce Syria's record on freedom of expression. Furthermore, the Syrian regime can easily reverse the trend at any moment.

For their part, Syrian dissidents have yet to take full advantage of the small but significant new freedoms allowed in state-owned outlets. Writing articles that touch upon long-taboo issues is necessary, but it is not sufficient. Activists should offer concrete proposals, programs and demands to facilitate the reform process and to build a grassroots constituency for democratic change—something that does not yet exist in Syria, at least not in an organized sense. For as we know, freedom of the press represents the first frontier of any genuine democratization process, because, once instituted, it allows for monitoring government performance and for holding regimes accountable to the people. Thus, if Syrian reformers fail to test the boundaries of these new freedoms, however scant or fleeting, how can they assess the regime's seriousness, or push it to undertake real reform?

Ammar Abdulhamid is currently a visiting fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Studies at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC. He is a Syrian novelist and social analyst based in Damascus, and is the coordinator of the Tharwa Project [www.tharwaproject.com], an initiative that seeks to raise awareness of the living conditions of minority groups in the Middle East.

Still Shooting the Messenger in Morocco

By Aboubakr Jamaï

Morocco's King Muhammad VI, who ascended the throne in 1999 following the death of his father, King Hassan II, is moving ahead with reforms in some areas such as women's rights. But he maintains an ambivalent, sometimes hostile attitude toward the country's new independent press.

This press, which consists of several weekly newspapers published in Arabic and French, emerged in the second half of the 1990s. Their collective circulation exceeds 100,000, a sizeable figure by Moroccan standards. Sovereign from political parties, the government, and the Palace, they have broken many taboos in the past five years by investigating human rights abuses committed by the security apparatus, the corruption of government officials, and the fortune of the King. For this, they have found themselves in frequent confrontation with the government.

During Muhammad VI's first year on the throne, some independent journals were banned and their journalists harassed. Press repression has worsened in the wake of the government's "fight against terrorism," launched after the May 16, 2003 terrorist bombings in Casablanca. Two journalists were the first victims of the anti-terrorist law passed soon after the attacks. They were jailed after publishing a letter from a man claiming responsibility for the bombings and an interview with a member of an illegal Islamist group. Only after intense national and international campaigns did the government release them.

Some analysts attribute such clampdowns to a necessary phase of adjustment for the new King as well as to the audacity of the independent press, which in their view justifies government control. Such an analysis is misleading. It implies that political and media liberalization began under the reign of Muhammad VI. In fact, it was during the last years of Hassan II's reign that a gradual yet steady opening of the media sector occurred. The press criticized government policies more openly, and published, without incurring the wrath of the Palace, path-breaking stories about the three first decades of Hassan II's reign, a time known for widespread human right violations.

This analysis is also denied by the facts. If the repression of independent media at the beginning of Muhammad VI's reign reflected his inexperience instead of an anti-liberal vision, then how can ongoing repressive measures be explained more than five years into his reign? To answer this question, it is important to understand the editorial line of publications that have been the target of harassment. The independent papers have been unrelenting in their defense of democratic ideals. They have argued for constitutional reforms to reduce the powers of the monarchy and enhance those of the elected parliament. They have investigated cases of torture perpetrated by the secret police of the new regime. They have published exposés revealing the monarchy's harmful involvement in the Moroccan business world.

These publications were the recipients of executive orders banning them, and later, of judicial harassment. Such repressive tactics were staunchly denounced, notably by international human rights groups. The criticism tarnished the monarchy's image abroad, and subsequently, the authorities tried to use less conspicuous methods. Aware that the economic survival of the independent weeklies hinges on advertising revenues, they exerted pressure on companies to stop doing business with them. As most advertising companies are state-owned or controlled by the King, this tactic was relatively easy to carry out. As a result, the independent press is struggling to survive.

In the legal sector, the regime's attitude was manifested in its 2001 reform of the press code. Although the new code was free of some repressive elements of earlier texts, its spirit was the same. It preserved penalties of up to five years imprisonment for those who defame the royal family. It affirmed the government's right to ban Moroccan or foreign journals if the publications "undermine Islam, the monarchy, territorial integrity, or public order." Morocco's subservient judiciary has shown little hesitation to interpret this broad-brush legal wording in the most repressive manner.

Such an attitude is particularly short-sighted because the independent press offers a public space in which members of society can peacefully debate one another on controversial issues—a space generally lacking in Morocco. A case in point is the debate surrounding the reform of the personal status code, or *Mudawwana*, to expand women's rights. In June 2002, the independent weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* convened and published the proceedings of a debate between Nadia Yassine, a representative of *Al Adl Wa Al Ihsan*, one of Morocco's most popular Islamist movements, and Said Saadi, a former minister who had first proposed the reforms. At the time, the topic was still highly sensitive and politically charged. The civilized debate allowed both points of view to be expressed in a peaceful setting, and signaled the possibility of adopting changes without great social cleavage. Yassine announced that her movement was not opposed to the proposed reforms, thus weakening the position of radical Islamists who staunchly opposed the reforms and giving the upper hand to the liberals and secularists who strongly supported them. With Islamists further weakened by the implication of radical Islamists in the 2003 bombings, the code was amended with relatively little controversy in 2004. The independent press had helped to dampen down a subject that had been extremely flammable.

Aboubakr Jamaï is the founding editor of Le Journal Hebdomadaire and Assahifa, two independent weeklies in Morocco. He is a 2004 Yale World Fellow at Yale University. This article was translated from the French by Julia Choucair.

Egypt: Political Films and the Politics of Filmmaking

By Walter Armbrust

Over the past two decades the politics of Egyptian cinema—the only commercial film industry in the Arabic-speaking world—have been shaped by broader issues such as economic globalization and concepts of national identity. Some films have addressed overtly political themes, including "the American dream," injustices inflicted on the Palestinians, and Islamist protest movements. The character of such films is often strongly influenced by the overarching context in which they are produced. Consider, for example, the fate of "The Closed Doors" (*Al Abwab Al Mughlaqa*; 1999).

In "The Closed Doors," Islamists recruit a vulnerable early adolescent boy in a public school. "The Closed Doors" was an anti-Islamist film, as are virtually all Egyptian films that address the issue of political mobilization through religion. It was the location of the boy's recruitment that was distinctive. State-sanctioned representations of political Islam usually ignore the presence of Islamists in modern institutions like the public school system, even though Islamists are hardly strangers to such institutions. Indeed, they often dominate them. But at the representational level, the Egyptian state prefers ignorant Islamists. They should not come from what the state likes to think of as its own turf.

At first glance, the film was one of the boldest political statements in the past decade of Egyptian cinema. But the politics of Egyptian cinema dictated that "The Closed Doors," while widely marketed in Europe and the United States as an Egyptian film, would barely be seen in its country of origin. It made no contribution to local debates about the role of religion in society or

politics. One reason for the film's marginalization was that it was financed by French cultural foundations. "The Closed Doors" was therefore a product of "globalization," but of a sort that many Egyptians, both critics and audiences, distrust—a globalization formed not by the uncontrolled movement of economic and cultural products, but rather by what they see as a foreign-sponsored, anti-nationalist movement. "The Closed Doors" also criticized Islamist politics in an idiom that indicted Egyptian national institutions.

Many Egyptian films criticize national institutions, but crucially, they were financed by local, or at most regional, capital, and they circulate no further than the Arabic speaking world. "The Closed Doors" may also have been a commercial failure for other reasons. Its realist style departed from current local cinematic trends; it contained a heavy Oedipal theme that might have struck audiences as preposterous; it featured no bankable stars. Most importantly, audiences may not have accepted the film's assertion that their pious friends, relatives, and colleagues should be conflated with a dangerous "political Islamism." These are all sure signs that the political message promoted by "The Closed Doors" was well out of step with the usual politics of Egyptian filmmaking.

Egyptian cinema has sometimes attracted attention in the United States not for opposing political Islam, but for fomenting anti-Americanism or even anti-Semitism. Such charges are exaggerated, and a case of the pot calling the kettle black, given the anti-Arab bias prevalent in parts of the American media. Films that have struck American journalists—though not necessarily Egyptian audiences—as controversial include "An Upper Egyptian in the American University" (*Saidi fi Al Gami'a Al Amrikiyya*; 1998), in which a peasant makes his way in the elitist American University in Cairo, or "Hello America" (*Allo Amrika*; 2000), in which a man visits his cousin in New York and encounters a virtual encyclopedia of Egyptian stereotypes about the amoral nature of American society. But they must be understood in the same context as "The Closed Doors." They are not so much anti-American as they are nationalist. More important, they are far from the 'massive wave' of anti-Americanism in the Arab world to which the American media often points.

Indeed, anti-Americanism in Egyptian cinema is best seen as a mini-trend that has perhaps had its day. In the past two years by far the most significant commercial Egyptian film has been "Sleepless Nights" (*Sahar Al Layali*; 2003)—an exploration of marital problems portrayed pointedly against the backdrop of a completely globalized Egyptian society. "Sleepless Nights" is like a scientific experiment that controls for all material factors by inventing characters who could be living anywhere—in Los Angeles, or Minneapolis, or any suburbanized city. The film asks what relations between Egyptian men and women would be like if reduced to their essence by eliminating all worries about money, modernity, or politics. "Sleepless Nights" is in many ways a total embrace of globalization, but one that contrasts strongly with that of "The Closed Doors." "Sleepless Nights" portrays society in terms that put Egypt in the world, rather than putting Egypt under an imagined microscope in some European or American laboratory. Consequently the film was fully cognizant of the politics of Egyptian cinema rather than the politics in Egyptian films. In the final analysis, it is the "politics of" that reveals the most about how popular Egyptian cinema re-packages the world for its primary audience.

Walter Armbrust is university lecturer at the Middle East Centre of St. Antony's College, University of Oxford. He is the editor of Mass Mediations: New Approaches to Popular Culture in the Middle East and Beyond (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) and the author of Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996) as well as numerous articles on Egyptian popular culture and mass media.
Return to table of contents.

* * *

News and Views

Statistics on the Arab Media

The media environment varies considerably across the Arab world. Click [here](#) for statistics on the circulation of leading Arab newspapers, radio and television access, Internet use, and literacy rates throughout the region.

Trends in Media Law Reform

Several Arab countries are reforming their media laws. On November 25, 2004, the Moroccan Parliament unanimously passed a law to liberalize the country's audiovisual sector. The legislation opens up the government's radio channel and two television stations to investors, although no investor is permitted to own more than 51 percent of the capital of any audiovisual company. Meanwhile, political parties are discussing amendments to the press code.

In Kuwait, an amended Press and Publications Law is pending in Parliament. The bill would make it more difficult for the government to close publications and to imprison journalists, and would relax licensing restrictions. Criminal penalties for defaming the Amir or Islam or for reporting news that undermines the economy would remain in place. The Ministry of Information is also drafting legislation for privately-run television and radio stations.

The Jordanian government prepared a draft law in March 2004 that would ban detention of journalists and would make it harder to suspend publications. In 2003, the government revoked temporary laws enacted in 2001-2002 that criminalized press violations. It also abolished the Ministry of Information, replacing it with a Higher Media Council that formulates media policy, and created an audiovisual committee to oversee the licensing of private radio and television stations. (Licenses cost between 25,000 and 100,000 Jordanian Dinars, or US\$35,000 to US\$140,000, plus a 50 percent surcharge for stations choosing to cover news and politics). In Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak announced at a February 2004 conference of the press syndicate that prison sentences for journalists convicted of libel would be abolished, but the promised reform has yet to be enacted.

The Bahraini Parliament is considering an amended press law that would limit the cases under which journalists can be subjected to criminal prosecution. The law, introduced in January 2004, would abolish jail punishment for press violations (except for transgressions against Islam and

the King) and would stipulate that no newspaper shall be seized or suspended except by court order.

Trends in New Arab Media

Reflecting the recent emboldening of Arab liberals and democrats, in the past year the region has witnessed the emergence of newspapers with a liberal political hue. For example, Egypt's *Al Masri Al Yawm* ("The Egyptian Today") published its first issue on June 7, 2004. Backed by a group of leading Egyptian businessmen, *Al Masri Al Yawm* is the first independent political daily to be licensed in Egypt since 1954. Columns by editor Anwar Al Hawari and columnist Magdi Mahanna contain scathing criticism of Hosni Mubarak's government. Jordan's *Al Ghad*, an independent political daily, also debuted this year. *Al Ghad* is less outspoken than *Al Masri Al Yawm*, but features investigative reporting critical of government policies. In addition, Egypt's Al Ghad party, which obtained a license in October, plans to launch its paper next spring; reportedly it has chosen as editor Ibrahim Eissa, one of the country's feistiest and best-known liberal journalists.

A second trend in Arab media is state-sponsored broadcasting aimed at combating radical interpretations of Islam and showing a tolerant face to the world. In Morocco, the Ministry of Religious Affairs launched a new radio station, Muhammad VI Quranic Radio, during the recent holy month of Ramadan. According to the Ministry, the station tackles various religious issues, especially fanaticism. In Saudi Arabia, the government launched *Al Fajr* ("The Dawn"), a religious and educational channel whose stated goal is "to spread the message of the Holy Quran." On November 30 of this year, information ministers from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries announced plans to launch a joint media campaign to promote Islamic moderation among their citizens and improve their countries' image abroad. The proposed plan, which includes regional broadcasts calling for religious coexistence and shunning violence, will be taken up at a GCC foreign ministers' meeting in January 2005.

A Snapshot of the Iraqi Media Scene

The April 2003 toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime transformed Iraq almost overnight from the Middle East's most repressive media environment into its most diverse and loosely regulated. Although exact figures are difficult to obtain, reports estimate that as many as 400 newspapers and magazines are now being published across Iraq, with some 100 operating in Baghdad. Most are affiliated with political parties and sell no more than a few thousand copies. Among the largest-circulation newspapers are *Azzaman*, owned by leading Iraqi businessman Saad Al Bazzaz, and *Hawlati*, a Kurdish weekly.

Iraq has also experienced an explosion of new broadcasting. New terrestrial commercial channels include *Al Sharqiyya*, founded by Al Bazzaz, and *Al Nahrayn*, launched by Egyptians Najuib Sawaris, a business magnate, and Muhammad Gohar, a producer. Several stations, such as *Al Salam*, *Al Furat*, *Al Fajr*, *Al Anwar*, *Al Huda*, and *Al Huriyya*, are affiliated with Shiite, Sunni, or Kurdish political parties, several of which seized broadcast equipment from Saddam's regime after it collapsed. The new state channel, *Al Iraqiyya*, was established by

the U.S.-led occupation authorities from the remnants of Baath Party television. It is the only terrestrial channel able to transmit nationally. Satellite dishes, banned during Saddam's reign, have proliferated, allowing Iraqis to watch Middle Eastern, European, and American channels. Notably, *Al Alam*, Iran's Arabic-language channel, is the only foreign station that can be viewed without a satellite dish and is widely watched in the South.

Dozens of radio stations are also operating throughout the country, most with only local reach. Noteworthy is Baghdad-based Radio Dijla, Iraq's first talk-radio station.

Reports on Press Freedom in Arab Countries

Countries in the Middle East (along with Burma, China, North Korea, and Vietnam) scored the lowest in press freedoms in 2004, according to the annual worldwide press freedom index issued by the Paris-based watchdog group Reporters Without Borders (RSF). The report offers several key findings. It states that Iraq is the most dangerous place on Earth for journalists, with forty-four killed since fighting began in March 2003. The Iraq war also provoked Arab regimes facing domestic populations largely opposed to the war to tighten controls on their press. Lebanon is the Arab country with the greatest press freedom, although it ranks only eighty-seventh globally. Saudi Arabia ranks 159th out of 167 countries. In Libya, Syria, and Tunisia, no independent media exists and many journalists are persecuted and censored on a daily basis. In 2004, the media environment deteriorated in Algeria, where journalists were harassed in the lead-up to the April presidential elections, and in Morocco, where local journalists have been given long prison sentences and foreign journalists have been expelled. Finally, the report states that working conditions for Palestinian journalists worsened in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the past year. The Israeli army committed acts of violence against Palestinian journalists, who were also attacked by armed Palestinian groups.

The 2004 report of the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) contends that while some Arab countries took positive steps to expand press freedom in the past year, such steps had little effect on the overall negative conditions for journalists.

Private Broadcasting in Palestine

The Palestinian Territories are home to one of the densest networks of private, community-based broadcast media in the Arab world. More than thirty private television stations operate in the West Bank, the most well-established of which transmit across the West Bank and into Gaza and Jordan. Dozens of private radio stations in the West Bank and Gaza offer mostly entertainment programs, though a few feature news and overtly political broadcasts. The growth of private broadcasting started in the 1990s, before the current Intifada broke out. The Palestinian Authority (PA), fearing that Israel might one day close down or attack its official stations, reluctantly allowed numerous private stations to operate. Israel did attack the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) in 2002.

Al Jazeera Initiatives

In an effort to establish itself as a leader in global news, the Arab satellite TV network *Al Jazeera* opened the Center for Media Training and Development in February 2004 at its Doha, Qatar headquarters to offer training programs in print, broadcast, and electronic media to journalists from around the world. According to Wadah Khanfar, the station's managing director, the center aims to "provide journalists with the best methodologies and techniques of media work." Working in collaboration with the British Thomson Foundation, G-Track Foundation for Training and Consultation, and the International Center for Media Training (CIFAP) in France, the Center will also conduct studies of media developments.

Also, *Al Jazeera* plans to launch an English-language news channel next year. Operating from Kuala Lumpur, London, and Washington, the channel hopes to distinguish itself from news sources such as the Cable News Network (CNN) and the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) by focusing primarily on stories from the developing world.

New Journalists' Associations

On November 23, 2004, the Omani government approved the establishment of the country's first journalists' association. According to Minister of Social Development Minister bint Khalfan Al Yahieyaiah, its purpose is to "spread awareness about the profession and encourage and upgrade journalists' professional standards." In the same week, the Minister of Information came under criticism from press freedom organizations for banning intellectuals Mohammad Al Harthi and Abdullah Al Ryami from Omani media, after they expressed doubts about the government's commitment to political reform on the Iranian channel *Al Alam*.

The Saudi Arabian government has also formed a journalists' association, although many Saudi journalists are skeptical that it will become an assertive advocate for press freedom. The stated purpose of the organization, founded in 2003, is to "boost the role of the press and its message, and to grant journalists more confidence, security, and a sense of responsibility towards their country and people." Some Saudi journalists criticized the appointment of Turki Al Sudairi, Chief Editor of the pro-government *Al Riyadh* newspaper and a relative of King Fahd Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, to head the committee responsible for electing board members. They also complained about alleged corruptions in voting preparations and repeated delays in electing the board. Voting finally took place on June 7, 2004, with nine board members elected, including five-editors-in-chief of the main Saudi newspapers and two women.

U.S. Funding for Arab Media

U.S. funding for Arab media is overwhelmingly directed to American-created Arabic language news networks. The Middle East Television Network (METN), which includes *Al Hurra*, a pan-Arab satellite television station, and Radio Sawa, aimed toward Arab youth, received \$82 million for fiscal year 2004 and is set to receive \$62 million for fiscal year 2005. *Al Hurra* went on the

air in February 2004 and Radio Sawa was launched in 2002. The United States is also funding Iraq's new state broadcasting network through a \$96 million contract to the Harris Corporation.

The Bush administration has provided much more modest support for media development elsewhere in the region. With \$1.7 million in funding from the Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the United States has launched the "Initiative for Open and Pluralistic Media in Arabic-Speaking Countries," which offers capacity-building for journalists and technical assistance in media law reform in Algeria, Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. MEPI is currently devising a long-term strategy to support independent media in the Arab world.

Views from the Arab Press

A sampling of recent editorials from the top-circulation papers across the region.

Writing in the semi-official Palestinian daily *Al Ayyam*, Walid Batrawi criticizes Palestinian media for violating the regulations established by the Central Elections Commission for campaigning in the upcoming presidential elections, scheduled for January 9, 2005. The law clearly states that candidates are only allowed to campaign between December 26 and January 7, but both official and private media have already started giving space and airtime to candidates.

A December 7 editorial by Omar Jaftali in Syria's official daily, *Tishreen*, argues that the recent visit to Damascus of Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) chairman Mahmoud Abbas and Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qurei proves Syria's continuing solidarity with the Palestinians.

Sultan Al Hattab, writing on the same day in Jordan's pro-government *Al Rai*, asserts that Syria feels cornered by mounting U.S. pressure and therefore is seeking to improve its long-strained relations with the Palestinian leadership as a way to revive its role in the international scene.

Commenting on King Abdullah's December 6 meeting with U.S. President George Bush, a December 8 editorial in Jordan's pro-government daily *Al Dustour* affirms that the United States and Jordan share an optimistic vision for real progress in the Middle East, as both leaders agree on the priorities of creating a Palestinian state and holding elections in Iraq.

Jibran Tueini, general manager of Lebanon's leading independent paper *Al Nahar*, criticizes the recent pro-Syria demonstrations organized in Beirut by the Lebanese government in a December 2 opinion piece. Tueini accuses the government of refusing to accept the reality of the post-Cold War world, in which demonstrations are no longer organized by regimes, but by those wishing to express alternative views.

Egyptian citizens are dangerously ignorant about the country's over-population problem, which causes unemployment, poverty, housing shortages, and pollution, writes Muhammad Hassan Al Hafnawi in a December 6 opinion piece in Egypt's mass-circulation government-owned *Al*

Ahram. Without greater public awareness of the problem, Egypt might collapse under the pressures of an ever-growing population.

In a December 7 article in Kuwait's leading daily *Al Rai Al Aam*, Muhammad Al Rumaihi blames Kuwait's rampant corruption on the government's complete control of economy.

Writing in Algeria's top-circulation *Al Khabar* on December 5, Mahmoud Balhemer accuses the Algerian government of behaving in an authoritarian manner when it recently denied representatives of the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) entry into the country to conduct a journalist training program. Balhemer argues that Algerian authorities apparently do not want the country's media to meet global standards, yet they continue to complain about journalists' lack of professionalism.

Women should vote in Saudi Arabia's upcoming municipal elections, argues Adel Basgr in a December 3 opinion piece in the popular Saudi daily *Okaz* because they constitute half the population and contribute significantly to the country's education and health sectors. Women do not have to go to the polls to vote; they could cast their ballots from centers set up at schools, universities, and hospitals, or even from their homes.

* * *

Read On

Several recent publications examine Arab media's impact on politics. Marc Lynch argues that transnational Arabic television and print media have created a public arena outside the control of states, with important implications for political identity, beliefs, expectations, and behavior ("Beyond the Arab Street: Iraq and the Arab Public Sphere," *Politics and Society*, vol. 31, no. 1, March 2003, 55-91).

William A Rugh's book, *Arab Mass Media: Newspapers, Radio, and Television in Arab Politics* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), argues that the growth of privately-owned Arab satellite television in the 1990s has helped to liberalize media throughout the region. Rugh is cautiously optimistic that Arab media can play a positive role in democratization and nation-building.

Investigative reporting on prominent politicians is still rare in Arab countries, due to severe penalties levied for transgressing "red lines" and to a pervasive culture of self-censorship, argues Gregory Kent in his article "Privacy and the Public Interest in the Middle East" (*Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 57, no. 1, January 2004, 131-41).

Arab media organizations still have a long way to go to generate pressure for government transparency and accountability, contends Naomi Sakr in "Freedom of Expression, Accountability and Development in the Arab Region" (*Journal of Human Development*, vol. 4, no.1, February 2003, 29-46). Arab media should oppose ongoing state control over content, ownership, printing and distribution, and entry into the profession of journalism.

Democracy and the rule of law create freedom of the press, not the reverse, asserts Ahmed Bedjaoui in "Arab and European Satellites Over the Maghrib" (*Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, vol. 12, Spring/Summer 2004). The recent expansion of broadcast media in North Africa has generated competition in the information market, but has not altered the political attitudes of average viewers living under undemocratic systems.

In his article "Arab Satellite Television and Politics in the Middle East," Mohamed Zayani argues that transnational broadcasters such as Abu Dhabi TV, *Al Arabiyya* and *Al Jazeera* are helping to shape a new Arab public opinion that will support the political status quo, not undermine it as many Western scholars believe (*Emirates Occasional Papers*, no. 54, The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2004).

Russell Lucas analyzes the Jordanian government's use of press laws to strengthen its control at a time when the country was supposedly liberalizing ("Press Laws as a Survival Strategy in Jordan, 1989-1999," *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 39, no. 4, October 2003, 81-98).

Naomi Sakr describes how, in the late 1990s, newspapers in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries began to test censorship rules and to comment on governance issues ("Dynamics of GCC Press-Government Relations in the 1990s," in *Good Governance in the Middle East Oil Monarchies*, eds. T. Najem and M. Hetherington, London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, 102-18).

A new report from Germany's Heinrich Boll Foundation argues that Arab regimes have displayed an ambivalent attitude toward the proliferation of new media. Seeing in satellite television and other new outlets both threats and opportunities for financial gain and enhanced political control, they sometimes allow greater freedom of expression and sometimes clamp down ("Walking a Tightrope: News Media and Freedom of Expression in the Arab Middle East," Layla Al Zubaidi, Heinrich Boll Foundation, November 16, 2004).

Several writings analyze the phenomenon of pan-Arab satellite television channels. Hazem Saghiye explains that *Al Jazeera* has become "in effect the most popular political party in the Arab world" because the station articulates the sense of loss and failure felt by many Arabs and provides an escape from the region's crushing realities ("*Al Jazeera*: The World Through Arab Eyes," OpenDemocracy.net, June 17, 2004).

In *Freedom Fries—Fried Freedoms: Arab Satellite Channels Struggle between State Control and Western Pressure* (Amman, Jordan: Arab Archives Institute, 2004), Saeda Al Kilani explores the rise of Arab satellite channels and their impact on media freedom across the Middle East. Al Kilani finds that these channels shy away from women's issues and make little effort to highlight the ideas of Arab intellectuals, and that despite its rhetoric of supporting democracy in the Middle East, the United States has pressured some stations not to broadcast certain news.

Avi Jorisch's new study describes how Hizballah uses its satellite television station, Al Manar, to disseminate the party's ideology and anti-American propaganda to audiences in Lebanon and the broader Arab and Muslim worlds, and to wage psychological warfare against Israel (*Beacon of*

Hatred: Inside Hizballah's Al Manar Television, Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004).

Interpretations of Islam are also being altered through the Arab media, as Jon Anderson argues in his article, "New Media, New Publics: Reconfiguring the Public Sphere of Islam" (*Social Research*, vol. 70, no. 3, Fall 2003, 887-906). New media have opened public discourse about Islam to new voices and new practices.

An edited volume by Jon Anderson and Dale Eickelman, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), examines how media is reforming notions of authority, justice and politics in Muslim societies, especially by loosening the control of state and religious authorities over what is printed and broadcast.

Other writings explore U.S. policy toward Arab media. Marc Lynch argues that the United States must engage, not shun, the new Arab public sphere being created by independent, transnational Arab media outlets ("Taking Arabs Seriously," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2003, vol. 82, no. 5, 81-94). U.S. officials should make a concerted effort to explain American policy openly and continuously in the Arab media.

The United States' 2002 public diplomacy campaign in the mainstream media of Arab and Muslim countries lacked a coherent message and was a liability rather than an asset, asserts Jihad Fakhreddine in "U.S. Public Diplomacy in Broken Arabic: Evaluating the Shared Values Advertising Campaign Targeting the Arab and Muslim Worlds," (*Global Media Journal*, vol. 2, no. 3, Fall 2003).

Jon Alterman argues that the United States should devote far more attention to monitoring developments in "mid-tech" Arab media—satellite television, videocassettes, and photocopiers often associated with the 1970s—instead of focusing on "high-tech" advances such as the Internet ("The Information Revolution and the Middle East," in *The Future Security Environment in the Middle East*, eds. Daniel L. Byman and Nora Bensahel, RAND, 2004, 227-51).

Iraq's media environment is the focus of several reports. A Freedom House study by Brian Katulis applauds the proliferation of independent media since Saddam Hussein's downfall but warns that violence and an unregulated media environment threaten press freedom ("Liberated and Occupied Iraq: New Beginnings and Challenges for Press Freedom," in *Freedom of the Press 2004: A Global Survey of Media Independence*, ed. Karin Deutsch Karlekar, Freedom House, 2004).

Iqbal Hassoon Al Qazwini paints a detailed picture of the current "media boom" in Iraq, finding it chaotic and lacking a press that is balanced, professional, and politically independent ("On the Role of Media in the Current Transition Phase in Iraq," *Transnational Broadcasting Studies*, vol. 13, Fall 2004).

Iraq's proliferation of new media outlets will end quickly unless its economy is able to generate sufficient advertising revenue and a clear legal framework is created, writes Borzou Daragahi in "Rebuilding Iraq's Media," *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 2003, vol. 42, no. 2, 45-48).

A report by Article 19 argues that Iraq's entire legal framework as it affects freedom of expression must be overhauled. In addition, Iraqi politicians and other public figures need to become accustomed to independent reporting that will sometimes subject them to intense scrutiny and harsh criticism ("Freedom of Expression Essential to Iraq's Future," *Iraq Media Law Analysis*, Article 19, London: February 2004).

Reporters Without Borders finds a blossoming of independent media outlets in Iraq but warns that many lack credibility and reach only small sections of the public ("The Iraqi Media After the War: A New But Fragile Freedom," Reporters Without Borders, July 2003).

A detailed study by Internews analyzes media law and policies in fourteen Arab countries and offers recommendations for strengthening independent media in the region ("Study of Media Laws and Policies in the Middle East and Maghreb," Internews, June 2003).

It is unlikely that any country in the Middle East or North Africa will experience a full information revolution during the next decade, concludes a study by the RAND Corporation (*The Information Revolution in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Grey E. Burkhardt and Susan Older, Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2003). Media reform has too many impediments and too few champions, and—in most countries—too few resources.

The *Middle East Media Guide* (ed. Ben Smalley, Dubai, United Arab Emirates: Sandstone, 2004) provides comprehensive information on all the major media sectors in the Middle East, on media research and monitoring organizations, and on media training programs.

The current issue of *Global Media Journal* (vol. 2, no. 5, Fall 2004) is dedicated to the topic of media in the Middle East. It features articles on media laws, U.S. reactions to Arab media, the Internet, advertising trends, censorship, media ownership patterns, and the new "media cities" that recently have been established in Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates.

Correction:

John P. Entelis's article, "The Sad State of Political Reform in Tunisia," which appeared in the November 2004 issue of the *Arab Reform Bulletin*, states that "the [Tunisian] Constitution mandates that four-fifths of the legislature's seats be reserved for the ruling party while the remaining 20 percent are contested by the country's seven officially-sanctioned opposition parties." In fact, the Constitution does not contain such a clause. Rather, a 1998 amendment to the electoral law stipulates that at least 20 percent of the seats must go to candidates (in effect, those from opposition parties) who do not win the majority of votes in the country's 26 electoral districts. In practice, 20 percent has become the maximum that the opposition is allowed to win, with the ruling party, the Constitutional Democratic Rally (Rassemblement Constitutionnel

Démocratique), holding the vast majority of seats (currently, 152 out of 189). The *Arab Reform Bulletin* regrets the error.

Subscriber Information

Click [here](#) to receive the *Arab Reform Bulletin* via e-mail every month or to unsubscribe.

To subscribe to the Arabic edition of the *Bulletin*, click [here](#).

Click [here](#) to read past issues of the *Bulletin*.

We welcome your comments or suggestions. Please e-mail the editor at arb@ceip.org.

The *Bulletin* will not be published in January 2005. The next issue will appear in February 2005.