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# *Media in the Middle East: Changing realities*

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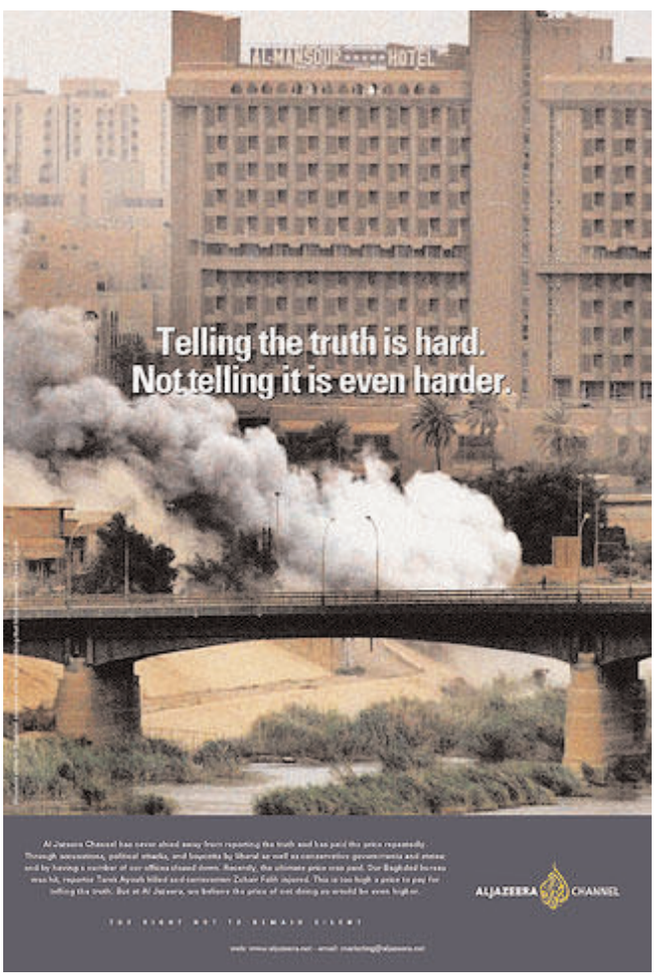
# Al-Jazeera after: 9/11 The emergence of an Arab world-class news organization

**Alexandra Karaiskou**

*Since 11/9 and through its exclusive live coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, al-Jazeera has gained worldwide popularity and credibility even among Western viewers. At present, it ranks next to world-class news organizations and plays an important role in shaping Arab public opinion. As a consequence, it has been the target both of the West's acerbic criticism and of restrictive measures on behalf of Arab regimes.*




Launched in November 1996, al-Jazeera has been the culmination of Qatar's democratization process. The Qatari Emir, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, allocated to the station approximately $140 million for its first five years of broacasting, guaranteeing editorial independence and unbiased information. Al-Jazeera succeeded the BBC World Service Arabic television, a Saudi Orbit Communications joint venture with BBC, when in April 1996 the latter was forced to close down after broadcasting a documentary on government execution policies in the Saudi Kingdom and lending voice to Saudi political dissidents.

Apart from being the first 24-hour Arab satellite news network, al-Jazeera has turned the tables on state-controlled Arab media. Through its tackling of controversial issues and by leveling criticism at both religious and political officials, it has offered its audience alternative news reporting and challenged the official pro-governmental Arab version of events. Moreover, it was the first to conduct open debates, where dissidents and citizens from across the political spectrum express their opinions freely. Most importantly, it seems to be in touch with the "Arab street" and play a role in shaping Arab public opinion. Al-Jazeera achieved where the privately owned Saudi and Lebanese networks, launched by way of counterweighing governmental monopoly

on television, had failed, that is to detach themselves from the ruling elites and become truly independent.

The revolution that al-Jazeera brought about in Arab mass communication became a double-edged sword for the network. Even though it has gained credibility and wide popularity among Arab viewers, it has incurred the wrath of many Arab governments and has often been accused of partiality and lack of objectivity. The criticism, coming even from guests in its programs, concerns its indulgent stance towards the Qatari government. At the GCC Summit of October 2002 the Gulf states considered taking measures against the network, which had reportedly referred to the Gulf regimes in an offensive manner. Two years later, in August 2004, the Iraqi interim government sealed the network's bureau in Baghdad on the grounds that its footage incited violence. In both cases the International Press Institute stepped in to ask for a withdrawal of the bans. Moreover, reporters and broadcasters have been banned on occasion from Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian authority and the network's offices were shut down in Kuwait and Jordan. Algeria cut the signal when the network attempted to delve deeper into the civil war. Egypt's state media launched an anti- al-Jazeera campaign, while Tunisia, Morocco and Libya recalled their ambassadors from Qatar. For its part, the Saudi Kingdom, in an effort to acquire influence over the network, tried to reduce its ad revenues – a highly important source of income and, consequently, the vanguard of the network's independence – by urging Saudi companies to refrain from advertizing themselves on the channel.

Despite this restrictive action, its coverage of Operation Desert Fox in 1998 and of the second Palestinian Intifada in 2000 increased the network's stature among Arab audiences. Yet, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were the turning point which lent al-Jazeera the status of a globally renowned news network, in the same way that CNN met tremendous success during the 1991 Gulf War. The date of the US invasion of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan (October 7, 2001) is a landmark in the network's history, rendering it almost overnight a household name in the West. Al-Jazeera secured exclusive coverage of the war and broadcast exclusive videotaped messages from Osama Bin Laden. This practice has gained it labels such as "the mouthpiece of Bin Laden" or "Osama Television".

The Qatari-based network operates on the model of Western media, such as BBC and CNN, pursuing editorial impartiality and independence and becoming increasingly competitive. It is noteworthy that al-Jazeera's staff consists of journalists previously employed, among others, in CNN, BBC and CNBC. What distinguishes al-Jazeera from Western networks is the fact that it broadcasts Middle Eastern news from an Arab perspective. Its Muslim-centered news reporting has attracted more viewers, including many in Europe and the US who seek an alternative to the Western outlook. Indeed, according to al-Jazeera, the number of European subscribers has doubled since the outbreak of the war in Iraq.

As al-Jazeera obtained exclusive footage from the theatre of the Afghanistan and the Iraq wars, many foreign networks (such as NBC, CBS, ABC News, Fox, French TV, the Economist,

Time and the Daily Mail) tried to reach a deal with the Arab network concerning, among others, resource sharing or rebroadcasting of its crises coverage. Indeed, al-Jazeera has signed a long-term agreement with CNN and has become a CNN World Report contributor.

However, the live coverage of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the broadcasting of al-Qaeda's statements have evoked the ire of the US government, which has accused the network of anti-American bias (due to its widespread use of phrases, such as "what the US calls terrorism" referring to the 11/9 attacks or "the forces of occupation" concerning the American troops in Iraq). Washington has heavily criticized the network for airing scenes of war atrocities which are thought to be responsible for inciting insurgents to an escalation of violence. In October 2001, Washington put pressure on the Qatari regime to impose restrictions on the satellite network. This action resulted once again in the intervention of the International Press Institute. In the same vein, in November 2005, a top-secret British government memo was leaked, according to which George W. Bush was considering bombing the Qatar headquarters of al-Jazeera. These two incidents have raised speculations about whether the bombing of the network's offices in Kabul and Baghdad in 2002 and 2003 respectively were intentional or not. However, the network's motto is "the opinion and the other opinion" and therefore high-ranking officials, such as Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, Tony Blair, Colin Powell and Ariel Sharon, have been interviewed, contributing to the international credibility of the news organization. Thereby, al-Jazeera has been characterized as the CNN of the Arab world.

Apart from al-Jazeera, there are also other news networks competing for a share of the Arabic-speaking audience. Al-Arabiya is a 24-hour news channel which was launched in March 2003 as a joint venture of Saudi-controlled pan-Arab satellite TV pioneer, Middle East Broadcasting Centre, Lebanon's Hariri Group and other investors from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Gulf states. The Dubai-based channel is becoming "the moderate alternative to al-Jazeera" and it states that it is committed to objectivity. However, during the war in Iraq, al-Arabiya's coverage evoked Washington's irritation and, as a result, its coverage of the Iraq war was upheld for two weeks. Abu Dhabi TV, launched in 2000, follows in al-Jazeera's footsteps as well. It is not a 24-hour news network but is still competing with al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya in order to attract Arab viewers. The TV station has drawn attention due to its coverage of the Iraq War. However, according to a poll conducted by the US State Department in seven Iraqi cities, it was found that during the US invasion, 37% chose al-Arabiya as their news source, al-Jazeera followed with 26%, while the US-run Iraqi Media Network gathered only 12%.

Despite the increasingly competitive race to gain the lead in Arab news reporting, al-Jazeera is still the region's most-viewed news network and the second most watched pan-Arab station. Among the approximately 40 million viewers, 175.000 are situated in the United States. According to Allied Media Corporation statistics, the largest proportion comprises of young, educated professionals and decision-makers aged 20-35, who spend about 4 hours per day watching the channel. The majority of the viewers reside in populated urban areas and hold a high school degree. A high percentage of its viewers are reported to be Muslim, while men overwhelmingly outnumber women. Along with the statistics, what raises concern in the West is therefore the network's potential influence over Arab public opinion.

# "Jihad International" *Presents...* **New** age war, a **media** war

**Marina Eleftheriadou**

*The "war on terrorism" is fought not only on the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan but also on the parallel microcosm of the media. The "jihadi movement" has moved the struggle to the level of information where, via the use of television and particularly the Internet, it can easily get a podium to address its audience, create a virtual ummah, spread its worldview and terrorize its enemies. Admittedly, for a movement with "medieval leanings", they have been quite successful.*

"Publicity is the oxygen of terrorism", concluded Margaret Thatcher at a time when IRA violence was reaching a peak. Walter Laqueur, one of the most influential analysts of guerrilla warfare, came to this conclusion even earlier, in the early 1970's, long before we crossed the threshold of the "information age". As he put it: "The media are the terrorist's best friend. The terrorist's act by itself is nothing, publicity is all".

The critical role of the media is well understood by the Salafi groups that wage an international jihad against their perceived enemies throughout the world. The centrality of this axiom in al-Qaeda's philosophy is evident in the fact that, even before the spectacular 9/11 attacks, one of the four committees that formed its organizational structure was tasked with media and publicity. The importance of the message behind the action was stressed in a letter sent by Ayman al-Zawahiri to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi where Zawahiri said that the media represent two thirds of the battle, as well as in a speech made by Osama bin Laden in 2002 where he argued that: "The time has come to have the media take its rightful place, to carry out its required role in confronting this aggressive campaign and the open declared Crusader war by all means that can be seen, heard, and read." From this angle, the emergence of groups such as Global Islamic Media Front, the Jihad Information Brigade and Jihad Media Battalion, to name just a few, comes as no surprice.

The use of media power, of course, is by no means peculiar to al-Qaeda and like-minded groups. However, what is significant in this case is the adaptive and more or less sophisticated exploitation of the opportunities that the media offer in order to promote their goals and elucidate their worldview. The "jihadi movement" learned the lesson of Ayatollah Khomeini's use of the cassette-tape to diffuse his teachings - to the point that the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was also dubbed "the cassette revolution"-

, but most importantly they managed to move beyond the traditional methods of leaflets, booklets, paper magazines (i.e. GIA's magazine Al-Ansar) and audio-visual recordings that circulated in essence from hand to hand and to reach a grand audience by exploiting two phenomena of the "information era", namely satellite television and the Internet. A research conducted by Manuel Torres, Javier Jordan and Nicola Horsburgh (published in the journal "Terrorism and Political Violence") showed a concrete turn towards the two aforementioned media which the "Jihadists" prefer more and more to transmit their message. In 2001 none of the messages came out through the Internet, 9 through television and 3 through print media. In 2002 there were already signs of a change, as the Internet was used in 23 cases, television in 4 and print media in 30. In 2005 this trend became pronounced to the utmost, since the respective numbers were 2439, 10 and 0.

Satellite television was the first target and boadcaster of the "jihadi message" especially after the "big bang" of 9/11 when Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda became the focus of global attention and any public declaration was almost certainly reported on news channels. Al-Jazeera benefited most from the ensuing deluge of public debate on terrorism, as the preferential status that al-Qaeda ganted it brought the satellite channel to preeminence. Al-Jazeera was usually the first to televize al-Qaeda's communiques and was the only channel to be granted an interview with bin Laden after the attacks.

The access to the mass media underlined the power of the image in fulfilling the goals of propaganda towards either existing or potential sympathizers or towards presumed adversaries by multiplying the terror generated by a single terrorist -or not- act. While the Chechens were the first to incorporate the videocamera into the equipement of a guerrilla squad, it was only after 9/11 that their example has loomed large. At the Iraqi front where the material was vast this tactic flourished. Any group that wants to build a respected profile has to release a video that depicts its activity. As a consequence, alongside the usual videos of speeches delivered, for example, by bin Laden or Zawahiri or videos with advice and instructions to future fighters, there is a growing number of recordings that show ambushes against coalition forces, roadside bombs, captured hostages and decapitations. Kidnappings and executions of foreigners was indeed the easiest way to gain immediate coverage in both Arab and international media. Besides the recent, widely-covered, video release depicting the BBC correspondent kidnapped in Gaza, Alan Johnston, who is held by a radical Islamic organization called the "Army of Islam", this tactic is waning. It was against this background that al-Qaeda established its "video arm" As-Sahab Productions. The amount (in the first four months of 2007 it has released 35 videos, that is a rate of one video per 3,6 days) and the improving quality of its videos is at least remarkable, given the difficult conditions under which the crew has to work and the prerequisite of secrecy during shooting and editing.

However, as public "thirst" for violence reached its saturation point and perhaps as a result of an understanding between certain governments and media companies to limit their access to the media, these groups had to find other ways to impart their message. Audiences in the Middle East could still be reached via some marginal TV channels such as the Iraqi Al-Zawraa TV, (after a ban by the Iraqi government in November 2006, it broadcasts via the Arabsat Badr-3 satellite) which recently started to air a program called "Hidden Camera Jihad" that shows videos of attacks followed by a laughter track, or through direct sale of these videos in the markets of Iraq and other countries in the region.

Nevertheless, in order to keep in contact with the rest of the world, Internet had to assume the

reins of the "media war". As Global Islamic Media Front (purportedly Al-Qaeda's mouthpiece) suggested: "This is the Internet that Allah has enlisted in the service of jihad and of the mujahideen, which has come to serve your interests -given that half the battle of the mujahideen is being waged on the pages of the Internet- the sole outlet for mujahideen media". Ironically, the Internet is the incarnation – at least on the level of symbolism - of a "virtual" ummah, even more so since the physical "scale model" of the ummah in Afghanistan was lost. Bulletin boards and chat rooms proved to be ideal in creating an atmosphere of community.

The pattern of the jihadi presence on the cybernet is in fact a reflection of the movement's actual needs and organizational style. While in the 1990's, when the Jihadists formed a more hierarchical structure under the shadow of al-Qaeda, there were only a few sites of that kind, of which the most important was "alneda.com", after 9/11 the imperative to move to a more decentralized network of like-minded groups meant, in the case of the Internet, the proliferation of "jihadi cells". According to Professor Gabriel Weimann (University of Haifa, Israel), the number of terrorist-run websites increased by 571% between 1997 and 2004.

The material distributed via the Net proliferated accordingly taking advantage of the absence of the restrictions present in the traditional mass media. In addition to various official jihadi statements, videos and monographs of ideological content, there have emerged manscripts and on-line magazines of military and technical nature such as the "Encyclopedia of Jihad", the "Encyclopedia of Preparation" and the on-line magazine "Mu'askar al-Battar" which was published in 2004 by the al-Qaeda organization in Saudi Arabia as a complement to the "Sawt al-Jihad" magazine that dealt with doctrine issues. Also in 2004, another internet magazine appeared under the name Al-Khansa. It widened the target group by reaching to women in order to teach those married to radical Islamists how to support their husbands. Meanwhile, a rather small and modestly harmful group of hackers completed the notion of cyberwar. The most notorious was Irhabi007, arrested by British authorities in 2005, who also wrote a "hacking manual for mujahideen". His example is followed by others such as the Muhajirun Brigades who aim to "attack those websites which do harm to Islam and to the Muslims".

The Jihadists do not underestimate the importance of marketing either. In 2005 a message was posted on several websites announcing a contest to design a new site for a militant group called Jaish Al-Taifa Al-Mansura in Iraq. The winner would be given the chance to fire through a computer three remote-controlled missiles at a US military base in Iraq. Likewise, in 2006 the Global Islamic Media Front created a videogame with fighters making their way through Coalition forces and eventually getting a chance to take a digital shot on George Bush.

The first reaction of counterterrorism experts was to close down these sites. However, this effort turned out to be futile as the administrators of the sites kept moving to new servers and the proliferation of similar websites didn't cease at any point. Donald Rumsfeld admitted the ineffectiveness of this policy in a speech at the Council on Foreign Relations in February 2006, saying that "the US has lagged behind the al-Qaeda network in one of the most important aspects of the war on terrorism - the media war". As a result, a new approach was put forward. On the one hand, instead of trying to obliterate them, it's better to oversee what is being discussed on those sites in order to evaluate the ideological and military developments of the jihadi movement. On the other hand, their message should be countered by a persuasive retort. As Bruce Hoffman of the Georgetown University put it: "the US must help foreign governments flood the Internet with persuasively youthful Web sites presenting anti-jihadist messages yet without leaving American fingerprints". A war - especially this kind of war - is rarely just a matter of simple power balancing. It is also about "winning the hearts and minds" and, in that sense, it is a media war.

# Media freedom The *role* of the STATE in the **Arab** World

**Ilias Tassopoulos**

*The influence of the Middle Eastern State on the Media has not receded over the past few years. However, the latest technological, political, economic and societal developments seem to have affected the course of press freedom in the region.*

Although newspapers existed in the Middle East from the middle of the eighteenth century, they were under the total control either of the Ottoman authorities or of foreign Embassies. The first Arab newspaper, "Al-Waqae al Masreya", was printed in the 19th century in Egypt. Since then, many things have changed. Technological developments have enabled the media to expand their scope of activity - there are around 200 Arab satellite TV channels. World events, like the decolonization, the end of the USA-USSR Cold War conflict, the 11/9 terrorist attacks and the US response, have influenced not only the regimes but also the populations of the Arab countries.

One thing that has not changed is the continued attempt of any regime in power to use the mass media as a tool to accomplish its goals, whether it is the integrity of the empire, the national independence, the maintenance of public order and so on.

In retrospect, the technological developments in the media sector could have had two adverse effects on the Middle East's state of affairs. They could have enabled the repressive Middle Eastern regimes to ensure their domination of Arab societies' information channels (a Middle Eastern version of London as depicted in the futuristic film "V for Vendetta"). Or, on the other hand, it could have enabled new political organizations to use the technological developments in their favour so as to mobilize the Arab populations to a rebellion or at least to demand the establishment of a more representative governance (a Middle Eastern version of Eastern European revolutions). What actually happened from the beginning of the nineties was somewhere in the middle.

The media were indeed used by the political organizations that gained strength in the region. However, the voices of radicalism and extremism, stemming either from organizations like al-Qaeda or other fundamentalist organizations were much louder than the modernizing voices of the moderate political Islam.

The regimes also tried to use the media so as to preserve their dominance. Egypt had attempted to keep a strict control on the media, ever since Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the press after the 1952 revolution. The Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria followed a similar course. Prior to 1990 almost all Arab radio and television channels were government monopolies. Only in Lebanon the political system fostered newspapers representing a variety of different views.

In the early 1990s, Arabic satellite television networks aiming at a pan-Arab audience were established in Europe. Simultaneously, after the end of the Cold War, Egypt was pressed by the US to liberalize the press and to allow the spread of independent media. This does not mean, nevertheless, that the regime didn't attempt to stop their action by taking advantage of state monopolies, e.g. printing facilities, state advertisements etc. Especially after the Gulf War of 1991, the Gulf states had also comprehended the importance of satellite television not only in times of peace, but also in times of conflict. A major motivation for the establishment of the first Arab satellite TV networks was the fact that the coverage of the crisis by CNN was thought to convey to the Arab audiences a different picture, biased against the Arabs. Although CNN was watched by many in the Arab world, most Arabs preferred a different approach to events, closer to Arab sensitivities and interests. The most obvious example of the Arab satellite stations that were created is the state-subsidized al-Jazeera, which enjoys the support of Qatar's government. Additionally, Muslim investors seem to invest in the large media institutions of the world so as to affect their policies via their participation in the administrative boards (e.g. Saudi Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal holds more than a 5% share in Rupert Murdoch's News Corp - News Corp owns the Fox News TV channel).

Although Al Jazeera is a private TV station and its officials have declared that, ideally, they would like to the network to be totally commercialized, this is not feasible. As the projected material in al-Jazeera was considered hostile to the Middle Eastern regimes, most governments in the Middle East apart from being reluctant to grant state advertisements to al-Jazeera, used their influence and power so as to prevent their own private sector from advertising on the network. This example depicts the ability of the regimes to intimidate the private sector through indirect means, by using their financial clout.

An interesting case in point was when a liberal power encountered the difficult situations of the region and had to deal, among others, with the issue of Arab media (even under the "distorting" influence of leading an occupation force): after the successful US-led invasion of Iraq, as

William A. Rugh eloquently describes, the U.S. government was dominant in the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) that was responsible for all aspects of governance in Iraq, including the Iraqi media, from March 2003 until June 2004. Apart from providing an example of "democratic" governance in a Middle Eastern state, the US had to improve its image in the Arab world, so as to increase the possibilities of stabilizing the region. How did the US respond in this difficult situation, where normally one would expect an occupation force to impose totalitarian measures?

The American response was quite interesting. Attempting both to balance between the desire not to violate its declarations about freedom and the need to steer the post-Saddam Iraqi media into a Western course, the CPA established media outlets that would be supportive of American views. The most notable examples provided by Rugh were that of al-Iraqiya Television and of al-Sabah daily newspaper which were favoured with U.S. funding and access to information (the US had established two international broadcasting stations, Radio Sawa in 2002, an Arabic language service, and al Hurra Television).

Simultaneously, the CPA permitted the emergence of several Iraqi-controlled media all over the country` however it took action in exceptional circumstances (the CPA also tried to establish an Iraqi media regulating body, the ICMC, modelled on the American Federal Communications Commission). The US was also behind the shutting down of al-Jazeera's offices in Iraq, on the accusation of inciting the populations to opposition against the government.

From the above it can be established that the US administration initially followed a more "polite" version of state intervention in media operation than e.g. Egypt did in the post Cold War years. The US attempted to influence the Iraqi media in its favour, indirectly at first (subsidies, exclusive information etc.) but when it was judged that this was not enough, it intervened directly to shut down the dissenting media. The above example illustrates that the future prospects are not so appealing when a liberal power (although under these special circumstances) employs, among others, repressive measures in its dealings with the media.

Nevertheless, one must admit that, at this particular instance, the growth of new market-based media providers could empower more radical forces in the Middle East. As professor Shibley Telhami points out "the media looks at the world through the prism of its audience, through the prism of its consumers" and the Arab audience might be too angry at the moment to reach for the truth.

# Coverage of the Lebanese Crisis
## Middle Eastern Media inside and outside Lebanon.

**Chryssoula Toufexis**

*Lebanon has a unique media environment in the region. The media is engaged in the dialogue over a number of political, economic religious and social issues, a phenomenon unparalleled in other Middle Eastern states, in which the regimes still practice strict state censorship on their media outlets. Unlike other Arab countries, Lebanese media owners are affiliated with the various religious and political groups or sects, reflecting the political interests and divisions of the country. However, sectarianism has escalated after the June 2006 Lebanon War between Hezbollah and Israel.*

Mostly sectarian, Future TV (FTV), owned by Saad Hariri, a Sunni member of parliament and the son of Rafiq Hariri, regularly airs shows and videos praising Rafiq Hariri and promoting the March 14 movement. Its news are focused on mainly Sunni Lebanese issues that do not include Southern Lebanon and are basically supportive of Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Hezbollah-affiliated al Manar TV presents news through the prism of its own political context and orientation giving special coverage to Southern Lebanon and the Bekaa (Shia areas). It is markedly supportive of Palestine, Syria and Iran.

A media war has also erupted between Syria and Lebanon, following the February 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Not only the anti-Syrian LBC, but also the FTV channel, which attracts a large number of Syrian viewers, leveled unprecedented harsh criticism at Syria for its involvement in the assassination. The Lebanese media have

played a major role in the "Cedar Revolution" and the revolts that led the Syrian forces to withdraw from the region in April 2005. However, in the months that followed, media critics of the Syrian regime paid the price with their lives, as publisher Gebran Tueni and columnist Samir Qassir of al-Nahar newspaper as well as LBC-TV journalist May Chidiac were killed in car bomb attacks. The Lebanese media are very important to the Assad regime, because Syrian state television has no appeal to the Syrian public that usually tunes to Lebanese terrestrial TV in order to be informed on current events.

Disagreement in the Arab world about the Lebanon War, between the state sponsors of Hezbollah and the moderate Arab states of Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has been reflected in the Arab media too. Newspapers affiliated to the moderate regimes, accused Hezbollah for serving Syrian and Iranian aspirations in the region and for jeopardizing the interests of the Lebanese people and of the Arab states. Accusations went further to criticize the role of Iran and Syria in manipulating Hezbollah and setting off the Lebanese crisis. In Egypt, some of the allegations directly accused Iran of manipulating the Lebanese crisis in order to drive international pressure away from its nuclear program. Abd Al-Rahim 'Ali, director of the Arab Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Cairo, wrote in the Egyptian government daily Al-Ahram: *"When Iran saw that its nuclear dossier would soon be transferred to the Security Council, it decided to use Lebanon, along with Iraq, as a bargaining card to increase the pressure on the Americans"*. Egyptian columnist Hazem 'Abd Al-Rahman wrote in the same newspaper: *"all Iran wants is to extend its hegemony over the eastern Arab countries, and it is trying to use Hezbollah as a Trojan horse to achieve this aim"* (Al-Ahram, August 6, 2006). In the same tone, Lebanese columnist Fuad Matar wrote in Al-Sharq Al-Awsat: *"Hezbollah has placed the Arabs in a questionable situation, since its operation was meant to serve Iran's interests"*. Muhammad 'Ali Ibrahim, chief editor of the Egyptian government daily Al-Gumhuriyya, wrote: *"... the Iranian plan...seeks to destroy the Arab states from within by using Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine and by swallowing Iraq... Iran wishes and plans to turn the entire Arab world into an assortment of armed militias like Hezbollah"*.

Saudi-affiliated newspapers, owned by or based in Saudi Arabia, also express the disagreement of their government over Hezbollah's provocative actions. Al-Riyadh newspaper published an editorial *"Irresponsible wars"* which called Hezbollah's war an "illusory victory". Particularly critical of Syria's involvement and role in Lebanese domestic affairs, Jamal Hashukji, former editor of the Saudi daily Al-Watan wrote about Syria: *"angry, anxious, and hurting because of the loss of its hegemony over Lebanon, was interested in drawing attention away from the investigation into the assassination of Prime Minister Rafiq Al-Hariri..."* Al-Watan, July 18, 2006.

The Syrian regime denies those allegations and claims that it is Israel and the West that have been determined to redraw the map of the Middle East. It goes further to accuse Israel of plotting the Hariri assassination in collaboration with the US. Within this context, Syrian Minister of Expatriate Affairs Buthayna Sha'ban answered to the accusations by writing in her column in Al-Sharq Al-Awsat: *"It is not Hezbollah which is a proxy, fighting on behalf of Syria and Iran, as some have claimed in attempt to mislead the Arabs. Israel is the one which is fighting the Arabs and Muslims on Lebanese soil on behalf of the U.S., Britain and the entire West... (Al-Sharq Al-Awsat, London, July 24, 2006). In the same tone Columnist Adnan Ali wrote in the Syrian government daily Al-Thawra: "The repeated statements by U.S. Secretary of State about the birth of a new Middle East expose the intentions of those who planned this war against Lebanon and who wanted to use it as an opportunity to... create a new reality based on America's and Israel's perception of the region..."* According to another article in the Syrian government daily Al-Thawra:

*"The war that is currently waging makes us more certain than ever that Israel and the U.S. are the forces behind the assassination of Rafiq Al-Hariri. The assassination was part of an unsuccessful attempt by the U.S. to enforce U.N. Resolution 1559. ...Israel is the only one who benefits from this resolution and from Al-Hariri's assassination"* (Al-Thawra, July 27, 2006).

The Syrian media have also condemned as a *"political vengeance"* the UN Security Council resolution to establish an international tribunal for the prosecution of the suspects of the Hariri assassination, arguing that the resolution is just another instrument for the US and Israel to interfere in the Middle East and it does not reflect the policy of the other international powers. *"The resolution ... is absolutely a US-Israeli one and could never be regarded as an expression of the international will,"* argued an editorial of the Tishrin government newspaper. The Al-Thawra government newspaper has also stated that the purpose of the resolution was *"to politicize investigations in Hariri's assassination"* and that it was revealing of the US intensions of a *"direct and abrupt intervention"* in regional affairs.

Syria's ally, Iran, who hasn't escaped criticism over its role in the Lebanese crisis, has adopted very similar arguments as Syria and its newspapers along with Syrian ones reflect the common policies of the two countries. Hard-line Tehran newspapers have been really supportive of Damascus over the Hariri investigation tribunal, accusing the US and Israel that the resolution is part of their imperialistic plans that target Syria. Jomhuri-yi Islami daily newspaper, stated in its editorial of January 3, 2006 that the assassination of Hariri was *"the first phase of the project America and the Zionists had prepared to pave the way for annexing Syria and Lebanon to the imperialist plot of a Greater Middle East."* Similar comments have also appeared in Resalat newspaper, accusing the United States, France and Israel of interfering in domestic Lebanese and Syrian affairs.

In conclusion, true debate over the issues galvanizing Lebanon's crisis is prohibited in the media of the Middle Eastern Arab states. On the contrary, the state of affairs in Lebanon has provided an environment which is revealing of the regional antagonisms precipitated by the political interests of the two Middle Eastern camps and their affiliates inside Lebanon who push for further division between the various political religious and sectarian groups.

# Introvert Societies in Africa: The Issue of *Press Freedom*

**Ioannis V. Mantzikos**

*In Africa the problem of press freedom remains yet unsolved. Attacks against the press are on the rise in many countries of the Maghreb as well as in sub-Saharan Africa as journalists become more outspoken in their criticism. The struggle for free press is destined to be long, arduous and buffered by wider political forces.*

In the mid-1990's Algeria was considered to be the most dangerous place in the world to practice journalism. In the 1990-92 period the Algerian media enjoyed a freedom and vibrancy unparalleled in the Arab world. The political turmoil and the outbreak of violence widened the divide between secular and Islamist extremists. Initially, organs of the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS), such as the weeklies Al-Mounqidh and Al-Forqane, were closed down in 1992. The clampdown on news coverage gradually extended to independent Arabic publications which had been critical of the government. In addition, the Algerian authorities remained silent about the cases of "disappeared" journalists Djamel Eddine Fahassi and Aziz Bouabdallah who were abducted in 1995 and 1997 respectively by men believed to be state agents.

Despite the fact that the Algerian constitution guarantees freedom of the press, in February 2006 free expression was dealt another blow, when the cabinet passed a decree that granted immunity to perpetrators of violence during the conflict (the Algerian civil war of the mid-1990s). In addition, the decree authorized imprisonment up to five years for anyone who by speech, writing or any other act used or exploited the wounds of the National Tragedy.

In January 2006, the reporter Bachir Larabi of the daily independent el-Khabar was imprisoned for a month, after he was found guilty of defaming a local mayor. That same year, Mohamed Benchicou director of the Algiers-based daily newspaper Le Matin, was released from prison. Benchicou served a two-year sentence after his newspaper had virulently criticized the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and other cabinet ministers. Another daily newspaper critical of the government, er Rai, has been out of circulation since 2003, when state-owned printers demanded payment of all bills within 48 hours.

The only country in North Africa with significant progress in press freedom is Mauritania, regardless of the fact that the government still maintains a monopoly on radio and television broadcasting. In 2005 the military council established the "National Commission in Change of the Reform of the Press and the Broadcasting". In addition, in 2006, the government created the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA), the first independent media regulatory body in Mauritania. The government controls two daily newspapers, while 40 newspapers are privately-owned and circulate on a regular basis - nearly double the figure compared to the previous year. Furthermore, newspaper owners and book publishers are exempt from all taxes on material used for production.

In sub-Saharan Africa, the situation regarding freedom of expression can be described as worrying, especially in Zimbabwe where the most recent negative developments in media

manipulation and press harassment have taken place. Professional and media monitoring organizations such as the Zimbabwe Union of Journalists, the Media Monitoring Project of Zimbabwe and the local branch of the Media Institute of Southern Africa were subject to official harassment throughout 2006.

In February 2006, Gift Phiri, a freelance journalist was brutally beaten by police officers who accused him of working for foreign media outlets. The government, through Mass Media Trust Holding Company, controls several major daily newspapers, including the Chronicle and the Herald; coverage in these news outlets consists of favourable portrayals of President Robert Mugabe and his ruling party ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front) and attacks on perceived critics of the regime. Several independent weeklies such as the Standard and the Zimbabwe Independent continue to be published, although many journalists practice extensive self-censorship.

The state controlled Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) runs all broadcast media, which are seen as mouthpieces of the regime. In addition, the popular short-wave service Radio Africa, a London-based station run by exiled Zimbabweans journalists, was blocked during the 2005 parliamentary elections.

Finally in recent months, Zimbabwe was shocked by the murder of Edward Chikomba and the beating of the award winning lawyer Mtetwa. Chikomba was a veteran cameraman of the state-run ZBC. Several news reports link Chikomba's death to his alleged leaking to foreign media of footage of opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai badly beaten after his release from police custody last month. Beatrice Mtetwa, President of the Law Society of Zimbabwe, has defended dozens of journalists and fought for press freedom, all at great personal risk.

Despite the fact that South Africa's President Thabo Mbeki supports his Zimbabwean counterpart Robert Mugabe, in South Africa press freedom and freedom of expression is constitutionally guaranteed. South Africa features a vibrant press and active journalist organizations. A number of private newspapers and magazines - including the Mail & Guardian, the Cape Times, and the Sunday Times - are sharply critical of the government.

The state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) dominates broadcast media. However, the SABC is editorially independent from the government and has come under fire for displaying pro-government bias and for encouraging self-censorship.

Although most South Africans receive the news via radio outlets associated with the SABC, efforts are being made in order to expand the number of radio stations through the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA). In addition, Thabo Mbeki has been praised by several journalist organizations for his decision not to sign a controversial legislation regarding ICASA's council.

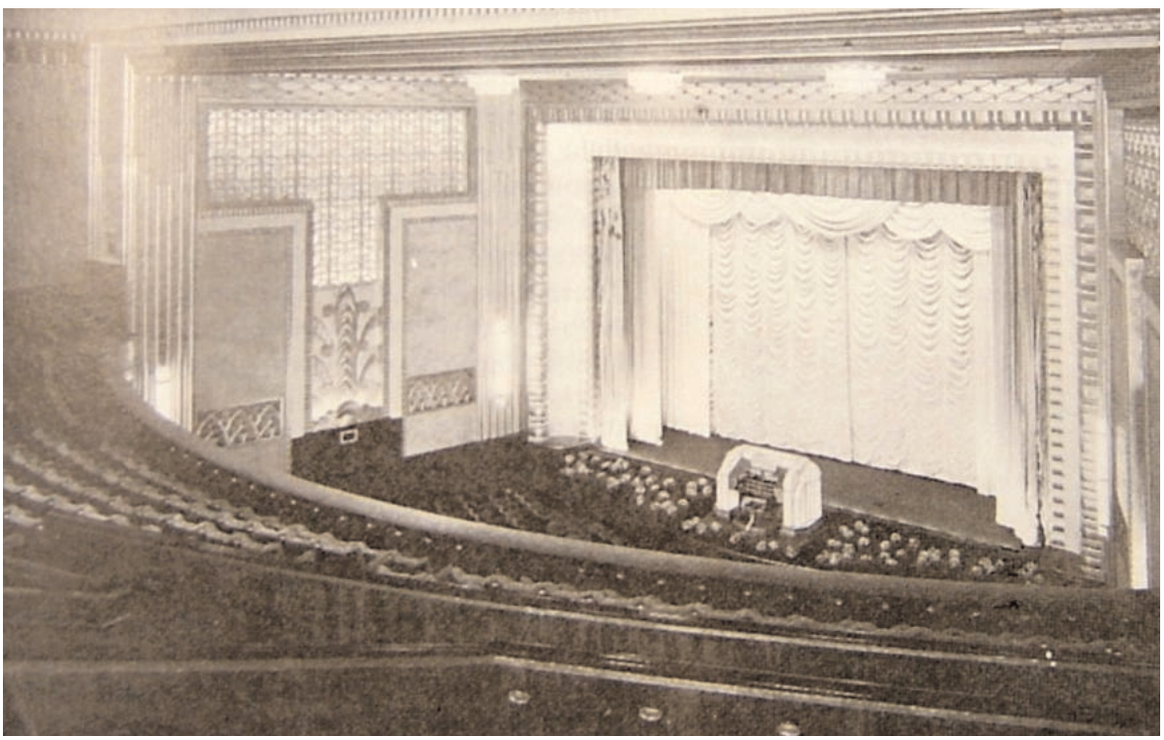
The fact remains that press freedom and free expression are at a critical low point throughout Africa. The African Union human rights agencies are gaining ground, while the establishment of an African court of human rights will also be important. If the African Union wants to shed suspicions that it is still a club of dictators, it must be prepared to give press freedom the importance it deserves.

# Cinema as a mirror of Middle Eastern Societies

**Anna Apostolidou**

*Although it is difficult to speak about Middle Eastern cinema as a whole due to the particularities of the distinct cultures comprising the region, there are certain themes (neocolonial oppression, national self-determination, religious fundamentalism, women's position vis-a-vis Islam) that preoccupy most of Middle Eastern filmmakers. Combined with the fact that the states have not relinquished control over the cinema, cinematographic expression is transformed into political statement.*

If we accept the principle that cinema is the mirror of the society it is born in, Middle Eastern cinema is perforce a profoundly political cinema, not because the majority of Middle Eastern films deal with political issues - on the contrary, political cinema as a cinematic genre is forbidden in many of these countries - but because it has developed amidst regional crisis that have influenced the world-view of its creators; because its themes reflect the mysteries of the Middle Eastern way of life; because, even in the lightest mainstream Egyptian comedies, it depicts the everyday life of the habitants in this benevolent region. Mostly it is political because it has been used as an instrument of politics: by the state as a tool of propaganda; by the opposition in order to protest against national politics; by individuals as the ultimate means to express their concerns in countries where liberty of speech is rather restrained.



Certainly, cinema is not the same in all Middle Eastern countries. Indeed, we could categorise the countries on the basis of film production into three groups. First, the very productive countries: Egypt, the centre of Arab film production, which has the world's fourth-largest and third-oldest film industry; Israel, which also has a notable cinematographic history and its films

are popular in the U.S. (6 times nominated for Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award, more than any other Middle Eastern country); Iran, whose cinema is quite renowned in Europe and is always present in European and International Film Festivals (one of the highlights being Abbas Kiarostami's winning the Golden Palm award in Cannes for *The Time of Cherry* in 1997); Lebanon, which has also succeeded in standing out - though its films are mainly produced with European financing; and the Palestinian cinema which, though relatively young in comparison to Arab cinema as a whole, has gained international recognition. The second group includes Syria, Iraq and Jordan, countries which had a noticeable film production in the past but are now in decline. Syria is the second-largest, after Egypt, television producer in the region, and has the necessary facilities, but due to the lack of public interest it has turned to film imports rather than local productions. Iraqi cinema possessed both institutional and technical infrastructure and flourished during the 1970s only to perish after the Gulf War in 1992. Finally, the third group includes Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, whose film production is rather meagre (1-3 films in each country), mainly because of moral restrictions dictated by the strictly Islamic way of life.

The cinema of the Middle Eastern countries did not follow the same course and does not share common aesthetic characteristics. For example, the Iranian cinema is meditative, inspired by the Persian lyricism and poetic heritage, and often symbolic - partly because of the strict censorship. On the other hand, Egypt's artistic cinema - collated to the dominant Hollywood-style mainstream - has amalgamated various cinematic trends (French poetic realism, Italian neorealism, socialist realism, modernist German expressionism, Soviet dialectical montage) which resulted into the emergence of a distinctive realistic (and later, New Realistic) movement, expressed by prominent directors as Atef Al Tayeb, Salah Abu Seif, Youssef Chahine, Taufik Salih, Khairy Beshara and Daoud Abd El-Sayyed. Meanwhile in Syria there emerged the Alternative Cinema in 1972 - as a response to the growing commercial Egyptian cinema - which focused on pan-Arabic nationalism and included Palestinian and Lebanese filmmakers. Nevertheless, a common characteristic of most regional movements was their influence by the *"cinema d'auteur"* (the auteur theory states that one person, usually the director, bears sole responsibility for the film and that his personal views, or his "vision", can be observed in it.)

Regardless of the various regional movements, a great body of Arab cinema can be placed among the so-called Third Cinema, i.e. the cinema of the Third World. Named by the Argentinian filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in accordance with the First (Hollywood) and the Second (European) Cinema, the Third Cinema decries neocolonialism and the Western or Westernized (Israel) capitalist world as well as the Hollywood model of cinema, and strives to promote solidarity among all peoples that have experienced (neo)colonialism. Examples include films by Egyptians Youssef Chahine (*Cairo Station*, 1958; *Alexandria... Why?*,1978*; Destiny*, 1997) and Taufik Salih (*Street of Fools*, 1955; *The Duped*, 1972), as well as Palestinian Elia Suleiman (T*he Chronicle of a Disappearance*, 1996; *Divine Intervention*, 2002).

The oppressive reality of the neocolonial dominance comes dimly into sight in films as Usama Mohammad's *The Box of Life* (2002), which describes the life in a small Syrian village during the 1967 war with Israel and in Randa Chahal Sabag's *The Kite* (2003), in which a young couple, a Lebanese girl and an Israeli Arab soldier (both from the Druze religion) cannot contact on account of the barbed wire. The subject of the Israeli occupation becomes more pungent when it comes to the Palestine issue (e.g. Michel Khleifi's *Wedding in Galilee*, 1987; Hany Abu-Assad's R*ana's Wedding*, 2002; Yousri Nasrallah's *The Gate of Sun*, 2004). However, Palestinian filmmakers have latterly commenced to examine the Palestinian problem from another angle. Elia Suleiman, in *Divine Intervention* (2002) portrays the Palestinians as victims of the Israeli despotism, but also as victims of their own frictions. He criticises his own people directly, through the unflattering figures of the saboteur and the collaborator, and indirectly, by detecting the Pales-

tinian stagnancy and remission. Hany Abi-Assad in *Paradise Now* (2005) treats the controversial phenomenon of suicide bombing missions, narrating the story of two friends who undertake a suicide mission but, in the course, have doubts about the effectiveness of such an action. The filmmaker detaches himself from the myth of the martyr and provokes a discussion about the vicious circle of violence.

As far as Israel is concerned, some filmmakers renounce the encroachment of human rights in the occupied areas and propose another way for contacting the Palestinians. In David Benchetrit's documentary *Dear Father Quiet We're Shooting* (2006), Israeli soldiers deny serving in Palestinian territories; Amos Gitai films *Free Zone* (2005) narrating the friendship between women from different cultures in Jordan (an American, an Israeli and a Palestinian), while he expresses skepticism about the issues at stake in *Kippur* (2002), a film on the 1973 Yom Kippur war between Syria and Israel in which he fought; and Avi Mograbi shatters the two Israeli myths, the myth of Sampson and the myth of the Massada hill in *Avenge but one of my two eyes* (2005), naming Sampson the first kamikaze in history and withering the praise of the collective suicide of the Zealots.

The Arab filmmakers' preoccupation with the Israeli practices pertains to the general subject of national self-determination, since the Arab societies struggle to reclaim their own national identities through their contradistinction with the Other, who, apart from Israeli, might be American (Nader Galal, *Hello America*, 2000) or European. In Youssri Narsrallah's *The City* (1999), an Egyptian immigrant in Paris suffers from amnesia (symbolizing the loss of the past, present and identity) and overcomes it only when he returns to Egypt. Other films approach the national self-determination issue by praising the heterogeneity of Arab culture; still the allusion to Jews as a part of the Arab cultural mosaic remains a taboo, although challenged in the awarded documentary *Forget Baghdad: Jews and Arabs - The Iraqi Connection* (Samir, 2002), which compares the alienation facing four Iraqi communist Jews in their homeland with that of the Arabs living in Israel.

Other films depict the various wars that have taken place in the Middle East, from the Lebanese civil war (Zaid Doueiri, *West Beirut*, 1998) to the Iran-Iraq War (Salah Abou Seif, *Al-Qadisiyya*, 1981) and the Iraq-Kuwait War (multiple directors, *The Gulf War, What's next?*, 1991). At the same time, films like Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1994) and *A Taste of Cherry* (1997) provoke discussions about the vast ethnic mix of the countries that have received refugees from various Middle Eastern conflicts and offer a universal commentary on the value of human life.

Another constant theme in Middle Eastern filmography is religion and religious fundamentalism. Through their films, the cinematographers take the occasion to consider the roots of religious extremism (Youssef Chahine, *Destiny*, (1997); Atef Hetata, *The Closed Doors*, 1999) and to impugn religious intolerance (Merzak Allouache, *Bab El-Oued*, 1994; Yamina Bachir, *Rachida*, 2002). The latter film deals with religious terrorism against women, whose place in Islamic societies has also been a taboo in the Arab films for a long time. For example, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time to Love* (1991), depicting a love triangle between a woman and two men, was never screened in public cinemas in Iran. However, since the 1990s, an entire genre of feminist Middle Eastern cinema has emerged and has estab-

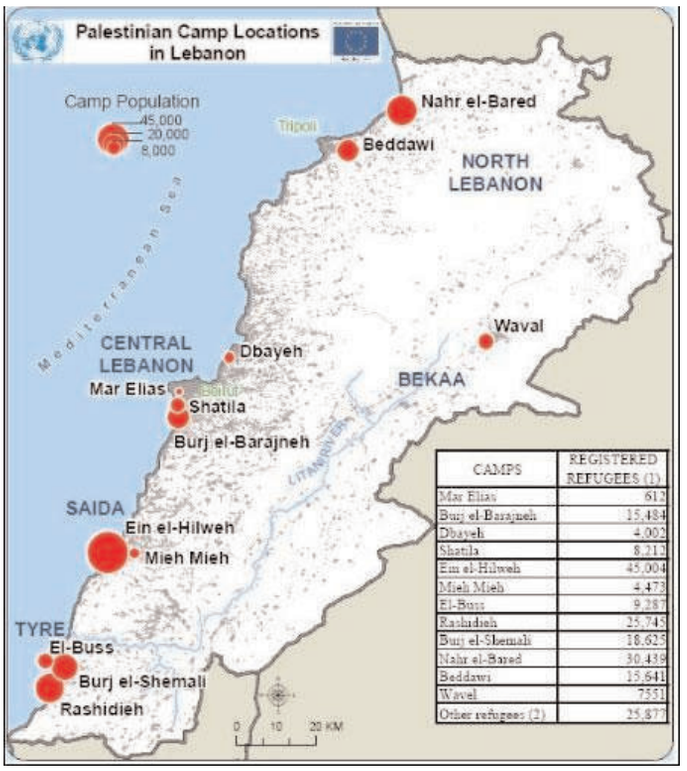
lished a strong foothold, particularly in the Islamic Republic (Marziyeh Meshikini, *The Day I Became a Woman*, 2000; Tahmineh Milani, *The Hidden Half*, 2001; Jafar Panahi, *The Circle*, 2000). In March 2007, Egypt hosted its first Woman's Film Festival, where female directors from various Islamic countries, even Saudi Arabia (Haifaa Al-Mansour), presented their fiction or documentary films regarding the position of women vis-a-vis Islam. And speaking of tumbled taboos, we should also mention the attempts to film gay and bisexual relations within the Arab society, like *A Minute of Sun Less* (Nabil Ayouch, 2002) and the short films *How I Love You* (Akram Zaatari, 2002) and *Diary of a Male Whore* (Tawfik Abu Wael, 2001).

Nevertheless, this regeneration of cinematographic manners cannot be interpreted as the beginning of a new, free, era of cinematographic creation. The state remains omnipotent as far as film production and distribution are concerned. Each country forms its own "cinema" policy in terms of its principles and aims, which ranges from absolute interdiction of cinemas (the case of Saudi Arabia) to the exploitation of cinema for the purpose of islamicizing society (the case of Iran). In countries like Egypt and Iran, where cinematographic production is state-funded, filmmakers have to endure censorship. Even in the comparatively liberal Egypt, films that dealt with the 1967 defeat were banned during Sadat's early years (e.g. Youssef Chahine's *The Sparrow*, 1973), and even after state censorship was eased (in the early 1990s), films that treat religious issues are subjected to meticulous examination. In fact, it is not unusual for filmmakers to have their films banned at home. Censorship is predictably stricter in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where cinema is perceived as a means of promoting the Islamic way of life. The Iranian Constitution states that the media "are free to present all matters except those that are detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public", namely, according to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, matters that question monotheism and submission to God, the role of Revelation (vahy) in creation and in law, and the continuity of religious leadership (emamat). Furthermore, violence and profanity are forbidden, as well as physical contact between men and women, and women in films must always wear a hejab (covering). To ensure compliance with these restrictions, the Ministry has implemented a 5-step regulation process that controls all the stages of film production. In order to evade restrictions, many filmmakers shoot their films outside Iran (like Makhmalbaf who filmed part of *The Cyclist* in Pakistan, *A Time for Love* in Turkey, and the *Silence* in Tajikistan) or turn to films about children as a surrogate to adult films (Jafar Panahi, *The White Balloon*, 1995; Majid Majidi, *Children of Heaven*, 1999). Yet, many Iranian masterpieces, like *The Circle, Banoo* and *The Hidden* Half have been banned by the state.

Notwithstanding, the independent cinema remains the voice of the Middle East. And most important, it reflects the opinions, concerns and hopes of Middle Eastern societies, offering us a different image to that of the official proclamations. Cinema, as Amos Gitai avows, might not change the world. But it can be the means to "say to all the mechanisms that we are active, that we are not participating in their game, and that we are going to propose another reading of things".

# The echo of Lebanon's clashes: The quagmire of truce

**Alexandra Karaiskou**




| CAMPS | REGISTERED REFUGEES (1) |
|---|---|
| Mar Elias | 612 |
| Burj el-Barajneh | 15,484 |
| Dbayeh | 4,002 |
| Shatila | 8,212 |
| Ein el-Hilweh | 45,004 |
| Mieh Mieh | 4,473 |
| El-Buss | 9,287 |
| Rashidieh | 25,745 |
| Burj el-Shemali | 18,625 |
| Nahr el-Bared | 30,439 |
| Beddawi | 15,641 |
| Wavel | 7551 |
| Other refugees (2) | 25,877 |

*The clashes which broke out on the 20th of May between the Lebanese Security Forces and Sunni extremist groups, initially Fatah al-Islam and subsequently Jund al-Sham, at Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon threaten once again to plunge the country into civil war. The existing controversy between the pro-Western March 14 Coalition and the Hezbollah-led opposition, along with the newly emerged feuds, have plunged Lebanon into the bloodiest internal fighting since the end of the 1975-1990 sectarian conflict and brought about deeper political instability, testifying to the impasse facing the country.*

In November 2006, Fatah al-Islam splintered from Fatah al-Intifada, the Syrian-backed non-Islamist Palestinian faction which aimed at counterbalancing Yasser Arafat's Fatah influence among Lebanon's Palestinian refugees. Within a year from its inception, the tiny Sunni Muslim extremist group has recruited jihadists from several Arab countries, including Lebanon, Syria, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, and even from the Maghreb and some Eastern countries, comprising a contingent of approximately 500 militants. Fatah al-Islam seized control of Nahr Al-Bared camp (the refugee camp in northern Lebanon) from Fatah Al-Intifada, expressing its disapproval of the latter's increasingly pro-Syrian stance. Even though it may not maintain organizational and economic ties to al-Qaeda, it does however espouse its salafist ideology, and as such it could possibly open an anti-Shi'ite and anti-US front in Lebanon, including Hezbollah, the pro-western Fuad Siniora government and the United Nations' peace keepers as well. However, Shihab al-Qadour, the second in Fatah al-Islam's rank, has declared that it is not among the group's intentions to attack neither the UNIFIL, as long as it is not attacked by them, nor the Shi'ites in Lebanon. According to a statement by Fatah al-Islam's leader, Shaker al-Abssi, the organization has two main goals, the Islamic reformation of Lebanon's Palestinian refugees in alignment with the Sharia law and confrontation with Israeli.

In the same vein, Jund al-Sham, "the Soldiers of Greater Syria", is another Sunni Islamic extremist group, ideologically affiliated to al-Qaeda. Following its splitting in 2002, a more radical group

was formed, with equivocal links to the Syrian regime. Noticeably smaller than Fatah al-Islam, numbering a few dozens of members, it is based in Ein El-Hilweh, the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon. Though it forms part of the newly emerged Lebanese feuds within the Lebanese national troops, both radical groups rather place themselves in the context of the overall war of Islam against the infidels, i.e. West.

The Lebanese government alleges that the strings behind the clashes between the Lebanese army and the fundamentalist movements are pulled by the Syrian regime, in another attempt to prevent the establishment of an international tribunal for the Rafik Hariri assassination. It is noteworthy that the assassination of the Minister of Industry, Pierre Gemayel, on November 2006, also believed to be the work of Damascus, took place short before a Security Council session to address the Hariri assassination. Still, the truth seems to go beyond these mere speculations, as the ideological differentiation makes rather implausible the collaboration between a fundamentalist Sunni movement and a secular regime. Moreover, Shaker al-Abssi has served a three-year sentence in Syria due to his implication on a number of terrorist attacks, a fact that casts doubt over the purported relations between the Syrian intelligence service and Fatah al-Islam. We could never know how and why he got out of prison. His sentence is not a conclusive argument against relations with Syrian intelligence. His release cast similar doubts to the opposite. Last, but not least, the creation of the international tribunal depends on the major powers and cannot be decided on the grounds of these small-range internal clashes.

Concerning Fatah al-Islam's revenues, it comes as no surprise that the funding does not come from Syria, as was the case for Fatah al-Intifada. Besides, Syrian influence over the non-Islamist faction was the reason for its split. Instead, a different and more extremist aspect was presented by the world famous American journalist Seymour Hersh, according to whom Fatah al-Islam is financed by the Siniora government, which channels Saudi and American money to it. The ultimate motive of the pro-Western March 14 Coalition, including Saad Hariri, the son of the assassinated prime minister in reinforcing both Fatah al-Islam and Jund al-Sham is the formation of a tenacious Sunni militant front against Hezbollah.

On its part, the popular Shiite resistance movement, while it had initially opted for the Lebanese Security Forces, it now condemns the actions of the army that put at stake Palestinian civilian lives, as the leader Hassan Nasrallah confirms. The latter has also drawn attention to the imminent danger of

uncontrollable violence and called for a political solution. While the pro-Western government tried to reap fruits from the political turmoil, taking into consideration the forthcoming presidential elections, Hezbollah ran a political campaign against the government's responsibility for the army's actions and the racist discriminations against Palestinian refugees. As the controversy between the March 14 Coalition and Hezbollah (backed by Michel Aoun) vis-a-vis parliamentary recession and the lack of consensus on the new president carry on, the country is falls into deeper political instability.

As far as the Palestinian refugees are concerned, the civilian death toll has evoked their ire and as a result they are supportive of the Lebanese troops. The PLO has distanced itself from the Islamist militants and has denied any ties between the Fatah movement and Fatah al-Islam. The PLO's representative in Lebanon, Abbas Zaki, characterized the Nahr al-Bared camp as 'a hijacked plane or ship' and backs governmental efforts toward stabilization. Moreover, he proposed the formation of a 5000-Palestinian security force in the Lebanese camps in order to prevent extremist militancy. Hamas and

Islamic Jihad have opposed Fatah al-Islam, proclaiming that the militants have no relation with the Palestinian cause and demanding their surrender to the authorities.

In response to the Lebanese call for military assistance, the United States sent more ammunition and other equipment to the Lebanese army in order to help them confront the heavily armed militants. In addition, the US offered a $3 million aid to those displaced from the refugee camps. According to Fatah al-Islam's spokesman, the arm supplies included unconventional weapons, such as nerve gas and cluster bombs, and warned of unconventional attacks in response. However, the US seized the opportunity created by the internal political vacuum to interfere once again and offer its support to their "enfant-gate", the March 14 Coalition, so as to preserve its control over the country.

# Palestinian Tragedy: Is there a Palestinian leadership?

**Sotiris Roussos**

*The recent civil strife is by all means the worst in the history of the Palestinian national movement since 1967. In all other circumstances violent confrontation among different political and armed groups stayed beyond the core of the Palestinian society in the Occupied Territories and did not represent diametrical differences concerning the strategy and nature of this society. The question rising with the fall of Gaza is how many Palestinian societies are there, how many Palestinian national strategies are there, how many Palestinian authorities are there.*

After the second Intifada it became evident that the Palestinian Authority amounts to no more than a scenery for the visits of international dignitaries and a corrupt and frequently demoralised patronage mechanism to channel international aid to a hardly hit society. At the same time, underground forces tried and in many ways succeeded to substitute for the absence of Fatah's Palestinian Authority. It was a second Palestinian authority which cared for the poor, the needy, the homeless, the sick, the injured, the orphans and the widows. Most importantly, it was a parallel and more powerful authority with a clear, alas counterproductive, strategy, which seemed not to be trapped in Fatah's everyday petty negotiation with Israel over this or that check-point, urging confrontation with Israel and pointing to the successful Hizbollah strategy.

Ever since the creation of Fatah and its domination of the PLO, Palestinian nationalism was based on Arabism and it was mostly secular with a revolutionary, bureaucratic and paternalistic mechanism. All this was built around one name, Yasser Arafat. Evil tactician and merciless terrorist for his foes, the incarnation of the Palestinian national struggle for his friends and followers, he built a mechanism and a myth that his successors can not handle. Without him the message of Palestinian Arab nationalism is pale, the vision obscure. On the contrary, Hamas presents an alternative vision for the Palestinian society and the future Palestinian state. It is based on political Islam, in the dignity and moral code which derive from the Koran and the Shariah. Accordingly, no national salvation and no social transformation can be attained by the Palestinian people away from Islam. Self-sacrifice in the manner of suicide bombing and eternal struggle against Israel, with or without hudna intervals, is thus

the only way to liberate Jerusalem and create an Islamic Palestine. A simple, clear message, most importantly, carried out not by patronage-bureaucratic mechanisms but by grassroots organisations in the mosque, the street, the school, the union and the hospital.

And now what? There is already some talk about two Palestinian "states", as if there was any Palestinian state to begin with, that is before Gaza fell under Hamas' control. Some talk about a West Bank Palestinian Authority of Fatah, which will continue its present policies, benefit from the international aid and from the lifting of Israel's revenues blockade. Hopefully, the same analysis maintains, this WB Authority will come to some sort of an agreement with Israel on West Bank and East Jerusalem and such progress will inspire the Palestinians of Gaza Strip to revolt against Hamas and follow the line of WB Authority. Such a scenario might seem out of reality. But, no one can persuasively argue that it did not cross the minds of the Quartet and Israel when they refused to recognise the National Unity Government and the right of the Palestinians to elect their own representatives.

What is missing from this scenario is a clear baseline analysis. The main problem in the Palestinian society and the Palestinian national movement is not the empowerment of Hamas and its current leading role. The main question arises from the inept Fatah leadership, who had no social and political backing, who were away from the people in all their monumental uprisings, the first and, most importantly, the second Intifada. The Palestinian people are not behind Hamastan. They are simply without national leadership. It is evident that the incumbent Fatah leadership does not have a genuine mandate to reconstruct the society nor to strike a peace deal with Israel. If the Quartet or any other body created by the hegemons of the international system wishes to bring stability in the region, they should allow a new genuinely popular Fatah leadership to emerge and urge Israel to cooperate on this.

The future is bleak. Gaza can be the test case for Hamas in terms of government and society reconstruction. We do not know what to wish for. A Hamas success might well push the WB towards political Islam, with serious consequences for relations with Israel, the USA and the region. A Hamas failure would lead to further social disintegration, create a fertile ground for al-Qaida type organisations and eventually bring about a smaller but no less explosive "Iraq" on the shores of the Mediterranean.

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