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THE WEST BANK ARAB PRESS

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A cursory glance at one of the teeming newsstands dotting the East Jerusalem or West Bank landscape reveals a cornucopia of Arabic-language newspapers and periodicals, all almost invariably adorned with a picture of Yasser Arafat, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The publications are all headquartered in East Jerusalem, differ only slightly in layout or content, and share a common, unmistakable opposition, sometimes verging on outright hostility, towards the Israeli occupation.

It is a far cry from the bleak old days of the Jordanian administration when newsstands could boast of a mere handful of newspapers which all toed the establishment line and when the "house" censor, a Jordanian army official, vetted the papers, looking for telltale indications of an anti-government slant. Today's Palestinian press has an open mandate to criticize, condemn or denounce any Arab head of state, with slight fear of persecution. And as for the Israeli government, its officials are fair game and its policies are frequently targetted for attack. Even Communists, a breed accursed under Jordanian jurisdiction, have come out of their shells. Under Israeli democracy they have acquired an outlet for their views: witness the weekly, *Al-Tali'ah*, (The Vanguard), edited by Bashir Barghouti, who prefers to call it "leftist progressive."

CENSORSHIP

Even though more newspapers and journals have sprung up in the West Bank since 1967 than during the whole of the Jordanian administration and more Palestinian writers are finding an avenue for expression in their local papers than at any other time, it would be an exercise in self-deception to say that the Arab

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press is a flourishing enterprise or a totally unfettered institution. Despite the fact that the Palestinian journalistic fraternity is very well aware that it owes a debt to the Israeli democracy which has made it possible for Arab writers to practice their craft here, subjectively there is a universal feeling of oppression at the hands of the censor. There is no sugar-coating the "unpalatable fact that we are under occupation," as one editor put it.

Every publishing house polled in the West Bank recited a drearily uniform litany of the belaboring of the Fifth Estate by stiff censorship, inadequate financial resources and restricted distribution. Above all, the West Bank Arab press has to run the gauntlet of a relentless, daily feud with the Israeli authorities "whose prime objective is to see our press institution destroyed," according to Ibrahim Kara'een, who describes himself as a production chief of *Alawdah* (The Return), a weekly magazine edited by Raymonda Tawil, the most outspoken Palestinian journalist in the land.

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

(The) censor for Judea-Samaria (the West Bank) and the Gaza district operates along the lines of Defense (Emergency) Regulations established during the British Mandate. The relevant clause (Part VIII, 88(1)) states: "The censor is authorized to forbid, by order, the import, export, printing or publication of any publications whose import, export, printing or publication are likely, in his opinion, to damage or endanger the security, public safety or public order." The procedure for anyone wanting to bring a particular publication into the administered areas, or to reprint there printed matter issued in one of the Arab countries, is to submit a copy of the proposed material to the censor for examination.

Each of the hundreds and sometimes thousands of publications brought before the censor monthly is given a preliminary inspection by a high ranking officer. If he raises no objection, the material is accorded the necessary distribution permit—a procedure that takes only a few hours. The publications that require additional scrutiny are submitted to the censors, each of whom holds at least a Masters degree in Arabic language or literature. Their recommendation must be approved by the chief censor, an officer with the rank of brigadier-general.

The Ministry states that the censor bans only those publications whose contents come under the following criteria:

- a) Subject matter which is damaging to the security of the state and to public safety,
- b) it incites hatred of Jews,
- c) it incites violence or war.

In accordance with standing instructions, all press material must be submitted to the censor prior to publication, and this applies to every single paper and journalist working in Israel, whether Arab or Jew, American or German.

Violations are dealt with summarily, regardless of the offender's status or identity. Even David Shipper, bureau chief of *The New York Times*, did not escape the Government Press Office's (GPO) wrath when he was "found to be in violation of military censorship." He was summoned to the GPO and informed officially by GPO Director Mordechai Dolinsky that "the consequences of the violation of these (censorship) rules" were no laughing matter and had them spelled out "in the strongest possible terms." In an unprecedented move, the censor closed down a Hebrew paper, *Hadashot*, for having violated these same rules.

There were no physical threats or assault from Israeli authorities, as occurred in Jordan when two senior East Jerusalem journalists who were known to be critical of the Jordanian regime were arrested after crossing over into Jordan. But Palestinian journalists see hardly any difference.

THE EDITORS COMMENT

Sitting back in his tastefully decorated office, *Alawdah's* Kara'een, thirtyish, smartly dressed, discoursed at length about the incessant harassment Palestinian scribes are being subjected to here, in their own land. "The intention of the authorities is to put us out of business, but by utilizing purely 'legal', expedient means. For instance, we have been applying for a telex since 1977. And despite the fact that the Israeli authorities have already supplied two other Arab papers—*Al Fajr* (The Dawn) and *Al Quds* (Jerusalem)—with the facility, we are still being denied. The reason? There are no lines."

Kara'een recalled the time questions were raised in the Knesset about the Palestine Press Services (PPS) bureau that he and *Alawdah* Editor Raymonda Tawil set up seven years ago. The Government conceded it "knew of the existence of such a bureau, but what the security forces were doing about it could not be discussed in an open forum." Hebrew papers took up the cry: "Keep your eyes on No. 10 Salah Eddin Street, Second Floor" (the bureau's address). Eventually, something was done. In 1983, the Government ruled that the bulletins the PPS had been putting out constituted a newspaper for which it had obtained no license, and warned that if the PPS put out another issue, the bureau would be closed down. Tawil and Kara'een backed down, but all was not lost. They subsequently obtained a permit to put out *Alawdah* and an English supplement addressed principally to the corps of foreign correspondents and diplomats stationed in Israel, pending the issuing of a license to publish a daily newspaper.

"There is absolutely not the slightest doubt in our minds that the Israeli government is hostile to us, and discriminates against us," Raymonda Tawil, Hanna Siniora, Jack Khazmu and their colleagues reiterate.

Jack Khazmu, a member of Jerusalem's dwindling Syriac community and editor of the weekly, *Al Bayader* (Granaries), stated that on several occasions he had to submit some four hundred pages of copy to the censor in order to ensure that after the censor had whittled it down he would still have enough to fill his quota of some seventy pages. Hanna Siniora, a Christian Arab who runs the *Al Fajr* establishment, noted that what the Arab papers print is mostly leftovers. And Kara'een again, "We are enjoined from writing anything about land expropriation, torture of Palestinian prisoners, harassment, closures of universities, demonstrations, political assassinations, strikes, you name it—which leaves us precious little to write about. We might as well close up shop—that's what the Israeli government wants—but no way."

RUNNING THE PRESSES

The PPS run by Kara'een and Tawil, mentioned above, has stayed in business by providing the foreign press community with unique services: acting as liaison between Palestinian VIPs in the West Bank and foreign visitors, arranging interviews, tipping off subscribers when any big story breaks in any part of the West Bank. "Our main purpose is to explain the Palestinian problem to the outside world and inform world opinion about all aspects of that problem," Tawil said. That is the motto reiterated by every single one of the dozen or so Palestinian periodicals published in the West Bank.

The first daily paper allowed to circulate in the West Bank after the Six Day War was the unabashedly pro-Jordanian *Al Quds*, formed by the merger of two Jordanian papers—*Al Difa'a* (Defense) and *Al Jihad*

(Holy War). The Israeli occupation had triggered a general boycott by the Palestinian press, which ended when Editor-Publisher Mahmoud Abu Zuluf began the circulation of *Al Quds*. The other papers held firm for a while. Mahmoud Ya'ish, who later broke with Abu Zuluf to start his own paper, *Al Sha'ab* (The People), explained that "our refusal to resume publication was based on overriding political considerations in the wake of the Israeli occupation." But before long he became convinced that "we had our own national duty towards our people," and started the presses again.

Accurate circulation figures for the West Bank press are notoriously hard to come by, but it is generally conceded that *Al Quds* tops the list (with a claimed run of between 23,000 and 25,000 copies daily, a figure that rises sharply when a big story breaks, like the Ashkelon bus hijacking, and the sabotage attempts against six Arab buses). Its eight pages, printed in offset, carry the heaviest advertising load of all West Bank papers.

Abu Zuluf calls himself a businessman. "I'm not involved in politics," he stated, pointing out that his paper is interested in dealing with news as news, and that it is not affiliated with any political party. Nationalist elements, however, dislike the paper's strong pro-Jordanian slant—there have been two assassination attempts on Abu Zuluf's life. *Al Quds* was almost the only paper that initially supported the Camp David accords, prompting a short-lived boycott by West Bank mayors. Some West Bank editors claim that *Al Quds* merits special consideration from the censor. Stories that are blue-pencilled in *Al Fajr* or *Al Sha'ab* are allowed to be published by Abu Zuluf, they claim. This reinforces speculation among Arab papers that the censor is an extremely whimsical Big Brother. Proof that *Al Quds* is granted special favor by the Israeli authorities rests on the fact that it is the only Palestinian paper that is permitted reading to political prisoners in Israeli jails.

The paper keeps a regular tab on its remorseless duel with the censors. The latest censorship report revealed that of twenty articles submitted, seven were totally banned. *Al Quds* editors note that about 30 percent of the news it submits to the censor ends on a spike, compared with about 50 percent for the *Al Fajr* English-language weekly, for instance.

The *Al Fajr* English version was launched in 1980, hailed as "the only English-language newspaper published in the Occupied Territories." It was born with a full-size, eight-page format, but a few months later adopted a sixteen-page tabloid presentation. As Raymonda Tawil has done with the English supplement of *Alawdah*, *Al Fajr's* Siniora has recruited a handful of American or British helpers to polish up the language in the English version of his publication. But despite their best efforts, rabid rhetoric does sometimes creep in, giving the impression that English-language publications are parodies of propaganda broadsheets. The English *Al Fajr* relegates international news to a back seat, although it boasts a correspondent in Washington and, until recently, had the late Livia Rokach in Rome. It believes its primary objective is to give extensive coverage to Palestinian affairs. This includes translations of articles from the Hebrew press written by people known to sympathize with Palestinians or to be critical of the Establishment. Some Israeli columnists who are regular guests in Arab papers are Dany Rubinstein, Zvi Bar-el and Schiff Weiss. The *Al Bayader* weekly runs a regular column penned by "an Israeli observer," who has the distinction of being the only salaried Israeli writer in the West Bank. His identity is a closely guarded secret.

The *Al Fajr* English edition is printed simultaneously in Jerusalem and Washington where Owner-Publisher Paul Ajluni has established residence. Ajluni is banned from entering Israel, just as Siniora and several other Palestinian journalists are banned from travelling freely within the occupied territories, although they may catch a flight to destinations abroad. This did not prevent the Israeli authorities from giving Ajluni permission to come to Jerusalem earlier in April, despite their conviction that Ajluni is "an active member of a hostile organization."

All has not been well with the *Al Fajr* establishment during the past year or so, and economic difficulties forced the eventual closure of the Hebrew *Al Fajr* after a fourteen-month run. However, Siniora revealed that plans are afoot to revive the paper—the only Hebrew-language Arab organ in the territories—under a new editor subject to tighter control. The former editor, Ziad Abu Ziad, had reportedly been running it as his personal fiefdom, a practice Ajluni frowned upon. *Al Fajr* also lost a sports and women's supplement after only three issues, but elevated a literary supplement into a monthly magazine, edited by the poet Ali El Khalily.

Among other casualties in recent years were *Al Shira'a* (The Sail) which, its editors claim, was ordered closed by Jerusalem District Commissioner Raphael Levy for no apparent reason (all efforts to resurrect it have failed), and *Al Wihdah* (The Unity) whose publisher, Fu'ad Sa'ed, had died. An application by the Ayoub family in Jerusalem to obtain a license for a new Palestinian publication has been turned down. Knowledgeable sources attributed this to the theory that the publisher's sympathies lay with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Mahmoud Ya'ish's *Al Sha'ab* was born in 1972, with a modest four pages but has now grown to six. It is one of the few papers in the West Bank that still uses hot lead. No more than fifteen people work on the daily, edited by Akram Haniyeh. It ranks third, after *Al Quds* and *Al Fajr* in order of importance and concentrates on local issues and "on the daily practices of the Israeli occupation authorities against the Palestinians." The paper relies heavily on translations of Hebrew articles, but even these have to be submitted to the censor. Ya'ish said there have been times when articles which appeared in the Israeli press were censored out of *Al Sha'ab*.

Ya'ish shares with Siniora the "privilege" of having had his offices firebombed and of having had his paper closed down on more than one occasion. Both papers, as well as the magazines *Alawdah* and *Al Bayader* are banned from circulation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The editors claim that possession is punishable by a fine and/or imprisonment. Israeli sources note that the ban has been enforced because the papers and publications concerned had violated the state censorship laws, and denied that they had been singled out for such drastic measures because of the "unsavory" politics of their publishers and editors. They point out that the authorities rarely muzzle or ban the leading local gadfly, *Al Ittihad* (The Union), organ of the Israel Communist Party, published in Arabic in Haifa. However, its West Bank equivalent, *Al Tali'ah*, is constantly in trouble with the censor.

Al Tali'ah was founded in 1978 by Bashir Barghouti, a political activist with hardly a penny to his name. But his lack of financial resources did not prevent its launching: friends and supporters chipped in, with Barghouti doing most of the writing, assisted by four or five "volunteers." Things have not changed much since then and the volunteers are often forced to work overtime (without pay) to get the paper out. It, too, is banned in the West Bank. Hanna Amira, one of its staff writers, explains the paper's distinctive style of writing as an attempt to analyze, not photograph, the news. It gives extensive coverage to Gazan affairs, a weak point in the other papers. "We are committed to national unity and to the Palestinian national line. Our paper supports national independence," Amira said.

Barghouti seemed to speak for all West Bank Palestinian editors when he said that "we live from week to week, with the damoclean sword of closure hanging over our heads. If we are still publishing next week, we look upon it as a victory in the struggle to survive." Although his paper has been proscribed from circulation in the West Bank almost since its inception, it has never been banned by the Israeli authorities. Barghouti, who spent eight years in Jordanian jails for launching a controversial paper in the 1950s, could not bring himself to feel grateful to the Israeli authorities who, he claims, have applied all sorts of pressure on his paper. For instance, advertisers stayed away in droves after their initial support because the

authorities began harassing them in a bid to force them to pull out. The campaign worked: today, the paper hardly carries any ads worthy of the term.

The paper's Owner-Publisher, Elias Nasrallah, is an Israeli Arab from Shafa'Amr (Sheforam, a Galilee village), "otherwise we would never have got our license to publish," said Barghouti. He recalled the difficulty he had in getting a phone. "I had to wait for three years," he said. At one stage, the military government placed him under house arrest. The "punishment" lasted two and a half years, during which time "we had to resort to an alternate brand of journalism to keep the paper going." The weekly survives, thanks mainly to contributions from subscribers abroad: but it's still touch and go. Nevertheless, Barghouti has not the slightest doubt that "we can keep publishing."

Al Mithaq (The Covenant) was established in 1980, as a twelve-page weekly tabloid, but is now publishing twice a week, with hopes of eventually becoming a daily. Like almost all Palestinian press barons, founder Mahmoud Khatib had only the barest experience in journalism: one would have to look far and wide among the local Arab journalistic fraternity to uncover a real professional. *Al Mithaq* is something of a maverick in the West Bank—its sympathies clearly lie with the dissident Fatah faction led by Abu Moussa, and it has repeatedly lashed out at PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, in addition to its regular forays against other Arab leaders. Israel and the United States remain the perpetual *betes noires*, meriting a lavish share of editorial venom.

Khatib counters claims that he is backed by Libya or Syria by the disclaimer that "We write what is good for our people." He asserts that his paper is independent: he does not support Abu Moussa as an individual, but rather demands for reform ". . . and we don't care who makes these demands." Khatib directed a long-standing tirade against Arafat in the wake of his Cairo visit after the Tripoli debacle, often devoting whole pages to his sustained critique.

MAGAZINES

While the newspapers try to survive in what editors claim is a hostile atmosphere, aggravated by the severe restrictions imposed upon them by the military authorities, the magazines that have sprouted in the past few years give ample testimony to the "will and determination of Palestinian writers to make their voices heard, in language that is polished and that reflects the superior quality of the Palestinian thinker and writer," as one editor said. The magazines share with the newspapers the same burden of censorship and restriction, they claim, but writers have greater leeway and the topics covered are liberally mixed with cultural and literary output. The two leading literary magazines are *Al Fajr Al Adabi* and *Al Bayader Al Adabi*, adjuncts of *Al Fajr* and *Al Bayader*.

"Our purpose is to boost local literary efforts," *Al Bayader* Editor Jack Khazmu said. However, critics charge that nearly four-fifths of his magazine contains material originating abroad. They maintain that the use of packaged or syndicated material cuts down on costs at the expense of denying local writers an outlet.

Still, short story writers and poets are eagerly courted by *Al Fajr's* literary monthly, which runs to 120 pages, and whose motto, emblazoned on the jacket reads: "Toward a progressive Palestinian literary movement in the Occupied Territories; to promote our local literature and maintain our distinct literary voice; to strengthen our ties with the international and Arab literary movement."

Editor Ali El Khalily turns over 90 percent of his magazine to local talent. He remains the final arbiter on what goes in. "We are open to national and progressive literature, but rule out reactionary material," he explains. This also helps keep the censor at the door.

In 1979, after a two-year wait, Assad el Assad finally got his license to publish a "literary, cultural and political magazine," titled *Al Kateb* (The Writer). The wait was not unusual, but in this case it had been justified because of the allegation that Assad was an active member of the banned Palestinian Communist Party. The magazine regularly publishes contributions by Palestinian prisoners, and often lets Marxist writers have their say. Editorial policy is decided jointly by the staff who receive only "symbolic" salaries. Editor Jamil Salhout says "the magazine is not owned by anybody, and we don't work for money." *Al Kateb* is considered highbrow. "We are under occupation and the tasks we face are heavy. This is why our magazine is serious," Salhout said in explaining the lack of any light content in its pages.

Editors concede that the literary periodicals have a limited circulation, unlike the political magazines which tend to be more sophisticated, boasting covers in color, jazzier layouts and professional graphics. But, as with the rest of the field, a mere smattering of ads. "We've been running in the red for the past twelve years," Siniora confesses. He's not alone.

Khazmu's *Al Bayader* has to compete for readership with Tawil's *Alawdah*. Their point of departure is Khazmu's growing pro-Jordanian shift: he repeatedly urged Arafat to seek closer rapprochement with Jordan. *Alawdah* tends to dedicate more attention to Palestinians living within Israel proper, mainly because Tawil is originally an Israeli Arab. The two have now been joined by a newcomer, *Al Ahd* (The Oath), put out by *Al Mithaq* and reflecting the same political philosophy. Observers note that its radicalism is one of the reasons it is attracting growing interest. Contributors usually do not get paid. Editor Mahmoud Khatib said *Al Ahd* provides an opportunity for journalists and writers who are deprived of writing in other publications to express their views. About half of the sixty-page magazine is given over to political and ideological articles about the Palestinian cause, written in a style labelled "extreme and unreasonable" by some. "We keep a balanced and objective outlook," Khatib retorted. "The Palestinian masses should know everything."

Until about two years ago, Palestinian Islamic institutions and groupings lacked an articulate organ in the West Bank. In 1981, the Islamic Religious Trust (the *Waqf*) applied for a license to issue a periodical that would focus on Islamic and theological issues. It had to wait a year before its baby *Huda Al Islam* (The Islamic Guide) was born. The editor, Sheikh Ikrima Al Sabri, said some ten thousand copies are sold monthly. Its distinctive feature: it ignores politics. "We don't interfere in the politics of the PLO or Arab countries," Sheikh Ikrima said. However, attacks on Islamic holy places are reported in full. The magazine has to submit all material to censorship, as is the norm in Israel. But apart from matter dealing with sensitive issues, like "Israeli Practices in Holy Places" and allusions to *Jihad* (Moslem Holy War), few articles are excised.

CONCLUSION

As for the future, Siniora, for one, sounds optimistic. He has grandiose plans for extending the *Al Fajr* sway. His most ambitious project to date is to initiate a wire service that would cover the whole of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, utilizing "our own resources." He is not worried about competition from the giants like Reuter. Other projects in the pipeline include an evening tabloid and the setting up of a publishing house.

Israel has been occupying the West Bank for seventeen years and Palestinian Arabs have still not come to terms with occupation. Nor do they intend to. It is a sombre message that the Palestinian press keeps dwelling on, on an almost daily basis. Yet, this is not to say that there are no exceptions. But those who regard life under the Star of David more palatable and salutary than under the Jordanian flag must needs keep their tongue. Yet, they are there, no doubt about it. Once in a while they make their presence known, but furtively.

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