



The Role of the Media and Journalists in Arab Affairs

ODU United Nations Society

Introduction: A Window on the Future

Debates over the role of media and journalists mean more than the immediate issues, whether cases of news media refused permission to report, reporters who become victims of violence or arbitrary arrest. These questions, rather, are a window into the condition of Arab civil society generally, the power of the state, the legitimacy of power, and the future direction of Arab society generally. For the Arab League, this topic raises the question of what will Arab societies look like five, ten or twenty years from now?

According to the most authoritative evaluate of media freedom in the region, published by the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Member States of the Arab League are the world's most challenging for reporting:

The Arab region has been the most unsafe for journalists globally, reflecting the highest number of journalist killings between 2012 and 2017. Internet journalists have been at more risk, the number of imprisoned journalists has increased steadily, and women journalists are increasingly targeted with threats to their safety. The rate of impunity related to the killing of journalists in this region has been near absolute.¹

For many Member States, media and reporters are not seen as disinterested, neutral observers of

social events. Rather, they are viewed as active participants in national struggles to maintain order and promote official goals. In the words of the UNESCO report:

A number of Arab governments have represented the region's wars and conflicts as existential battles that require the loyalty of citizens. In the fight against terrorism, governments have targeted media outlets associated with an Islamist worldview, and journalists, citizen journalists and social media users who may have links to Islamist groups.²

When the Council of the Arab League meets, 14-16 February 2020, to consider the issue of media and journalists, it must consider global norms and principles, as formulated in resolutions of the UN General Assembly and other international statements.

But it also must bear in mind four uniquely regional aspects, uppermost in the minds of many Member State delegations: the rise of more aggressive reporting, led by Al Jazeera, the role of social media and reporting in the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011, the killing of the Saudi-American reporter Jamal Khashoggi in 2018, and the seemingly endless barriers to reporting in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

¹ *World trends in freedom of expression and media development: regional overview of Arab*

States, Paris: UNESCO, 2018, p. 4, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pt0000266023>

² *Ibid.*, p.8.



The Arabic Media Landscape

All Member States of the Arab League have a range of Newspapers and Television networks.³ Every Member State delegation to the Arab League needs to be familiar with the media outlets of their country, appreciating not just their political role, but how they are financed. Arabic media are highly diverse, but tend to be tightly limited. The region is judged by outside analysts to have the least media freedom of any in the world.⁴

Arabic media is among the world's most cosmopolitan. With the advantage of a common language shared by most of the population of the Arab world, it is easy for with readers and viewers routinely to look not only to their national media, but to reporting from other Arabic speaking countries, and Arabic publications from elsewhere, especially London. In addition, there are large English or French-speaking populations throughout the region, especially among the rapidly growing middle class, who can avail themselves to reporting in those languages.

The diversity of Arab media reflects not just strong public interest, but the tradition of official support for the media. Newspapers and broadcast media in many Arab states were created by the state itself, or are heavily

subsidized by their national government. Their staff often are considered government employees. Far from being independent observers, they are expected to support the government that supports them.⁵

The classic example is the Egyptian semi-official newspaper and broadcast network *Al Ahram*. Unlike media in liberal countries, *Al Ahram* is a voice of the state. It can be relied on to report and editorialize what the state need to be said. It reliably supports official policy and attacks opponents of the government.

What is true of *Al Ahram* is true of semi-official media outlets throughout the region. No Arabic news outlet criticizes their home ruler or the ruler's family. Arabic newspapers and broadcast media often have greater freedom to criticize the governments or ruling families of other Arab countries.⁶

Until recently, critiques of media freedom in the Arab World almost universally come from elsewhere, not from the countries of the region, but especially from non-governmental originations (NGOs) in the United States and United Kingdom. The lack of direct criticism from within the region is revealing of official and professional attitudes there.⁷ Not only are governments cautious about permitting the media independent power, but the regional

³ List of Arab newspapers, *Wikipedia*, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Arab_newspapers; and 'List of Arabic-language television channels', *Wikipedia*, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Arabic-language_television_channels

⁴ Perceived press freedom & freedom of expression in the Arab World', *Arab Barometer*, 18 October 2018, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2018/10/perceived-press-freedom-freedom-of-expression-in-the-arab-world/>

⁵ 'Arabic media', *Wikipedia*, n.d., https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arabic_media

⁶ Isaac Scher, 'Restrictions on Press Freedom in the Middle East—and Beyond', *The American Prospect*, 4 November 2019, <https://prospect.org/blogs/tap/restrictions-on-press-freedom-in-middle-east/>

⁷ Pintak, Lawrence, 'Arab states', in Pippa Norris, ed., *Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform*. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2011, ch. 13, <https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/WorldBankReport/Chapter%2013%20Pintak.pdf>



media has learned over the years to show restraint. To its advocates, the latter is a way of supporting the policies and goals of the nation and its rulers, to critics it is mere self-censorship, trading restraint for personal security.⁸

Such criticism is not unique to the Member States of the Arab League. News media in authoritarian governments everywhere face much the same allegations, whether they be China with state controlled media, or illiberal democracies like Hungary and Russia, where the news media is controlled by friends of the Prime Minister or President.

Independent news previously meant the international services of western government news services, especially the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VoA). Both of those have lost financial support from their governments in recent years, and play less of a regional role. Their reporting, moreover, was suspect, believed to serve the self-interest of the former colonial power or the interests of the US.

The major exceptions are foreign-based, especially London-based Arab media, and the media of Arab democracies. Media outlets in Iraq, Lebanon and Tunisia have been among the most outspoken, often reporting negative stories about their home governments and prominent officials. Their independence makes them

important symbols throughout the Arab world, but they tend to lack the financial resources of pro-government, semi-official media elsewhere, and often lack their high profile. The most independent Arabic media tend to be based outside the region, most famously in London, home to four major Arabic newspapers: *Al-Arab*, *Al-Hayat*, *Al-Quds al-Arabi* and *Asharq Alawsat*. Although their readership is small, their influence can be significant.

The limits on domestic media are especially irksome to many journalists themselves. They have organized to demand greater political space for independent news media. Only with full media freedom, they insist, can Arab societies understand their own problems and the best solutions. The Arab League has been a special target of their demands, the one place they can reach all governments and hope to gain regional influence.⁹

Challenging the Role of Arabic Media

The traditional critique of Arab media remains largely true, but the picture has gotten more complicated in the last generation. Four events deserve special attention.

⁸ Pintak, Lawrence, and Jeremy Ginges, 'Inside the Arab Newsroom', *Journalism Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp.: 157–177

⁹ 'Arab World: Journalists' unions say it is time for Arab states' leaders to support media freedom and independence', *International Federation of Journalists*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/collective-agreements/article/arab-world-journalists-unions-say-it-is-time-for-arab-states-leaders-to-support-media-freedom-and.html>. Also see 'Declaration on Media

Freedom in the Arab World discussed at League of Arab States meeting in Cairo', *International Federation of Journalists*, 1 June 2018, <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-freedom/article/declaration-on-media-freedom-in-the-arab-world-discussed-at-league-of-arab-states-meeting-in-cairo.html>



Al Jazeera, 1996

The exceptional diversity of Arab media also limits its influence. Unlike the state-sponsored media in China or Russia, or the largest outlets of countries like the United Kingdom or United States, historically there have been no equally prominent Arab news organizations. This began to change in 1996, when the Emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, who ruled from 1995-2013, created Al Jazeera (*The Island*, a reference to the Qatar peninsula or the Arab world), with financial resources to establish global news bureau and reporting in many different languages. For the first time this gave Arab journalism a global profile. Today Al Jazeera Media Network is most watched media outlet in the Arab world. As of 2018, it had 80 international bureaus,

The nature of official control is the most controversial question surrounding Al Jazeera. The network has strong support from Qatar's then-ruling monarch, Emir Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. In the words of a prominent analyst, 'Make no mistake: Al-Jazeera is owned by, and answerable to, the Qatari government. But the channel was given a very long leash and soon brought to the region's television screens a diversity of voices and a kind of questioning journalism never before seen in the Arab world.'¹⁰

Al Jazeera raised expectations throughout the Arab world, making it impossible for Arab League Member States to continue to rely exclusively on semi-official news. Others—beyond their control—also tell they Arab story

now. By refusing to parrot the official line reliably, Al Jazeera puts pressure on Arab governments they had never faced before. Most affected were those in conflict with the government or emir of Qatar, including Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Everyone had to act in ways that did more to satisfy public demand for more honest and searching reporting.

The rise of Social Media and the Arab Spring, 2011

The Arab Spring of 2010-11 was a second breakthrough. A public uprising throughout the Arab world, it arose without leadership, as people followed news about uprisings on Al Jazeera, and even more on social media. The Arab Spring revolts were criticized or even ignored by state media, which quickly became irrelevant. A new media, beyond state control, without editorial restraint, emerged as the fulcrum of change.¹¹

The revolutions spread throughout the region, involving virtually every Arab League State to some degree. Every government struggled to cope with public anger and new means of expression. 'Social media in general, and Facebook in particular, provided new sources of information the regime could not easily control and were crucial in shaping how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests, the logistics of protest, and the likelihood of success.'¹² Governments were overthrown in Libya, Tunisia, Yemen and most importantly in Egypt, the largest and most influential Arab League Member State. It was

¹⁰ Pintak, Lawrence, 'Arab states', in Pippa Norris, ed., *Public Sentinel: News Media and Governance Reform*. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 2011, ch. 13, <https://sites.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Acrobat/WorldBankReport/Chapter%2013%20Pintak.pdf>

¹¹ Pintak, Lawrence, 'The Al Jazeera revolution', *Foreign Policy*, 2 February 2011, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/02/the-al-jazeera-revolution/>

¹² Lever, Rob. 'Debate flares on Twitter revolutions,' Arab Spring', *Agence France-Presse* 10 March 2013, <http://www.dawn.com/news/791757>



resisted and contained in other regional countries like Jordan, Morocco and Saudi Arabia, but governments had to rapidly change policy to stay ahead. All Arab governments and the media they support are struggling to this day.

The Jamal Khashoggi killing, 2018

The third critical event was the assassination of the Saudi-American journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The killing of the journalist Khashoggi on 2 October 2018 created even greater awareness of the depth of the problem. Showing that states—in this case the government of Saudi Arabia—could be as dangerous to their lives as any criminal organization.¹³ After devoting much of his career to critical journalism in Saudi Arabia, Khashoggi had relocated in the United States, where he became a columnist for *The Washington Post*. On 2 October 2018 he visited the Saudi Arabian consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, where he had an appointment to arrange a license for his marriage to his Turkish girlfriend.¹⁴

The killing severely embarrassed the Saudi government, making it impossible for other governments to continue normal relations. While some world leaders stood by the Crown Prince—most visibly American President Donald Trump—other denounced his rule for

tyranny and defiling basic international principles.¹⁵

A six-month investigation by the UN concluded that ‘Saudi state agents, 15 of them, acted under cover of their official status and used state means to execute Mr. Khashoggi... His killing was the result of elaborate planning involving extensive coordination and significant human and financial resources. It was overseen, planned and endorsed by high-level officials. It was premeditated.’¹⁶

Saudi government initially denied any role in Khashoggi’s disappearance, reporting he completed his business at the consulate and left normally. The official Saudi explanation later shifted to say Khashoggi died after starting a fight with consulate officials. Only much later did Saudi officials acknowledge that he died in the consulate. Saudi officials strongly deny that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman played any role, although he did accept ultimate responsibility in principle. There is widespread agreement the assassination could only have occurred with his explicit approval.

Instead of bin Salman, several Saudi government agents involved in the killing were arrested, tried in secret, found guilty, and sentenced to death for the killing.¹⁷

¹³ ‘Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death’, *BBC News*, 9 June 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-45812399>

¹⁴ Ian Black, ‘Jamal Khashoggi obituary’, *Guardian*, 19 October 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/19/jamal-khashoggi-obituary>

¹⁵ ‘The Latest: Trump says he doesn’t feel betrayed by Saudis’, *Associated Press*, 31 October 2018, <https://apnews.com/7b064bec9b1448d7b2c1ec259b37503c>

¹⁶ ‘Khashoggi killing: UN human rights expert says Saudi Arabia is responsible for premeditated

execution’, *UN High Commissioner for Human Rights*, 19 June 2019,

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24713&LangID=E>

¹⁷ Kareem Fahim and Sarah Dadouch ‘Saudi Arabia says five sentenced to death in killing of Jamal Khashoggi’, *Washington Post*, 23 December 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-says-five-sentenced-to-death-in-killing-of-jamal-khashoggi/2019/12/23/02fc0ea4-256a-11ea-9cc9-e19cfbc87e51_story.html



Unlike most foreign governments and international organizations, the Arab League defended the Saudi Government. Without speaking out on the murder, the Arab League denounced any political pressure applied on Saudi Arabia and stated in an official response ‘It is totally unacceptable, in the context of relations between countries, to wave economic sanctions as a policy or tool to achieve political goals.’¹⁸

Reactions to the Khashoggi killing revealed a lot about Member State attitudes. The strongest supporters of Saudi Arabia were countries most dependent on its financial or military assistance. Among the strongest defenders of Saudi Arabia were Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates. Within the Arab League, Qatar—the most consistent opponent of the Saudi role within the League—was the clearest in condemnation. Tunisia was officially opaque, but saw large public demonstrations against the Saudi murder. Only states outside the Arab League were explicitly critical, led by Iran and Turkey, neither formal members.¹⁹

The Palestinian priority

While they often disagree on everything else, the Member States of the Arab League usually can agree on one thing; the Palestinian angle. Whether they promote media freedom or repression, Member States universally support the Palestinian people in their conflict with Israel. As noted by the journalism critic Isaac Scher, journalists in Palestine are also under fire—

literally. According to United Nations findings, Israeli snipers intentionally targeted Palestinian journalists, as well as children and people with disabilities, during the Great March of Return, a weekly mass protest along the Israel-Gaza perimeter. The peaceful demonstrations, which began in March 2018, pose one demand: the right for Palestinians to return to their historical land. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a media monitoring organization, has roundly condemned mainstream coverage of the protests, and a Canadian research firm recently reported that such coverage is systematically anti-Palestinian, after studying nearly 100,000 U.S. news headlines on the issue.

Similarly, pro-Palestinian activists stress the one-sidedness of U.S. media coverage of Israel-Palestine. The issue is such a flashpoint in American culture and politics, reflecting the Trump Administration’s close ties with Israel, that certain views are simply unspeakable in the United States, even though free speech is legally protected. American journalists speaking out in favor of justice for Palestine are routinely harassed and threatened. Some have been fired for expressing their views. On American university campuses, scholars also have been threatened or fired for denouncing the Israeli occupation or advocating Palestinian rights.

The Member States, while they disagree on much, can readily agree that Israel must permit Palestinian journalists full freedom to cover and publish on all aspects of Israeli repression of Palestinian efforts to fully establish national self-determination and sovereignty. They also agree, with less intensity, that foreign—

¹⁸ ‘Middle East leaders back Saudi Arabia after Jamal Khashoggi’s disappearance’, Middle East Eye. 15 October 2018,

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/middle-east-leaders-back-saudi-arabia-after-jamal-khashoggis-disappearance>

¹⁹ ‘Middle East leaders back Saudi Arabia after Jamal Khashoggi’s disappearance’, *Middle East Eye*. 15

October 2018,

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/middle-east-leaders-back-saudi-arabia-after-jamal-khashoggis-disappearance> . Also see detailed links to Member State positions in ‘Reactions to the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi’, *Wikipedia*, n.d.,

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reactions_to_the_assassination_of_Jamal_Khashoggi#Arab_world



especially American—coverage of the Israel-Palestinian conflict is highly one-sided, virtually ignoring the problems and rights of the Palestinian people. Rather than focus on the need for reform within their own countries, Member State delegates may find it much easier to pass resolutions demanding Israel show full rights to reporters covering the Palestinian cause, and demand news agencies elsewhere in the world cover Palestinian cause more extensively, and with less partiality toward Israel

Role of Other International Organizations

Although it is not part of the UN system, the Arab League and its Member States are affected by international precedents. Resolutions and reports by other international bodies do not bind the Arab League or its Member States, but they set precedents and expectations, and create the framework the Arab League often feels compelled to interpret and react to.

The principal institutions affecting international law and precedent on issues of journalistic freedom is The Human Rights Council, is the leading UN body responsible for these issues. But it is not alone. The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) also has been involved in this issue since 1997 when the UNESCO Director-General condemned the killing of journalists and created authorized the *Report on the Safety of Journalists*.²⁰

²⁰ 'Safety of Journalists and Impunity', *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*. n.d., <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/freedom-of-expression/safety-of-journalists>

The most important precedents for all international action come from the UN General Assembly (UNGA). On 18 December 2013, the General Assembly adopted its first resolution concerning the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity, resolution 68/163. The resolution condemns all attacks on journalists unequivocally, including killings, torture, harassment and intimidation in both conflict and non-conflict areas.²¹ The resolution also urges Member States to break the cycle of violence against journalists by ensuring that all alleged investigations under their jurisdiction are given fair, speedy, and impartial trials, and that the perpetrators of these attacks are brought to justice.²²

Resolution 68/163 is widely viewed as a helpful first step, but vague about specific protections, international oversight, or the responsibilities of the international community.

Illustrating the tensions surrounding the issue, in May 2012, the *Committee to Protect Journalists* (CPJ), a non-governmental organization, applied for the special UN consultative status. After consulting with Member States, the UN NGO committee (which is controlled by the Member States) denied the application.²³ In July 2016, the UN Economic and Social Council overturned this vote to grant the CPJ official UN consultative status, with the United States the forefront leader.²⁴ Out of the 54-member body of ECOSOC, 40 countries voted in favor. China, Russia, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, and Vietnam voted

²¹ *The safety of journalists and the issue of impunity*, A/RES/68/163, UN General Assembly, 18 December 2013, <https://undocs.org/A/res/68/163>

²² Ibid.

²³ 'UN overturns decision to keep out press freedom watchdog', *The Indian Express*, 26 July 2016.

²⁴ Ibid.



against, while Algeria, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, India, Pakistan, and Uganda abstained.²⁵

from the United States, such as Saudi Arabia, the Government of Yemen, and UAE.

Some Proposals for Action

Stress journalistic freedom of Palestinians.

This is the issue on which Arab League consensus is easiest. Not only might the reporting freedom and protection of reporters in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OTC) be guarded from restrictions by Israel, but rights and protection also could be extended to Palestinian reporters working on issues surrounding Palestinian residents in Israel-proper.

The most likely opposition could come from Arab governments more open to some cooperation with Israel, such as Qatar, and others more dependent on security assurances

Enhance the role of journalists and media throughout the Member States of the Arab League, possibly in conformity with the principles established in international documents approved by the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO. Such principles could be reinforced through creation of a regional observatory of journalistic conditions. The latter would require not only a mandate, but legal protections and financing.

Emphasize the sovereign rights of all Member States to establish their own domestic norms and law, including domestic control over the news media and individual reports. The goal would not be to strengthen international precedents on the role of journalists, but to create a legal foundation for a regional exception to international law and principle.

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²⁵ Ibid.



https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/saudi-arabia-says-five-sentenced-to-death-in-killing-of-jamal-khashoggi/2019/12/23/02fc0ea4-256a-11ea-9cc9-e19cfbc87e51_story.html

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