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Civil Society & Media

TWILIGHT

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Assessing the Role of Media in Palestinian Security Sector Governance

In 2009, the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces (DCAF) organised three media expert workshops with AMIN Media Network in Ramallah and Maan News Agency in Bethlehem. In addition to the editors-in-chief of AMIN and Maan News, more than 60 correspondents from the newspapers Al-Ayyam, Al-Quds and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida, from Palestine TV and Radio Voice of the People, and civil society representatives, participated in the discussions. The workshops discussed the role Palestinian media can play in strengthening good governance in the security sector. The events provided an opportunity for Palestinian media practitioners to assess their capacity to cover security issues and especially the performance of the Palestinian security forces. Participants identified legal and structural obstacles that hamper the oversight capacity of Palestinian media. This issue of DCAF Spotlight shows how Palestinian media representatives assess their oversight performance in the security sector.

What role for Palestinian media in security sector governance?

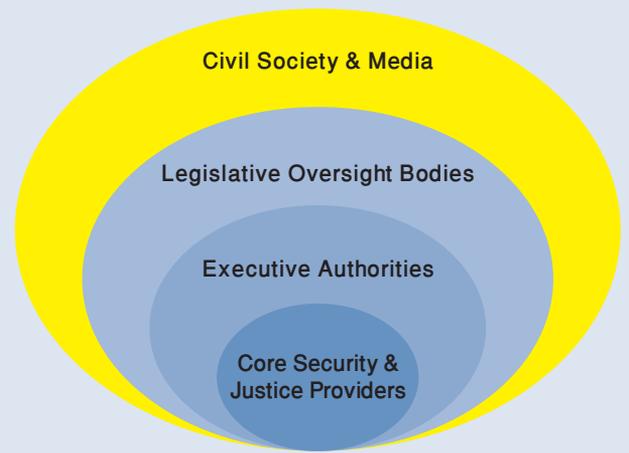
Palestinian journalists are aware that the media can play a key role in enhancing transparency and accountability in the security sector:

Fostering public discussion on security:

- ◆ ‘The media must provide the people with accurate information on security operations and on reforms in the security sector.’
- ◆ ‘Security sector representatives, especially security officers, should allow journalists to keep the public informed of national security concerns.’
- ◆ ‘The way the media present security-related information must be convincing and interesting. The media should reflect public concerns about security and provide citizens’ feedback on the performance of the security forces.’

What is the Security Sector?

Legal & Policy Framework



The security sector consists of the core security and justice providers and their management and oversight institutions. The legal and policy framework regulates their tasks, authorities and structures.

Core security and justice providers:

- ◆ Security forces (armed forces, police, intelligence and security services, but also liberation armies and insurgency groups)
- ◆ Justice and law enforcement institutions (courts, prosecution services, prisons, traditional justice systems)

Management and oversight institutions:

- ◆ Executive management and oversight bodies (Presidency, Council of Ministers, ministries of defence, interior, justice and finance)
- ◆ Legislative management and oversight bodies (Parliament and its committees, ombudspersons)
- ◆ Informal oversight institutions (civil society organisations, media, research and advocacy organisations)

What obstacles to media oversight?

Palestinian media practitioners contend that both security and media legislation restrict media activity. They also are critical of lacking access to information and fear repressive measures by the authorities:

No systematic access to security-related information:

- ◆ 'Many journalists face difficulties in obtaining information from the security forces.'
- ◆ 'Journalists have access to information because of personal relations, not because of institutional procedures.'
- ◆ 'The security agencies must be more open to the media. Journalists are not inferior to security officers. Both sides must build communication channels, such as permanent contact persons and specialised offices.'
- ◆ 'Security forces should establish public relations departments and websites to provide information to journalists.'

Limited willingness to risk-taking:

- ◆ 'I do not feel that there is freedom for the Palestinian media to criticise the security forces or even the general policies of the authorities.'
- ◆ 'The watchdog function of the media is not institutionalised. It all depends on the individual initiatives of courageous journalists.'
- ◆ 'When it comes to publishing news on security-related topics, self-censorship prevails.'
- ◆ 'Editors-in-chief have the power to shelve investigative reports on security issues, and they do so.'

Restrictive or ambiguous media legislation:

- ◆ 'There is no law on access to information. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) never adopted the draft law that was prepared in 2005.'
- ◆ 'Some laws forbid security officers to give information to the media. This is the case of the General Intelligence Law and the Law of Service in the Security Forces.'
- ◆ 'There should be a law regulating the way security-related information is shared and accessed.'

Abuses of journalists:

- ◆ 'Palestinian media representatives are too often scared to deal with the security forces because of past and present abuses.'
- ◆ 'Abuses such as killings, beatings, threats, and closures of media offices continuously take place.'
- ◆ 'When dealing with the media, security officers often try to control media outlets.'
- ◆ 'Although there is no official censorship before or after publication, the security forces frequently interfere in the media's work.'

How do media representatives assess their performance?

Participants felt that there are a number of structural and management weaknesses in Palestinian media institutions:

Lack of media independence:

- ◆ 'More than 90% of the local Palestinian media belong to a political party - less than 10% are politically independent.'
- ◆ 'The biggest political parties control large segments of the media. Although they frequently committed themselves to stop the media campaigns against each other, those campaigns are still going on.'
- ◆ 'Media controlled by political parties frequently issue news that instigate violence instead of promoting reconciliation.'

Lack of professionalism:

- ◆ 'We as media practitioners should develop our expertise in covering security issues.'
- ◆ 'Ideology still deeply influences the media discourse. It hinders the development of professional and objective media. The media are keener to follow official political lines than codes of conducts.'
- ◆ 'There are no journalists specialised in security-related issues, operationally or with regard to human security.'
- ◆ 'Palestinian media institutions often employ members of the security forces as correspondents. This undermines the perception of the media as professional and independent oversight actors.'

What relations with civil society?

Participants acknowledged that there is no systematic cooperation with civil society organisations active in the security sector:

Missing links between media and civil society:

- ◆ 'Media institutions must forge closer links with civil society organisations involved in security sector oversight.'
- ◆ 'Sometimes, the media hesitate to cover sensitive issues, even if these issues have already been made public by a civil society organisation.'
- ◆ 'How can journalists be afraid of transmitting news that have already been published by others?'
- ◆ 'The media only rarely conduct investigative reporting. They are hardly part of civil society programmes on security issues or joint awareness campaigns with NGOs.'

How do media see the communication strategies of the security forces?

Media representatives have witnessed the recent efforts of the security forces to develop public outreach and communication strategies. While they recognise the establishment of security spokespersons as a first step towards more transparency, they are critical of the emergence of the recent phenomenon of 'security media'.

Critical view of strategic communication tools used by the authorities:

- ◆ 'The authorities have recently started to resort to strategic communication tools such as 'security media'. The term 'security media' stands for a centralised system of communication by the security forces to promulgate their vision of security among the people.'
- ◆ 'The 'security media' have no interest in presenting the facts from different angles. They only express one perspective.'
- ◆ 'The websites of the security forces should be transformed. Instead of advertising for their activities they should provide accurate information about the role and operations of the security forces.'

Better access to information through spokespersons:

- ◆ 'It is important to have spokespersons liaising with journalists.'
- ◆ 'In the past, before security spokespersons had been appointed, it was impossible to reach the Ministry of Interior, for example, or any office of the security forces.'
- ◆ 'For the first time, there is a spokesperson for the security forces. It is an encouraging development, but there should be more of them communicating with the media in all areas of the West Bank. Security forces have to be as close as possible to the citizens' needs.'
- ◆ 'There is now one single spokesperson for the security forces, but there are still no precise procedures for the authorities to share security-related information with the media.'

Ineffective public relations departments:

- ◆ 'The security forces lack proper public relations offices and this is a problem.'
- ◆ 'The current public relations structures in the security forces only absorb the requests of the journalists without releasing information.'
- ◆ 'Palestinian security forces do not systematically organise press conferences. If they organise a press conference, admission is limited to a few journalists only and based on personal relations.'

What ownership of communication?

Palestinian media practitioners are aware of their need to regain ownership and credibility in transmitting security-related information to the people.

Viewing security issues through local eyes:

- ◆ 'The money provided by donor countries plays a positive role in promoting the independence of the media. But, of course, these funds also come with a political agenda.'
- ◆ 'Palestinians tend to watch almost only foreign media programmes. This is because of the local media's lack of credibility. Rumours and untrustworthy information are common.'
- ◆ 'It is the local media that should address security-related issues. They know the situation better than the foreign media.'

Recommendations

Palestinian media representatives acknowledge that their relations with security forces and political authorities are often marked by tensions and a lack of trust. They are willing to bridge the gap between the media and security sector institutions. However, they insist on maintaining their independence from political parties and decision-makers. Palestinian journalists urge the security forces to overcome their culture of secrecy and to develop procedures to make security-related information more easily accessible to the public. They also stress the need to develop an enabling legal framework for the Palestinian media. Workshop participants made the following recommendations to the Palestinian authorities:

Media representatives recommend:

- ◆ To engage in legal and policy reforms to grant the right of access to information to the Palestinian media, civil society organisations and citizens. This should be done in a way that allows broader participation in security sector governance.
- ◆ To establish clear procedures for Palestinian security sector institutions to release security-related information in an accurate and timely manner.
- ◆ To allow the local media to play their informal role by increasing their independence from political parties.
- ◆ To encourage relations between media institutions and civil society organisations with a view to reinforce their role in security sector oversight.
- ◆ To establish media departments within security agencies at the level of all governorates and to appoint trained officers as their official spokespersons.
- ◆ To review, amend and complete the current legal framework for the Palestinian security forces in order to respect the principles of freedom of press, expression and opinion enshrined in Article 19 of the Basic Law.

- ◆ To promote public understanding of the security strategies and broader legitimacy of security-related policy decisions through transparent decision-making processes subject to media scrutiny.
- ◆ To put an end to all forms of pressures, threats and intimidations against media representatives covering security-related events.

DCAF Spotlight publishes concise reports on salient topics of Palestinian security sector governance for local and international SSR practitioners.

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