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Freedom of the Press 2013 - West Bank and Gaza Strip

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2013 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: 84

Legal Environment: 28

Political Environment: 34

Economic Environment: 22

Press freedom in the Palestinian territories continues to be restricted by ongoing violence and by abuses at the hands of three different governing authorities: the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank, the Hamas-led government in the Gaza Strip, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which occupy parts of the West Bank and engage in intermittent hostilities with Hamas. Three media workers were killed in November 2012 by Israeli airstrikes – making 2012 the deadliest for journalists in the Palestinian territories since 2009 – and scores more faced harassment, detentions, assaults, and restrictions on their freedom to report throughout the year.

The Palestinian basic law and the 1995 Press and Publication Law provide for freedom of the press and freedom to establish media outlets, and state that there should be no censorship. However, restrictions are allowed if press activity threatens "national unity" and "Palestinian values." This vague terminology gives authorities ample leeway to impede journalistic activity through legal means, including by bringing criminal libel charges. In the West Bank, the PA Ministry of Information regulates all television and radio licenses. Following its 2007 takeover of Gaza, Hamas introduced a new system of accreditation under which all outlets and journalists are required to register with the authorities.

West Bank and Gaza authorities have banned broadcast outlets and newspapers associated with Hamas and Fatah, respectively. In early 2012, eight websites critical of the PA and its president, Mahmoud Abbas, were blocked in the West Bank; however, the bans were lifted in May under orders from Abbas. There were some reported instances of the PA, Hamas, and Israeli authorities monitoring e-mail activity and internet chat rooms.

According to a 2012 report by the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA), physical attacks, arrests, detentions, and confiscation of equipment by both Palestinian

governments accounted for 31 percent of all press freedom violations in 2012, with Israeli forces accounting for the remainder. The cumulative pressure has driven many journalists to practice self-censorship. Security services from both Palestinian authorities cracked down on journalists covering street demonstrations in 2012, with the situation somewhat worse in Gaza than in the West Bank. In June, several journalists were attacked by PA security personnel while attempting to cover a demonstration in Ramallah to protest a meeting between Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Shaul Mofaz and Abbas.

In 2012, MADA reported multiple instances of journalists in Gaza being beaten, threatened, and detained during Hamas crackdowns on demonstrations in support of Palestinian national unity. Security forces continued to intimidate bloggers and other social-media activists who were critical of the Hamas government. In February, Saher al-Aqraa, editor of the news website *Al-Shoa'lah*, was arrested and reportedly interrogated and tortured for allegedly collaborating with the West Bank PA. Al-Aqraa was again assaulted, detained, and tortured in August by Hamas security officials. He was forced to shut down his website after Hamas began to intimidate his family. In March, Hamas security forces beat journalist Yousef Basher Hammad while he attempted to cover a police assault on youths near Beit Hanoun. In September, Ismail al-Badah, a cameraman for the television news channel Palestine Today, was assaulted by Hamas security officials while filming a house fire. Although al-Badah complied with the officials' request to stop filming, he was nonetheless beaten and subsequently interrogated.

Israeli security policies and military activities also continued to restrict Palestinian media freedom in 2012. Israeli forces harassed and detained reporters during the year, and were repeatedly accused by local and international media advocacy organizations of targeting journalists with assaults and arbitrary detentions. Soldiers routinely fired tear gas, rubber bullets, and stun grenades at journalists covering events throughout the West Bank, and occasionally fired live ammunition as well. Soldiers confiscated journalists' equipment on a number of occasions in 2012. As with the PA in the West Bank, Israeli troops often target Hamas-affiliated press outlets and journalists. In February, the IDF raided the headquarters of two television stations in Ramallah: Watan and Al-Quds Educational. They seized broadcasting and technical equipment, halting the operations of both stations. Israeli officials claimed that the two outlets were using unauthorized broadcasting frequencies. In November, during an eight-day military offensive in Gaza named Operation Pillar of Defense, the IDF bombed the Al-Shawa Wa Hassri Tower and other buildings in Gaza City where media outlets associated with or sympathetic to Hamas were housed. At least three journalists were killed and several more were injured in the strikes.

Freedom of movement for journalists is restricted by the Israeli checkpoint system, which requires military permission for passage into Israeli territory and often hinders travel within the West Bank. In addition, the IDF has increasingly curbed coverage of regular protests near the Israeli security barrier in the West Bank by declaring such areas "closed military zones." In December 2012, four Palestinian journalists, including two working for Reuters, were stopped at a checkpoint in Hebron, physically assaulted, and forced to strip and kneel on the ground. After confiscating their gas masks and a video camera, the IDF members allegedly fired tear gas at the journalists.

There are three daily West Bank Palestinian newspapers: *Al-Hayat al-Jadidah*, which is completely funded by the Fatah-controlled PA; *Al-Ayyam*, which is partially funded by the PA; and *Al-Quds*, a privately owned paper based in Jerusalem that is subject to Israeli military censorship. Distribution of these papers in Gaza was alternately banned by the Hamas government or blocked by Israeli authorities beginning in 2008, but the latest ban, by Hamas, was lifted in January 2012. Distribution of pro-Hamas newspapers *Al-Risala* and *Filistin* in the West Bank remained banned.

There are approximately 45 privately owned television stations, and the PA funds the official Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), which is under the direct control of Abbas. The PA

has closed down Al-Aqsa TV offices in the West Bank towns of Ramallah, Jenin, and Tulkarm. PBC transmissions have been blocked in Gaza since the Hamas takeover in 2007, while the Voice of the People radio station, run by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, is generally allowed to operate but occasionally blocked. The Israeli military has utilized coercive tactics to restrict broadcasting by stations deemed to be advocating terrorism or affiliated with Hamas. Foreign broadcasts are generally available.

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