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Freedom of the Press 2014 - West Bank and Gaza Strip

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2014 Scores

Press Status: Not Free

Press Freedom Score: (0 = best, 100 = worst) 82

Legal Environment: (0 = best, 30 = worst) 27

Political Environment: (0 = best, 40 = worst) 33

Economic Environment: (0 = best, 30 = worst) 22

Press freedom in the Palestinian territories continued 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. Though no journalists were killed in 2013, ongoing violence against journalists and IDF-imposed restrictions on movement in the West Bank made reporting difficult.

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. Although there were no reports of Hamas or Israel using libel laws against journalists in 2013, PA police arrested a Radio Bethlehem 2000 journalist in November and charged him with "slander and abuse."

Toward the end of 2013, Palestinian officials in the West Bank were considering a draft freedom of information bill that would allow people to request information from public bodies. 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 2012 under orders from Abbas. In July 2013, Hamas closed local media offices of the Dubai-based Al-

Arabiya network and the West Bank-based news agency Maan for publishing "false" news. Both news outlets frequently carry stories that are critical of the Hamas-led government in Gaza. Maan's offices were closed after it reported that the Hamas government had sheltered members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in a Gaza hotel. Both Al-Arabiya and Maan were allowed to reopen in November. Separately in July, Hamas shut a local television production company called Lens after accusing it of providing services to an Israeli news channel.

Social media were used extensively by Palestinian journalists in 2013. Censorship of online content has occasionally taken place in the past, but there were no reported cases in 2013. There were some instances of the PA, Hamas, and Israeli authorities monitoring e-mail activity and internet chat rooms. Journalists and bloggers have also been interrogated and detained for writing posts unfavorable to the PA. In November, PA authorities interrogated a Palestinian journalist after he criticized Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations on his Facebook page. In March, Abbas pardoned a journalist who had been sentenced to one year in prison for insulting the presidency by posting a derogatory photograph of the president on his Facebook page.

According to a 2013 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 34 percent of all press freedom violations in the territories in 2013, with Israeli forces accounting for the remainder. The cumulative pressure has driven many journalists to practice self-censorship. Security services from both Palestinian governments cracked down on journalists covering street demonstrations in 2013, with the situation somewhat worse in Gaza than in the West Bank. PA security forces attacked journalists on multiple occasions in the West Bank, including in August, when several journalists were assaulted as they covered protests in Hebron. In December, the PA removed Israeli journalists covering Christmas festivities in Bethlehem. During 2013, MADA reported multiple instances of journalists in Gaza being beaten, threatened, and detained amid 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.

Israeli security policies and military activities continued to restrict Palestinian media freedom in 2013. Freedom of movement for journalists is hampered 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." 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. In August, Israeli officials released Amer Abu Arafa, a Palestinian correspondent for Shihab News Agency, after detaining him for two years without charge. Israeli authorities continued to hold two other Palestinian journalists, a correspondent for Al-Aqsa Radio and a reporter for the Tamimi Press Agency, both arrested in 2012.

Israeli 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. In April 2013, an Israeli soldier shot Palestinian freelance photographer Mohammad al-Azza in the face with a rubber bullet after he refused to stop filming a protest. Soldiers also confiscated journalists' equipment on a number of occasions in 2013. As with the PA in the West Bank, Israeli troops often target Hamas-affiliated press outlets and journalists. In January, Israeli security forces returned in damaged condition equipment that they had confiscated in 2012 from Wattan TV and Al-Quds Educational Television.

The PA and Hamas fund four of the five Palestinian newspapers. Of the three West Bank dailies, the PA completely funds *Al-Hayat al-Jadidah* and partially funds *Al-Ayyam*. *Al-Quds* is privately owned and based in Jerusalem, making it subject to Israeli military censorship as well as PA media controls. Hamas funds the twice-weekly paper *Al-Risala* and the daily *Filistin*. The PA

government bans distribution of Hamas newspapers in the West Bank, while Hamas bans distribution of the PA-funded newspapers and *Al-Quds* in Gaza. Israel sometimes blocks distribution of Palestinian publications as well.

There are at least 30 private Palestinian television stations registered with the Ministry of Information. Most are small stations operating in local city markets in the West Bank, though Hamas-run Al-Aqsa TV operates from Gaza. The PA allowed Al-Aqsa TV to operate in most West Bank towns with relative freedom, while in Gaza, Hamas allowed transmission of the PA-supported Palestine TV. However, Hamas has blocked transmission of the Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation (PBC), which has been controlled by Abbas since 2007. 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.

There are no PA restrictions on access to the internet, and it is a popular source of news and opinion. Statistics vary on how many Palestinians have access. MADA reported that only 34 percent of people in the West Bank and 28 percent in the Gaza Strip had access to the internet due to a lack of infrastructure and the high cost of service delivery. However, the International Telecommunication Union reported nearly 47 percent internet penetration in the West Bank and Gaza in 2013.

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