

The long March of the Pan-Arab Media:

A Personal View

Early in the summer 2006 I booked a flight to Beirut scheduled for the 12 July that would take me home after thirty years abroad. Little was I to know that the date displayed on my ticket would be inscribed in Lebanese history. But being well aware of Lebanon's acute vulnerability in the volatile politics of the Middle East, I kept to myself the excitement I was feeling about returning home.

Mid-morning July 11, a work colleague walked into my office asking if I had heard the latest news. Two Israeli soldiers had been kidnapped by Hizbullah, he told me. Thinking about my scheduled July-12 flight to Beirut, I rushed into the TV monitoring room at the Pan-Arab Research Center where I work. I was eager for the very latest news. The first report I saw featured the Israeli Army chief's threat to take Lebanon back thirty years. With the painful experience of civil war and Israeli invasions that I share with most Lebanese, I took these threats literally.

The first images of war that I witnessed were the flashing shells hitting Beirut airport's runway. This was an agonizingly familiar image. Our leaders have let the vulnerability of Beirut airport be enshrined in our national psyche: images of the national

airport succumbing to the Israeli Army go as far back as 1967 and have been replicated in the subsequent series of attacks against Lebanon. I have particularly strong visual memories of war as my home village lies just 350 meters above Beirut airport and is an ideal place for a panoramic view of all Beirut and the Mediterranean Sea beyond. These images of war remain vivid; nothing can erase them from my memory.

A colleague, who was also scheduled to fly July 12 to attend the concert of a national icon—Fayruz—singing for Lebanon, called me early that morning to confirm that the airport was closed and that all flights were canceled. This was what I had expected from the moment the crisis broke. Had I traveled a day earlier I would have witnessed the bombardment of the southern district of Beirut from the roof top of my family home in Ain Anoub, which offered a sort of first row seat during the battles of the civil war.

As the first shells fell, I longed to be at home in Lebanon with my parents. But I soon realized that the roof top of my parents' home was no longer the best view-point for keeping track of the war. With access to hundreds of Arab and foreign satellite channels; 24-hour access to the Internet; access to national, regional and international newspapers and magazines; mobile phones and SMS, I was probably as well informed as any other Lebanese living in Lebanon.

Through email exchanges and telephone calls, I also kept abreast of the word-of-mouth rumor and intrigue that were formerly the main sources of news in conflict-ridden

Lebanon. This conversational news is an invaluable complement to modern media news in any war; mass media cannot replicate the experience of hearing about life in war first hand. I am always struck by how the public opinion surveys I help to produce professionally routinely ignore the value of word-of-mouth in the gamut of sources real people rely on for news in war.

Nevertheless, when you compare the Israel-Hizbullah war of 2006 with previous Arab-Israeli wars, you cannot help but notice a central difference: the Arab media coverage of the 2006 war was without parallel in modern Middle Eastern history. Word-of-mouth is no longer the main conduit of insider news from Beirut to Baghdad. The extent and range of coverage of the 2006 war has far-reaching implications not only for Arab public opinion, but also possibly the global perception of the war.

Lives Lived through Wars, not Wars Lived through Television

During the first half of the last century, much of the land of Palestine was incorporated into the state of Israel with hardly any media coverage—be it Arab or international. Those were the heydays of word-of-mouth news. In the 1956 British-French-Israeli war against Egypt, the only footage Arabs saw was provided by British and French news services. The first major Arab-Israeli war I lived through was also marked by abysmal and deceptive Arab coverage. In the afternoon of June 6, 1967, I was fighting lethargy in my fourth grade class when a teacher barged in announcing that a war

with Israel had just broken out and that the victorious Arabs had already downed fifty warplanes.

All the pupils of the Ain Anoub English missionary-run elementary school paraded out to the schoolyard chanting nationalist songs. Days later, we knew that the downed warplanes were Arab. The Sinai Desert, West Bank, Syrian Golan Heights and Qunaitara were all lost to Israeli control in less than a handful of days, again with Arab audiences kept in the dark. Only those with access to BBC World Service or the Israeli Radio knew the true story of the 67 war—the Nakbat or Calamity in Arabic—as it happened.

In Lebanon, coverage of the 1967 war consisted of official warnings and instructions broadcast and published in the state media. We were advised to paint household light bulbs with blue dye so that Israeli warplanes could not target our homes at night. Some villagers instead painted their windows so they could keep the lights on at night.

My experience was typical. As a ten-year-old living with my family in a village barely twenty minutes from Beirut, I had very little access to media. Only a handful of homes had television, and even radio sets were rare. But even though I was a child, I had greater access to media than many thanks to the customers of my father's grand country store. This alone brought me into contact with print media. Because of my father's chronic illness I had to assist him in running the store at a very early age. Many villagers

who subscribed to newspapers and magazines were more than willing to give me their copies. I could recall the BBC programme *Huna London* (This is London). There was also a magazine I used to read published by the US embassy in Beirut. Initially I was interested in the photos but the exposure to print encouraged me to read the headlines and subsequently the articles.

It was not until 1968, a year after the war, that we owned our first transistor radio set. The set was a gift from my uncle to my father to help lessen the pain of his illness. Even then our contact with big media was intermittent at best. When the batteries ran out, many weeks would go by before we could replace them. One way we found of making four batteries last a few hours longer was by boiling them in water.

But even for Arab families who owned television and radio sets in the 1960s and 1970s, there was not much to listen to or watch. When the October 1973 War broke out, state-owned television was beginning to grow, allowing Arab audiences a glimpse of the initial Arab military successes. But we were not shown the subsequent humiliating defeats. Right up to the mid-1980s Lebanon had only one state-owned television channel that would broadcast for no longer than eight hours a day, and even then a limited range of content. The radio scene was equally limited; there was one state-owned AM station in addition to BBC AM relaying from Cyprus and Sawt Al Arab from Egypt. This narrow media landscape was not unique to Lebanon; it was replicated across the Arab world. Each country had one state-owned television channel and one or two radio stations at the

most. Perhaps the Lebanese were lucky for having a relatively vibrant print media compared to some other Arab countries.

In the 1960s and 70s, radio and television played only a minor role in shaping Arab public opinion. Political grievances were keenly felt, despite the relatively limited audio-visual media. Of course, print news reports had some impact. But hardening attitudes towards Israel and the Arab political elite's false promises of imminent change developed in the absence of the ubiquitous and varied *images* of Palestinian suffering. Although often powerful, photographs depicting the Israeli occupation—soldiers beating a Palestinian child or holding a woman at a gun point—were few. Often the same image would reoccur across the Arab print media. Clearly, Arab political opinion does not depend on media coverage. When three of the PLO's leaders—Kamal Adwan, Kamal Nasser and Abu Yusuf—were assassinated in one of the more affluent neighborhoods of Beirut on a sleepy night in April 1973, it was not live Al Jazeera coverage that mobilized the tens of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinian protesters to march at their funeral. By contrast, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the US, Arab agitation against Israel and the US is attributed (problematically) to the *Al Jazeera Factor*.

Political Reaction Finds Multiple Forms of Expression

The prevailing American perception that the pan-Arab media are the main agitators of Arab opinion points to a profound ignorance of Arab politics in the US. Many

Arabs backed the PLO struggle against Israel in the 1970s and early 1980s for precisely the same reason they cheer on Hizbullah today. As a young teen growing up in a village in Lebanon, it was not the Lebanese state-owned television channel or the radio station that mobilized my generation. Nor were recorded cassettes as influential in Lebanon during my youth as they were in the Iranian Islamic Revolution led by Khomeini. The main conduits through which networks mobilized in Lebanon—print and word-of-mouth—were in a kind of symbiotic, mutually reinforcing relationship. Informal conversations, lectures, demonstrations and speeches of political figures deploying inflammatory oratory were backed up by flyers, pamphlets, posters and books. There was a tremendous number of flyers and books circulating at this time, dozens of which I still have in my personal library in Lebanon. These were cheap to print and easy to disseminate, and because they were given out for free, were more widespread than newspapers which had to be paid for.

Reflecting back on that era, I cannot help feeling a certain nostalgia for the oral culture that existed then. One effective means for disseminating ideas and experiences was poetry. Spread partly by print partly by word-of-mouth, poetry was far more relevant to young Arabs than it is today. Who in the Arab world did not know Mohamoud Darwish's poem *Sajjil Ana Arabi* (Record: I am an Arab) by heart? Who does not recall Fayruz's nationalist songs *Ajras Al Awda* (Bells of Return), *Ya Jisran Hkashabiya Yasbaho Fawqa Annahri* (Wooden Bridge Swimming over the River), or *Sanarji'u Yaman ila Hayyina* (We Shall One Day Return)? Who had not heard of Nizar Qabbani lambasting Arab states for their ambivalent attitude to Israel and the US?

Another effective channel for political discourse sanctioned by the state was *plays*, especially the dozen or so plays starring the Syrian cast lead by Duraid Lahham and the late Nuhad Qal'ee. Distributed on cassette tapes, these satirical plays became hits across the Arab World. But unlike in the Iranian Revolution, these cassette plays were rarely distributed for free; rather they were sold as commodities at markets and in shops. Many plays depicted political corruption and the ineptness of the Arab political value system, acting both as a mobilizing tool for various political causes and as political pressure valves. Politically motivated activists would sit for hours, listening or watching and memorizing their contents and even reciting them in daily conversations. Given that such political texts were sanctioned by the state, many Arabs felt this was the best way to voice their frustrations publicly without fear of being apprehended by the authorities.

Another rarely mentioned medium pioneered by Lebanese editors and publishers in the heyday of state-led media censorship in the early 1970s was newsweekly magazines. These pan-Arab magazines emerged in a period marked by the decline of the pan-Arab radio stations based out of Egypt, and arguably constituted a new phase in the development of pan-Arab media in the post-colonial era. There was a good reason why only Lebanon could be the incubator for such dynamic and oftentimes vocal media: the state's lack of the authority in Lebanese society allowed for greater freedom of speech. Lebanon had no shortage of opinionated editors, writers, reporters, and commentators. Moreover, the influx of Arab political activists who found safe haven in Lebanon

provided a ready labor force for this nascent media scene. In addition, Lebanon was relatively wealthy and had access to foreign capital before the civil war.

But the pan-Arab weeklies were rarely financed by advertising money. Rather they were financed by political money. Arab states had to sponsor an outlet located in Lebanon to stay in the race and political polarization in the Arab World between the conservative Gulf states and those in the radical camp such as Syria, Libya and Iraq ensured that the stakes were high. Editors had little choice but to tow the line; failing to do so could mean risking their lives. Dominated by states as they were, the media of the pre-satellite era came to be known as the ‘Media of the Palace.’

The start of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975 marked the beginning of the end for these pan-Arab weeklies. By the latter years of the 1970s, most had migrated to Cyprus, Paris or London. By the 1982 June Israeli invasion of Lebanon the pan-Arab newsweeklies were devoid of meaningful content, lost to political rhetoric that consumed too much ink and paper.

So as my friends and I sat on the roofs of our homes in Ain Anoub overlooking the burning of the Palestinian Sabra and Shatila camps and the onward march of Israeli tank columns heading towards Beirut, we felt no longing for media to inform us of what was going on, or what the outcome might be. The Arab World’s military and political stagnation was merely replicated by a media sector that showed little sign of sustained

dynamism or independence. All we aspired to was turning our backs on the false hopes we had long entertained.

A New Media Age, a New Arab Confidence

Watching live footage of the nightly bombardment of the Southern District of Beirut on the pan-Arab TV channels this summer took me right back to 1982. I was transported back to the times when I sat on my parent's roof top helplessly, or rather hopelessly, watching Israel unleashing its cannons on Beirut. But the summer war was no repeat of history. This was in no small part due to the new realities of the pan-Arab media.

Just as Hizbullah turned out to be a seasoned military organization, so did the pan-Arab satellite TV channels, which dedicated most of their round-the-clock airtime to covering the war. This time around, it was not the Israeli media that provided much of the news for consumption in the Arab World—as was the case in all of the five previous Arab-Israeli wars.

In all previous Arab-Israeli wars Israel had dominated on all counts: in terms of military achievement, media coverage and psychological impact. Israel's media influence had previously established a global reach far in advance of the Arab media. But in this recent war, the influence of the Israeli media on global opinion seemed to have been tempered by the greater range of Arab voices.

The Israel-Hizbullah War has shown that wars are no longer fought on distant battlefields; wars are now fought live on air in front of millions. This has very significant repercussions for the way wars are fought. Military PR, political interviews and frontline coverage now play perhaps as great a role in shaping the outcomes of war as do military strategists in secret war rooms. And given that advancements in satellite and telecommunication technology are likely to produce ever-more responsive and immediate war coverage in the volatile Middle East, this trend can only grow.

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