

## ***Press Under Siege* Conference Raises a Cry for a Freer Middle East Press**

A conference on media freedom in the Middle East might sound like a quixotic endeavor in a region where the very words “media freedom”—let alone “freedom”—seem little more than an unattainable dream. Yet that did not stop the cluster of Arab journalists, editors, and activists who had come to Beirut in December 2006 for the *Press Under Siege* conference, organized by the World Association of Newspapers (WAN) and *An-Nahar* newspaper. The event was marked by animated and often passionate speeches from participants who largely represented Lebanon’s politically and intellectually isolated elite.

The official aim of the conference—fourth in a WAN-sponsored global series entitled *Media in Danger*—was to explore “the efforts of Arab media to win their independence and freedom in an environment of continuing repression and harassment.” The *Media in Danger* series has targeted regions where violence has become an all too recurrent theme—among them, Kyrgyzstan, Columbia, and the Basque region of Spain. So it was not surprising that the conference kicked off with an emotional opening ceremony dedicated to the memory of Lebanese journalist and activist, Gibran Tueni, who was killed by a car bomb a year earlier. Tueni had been both the publisher of *An-*

*Nahar* and a board member of WAN. More than 3,000 people attended the ceremony dedicated to his memory.

But perhaps also not surprising, the opening ceremony of *Press Under Siege* was marked by what Kristina Stockwood of the International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX) called “political overtones that one might not find at other media freedom conferences,” insofar as it had become something of a rallying point for Lebanese Prime Minister Fouad Siniora’s weak Christian-backed government. Indeed, many of those attending the conference later wondered whether the ultimate point of the conference was to support Arab journalists in their struggle for protected freedoms, or to promote Siniora’s government—then under heavy fire—as democratic and free before a would-be sympathetic international audience.

It seems unlikely that politics were directly behind the timing and location of the conference. Rather, the government probably viewed the conference as a convenient opportunity to underscore its positive international image and legitimacy as a democratic and benevolent ruling power, at a time of mounting national criticism and intensifying sectarian tension. When Prime Minister Siniora, spoke to the conference audience he praised Gibran Tueni for his commitment to free speech, yet failed to mention the elephant in the room—the mass Hizbullah demonstrations occurring just a few miles away. “The press is not only defending its own freedoms,” he declared, “but the biggest challenge is defending public freedoms, especially political freedom. The right to be in the opposition, the right to speak out.” The audience, made up largely of Lebanon’s elite

and foreign media representatives, exploded in applause, while simultaneously across town, thousands of mostly Shi'a with a minority of Sunni and Christian protesters marched to demand a political system that more justly and accurately represented the ethnic and religious proportions of Lebanon's population—or more specifically—a greater representation for Hizbullah, Siniora's prime opposition. The opening ceremony audience voiced its own political sympathies clearly: speakers' references to Syria's long-time occupation of Lebanon prompted a chorus of boos while mention of Lebanon's 2005 "independence"—an event for which all conference participants later received complimentary flags, bumper stickers, and coffee table books—was met with further applause.

Indeed Gibran Tueni's political activism and aggressive opposition to Syrian occupation and involvement in Lebanon was duly noted, but the direct implications that this may have had for his murder were never publicly voiced during the conference. Rather, the opening ceremony focused on Tueni as a martyr of free speech—and of course, of the values championed by Siniora's party.

### **A Partnership**

WAN, the primary sponsor of the conference, is not new to the Arab world news media. It has in fact run a series of projects in the region including The Arab Newspaper Development Project, a recently held Master class for Arab editors in Egypt, the Young

Readers Programme, and the Arab Press Network—an electronic resource for Arab media professionals.

The choice of holding the conference in Beirut in collaboration with *An-Nahar* was obvious; the two organizations have long held a close relationship, as exemplified by Tueni. Against the background of the ongoing political instability within Lebanon the move was seen to symbolize “a gesture of solidarity with the Lebanese media, showing them that they are not isolated despite ongoing events,” explained Kajsa Törnroth, Director of the Press Freedom and Development Programmes at WAN. The conference had originally been scheduled for the summer but was postponed due to the sudden outbreak of war with Israel.

### **Journalists Under Fire**

“At least 44 media workers have been assassinated in Iraq [alone] in 2006,” boomed the voice of WAN’s CEO, Timothy Balding, to the packed auditorium at the start of the opening ceremony. Prime Minister Siniora addressed the conference via video link; whether or not his physical absence was in any way related to the palpable political tension outside was not discussed. The loudest applause at the conference opening was given to Gibran Tueni's daughter, Nayla Tueni—deputy general manager at *An-Nahar*—who delivered an impassioned political speech about her father’s legacy and the future of media freedom in Lebanon, a goal which she claimed her father’s murderers hoped to crush.

Other speakers included Gibran Tueni's father Ghassan Tueni, the CEO of *An-Nahar*, as well as the General Manager of the Al Arabiya news channel Abdel Rahman El Rached, Thomas Friedman of *The New York Times*, and David Ignatius, Associate Editor and columnist for *The Washington Post*. Friedman said the major difference in the dangers that Western journalists face versus Arab journalists is that while the wrong word or opinion in an article might provoke an outcry or, at worst, tarnish a Western journalist's reputation, the same move by an Arab journalist might cost him his job, his freedom, or even his life.

A jury composed of WAN members and the Tueni family, presented the first annual Gibran Tueni Award to Nadia Al-Saqqaf, the editor-in-chief of the *Yemen Times*, for her commitment to the values of media freedom championed by Gibran Tueni. Al-Saqqaf was praised as the first female editor in Yemen, who in addition to this feat has actively strived to raise the bar for journalistic standards in the newsroom, as well as the position of female journalists in Yemen, despite oppressive censorship and restrictions.

A series of panel discussions followed the opening ceremony. Rodney Pinder, Director of the International News Safety Institute in Belgium moderated the first panel, entitled *A Deadly Profession— Journalists in Danger*. Salaheddine El Hafez, vice editor-in-chief of Egypt's state-run *Al-Ahram* newspaper spoke broadly about some of the dangers plaguing journalists in the Arab world, and of assassination as the ultimate form of censorship—a problem particularly prevalent in today's Iraq. Though neglecting to

comment directly on the heavy censorship imposed by his own government, El-Hafez briefly noted that three Egyptian editors-in-chief were, at the time of the conference, standing trial in Egypt.

Alia Talib, a Media Specialist from Iraq, represented the only Iraqi journalistic voice in a panel discussion. Journalists in Iraq are disposable items, she said—they receive no benefits, maternity leave, or compensation if they are injured. Female journalists are paid less than men and run additional risks of being criticized or even killed for their participation in the field, particularly if they choose not to wear the veil. If a female journalist is kidnapped and then released (a common phenomenon for journalists and civilians alike amid Iraq's ongoing civil strife), she runs the risk of being killed by her own family for the sake of preserving its honor.

Abdel-Rahim K. Abdallah, representing the Media Institute at Birzeit University in Ramallah, said that the Israeli occupation presents the most significant obstacle to the work of Palestinian journalists. Newspaper offices are frequently bombed; journalists are jailed; and due to the Israeli government's refusal to recognize Palestinian press passes, their movement is often very restricted.

Jamal Amer, editor-in-chief of *Al Wasat* in Yemen said, "Arab rulers, regardless of their differences, agree on one thing, and that is the way they regard the Arab press—all of them consider it their sworn enemy." A Yemeni law prohibiting journalists from criticizing the government is just one of the legal barriers afflicting Yemeni journalists.

Speaking from his own kidnapping experience, Amer explained that Yemeni journalists endure a constant barrage of intimidation tactics aimed at enforcing censorship and passivity. Both the government and tribal leaders play a hand in these threats, often forcing false confessions of treason or unlawful acts from the captive as condition for release. "We should have conferences that highlight violations of the press and issue recommendations," Amer pronounced. "And we should call on the United Nations to play a role in implementing Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We must consider that attacking journalists is an international cause, regardless of the nationality of the journalist. We should let everyone know what is going on."

The second panel discussion, titled *Censorship and Self-Censorship* was moderated by *The Washington Post's* Associate Editor and Columnist, David Ignatius. Ahmed Benchemsi, the publisher and managing editor of *Tel Quel* in Morocco, said that Morocco has witnessed significant changes in media freedom since the death of the oppressive monarch and dictator, Hassan II. Today, Benchemsi said, censorship is much more relaxed—or at least more murkily defined. However even without official censors, he explained, there remains a need to self-censor on particularly sensitive subjects, such as the personal lives of the royal family, pornography, and atheism. This is done out of concern for violent or angry reactions from sections of society. In Morocco, funding can also pose a major problem—even without restrictive laws—because companies might refuse to advertise in an overly-critical newspaper out of fear of being associated with the political opposition. Ironically, the public also expresses suspicion—even in the case of independent publications—that they might be secretly tied to the government.

"Self-censorship is the illegitimate daughter of censorship," declared Naziha Rjiba, the editor-in-chief of *Kalima online* newspaper based in Tunisia. The Tunisian government has successfully eradicated all forms of print journalism that present any formidable opposition, and the Internet remains the last viable outlet for honest criticism and reporting. However, even Internet news has been subject to recent crackdowns, and Rjiba has personally been the victim of government-fabricated accusations and scandals aimed at scaring her and other online journalists into submission to the government line.

Ali Abduleman, editor of *Bahrain Online* based in Bahrain, spoke about similar experiences with government censorship. His website has been forcibly closed on multiple occasions, and he was even jailed for a short-term period.

The third panel, titled *Controlling Media Through Legislation* dealt with existing legal mechanisms that serve to censor the Arab news media, as well as the possible routes for abolishing such laws. Kamel Labidi, a Media Expert from Tunisia, moderated the discussion. Ibrahim Issa, the editor-in-chief of the independent *Al-Dustour* newspaper in Egypt, voiced a bold critique of the current regime's track record with the Egyptian press, and joked that he might be going to prison after the conference. "Security concerns" and libel are recurrent charges raised against Egyptian journalists and publications, he said. Publishing rights are limited to companies and denied to individuals—a prohibition which severely constrains the number of independent Egyptian news sources available to the public.



The last panel discussion focused on the issue of *Achieving Economic Independence and Financial Viability* and was moderated by Natasha Vuckovic Lesendric, the General Manager of the *APM Print&Trans Press* in Serbia. Omar Belhouchet, the editor-in-chief of *El Watan* in Algeria spoke about a newspaper's freedom of speech as inherently tied to its financial independence. He emphasized the need for international solidarity in overcoming these obstacles, citing the positive effect that past pressure from the International Monetary Fund had in compelling the Algerian government to relax advertising and private printing restrictions. Hisham Kassem, the former publisher of *Al Masry Al Youm* in Egypt stressed the necessity of public records and the transparency of newspaper ownership and funding as a means to preventing corruption and covert political influence.

In their closing remarks to the conference, Said Essoulami, the director of the Center for Media Freedom in London, and Timothy Balding, the CEO of WAN observed that Arab world news media have made a lot of progress in the past few decades. The 1980s press was characterized by a lack of debate as Arab journalists were merely servants to non-democratic regimes. In 2006, they said, free debate is still being stifled in many places, but it does exist. In ensuring the continued evolution of an independent media, both the legal framework of a country and the economic sustainability of the news media are crucial factors. Governments must abolish restrictions on publishing rights and they must guarantee free access to information. So far, no such law exists in the Arab world, but one would be critical in the full transition from what is largely an opinion-based news media to one that is more information-oriented. Balding closed with a call

for the further participation of Arab journalists and editors in international meetings to make their voices heard.

## Reactions

Most conference participants offered very positive feedback on their experiences at the conference, saying that it provided an excellent opportunity to learn about the experiences of their colleagues across the region and to hear each other's unique ideas and opinions. Nevertheless, some of the very problems discussed on the panels still manifested themselves in an atmosphere of tolerance and free speech activism. Several participants cited self-censorship as one example. The analyses offered by the representatives of some state-sponsored newspapers were slightly more rosy than realistic, and few—even amongst the independent news represented—had the audacity to criticize their own governments directly, or to outline specific roads to reform. The vice editor-in-chief of *Al-Ahram*, (Egypt's notoriously biased government-sponsored news daily), spoke eloquently about the broader dangers that journalists face in the Arab world, but his speech was conspicuously wanting for commentary on Egypt's own oppressive environment. After experiencing harassment by officials at the Beirut airport on account of his nationality just a few days before, Palestinian journalist Abdel-Rahim Abdallah said he consciously limited his commentary on this experience at the conference for fear that this sort of criticism (of a fellow Arab country—the host country of the conference, no less) would be considered a kind of betrayal, and that speaking too much about the

experience might also invite future harassment or even permanent expulsion from the country.

Both Kristina Stockwood of IFEX and Abdel-Rahim Abdallah were disappointed by the noticeable absence of several prominent journalists from Palestine and Syria who were prevented from attending due to political reasons. They agreed that the messages delivered at the conference could have been amplified through the experiences of Syrian journalists living and working under one of the most politically repressive regimes in the Arab world, and of Palestinian journalists working in the context of the uniquely adverse Israeli occupation.

Additionally conspicuous in their absence were officials from governments outside of Lebanon. Described by some as a drawback, others believed their presence would have been advantageous in meeting conference objectives. Of the former view, Kristina Stockwood thought that the presence of government authorities “is intimidating, except at opening ceremonies.” Kajsa Törnroth of the WAN believed that it might have been useful to engage relevant officials in a dialogue about the way their policies affect media and democracy. At the same time, she pointed out, it is important for journalists to have an outlet to speak freely without fear of retaliation. Conferences like *Press Under Siege* might provide this much needed atmosphere, she said. Televising such conferences, on the other hand, might be a less provocative way to “spread the message of media freedom more broadly,” and the general public stands to benefit as well as its

participants through increased awareness, said Stockwood. Indeed the conference was covered by all local TV news channels within Lebanon.

### **A Political Message**

It is debatable as to how much of an effect the opening ceremony's political display ultimately had on the opinions of the conference participants and on the international parties who may, in fact, have been the intended beneficiaries of this effort. But as even Marie Claire Feghali of *An-Nahar* admitted: "It goes without saying that the conference had a political message, which differs from one receiver to another. In addition to that, the timing of the conference that coincided with a political stressful situation within the country had its role in showing a certain alignment of the conference to a specific current (multiple Lebanese parties, all pro governmental)."

In spite of Siniora's deteriorating reputation and other de-legitimizing issues, his commitment to free speech and an independent media is difficult to contest. The political assassination of journalists in Lebanon has been a real occurrence and is a continuing threat. However the sheer existence of newspapers like *An-Nahar* and the Hizbullah-backed *Al-Iktiqad*, as well as Hizbullah's TV channel, Al Manar—all of which operate with relative freedom and without officially-sanctioned censorship within the same country—is an indicator that Lebanon enjoys a level of press freedom that is seldom heard of in the region.

This success has certainly been applauded. However appealing to Western countries or even Western values—as Siniora may have sought to do through the opening ceremony—does not seem to be the route to reform favored by even the journalists themselves. Some, such as Algerian editor Omar Belhouchet, admitted that the Algerian government—among others—has proven receptive to international pressure to reform free speech laws in the past; and almost all agreed that international solidarity, publicity, and awareness should be strongly encouraged. However the notion of reform coming as the result of a unilateral effort—such as those by the U.S. or a European power was generally deemed foolish, regardless of good intentions. Particularly since the American invasion of Iraq, as Abdel-Rahim Abdallah pointed out, all American efforts of this nature are likely to be met with suspicion. In fact, such efforts might ultimately provoke the reverse reaction by pushing popular opinion further away from a free-speech and democracy-supporting constituency. Instead, many seemed to believe that the reform of laws governing the media—at least to a significant extent—needs to come from within. Arab journalists, editors, publishers, activists, and most importantly the people must face their governments to demand these changes. As far as international pressure, in Abdallah’s opinion, the U.N. and international NGOs are the appropriate foreign parties to play a role in this process, rather than single states pressing self-minded objectives.

### **Continuing The Struggle**

Though the conference inspired renewed feelings of optimism for some, elements of bitterness remained at the conference’s closure as many participants faced a return to

the harsh reality of autocracies and corruption at home. On this matter, an additional, but critically important challenge for journalists of the Arab world is the change of regimes, for as some noted warily the replacement of the current dictatorship by a more popular government will not necessarily prove most favorable to social and individual freedoms. At several points during the panel discussions, debate over the dilemma of government by dictatorships versus Islamists erupted between panel speakers and members of the audience. Naziha Rjiba, for example, maintained that the oppressive dictatorships will always be worse, and that states that issue warnings about the dangers of Islamists only use the threat as a tool of manipulation. Others, however, were not so convinced. So in a situation where—as Stockwood put it—“media freedom is essential to democracy building,” but democracy could potentially bring extremists to power, the Arab world media faces an uncertain future.

In light of future possibilities and the obstacles that they currently face, most of the conference participants agreed that the struggle for media freedom would be a long one and that it would not come easily. Nevertheless the conference succeeded in reminding many of its participants of their personal importance in the shaping of new and freer societies. And as Naziha Rjiba steadfastly declared, Arab world journalists have a responsibility—not simply to ask for their rights—but to actively practice them.

Kajsa Törnroth noted that “since press freedom and freedom of expression are the basic pillars of any democratic society, it is of huge importance that they are addressed, whether in the Middle East or any other region of the world where there are limitations

on freedom of expression.” Marie Claire Feghali marveled that many journalists throughout the Arab world still fail to realize the power they wield with a pen, or the rights they are entitled to. Thus, she added, conferences like *Press Under Siege* are necessary to create awareness among journalists so that they can better actualize their rights in the context of continuing adversity.

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**For more information on the *Press Under Siege* conference, see the World**

**Association of Newspapers’ Conference Report at: [http://www.wan-press.org/tueni\\_award/articles.php?id=663](http://www.wan-press.org/tueni_award/articles.php?id=663)**