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JEFF JACOBY

The Boston Globe

How PLO suppresses the news

By Jeff Jacoby, Globe Columnist | August 15, 2004

TWO DAYS after the liberation of Baghdad, a senior news executive at CNN disclosed that his network had for years been sanitizing its reports from Iraq. In an op-ed column titled "The news we kept to ourselves," Jordan Eason confessed that CNN routinely chose not to report on the atrocities committed by Saddam Hussein's regime. To have revealed the truth, he wrote, "would have jeopardized the lives of Iraqis, particularly those on our Baghdad staff."

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Suppressing news by threatening reporters with violence or death is one of the dirty little secrets of Middle East journalism. In his 1989 memoir "From Beirut to Jerusalem," Thomas Friedman wrote that "physical intimidation" was a major impediment to honest reporting from Beirut during the years when southern Lebanon was in the grip of Yasser Arafat's PLO.

"There were . . . stories which were deliberately ignored out of fear," Friedman admitted. "How many serious stories were written from Beirut about the well-known corruption in the PLO leadership. . . ? It would be hard to find any hint of them in Beirut reporting before the Israeli invasion." Instead of reporting what they knew, journalists censored themselves. "The Western press coddled the PLO," Friedman acknowledged. "For any Beirut-based correspondent, the name of the game was keeping on good terms with the PLO."

That was more than 20 years ago. Has anything changed?

In the wake of the 1993 Oslo Accord, Arafat and the PLO assumed control of the Palestinian population in Gaza and the West Bank.

Reconstituted as the Palestinian Authority, or PA, they lost no time cracking down on the press.

Arafat's "security forces have made more than 30 arrests of journalists and editors," the Columbia Journalism Review noted in 1996. "Although they have been almost completely freed from the Israeli yoke of military censorship, Palestinian journalists are being fettered in new ways. Reporters Sans Frontieres, a watchdog group based in Paris, released a report . . . deploring the Palestinian Authority's policy of suspending newspapers and employing threats and violence against journalists. . . . The result is a tame, compliant press that . . . rarely engages in investigative journalism and publishes only . . . 'vegetarian' criticism of the regime."

Khaled Abu Toameh, a veteran Arab reporter who covers Gaza and the West Bank for The Jerusalem Post and US News and World Report, noted recently that no credible, professional reporter can get a job at the three major Palestinian newspapers. "There are many professional Palestinian journalists," he told the Middle East Forum last April, but they can only find work

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Unfortunately, the intimidation of journalists extends to the wider Arab and Western media too.

On Sept. 11, 2001, Americans were shocked by footage of Palestinians dancing in the streets to celebrate the terrorist attacks on the United States. But those scenes disappeared from the airwaves soon after -- not because they weren't newsworthy, but because the Palestinian Authority gave orders to suppress them.

An Associated Press cameraman was summoned to a PA security office and warned not to release the material he had filmed. A top aide to Arafat told the AP's Jerusalem bureau that if the footage were aired, "we cannot guarantee the life" of the cameraman. Other news outlets were likewise ordered not to use any images of the 9/11 revelry. Most of them caved, and the images dried up.

Journalists like to cultivate a reputation for fearlessness, for a publish-and-be-damned commitment to putting out the story no matter what. The reality is not always so heroic. Sometimes the media are not fearless at all -- and their coverage, or lack of it, can amount to collaboration with dictators or thugs.

Meanwhile, the intimidation goes on.

In June, Abu Toameh reported in The Jerusalem Post that the Al Aksa Martyrs Brigade, an armed wing of the PLO's Fatah faction, admitted responsibility for a beating that left an Agence France Press photographer with two broken arms. In July, the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate -- an Arafat front group -- warned that any reporter caught covering clashes between rival groups in Gaza would be punished severely. Just last week, armed gunmen threatened to attack journalists working for Arab satellite stations unless they stopped covering the turmoil in the Palestinian Authority.

"People in the rest of the world . . . do not get an accurate picture of what happens in the region," Abu Toameh said in April. "Partly to blame are foreign journalists who allow themselves to be misled. . . . The bulk of the blame, however, rests with the PA, whose tyrannical approach and control of the media creates an atmosphere of intimidation and fear." For too many journalists, it seems, keeping on good terms with Palestine's bad men is still the name of the game.

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