

# Will the Palestinian Press Survive CORONA VIRUS?

The Media in light of Corona Crisis  
Difficulties and Challenges



2020



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**2020**

**(Special Report)**

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Various countries around the world have imposed a series of restrictions on the movement of their nationals, their jobs and lives to confront the spread of Corona Virus (COVID-19). This affected most sectors and activities that have been entirely or almost entirely suspended. Other activities and businesses diminished to the minimum, which caused the collapse and bankruptcy of some sectors and firms. Moreover, other sectors incurred huge losses and may not survive the consequences thereof during the coming period if they do not receive the aid that enables them to rise again.

In varying degrees, different media outlets in Palestine found themselves facing a series of unexpected difficulties and challenges that were not taken into account, as a direct result of the spread of “Corona Virus” epidemic and the consequent declaration of the Palestinian Authority imposing the state of emergency not to mention the accompanying procedures affecting various sectors of employment and activities.

Although the measures taken by the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian government left limited margins for movement and action in some sectors, including media outlets and journalists, it does not mean in any way that all sectors given the authorization to movement and continue working were immune from the effects of the epidemic and its direct implications. Rather, the media sector might be one of the sectors that will mostly suffer later as a result of this, due to its dependence and close association with various productive and economic sectors. This is in addition to the deep and far-reaching implications on the media and freedom of expression as a result of the imposed procedures (which are still in place) to counter the spread of the epidemic.

A quick review of the media status in Palestine indicates that the restrictions and general measures that accompanied

the spread of the epidemic will lead to the suspension of many independent/private media outlets, as a result of the interruption of their main source of income, represented in the already scarce advertisements. This will cause a serious blow to pluralism and undermine the contexts and trends of public media coverage of various issues, at the forefront of which the controversial issues, which may pave the way for a single-opinion media in Palestine.

The matter here is not only limited to the opportunities of continuity and survival from the financial challenges that independent/private media organizations will face, but also extends to one of the most important pillars of press, pluralism and freedom. It is not possible to address the concept of free media apart from pluralism, which (if absent) will lead to the lack of accountability and criticism on the media's agenda, and the absence of a very important platform for public debate, which will deprive the public of an important opportunity to participate and influence public issues and policies.

Some of the general measures imposed during this crisis (not only in Palestine but in various countries) indicate a more difficult and limited working environment that the media may be influenced by once the emergency state and the crisis end. Among the important questions raised in this regard is that idolizing the Government and Security Services (even the health staff) in connection with their role as part of their duty, will affect the opportunities for the media to account and criticize the Government, Security Services and the health sector after the end of the pandemic.

How will that be? Are the above-mentioned conclusions, although early, merely fiction, or is there anything that indicates this and raises concern about the state of the media in Palestine and what will it be?

This is a general image of the media map in Palestine. Besides the official media that is funded by the Palestinian Authority, and partisan media funded by the relevant parties, dozens of independent/private or civil media organizations are also present.

According to the Ministry of Information, 59 radio stations, 7 TV channels, and 9 news agencies are currently operating in the West Bank<sup>1</sup>. This is in addition to three daily newspapers (Al-Quds, Al-Ayyam, and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida), not to mention dozens of news websites (there are no available statistics).

As in Gaza Strip, and according to the Head of the Government Media Office in Gaza Strip, Mr. Salama Marouf, the total number of media institutions registered in Gaza Strip (until April 2020) is 249 (official, partisan, and private) media institutions, including the international media organizations authorized to operate in the Strip and the media production agencies. Around 1000 people are working for these institutions. According to some academics and media professionals, the number of partisan and official institutions out of the total number constitutes 20% and they have the greatest rate of personnel (most of them are large institutions).

By reviewing the total number of media institutions operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (whether included in the above figures or not), we found that the vast majority of them are independent/private institutions, which employ hundreds of male and female employees, and rely on advertisements as a source of income to cover its expenses and obligations and to continue working and developing.

For instance, 17 employees work for 24 FM Radio, while 42 employees work for Ajyal Radio. On the other hand, the

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<sup>1</sup> As reported by the Ministry of Information-Printings and Publishing Department, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2020.

number of employees working for Al-Quds Newspaper and its website exceeds 70 employees while around 1000 employees work for a total of 249 (official, partisan, and private) media institutions in Gaza Strip. This is in addition to another network of beneficiaries working for sectors associated to these institutions which includes several thousand working in this sector directly or indirectly.

## **TWO MAJOR THREATS:**

The crisis of Corona Virus which required imposing the state of emergency resulted in two major threats to the Palestinian media outlets:

The first is financial associated with their ability to continue, and the second is related to the plurality of media outlets that may lead to serious financial difficulties that they are facing (bankruptcy and closure), especially since most of the media outlets (specifically independent / private) depend on advertisement which is now gone due to the quarantine and will remain scarce even if things settled down within one or several months. Many economic and commercial institutions which used to advertise previously are financially suffering and incurring varying losses. Consequently, they will undoubtedly review their priorities to rise again, and it is probable that the advertising budgets will be the first thing these institutions will cede (or reduce to the minimum) to reduce their expenses and pay their liabilities to their employees, as they deem more urgent to keep going and rise again<sup>2</sup>, especially since most of the Palestinian institutions, even the large ones, lack what can be called as the advertising culture and do not include it as a fixed element in their budgets, which became clearly

2 Here, it is important to refer to the absence of the advertisement culture at most of the economic institutions in Palestine. Most of the institutions consider advertisement too secondary to be included in their budgets and could be the first thing to cede.



evident during this crisis. Dozens of the large institutions whose businesses have not been affected by the crisis have withdrawn their advertisements from the radios, even though following the Palestinian media has doubled in this period of time which is a golden opportunity to access the public and take advantage of the advertisement even more<sup>3</sup>.

In this context, the independent or private media outlets which rely on advertisement will find themselves with no source of income or revenues and that will not fulfill the minimum of their liabilities or businesses. This will leave them with the option of closing or diminishing their staff and activities to the minimum to continue if they could not find any official support.

To clarify the image, the Director of Ajyal Network, Mr. Waleed Nassar, in a conversation we had with him for the purpose of preparing this report, stated that 42 advertisers out of 64 have withdrawn their advertisements or suspended them in the first 24 hours following the announcement of the state of emergency and the procedures taken. On the other hand, the Director of 24FM Radio, Mr. Ihab Al-Jariri, confirmed that the Radio revenues declined by 60%.

The same applies in similar degrees to the various private/independent media outlets, in Palestine and elsewhere, as is Jordan, for instance. The closure threatens the well-established newspapers that employ hundreds of employees such as Al-Dustour, Al-Ghad and Al-Rai newspapers, which are facing a serious crisis in paying the salaries to their employees, and some of them are no longer able to do so.

**But what about the professional aspect related to the type of**

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3 In this regard, see what the Director of Ajyal Network, Mr. Waleed Nassar, has said, and so the Director of 24 FM Radio, Mr. Ihab Al-Jariri, later in this report.

press that we may be facing in Palestine as a result of all this, if things are not remedied these institutions are not protected from closure?

### **BELOW ARE THE MOST PROMINENT RISKS:**

1. Hundreds of employees losing their jobs, which will be similar to will happen to employees in other sectors who will lose their jobs and their livelihoods as a direct result of the implications of this crisis, which requires assisting and supporting all of them equally.
2. There is another different point specifically associated with media outlets and institutions threatened with closure. It is related to the general and distant impact on us as a society, that we, as a Palestinian society, will witness a single and dominant media, where pluralism will fade until become maybe absent, and there will be no other player than the official media (funded by the Government). This will kill any chances of multiple presence or opening public discussions on different and controversial issues, not to mention leading to the lack of accountability and criticism. Simply, other voices will be gone and only the official voice will be present. This undermines an essential element of democracy within the Palestinian society.

In this context, the head of the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate Nasser Abu Baker<sup>4</sup> said that the private media has established a school for free media and played an important role in this crisis and in the various stages that the Palestinians have gone through, and we must maintain, support and protect it.

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4 A summary of what came in a special interview conducted with the Head of Journalists Syndicate Nasser Abu Baker for the purposes of this report.

Abu Baker also added that There are major challenges facing private media organizations and threatening the ability of many of them to survive as a result of the consequences of the spread of Corona epidemic. Our greatest concern now is that we need to maintain the continuity of its work, and we in the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate work hard and on more than one level to achieve this goal, based on our commitment to protecting pluralism and preserving these institutions and their employees. Also, what we have done and continue to work on in order to achieve this goal can be summarized in the following points:

**First:** A meeting was held for representatives of local radio broadcasters in the union in connection with the crisis, which concluded that it is necessary to work to exempt them from fees and taxes for this year, as one of the steps that will alleviate the burdens and enable them to continue their work. After this meeting, we met and asked the Minister of Communications to do so, and he pledged to submit this to the Council of Ministers and support this request<sup>5</sup>.

**Second:** A message was sent to Prime Minister Dr. Mohammad Shtayyeh calling for exempting media organizations from fees and supporting them locally (from the Fund of Waqfet Ezz), or exempting them from taxes, which the government can do, and we are now in the process of arranging a meeting with the Prime Minister and pushing towards the fulfillment of these demands.

**Third:** We, at the Journalists Syndicate, have contacted the Palestinian private sector in order to urge him to continue to provide care to media institutions, especially since many of the sponsors that private media organizations depend on for

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5 The minister cannot approve this, and it is a matter for the prime minister or president.

their income have stopped at the start of the crisis.

**Fourth:** We formed a committee in the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate at the beginning of the crisis headed by colleague Omar Nazzal, to limit the damage that happened to media institutions and we have a file for that. Moreover, we have started contacting various international supporters, particularly the International Federation of Journalists to support Palestinian media institutions, as well as coordinating between journalists who works as freelancers to communicate with an international institution that directly supports this category.

**Fifth:** The union agreed with the Ministries of Labor and Information that no employees from their institutions will be laid off and that workers in media organizations should be supported and compensated for half of their salaries.

This is in addition to what the union has done on more than one level to support journalists / media institutions, such as providing tools and protective clothing for journalists, hoping that we can succeed through these procedures to protect our media institutions from closing and continuing to work.

## **THE SHOCK OF THE PANDEMIC AND THE DIRECTION OF MEDIA COVERAGE:**

The spread of the pandemic and the state of emergency announced in Palestine imposed on the media outlets a pattern of coverage that depends almost entirely on the official (governmental) sources only. This is not about the accuracy of whatever the official authorities publish; it is about putting the media outlets, indirectly, in a single route fed by the fear and concern of the pandemic and justifying everything just to fight it. Several journalists adopted this route and even considered it the correct and perhaps the

perfect route. Some of the media outlets, voluntarily, waived their roles, especially with connection to search, survey, monitoring and accountability.

Thus, most of the Palestinian media outlets (which are already weak), as a result of the challenges and difficulties that they are facing in light of the pandemic, the state of emergency and the conditions on movement and various activities, relied on making an official daily press brief without even searching and possibly being questioned. The media outlets, alarmingly, started following whatever issued by the official authorities to the extent the daily press brief became the most essential part of their work with regard to covering and fighting the pandemic disregarding the different roles of other parties and authorities. They no longer searched, questioned or criticized the coverage or the plans of fighting the pandemic and its implications.

In other words, most of the Palestinian media outlets have joined (some without even realizing) this circle. They considered the official daily brief was the “single” source of information to cover the spread of the pandemic, rather than considering it a source or opportunity to take the information for questioning and monitor the public performance. Mostly, whether realized or not, the media in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, started to act as the Government spokesperson.

The fear of the epidemic, the official measures and procedures taken, turned into the fear of the media outlets and journalists to cover the epidemic. This is addressed by Birzeit University Media Professor, Journalist Saleh Masharqah, in an article titled “The Anxiety Media”<sup>6</sup> where he states:

“The spread of Corona epidemic resulted in what we call Anxiety Media, where death meters are on every screen,

6 Saleh Masharqah, article, link: <https://2u.pw/cfk2X>

injuries are in every text message, and the news is about Corona Virus in the first place and the rest of the life issues come seventh or ninth”.

“The domination of the anxiety media resulted in creating pro-Government press entirely, loyal to the Country, its agencies, and the dominant firms, at lightning speed. This happened in most of the countries where journalists became as soldiers fighting in a war, as if they suddenly started feeling patriotism towards the officials. I cannot tell how safe this situation is, but I do believe that there is some sort of exaggeration, as officials have been beatified even though they only did their ordinary roles”.

“The social media suddenly fell in a strange patriotic state, in Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine ... In more than one country, the videos changed from laughing at the Country to children performing military salutations to the army and police patrols, and to persons putting their profile pictures to hawks and military eagles. Loving the national army with a balance is something we are used to all the time not occasionally. We cannot love it one day and hate it the other. I think our feelings need to be more balanced”.

“There is no report addressing the future, or what will come after the virus, as if a huge muzzle is blocking our thoughts, senses and motives. Although it is important, this muzzle will not help on the long term, and we journalists are not the prophets of change but we cannot be the slaves of quarantine, silencing and collective anxiety”, as stated in Masharqa’s article.

To shed light on the repercussions of this crisis, which may lead to even more deeper and lasting effects on the media presence in Palestine in the future, we had a conversation

with a number of media professionals, owners and directors of official, independent and private media agencies to address and look ahead the effects faced by the media and journalists as well as the challenges which may continue even after the crisis ends as new features and characteristics of the Palestinian media in the future.

The most prominent challenges and risks faced by the Palestinian journalism in light of the Corona pandemic, and those that may be faced later, as viewed by these journalists (who were interviewed), and their vision of possible intervention to support overcoming this crisis, can be summarized in the following main points:

First: Part of the difficulties and challenges the media faced during this period is related to technical logistical aspects such as work remotely, provide the required tools which are sometimes not available, not to mention the skills or experience to employ them to ensure the continuity of work and not being affected.

Second: the institutions and staff are facing complex pressures, as there are pressures related to concerns over the risks (on oneself and on others), and aligning that with the ability to continue coverage and work, taking into account that what is required from journalists in terms of work and production has become more than before, based on the fact that a very important and very huge issue that concerns everyone (the spread of the epidemic) is on the table, and we need coverage around the clock alongside other issues.

Third: the domination of Corona crisis over other issues listed on the media agenda (which is absolutely normal and justified) has directly and indirectly led to omitting and disregarding the other issues or covering them with quick briefs at least,

relatively far from the assumed interest. It escalated to the extent that the news on the number of persons infected with the virus became the only news or the most prominent compared to any other coverage throughout several weeks.

Fourth: One of the most serious current and future challenges is that independent/private media institutions have lost most of their revenues (as they depend on advertisements that have been totally or almost totally suspended) resulting in a real financial crisis two months after the pandemic, threatening many of them with closure or a serious reduction in their activities, staff or salaries in the event that these institutions do not find the required support, especially as the indications are that the crisis due to the epidemic and the implications thereof will last for months.

Fifth: regarding the official media, and although the public financial implications will not affect it the same as the independent/private media institutions, since it relies on the Government funding and will undoubtedly continue to do so, the general financial implications of this crisis will affect it, even if limitedly, and this may appear in suspending the development or expansion plans pursued.

Sixth: the owners and directors of these institutions believe that the Government can help them overcome the crisis and save them from the closure to be able to rise again (as some of the small institutions have closed or suspended their work) by taking the below measures and procedures:

1. Exempt from the fees they pay (for instance, Ajyal Network pays 32,000JD annually as rental of the electromagnetic spectrum) which will give them more possibility to rise.
2. Exempt from the taxes of the current year 2020, for instance.



3. Adopt a mechanism of fair distribution of Government advertisements in order to include different newspapers and media outlets.
4. Move officially regarding the advertisements published via social media (especially, Facebook), from which the Authority does not collect any tax, to be recovered and allocate part of the same to support the Palestinian media outlets, as it is estimated that the volume of the Palestinian advertisements on Facebook is about \$ 2.5 million Monthly.

## **MOHAMMAD RJOUB**

### **(Newscaster at Ajyal Network)**

The journalist Mohammad Al-Rjoub<sup>7</sup> describes the status of journalist in light of fighting Corona Virus and the challenges journalists face by stating that “this is an unconventional and unprecedented situation, as the governments have been trying to conceal information we were working on disclosing. However, the current situation led to reduced capacity to adventure (for example, our ability to go to Hugo Chavez Hospital where people infected with Corona virus are treated), and this of course has been reflected on work and the press need to adopt the official narration”.

The Palestinian split serves this situation, as “the journalist may become the subject of accusation in light of the prevailing split. For example, I once was working on a case of a nurse from Hebron, but the conclusions I came up with did not impress the opponents of the governor, and I became the

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7 This summarizes the conversations with a group of media professionals who have been interviewed for this report. Some of their statements were summarized without affecting their essence. All of the conversations that have taken place with the media professionals listed in this report took place during the period 15-27 April 2020.

target of their criticism”.

“Later, (once the Corona crisis ends) when we return to our normal life, the implications will continue and we will have to work for years to fix it (economic collapse, domestic violence, etc.) even though I do not believe we will return soon. The epidemic will change everything including press. It exposed several other things, many competent journalists did not appear for different reasons, while those present are definitely sacrificing themselves, but there are many observations on their work.

On the financial level, there is a breakdown, and the advertisements of media institutions are close to zero. Therefore, these institutions will find themselves obliged to pay, for example, half a salary to their employees for an unknown period of time, and no one knows what will happen next!

## **KHOLOD ASSAF**

**(Wafa Editor-in-Chief)**

Things were surprisingly imposed on us, and continue to be until now. Even the greatest countries were confused handling the virus and the consequences of the epidemic. The most important thing was to keep up with the media coverage, and this is beyond the ability of the existing staff. The biggest challenge was how we will continue to cover various issues, while maintaining the health of our journalists. Thus, we concluded more than one meeting to search for work mechanisms and to overcome the crisis if the situation escalated. We also addressed how shall we handle our staff (given the Government’s decision of closure) who cannot appear to the headquarters for different reasons (for instance, those who have children).

This resulted in making great and rapid efforts to provide the technical needs to our staff, such as the devices for those who do not have them, in addition to using some techniques and technology means (like Zoom) to communicate and meet. This happened gradually to maintain media coverage and the continuation of the staff. We tried to keep the number of those present at the headquarters to be within the minimum limit and to have others work from home.

It is found that most of the media outlets can do their works remotely and with competence. It was a surprise to us that we succeeded in the mechanism of working from home even more than from office. It is true that the burden is bigger on those working in Ramallah (the headquarters of WAFA), but all of those working from home did amazing. It seemed like they were working from the office, even better. I believe working remotely applies to the written media, but not all media outlets.

Has Corona Crisis professionally impacted the quality and diversity of work? How?

All of the messages were about Corona Virus, which led to omitting and disregarding other events and issues given the news is revolving mainly around the epidemic and the public's reaction to the same. Because of the epidemic, we had to have a daily action plan to act upon and correct our route or decide the same on a daily basis. It became difficult to draw a plan for tomorrow, and we are no longer capable (especially on the first days) of developing plans as we used to do previously. Most of our plans are now developed on a daily basis and everything else is not connected to the epidemic. For instance, you cannot address economic apart from the virus.

But if we want to evaluate ourselves through the number of readings in connection with what we publish about the health, medical, social and economic consequences of the epidemic, we will find that it has increased significantly.

Another challenge we face as Palestinians is occupation, and this is something additional compared to the rest of the world. This is also linked in part to the virus and the epidemic and what the occupation is doing in this context as well.

I do not believe that press after Corona will be the same as before. Corona increased the interest of specialization in journalistic work. We have noticed and figured the importance of this to our work. We are now held to absolute precision, because every word has a great impact on people's morale, government plans and general behaviors. Thus, absolute precision has become a major requirement and a fundamental pillar even more than before.

At some point, the administrative side and the supportive jobs were enlarged at the professional level in the media institutions. Despite the importance and centrality of this side (administrative and supportive), the challenge associated with the spread of the epidemic showed the necessity of a different arrangement of priorities focusing on the working sector (news producers - journalists) and be more fair to them because this group is the one that assumes direct responsibility. It was found that the absence of part of the management in light of the current situation does not affect work and performance, which requires reconsidering fairness to journalists and focus more on the working sector which assumes the direct responsibility (journalists) more than before.

One of the most important challenges during this crisis is the

issue of social media. The users of Wafa page have multiplied, at this stage. Unfortunately, this aspect did not receive sufficient attention in the past in terms of the skills and experience of the workers chosen by the media institutions for “social media” activities. The crisis clearly showed the importance of these people being those who combine two things: professional or good journalists and at the same time have technical expertise required to do this work, which requires reconsideration in this aspect and to adopt (Social Media) within the structure of press institutions<sup>8</sup>.

For instance, Wafa Agency French page on Facebook compete with the Arabic page in the number of readings and sometimes exceeds it. This may surprise some, but the news and materials posted on the French page are shared by about 600 users or sometimes even more. This indicates that the social media need to be given the proper attention by the media institutions and this shall not be neglected after Corona crisis ends. In conclusion, we support Wafa Agency that the social media need to be approved as a media activity rather than something minor just to support and market the pages.

The spread of the epidemic and its implications on the press led to broadening the horizon of many aspects that were neglected or did not receive the proper attention. Now it has become difficult to overlook this after Corona crisis. There is no doubt that we at “Wafa” Agency will work on this later. Our eyes are opened even better on aspects that we were not giving enough attention to. Now I have learned many

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8 A lot of Palestinian media institutions allocate for the social media activities specific people who do not have the sufficient press experience but have enough technical skills and the crisis showed that this is a problem as it is concerned with the content, what is published and how is it published... etc.

lessons from the experience we have lived which cannot be neglected.

As to what threatens some of the private institutions and general professional aspects, in any case, we need diverse media. Things will not be better with one type of media, we must have diversity in the media.

The official media will also be affected with the general financial implications of the epidemic, even if less than the private media. The official media will be affected differently which may also influence the salaries of employees and the development plans. For instance, we had a development plan for languages, or if we have a plan for the specialized media, we will be forced to suspend or delay them.

## **IHAB AL-JARIRI**

### **(Director General of 24FM Radio)**

First: logistic in connection to work. We made a move before the Government and started working from home. But this has influenced the work which is not done this way sometimes. In the end, we managed to overcome the problems in this regard.

Second: financial. The different companies have closed (following the measures which were announced), and some of them owed us money, now we cannot collect any of it. The crisis took place at the time we usually renew the annual contracts with the companies, but we could not do this as well, which applies of course to other institutions.

Third: professional on how to work in light of the pressures which increased due to the crisis in more than one form. First you need to keep abreast with all of the developments at the country level, whether in connection to the issues of

education, children, violence and other issues, in addition to Corona crisis. The work pressure on the institution and the staff increased, not to mention the pressure that you have to act emotional towards the issues and crisis, while you want to be professional and subjective. There is also the pressure that you need to be biased while you want to be critical.

As a result, our revenues declined by 60% at this point, and you need to keep the employees' salaries going which is a major problem, especially that we concluded 2019 with losses<sup>9</sup>, and you can only imagine how difficult it will be to start a new year with such crisis.

The advertisements market became significantly weak and my priority is to cover the salaries of employees. My plan is to work on reducing the expenses as much as possible noting that we rely on sponsorships in 50% of our revenues which is what we are trying to protect.

I think the challenges of the large institutions are more serious. Everyone has two choices, either to pay half salaries to the employees or accumulate debts as unpaid salaries, or you can choose to be extremely fair and pay complete salaries to the employees, and at the same time give those leaves or end their contracts. They are all difficult choices for sure!

In the future, I will not work without abundance for several months, and this will be reflected in employment, meaning that I will not be able to employ new people except in light of such abundance.

One of our problems in Palestine is that NGOs do not consider

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9 24FM Radio is an independent/private radio office that has been recently established, relatively. It was launched in year 2014, and 2018 was the first year it achieved some profits.

the media as a permanent ally. They never take the media into account in their work and plans.

We do not want aids from the Government, only facilitations, such as loans or reduction of taxes or fees or delaying some of the same temporarily.

As to the implications and reflections related to the profession, some of which appeared in the epidemic crisis, I think the press will be in trouble if it seeks to partner up with the Government. We were questioned by several parties that we criticize; we were also asked why our live broadcast is followed by double of those watching the same broadcast at Palestine TV?

Your performance today will reflect on you later, and people are smart. If they were convinced with your work and your way of media coverage, this will be for your own good in the future, but if you “partnered up” with the Government, it is the worst.

## **HANI AL-ABBASI**

### **(Financial and Administrative Director of Al-Quds Newspaper)**

In light of this crisis, and other crises, the media institution can control or reduce some of the aspects only to adapt to the declining of revenues, such as the printing supplies. For instance, we reduced the number of the newspaper pages due to inability to distribute the newspaper across the areas, as usual, but the other aspects which are more important remained the same, such as the salaries of employees, fees and taxes paid by the media institutions to the Government which constitute the greatest part of the financial burden that has not change.



On the other hand, the revenues of the media institutions (advertisements) were almost completely suspended. In other words, they had to continue spending without making any revenues, since many of them were suffering from financial difficulties before the crisis.

Therefore, many institutions, if they could not find any support, may have to dismiss some of their employees or reduce their salaries or not pay them entirely.

To support the media institutions, different countries are providing support in various means to enable the media outlets to continue and develop, whether through the tax exemptions or fees or for instance exempt the printing paper from tax or other ways. The media outlets cannot be considered as other institutions.

Another aspect the Government is supposed to pay attention to so as to support the Palestinian media outlets is to distribute the government advertisements taking into account transparency and justice. For instance, "Al-Quds" Newspaper, unlike other newspapers, does not receive advertisements from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education, and the Water Authority, which requires reconsidering this and re-distribute the government or official advertisements fairly across the difference newspapers private/independent media outlets.

## **WALEED NASSAR**

### **(Executive Director of Ajyal Radio Network)**

The effects of the crisis were evident in the first hours. For instance, during the first 24 hours following the announcement of the state of emergency, about 42 advertisements out of 64 advertisements were withdrawn or suspended. The advertisements were almost entirely suspended after

announcing the state of emergency. Currently in Ramadan, some started to advertise after suggesting very flexible prices unprecedented to encourage them again.

It is noteworthy that whereas the advertisements almost entirely suspended after the crisis, the media outlets in Israel (for instance) doubled their advertisements and revenues because firms believe (rightfully) that watching and following up with the media outlets currently (given the spread of the epidemic) increased significantly. Thus, the firms in Israel started publishing more advertisements which doubled the profits of the Israeli media outlets (the advertisements in Israel tripled). On the other hand, the opposite happened with us, as the firms rushed to suspend their advertisements given the absence of the advertising culture across most of the firms.

Even out large firms have suspended their advertisements including the firms whose businesses and revenues were not affected by the emergency and closure measures, and they kept working, such as banks and telecommunications, even the insurance companies whose profits increased in this period (since there were no accidents due to the closure) have also suspended their advertisements!

In summary, it has been 45 days so far and the advertisements are zero which places the private/independent media institutions in serious deadlock, especially the crisis is still going.

As to what the Government or official authorities can do to support the media outlets which are facing serious deadlock. Two weeks ago, a meeting was concluded for the radio offices at the Syndicate of Journalists. It discussed the implications of this crisis on the media institutions. Below are the two most

prominent matters the meeting concluded:

First: the radio offices shall be exempted from the fees they pay, which will give them margin, even if limited, to continue and rise again. For instance, Ajyal pays 32,000JD annually as fees of licensing electromagnetic spectrum or the transmission frequency. (The total amount of fees all radios pay is about 260,000JD). This shall cover part of their expenses and losses, noting that the monthly expenditure invoice of Ajyal Network amounts to 230,000NIS, given the fact that 42 employees work there.

Second: the participants in the meeting suggested to create “an aids fund” with the assistance of international organizations and donors supporting the Palestinian people. The purpose of this fund is to pay an amount of 1000USD to the radios for each employee, only for once. To clarify, a radio office with 10 employees will receive, for instance, 10,000USD<sup>10</sup>. The Chairman of the Journalists Syndicate, Nasser Abu Baker, presented these suggestions and demands to the Minister of Communication to be reviewed and decided by the Palestinian Government.

We support the suggestion of exempting the radio offices from the fees of the current year 2020 which shall help them to continue and rise again given the challenges they are facing. We also believe that any support of this kind (exemption from licensing and income tax fees) will allow these institutions to rise and advance again. We also believe that the aids fund suggested in the Syndicate meeting will help the radio offices and other small institutions.

There is another issue that is extremely important in connection to the advertisements and financial challenges the

<sup>10</sup> Haj Adeeb Al-Bakri (owner of Ajyal Radio) said in the meeting that he will donate with the share of Ajyal Network to the Fund.

media institutions in Palestine are facing and now are threaten to be closed, that is the issue of Palestinian advertisements on Facebook most of which are withdrawn due to the crisis. It should be noted that the Palestinian institutions which put advertisements of Facebook collect revenues amounted to two million Dollars or half million dollars monthly. It is not known if the Palestinian Authority collects tax on this or if Israel collects the same from Facebook and keeps it for itself.

In this regard, reference must be made to the crisis and controversy between France and the United States in connection to Facebook and Google. France imposed tax on Facebook by 12%, 1% of which was dedicated by the French Government to the Journalists Syndicate and the media outlets which is something the Palestinian Government has to work on.

As to the professional implications and repercussions of this crisis, the risk is that institutions may close in the future and we will all be hearing a single narration, the Authority's, which omits pluralism within the society.

## **DR. AHMAD HAMMAD**

**(Media Assistant Professor at Al-Aqsa University-Gaza)**

The closure and the accompanying procedures of closing different institutions in addition to the financial side of the local journalists resulted in restricting and limiting the capacity of journalists in accessing quarantine areas and information sources related to the implications of the epidemic and other relevant issues. The punishment of two journalists due to accessing one of the quarantine locations of infected persons taught a lesson to the remaining journalists as no one dared to pursue or follow up or even question anything in connection to the epidemic and its spread.

With regard to the professional work and obtaining information from official authorities only, the press originally needs to obtain information through cohabitation (direct communication with their owners or with the source). In this case, we are addressing the infected or those in the quarantine areas, for instance. This has become a problem that has affected the nature of media coverage in light of the crisis.

This is in addition to the impact of Palestinian split and its implications on the media with regard to different issues including the spread of the epidemic. The reliability of the information is one of the greatest challenges. You as a citizen choose what to listen to, the narration of the Authority or the narration of Hamas in connection to the epidemic implications. For instance, the Palestinian Minister of Health, Mai Kileh, announced that one of the infected persons in Gaza had a relapse, but in Gaza this was denied ... and who dares to question this? This is one of the implications and effects of the split that overlapped with the Crisis in connection with the information reliability.

At the professional level, this crisis proved to us that we need specialized media. We noticed that we lack the qualified journalist who is capable of writing about the health and medical issues which requires that we work to fill this gap later.

In the small media institutions, some of the employees were dismissed or their salaries were decreased even though some of them used to receive 700 NIS only and their salaries were reduced to 400 NIS. These circumstances that the employees experience undoubtedly frustrate any motivation they have to move on or take risks.

Moreover, some of the foreign press agencies provided their employees with protection means not to mention organizing training courses for them to maintain their safety and address the mechanisms of covering the pandemic. This was absent in the local, private and small institutions as they did not provide anything for their employees which limited their movement and coverage of the crisis and its implications. When they think about the amount of salary they receive, they for sure will ask themselves “Am I really going to risk my life for 700NIS”. There is another group of journalists who work as part time and their situation is even more difficult and tragic and the crisis affected their productivity and performance.

At the financial level of the implications of the crisis, the private/independent media institutions rely on advertisements that have been suspended or significantly reduced. One of the radios used to get advertisements and announcements in Ramadan from some institutions, but the institutions no longer did that claiming that the pandemic affected them even though the media institutions, especially the small ones, benefit greatly from Ramadan in terms of their business and revenues.

It is noticed that there is absence of the role of authorities and bodies which are supposed to protect the rights of journalists and media institutions and defend them at this point.

I believe that to support these institutions and enable them to rise again, at least they could be exempted from taxes and fees.

## **MUAMMAR URABI**

**(General Director of Watan Media Network)**

The Corona crisis and the accompanying imposition of the state of emergency and measures, created additional

challenges for three sectors: health, security and media, and the first and second sectors (health and security) are two government sectors, while the media are mostly private or private sector institutions, which is a large and important sector.

This challenge, which the media sector found itself before, was exacerbated by the financial and administrative burden, as media organizations worked at full capacity and crews, and they were forced to double efforts to cover the pandemic, its repercussions and the conditions that ensued. As these media relies mainly on commercial advertisements, the situation has become tragic, given that companies and commercial establishments have suspended their advertisements due to circumstances and the state of emergency, which has led to a decline of at least 70% of the income of media institutions (from advertisements).

But the most dangerous has yet to come, as a dark and harsh future awaits Palestinian media organizations, and they will face it in the next year 2021 and in subsequent years. Private sector institutions (advertisers that media organizations depend on for a major part of their income) donated during the Corona crisis to "Waqfet Izz" fund, which was established by the Palestinian government to help those affected. Companies and private sector institutions (or at least part thereof) will resort to deducting what they have provided or some of their upcoming budgets to settle their positions, and it is easier for them to deduct those amounts from the budgets allocated for advertising and media in the next year or in the coming years. This will put the Palestinian media institutions in front of a dark and tragic future, threatening to close some of them, weaken others, reduce their business and dispense with numbers of their employees.

To avoid such a fate, which will be reflected on the content and general media performance in Palestine, as a result of the possible closure of many media institutions, it must work to support them by the government, which can exempt them at least from taxes or frequent fees, or by providing incentive financial packages to media institutions.

## **RAED OTHMAN**

### **(Executive director of Ma'an News Network)**

Like other media organizations, Ma'an network continued its work during the crisis period, and it continued its obligations towards all its employees as usual, (no one has been separated or reduced salaries), at a time when the private sector institutions suspended their advertisements and sponsorships that are the source of income for independent or private media institutions. Between the fifth of March (when the state of emergency was declared) until the middle of May, the amount of the usual commercial advertisements was not provided.

In addition to this, the crisis came in the period in which advertisements and sponsorship contracts are usually renewed with private sector institutions, providing a black image of the difficult and dangerous situation that media institutions are now facing, and which will be exacerbated if there is no intervention to support them, especially if we consider two things:

First: The burden of the previous period that accumulated without income, in light of the continuing obligations and expenses towards our employees and institutions (whether all these dues are paid now or will be paid later), where for example our monthly bill amounts to 160 thousand dollars, 70% of which are salaries.



Second: Private sector institutions and companies have decided not to renew their usual annual contracts on the pretext that they are affected by the crisis (knowing that most of them operate in sectors that were not affected). We at Ma'an Network we only signed one contract from a total of 20 contracts with an institutions that cut the contract down by about a third. Also, media institutions lost the Ramadan season, which they usually rely on to cover an important part of their expenses

## **MONJED JADOU**

### **(Editor-in-chief of Palestine News Network PNN)**

Before the Corona crisis and the accompanying measures, and the repercussions it caused, the independent media was already suffering from severe financial hardship, given the scarcity and limited financial resources, and due to Facebook's acquisition of the advertising market in Palestine and the direction of institutions and companies, the Corona crisis came lastly to destroy the simple things available to media institutions. The advertising companies froze or suspend their ads, and the projects we implement are based on the provision of some specific media services, which led to placing most independent media institutions in an unprecedented situation, where many of them became genuinely threatened with closure if they did not find the support that would enable them to continue, and even if they could continue, they would not be able to continue they work as usual and with the same staff and performance, and they would soon find themselves forced to lay off some workers and reduce their work.

Another important aspect of the crisis should not be forgotten by anyone, which is a reflection of this on the media content

presented to the Palestinian public, as a result of the closure of some independent media institutions, or their weakness, as this will weaken the coverage and media content and related to pluralism in Palestine, which will have a far-reaching impact that will be reflected in various circles and it needs to be taken care of.