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ESSAYS

Red Lines in Global Media

Whether in liberal democracies or across the Arab World, journalists today are struggling to navigate a difficult route amid government restrictions, ambiguous red lines, and non-state actors affecting how the media is run

By Khaled Ezzelarab



Reporters are whipped by blowing snow as former U.S. President Barack Obama departs from the White House in a helicopter, Washington, March 6, 2015. *Jonathan Ernst/Reuters*

It was quite an absurd arrangement. In 1988, as Margaret Thatcher's government was embroiled in the violence in Northern Ireland, it decided to ban British media from broadcasting the voices of Sinn Féin representatives (the leading Northern Irish republican group) as well as a number of other groups. The point was to prevent

these groups from using British TV and radio networks as platforms to spread what the government considered to be messages of terrorism and violence.

However, the ban extended only to the voices of these groups' representatives—not their actual words. And so, it was only a matter of time before broadcasters found a workaround: they would hire actors to perform voice-overs and dub the original voices using the exact same words. BBC viewers would, for example, be watching Sinn Féin president Gerry Adams speaking on the screen, only to hear him in the voice of an actor rather than the republican leader.

Decades later, the British government, along with the European Union and the United States, would attempt once more to mute the voice of a different adversary through direct censorship. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, a variety of sanctions would be imposed by these countries on Russian media outlets they consider to be spreading Kremlin propaganda and disinformation.

Yet in liberal democracies, such instances of explicit government censorship are few and far in between. More commonly, the media is restricted by a variety of laws, including privacy, libel, and national security legislation, which set the boundaries for exercising the right to freedom of expression. Besides media laws, many other factors govern and restrict the free practice of media and journalism, including public image in countries with a freer press, and ambiguous red lines and repressive politics in countries lower on the press freedom scale.

Western versus Middle Eastern Media Laws

In mid-May 2022, London's Metropolitan Police arrested a Conservative Member of Parliament on suspicion of rape and sexual assault. Despite the gravity of the charges against him, up until this essay was being written in late June, British media had not publicly revealed the identity of the man, because of legal and procedural restrictions on identifying suspects who are under investigation but have not yet been charged. Critics point to the absurdity of continuing to hide the identity of a politician suspected of such grave criminal behavior, particularly if he is allowed to continue to meet with his constituents and act as their representative.

The degree of restrictiveness of the laws varies from one country to another within Western liberal democracies. Journalists in the United Kingdom are generally seen to be subject to much more stringent legal restrictions than their American counterparts, for example, where the First Amendment provides a constitutional protection of free speech.

While these laws are ostensibly apolitical, their application often reflects the power structure within society. Litigation is extremely costly, which means that entities with limited financial resources (whether individual journalists, small media organizations, or average people affected by media coverage) are automatically at a disadvantage when it comes to enforcing media-related laws. On the other hand, those who can afford a substantial legal war chest are in a better position to use these laws to protect their own interests.

Another political implication is the fact that the application of these media laws is often affected by the disposition of the government in power. Between 2009 and 2017, as the Barack Obama administration maintained an aggressive posture against leaks to journalists, the United States slipped from the 20th to 43rd place on the World Press Freedom Index published by Reporters Without Borders. At the end of Obama's tenure, a piece in *The New York Times* would lament that "the administration has prosecuted nine cases involving whistle-blowers and leakers, compared to only three by all previous administrations combined. It has repeatedly used the Espionage Act, a relic of World War I-era red-baiting, not to prosecute spies but to go after government officials who talked to journalists."

And yet, prosecuting journalists in liberal democracies is a rare occurrence when compared to the Middle East. According to the latest census by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), there were fifty-nine journalists in prison in Arab countries in December 2021 while the corresponding number in the European Union and North America was zero.

Laws affecting how journalists work have been tightened in many Arab countries in recent years, resulting in a more restrictive media environment. Publishing “false news” is now a criminal offense punishable by fines and possibly a prison sentence in several Arab states such as Arab Gulf countries, as well as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, and Sudan. Anti-terrorism and sedition laws have also been used frequently against journalists. New licensing requirements have been introduced to increase government control on both traditional as well as digital media outlets. In some cases, applications for licenses are denied or left pending, thus forcing the applicants into a legal limbo where they remain exposed to the risk of being prosecuted.

Arab Media in a Tense Political Context

The number of imprisoned journalists in Arab countries is significantly higher than it was a decade ago. According to the CPJ, in December 2011 the total number was twenty-one, almost a third of the figure for 2021. This is not surprising given the political context. Tightening their grip on the media has been an integral component of the process by which regimes across the Arab World reasserted their authority over their populations following the 2011 uprisings.

In the ensuing years the region also witnessed major geopolitical realignments, as tensions rose and conflicts intensified between various players, dividing the region into rival—and sometimes overlapping—camps: Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates versus Iran; Qatar supported by Turkey versus the quartet of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, and Bahrain; Jihadists versus Shiites; Kurds versus governments in Ankara, Damascus, and Baghdad, to name a few.

A battle of narratives went hand in hand with these political conflicts, as governments intensified their use of media as a propaganda tool. One study, for example, documents the increase in negative coverage on Al Jazeera English of the Saudi-led war in Yemen following the outbreak of the crisis between Qatar and the Quartet in 2017. This crisis in particular had significant implications on the regional media scene, as three of the most important pan-Arab networks are controlled by one of the Gulf rivals: Al Jazeera by Qatar, Al Arabiya by Saudi Arabia, and Sky News Arabia by the United Arab Emirates. Media on both sides of the divide expended substantial energy attempting to undermine their patron’s rival. Indeed, they often engaged in mudslinging fights with their journalist peers on the other side, in an attempt to neutralize their opponent’s media arm. (A typical tactic is to mock the other side’s coverage of a certain event to show its lack of professional journalistic standards).

The rise in regional tensions made governments nervous that their rivals would use the media to sow internal dissent and undermine their stability, as part of what officials increasingly started referring to as “Fourth Generation Warfare”. As a result, online censorship intensified in many Arab countries. Dozens of news websites have been blocked in recent years, often without an official explanation and sometimes even without official acknowledgment of website suspension or blockage on orders of the government.

Public Image as a Third Rail

The state is not the only source of media restrictions. In fact, in liberal democracies, some of the most publicized penalties imposed on journalists in recent years have not been instigated by the state at all. A public outcry against a journalist, or sometimes even the risk of such an outcry, is becoming a common cause for media organizations to sanction members of their staff.

The story of BBC 5 Live presenter Danny Baker is a case in point. In May 2019, he posted a tweet in reference to the newly born baby of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex Prince Harry and his wife Meghan. The tweet was a photograph of a couple holding hands with a well-dressed chimpanzee, with the caption: “Royal baby leaves hospital.” The tweet was interpreted as a racist slur because of Meghan’s mixed race, and caused a stir on social media. Baker deleted the tweet, apologized, and insisted that he meant to “lampoon privilege & the news cycle” and that he would have used the same image had the baby been born to any other celebrity white couple.

“Once again. Sincere apologies for the stupid unthinking gag pic earlier. Was supposed to be joke about Royals vs circus animals in posh clothes but interpreted as about monkeys & race, so rightly deleted. Royal watching not my forte. Also, guessing it was my turn in the barrel,” he said on Twitter. Nevertheless, the next day Baker was fired by the BBC, which said he showed “a serious error of judgment” by posting the original tweet.

Another BBC journalist, Tala Halawa, was also fired because of comments she had made on social media, only this time, the comments were made years before she joined the corporation. As part of the BBC’s coverage of the escalating conflict in Jerusalem and Gaza in May 2021, Halawa, a Palestinian journalist who worked at BBC Monitoring at the time, presented a video entitled “Israel-Gaza: What Bella Hadid’s stance says about changing conversations”. The video discusses why many celebrities such as Hadid are deciding to remove their posts in support of Palestine.

That same day a Twitter account with the handle @GnasherJew highlighted the report as an example of what it described as “one of the most disgustingly one sided @bbc videos, whitewashing antisemitism”. Later during the day, @GnasherJew, which describes itself as an organization using open-source intelligence “to unmask Jew haters”, went on to check Tala Halawa’s Twitter feed. Eventually it found a 2014 tweet by Halawa in which she wrote: “#Israel is more #Nazi than #Hitler! Oh, #HitlerWasRight #IDF go to hell. #PrayForGaza”.

A few hours later, the pro-Israel media watchdog Honest Reporting put out a report publicizing the findings of @GnasherJew and condemning the BBC for employing Halawa. Mainstream media outlets picked up the story, which gained widespread coverage throughout the rest of the day. The next day the BBC announced it had launched an investigation and three weeks later Halawa was sacked.

She issued a statement in which she apologized for the “offensive and ignorant tweet” which, she maintained, did not reflect her political views. She explained that she had posted it during “the traumatic Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip in 2014... where 55 Palestinian civilians, including 19 children and 14 women were killed in 48 hours by Israeli strikes... [and] Israeli settlers had also kidnapped and burnt alive 16-year-old Mohammed Abu Khdeir in East Jerusalem.” She continued: “I was a young Palestinian woman tweeting in the heat of the moment... and used a popular hashtag at the time without thinking”.

However, Halawa criticized the BBC for “capitulating to pressure from external pro-Israel interest groups”, whose efforts are aimed at “setting the parameters of acceptable journalism to suit Israel, and policing international media to maintain institutional pro-Israel bias”.

This last sentence might have been in reference to other high-profile cases in recent years, where journalists have been sanctioned by their international media organizations after they had been accused of holding anti-Semitic views. A few weeks before Halawa was sacked, Emily Wilder, an Associated Press journalist on the other side of the Atlantic, was fired. Wilder, a young Jewish graduate of Stanford University, had joined AP only three weeks earlier. The reason that AP gave for firing her was that she had violated the company’s social media policy, but the news agency did not disclose which social media posts it was referring to.

In fact, the furor had begun just a few days earlier, when a right-wing group, the Stanford College Republicans, in a Twitter thread said that it “discovered” that AP had hired “the former Stanford anti-Israel agitator, Emily Wilder,” and went on to list examples of her pro-Palestinian activism while in college.

In a statement following her dismissal, Wilder criticized AP for throwing her “under the bus” and penalizing her for her prior activism, warning that “the asymmetrical enforcement of rules around objectivity... has censored so many journalists— particularly Palestinian journalists and other journalists of color.” In all the cases outlined above, journalists were not censored because of their work, but rather for other activities they conducted—or had conducted in the past—outside of their job. Their news organizations felt that these activities risked compromising their public image and took action against them accordingly. However, while it is true that anti-Semitism and other forms of racism and bigotry exist within the media, and that news organizations should be expected to root out this behavior from their ranks, it is also true that accusations of such misconduct can be weaponized by organized groups to censor journalists.

Non-State Actors in the Arab World

In the Arab World too, journalists often have to contend with restrictions imposed by their own organizations. These organizations are often directly owned by political players (governments and to a lesser extent other powerful political parties), or by their affiliates, who exercise editorial control. Journalists who work at these organizations understand that they are bound by the political agenda of their employer, and that crossing red lines could jeopardize their career or indeed result in immediate dismissal.

In recent years some countries such as Egypt, which had previously enjoyed a degree of diversity in media ownership, have witnessed a process of consolidation through acquisitions that brought more media under direct or indirect state control. What remains of independent media are mostly digital outlets on the fringe.

Moreover, non-state actors other than news organizations have been active in attempting to restrict journalists in Arab countries. Coordinated campaigns of online harassment and intimidation are common, and the plethora of armed militias in the Middle East has meant that threats made online can materialize into real physical harm.

The case of Lebanese journalist and publisher Lokman Slim is sadly not uncommon. A prominent Shiite critic of Hezbollah, Slim was often subjected to online and physical threats by supporters of the paramilitary group. On February 4, 2021, he was found shot dead inside his car at a remote spot in southern Lebanon. Similar cases of journalists being targeted by armed groups are found in other Arab countries where no central government is able to exercise full control, such as in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

The effect of the physical harm to journalists, whether it is instigated by state or non-state actors, clearly extends beyond the individual cases of those who have experienced it themselves. The true impact of these actions is that they create an environment of fear in which the wider community of journalists is intimidated into falling in line.

Navigating Red Lines in the Region

One of the challenges for journalists in the region is to figure out exactly what the media red lines are and how to navigate them. The room for maneuver varies between countries. In Kuwait, for example, criticism of government ministers is generally tolerated, whereas other Gulf countries keep their media on a much tighter leash. However, even within the same country figuring out the boundaries can be tricky. Stories that seem to be pushing against perceived red lines are sometimes tolerated, while others that appear to be benign have landed

their publishers in trouble. This might be mere coincidence, but it might also be the result of a policy of deliberate ambiguity intended to keep journalists unsure of what is acceptable, thus pushing them to err on the side of caution and strengthening self-censorship.

Another factor is the relationship between the news organization (or the political entity that controls it) and the subject of its reporting. For example, local journalists working for Saudi and Emirati-based news organizations in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen are often threatened and/or targeted by Iranian-backed groups who yield vast power in these countries.

The Al Jazeera network, which is generally seen as an extension of the state of Qatar, is another case in point. For example, as relations deteriorated between Cairo and Doha after 2013, Al Jazeera was banned from reporting in Egypt and a number of its journalists were prosecuted on several occasions. As the relationship thawed in 2021, one of the journalists was released, and the Qatar-based network was allowed to do a live report from Cairo with a visiting correspondent. And yet, the volatility and complexities of state relations mean that they can be a poor guide for journalists to predict the boundaries in which they are allowed to function. Only one month after Al Jazeera was permitted to deliver its live report from Cairo, an Egyptian journalist working for the network was arrested upon his arrival at Cairo Airport, and despite the release of one of its journalists in 2021, other journalists who worked for Al Jazeera remained in prison. Incidentally, the visiting Al Jazeera correspondent who did the live report from Cairo in 2021 was Shireen Abu Akleh whose name would make headlines a year later. In May 2022, she was shot and killed as she reported on an Israeli raid on Jenin in the occupied Palestinian West Bank. According to multiple investigations, including one that was conducted by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, she was killed by Israeli forces.

Abu Akleh was a veteran journalist with twenty-five years of experience reporting in the Occupied Territories. According to her colleagues, she was a safety-conscious journalist who knew how to report boldly while navigating the red lines imposed by the high-risk environment in which she functioned. On the day she was killed she had taken all the usual precautions, and thought she was operating within safe boundaries. She would end up paying with her life as a result of an arbitrary and ambiguously enforced red line.

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