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Hajj Tabouz and Media Censorship in the Middle East

Jabbar A. Al-Obaidi



Travel back with me to the time in Iraq between the late 1950s and the late 1970s. I can still vividly recall the “*el-mesta’r*,” a gathering of the local leaders including my late father, in our village of *El-esrya* (a modern village, or as others preferred to call it, the evening village). Now the village is known as *el-sadeer*; in fact, the former regime of Saddam Hussein deliberately imposed the name change to the village.

El-sadeer is located in the El-Qadesya Province south of Baghdad. The daily *el-mesta’r* was held on a hilly bank of the Tigris river every evening, exactly from 5:00–7:00PM in the summer, and 1:00–3:00PM in the winter as weather permitted.

El-mesta’r was led by an elderly man by the name Waried abu Yousif, whose nickname was Hajj Tabouz. Hajj Tabouz did not go to school but he learned reading and writing through an “*el-mula*” traditional religious school that used the holy book Qur’an as the textbook. (Hajj Tabouz did not like his nickname and he asked his people to call him Abu Yousif instead. However, to his dismay, others insisted on calling him by his nickname because he was a news disseminator whiz. In honoring his wish, I have decided to call him Abu Yousif throughout this article.) Amazingly, Abu Yousif was really the local, national, and international source for the news and political events. He had three radio sets that operated on different sets of batteries. I’m not quite sure of the mod-

els or makes of his sets, but no doubt they must have been one of the popular sets of the time, such as Zenith, National, General Electric, or other small transistors.

Occasionally, Abu Yousif had to bring his transistor with him to *el-mesta’r*. He trained himself to stay up late at night listening to Radio Moscow, BBC, Voice of America, and Sawat Al-Arab min el-Qahera-Arab Voice from Cairo. In the old days, given the level of communication technology, radio reception reached its best at night. In addition to news, Radio

Moscow, BBC, and

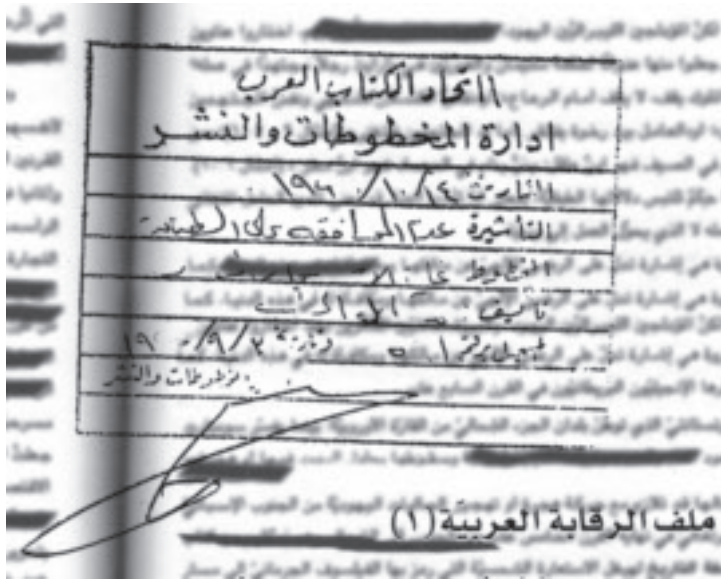
Voice of America had a variety of programs that were broadcast in Arabic. Abu Yousif had incredible listening skills and an exceptional ability for retention. Hence, he deservedly earned his title as a news disseminator for *el-mesta’r*. For some reason, Abu Yousif favored Radio Moscow to the point that others accused him of being a communist; some in the *el-mesta’r*

even showered him with many phrases like “You are a socialist to the bone.” Although other participants acquired radio receivers, however, *el-mesta’r* continued to rely on Abu Yousif

rather heavily to get the news and comparative analysis. He was always up to the task and he fulfilled his duties exactly to the point. Abu Yousif did not exercise any level of self-censorship. He restated the news as he heard it from the source. Self-censorship has been adopted by the majority of Middle Eastern journalists and reporters as one of the many ways to avoid negative reactions or



Detail, *Al Adab* magazine cover.



repressive retaliation by local authorities. However, sometimes Abu Yousif came to the *el-mesta'r* with no news at all. He would complain that the *tashweesh* jamming of radio signals was so strong that his three radio sets with long antennas and multiple bands of shortwaves and longwaves could not help his radio dials overcome the jamming beamed by the Iraqi authorities who were blocking radio signals. Jamming was done throughout the whole spectrum of broadcasting wavelengths.

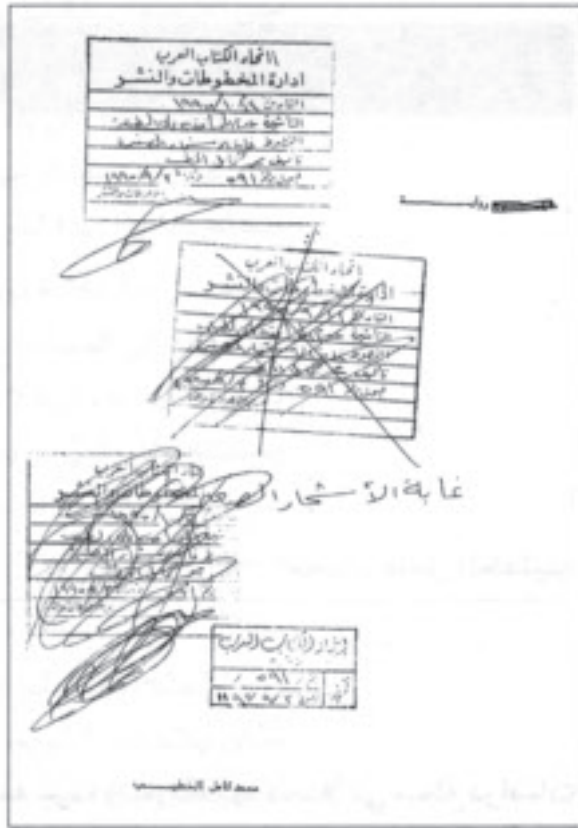
Historically, governments in the Middle East were, (and some are still), frightened by radio receivers, typewriters and cameras. When the June war of 1967 broke out between the Arabs and the Israelis, Abu Yousif was told by the local authorities to stop agitating the people by reporting to them the daily events of the war. Abu Yousif was informing his participants in *el-mesta'r* that the Arab troops were losing to the Israeli military, that the Arab Voice from Cairo was exaggerating and not telling the truth to its Arab receivers, and that all Arab radio broadcasts were only a mouthpiece for their governments. Abu Yousif was right. The Egyptian air force lay in ruins on its runways; Arab troops retreated on every front, while Israel rapidly took the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Golan Heights. The radio of the Arab Voice from Cairo lost its credibility once and forever. The assessment of the media by Abu Yousif was absolutely correct. Soon local security agents and other informants started showing up at *el-mesta'r* and directly and indirectly conveyed the official message that Abu Yousif must turn down his skeptical voice or else. A few years later, Abu Yousif passed away and *el-mesta'r* vanished with him as well.

The Arab political scene changed after the Six-Day War in 1967. The rigid media censorship *rakaba elameya* and *tashweesh* jamming techniques became even harsher and much stronger. Surely, these techniques of muzzling and muting the media and critical voices, all

together, would not outlive the media audience in the Middle East. Thirty-two years went by after 1967 and along with it thirty-two new rules and policies were passed only to make working for media and doing professional journalism a nightmare. In

December 1979, I arrived at Baghdad Airport only to see my new reel video camera being confiscated by the airport authorities. It took me three weeks to reclaim it but only with a signed affidavit not to use it while I was on Iraqi soil. In the summer of 1983, my small manual typewriter was confiscated by the airport authorities as well. In October 2007, I was about to lose my digital video camera to two policemen in Cairo only because I took a picture of a poster for an old Egyptian film glued to a high cement wall and nothing else around it. I think Abu Yousif would not appreciate such kind of *tashweesh* on those of us who work in the media and teach media and communication technology to a new generation of students.

The policy-makers in the Middle East appear to be always in agreement whenever the issue of media censorship is on the agenda for discussion. A case in point: a new charter was signed by all Arab countries except Qatar that amends the regulations of Arab satellite TV channels and imposes more oppressive restrictions on television reporters and producers. Similarly, the Sudanese authorities enforce daily censorship of newspapers when they report on governmental issues deemed sensitive by the government. And in a major development, media in the region reported that "The Arab countries agreed to allow punishment of satellite channels deemed to have offended Arab leaders or national or religious symbols." These recent censorship practices have further strained political and professional relations between local authorities and privately-run and financed newspapers and media organizations.



بين ٩٥/٩/١١ و ٩٥/١٠/١٤
من الموافقة، إلى عدم الموافقة.

Preliminary Notes, showing text that was removed.

Recently, *Zanan*, (Women) a women’s monthly magazine was forced to close after 16 years of publication. The editors of *Zanan* were accused of painting a ‘dark picture’ of Iran. Authorities in the Middle East refused to understand that it is not the media’s job to paint a dark or a bright picture for a country; it is the job of the government to enforce the order of law, to maintain social justice, to nurture a democratic political system, and to build infrastructure for economic prosperity. It is my firm conviction that governments of the Middle East cannot forever resist the winds of change. In fact some of them have already acquainted themselves with the concept of pluralism and democracy.

In light of drastic changes and political storms that hit the former Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries in the 1990s, and the expansion of global technological connections, we have started to witness some promising but limited changes in the region. For example, a Saudi princess revealed a plan for offering a generous rewards and scholarships worth \$270,000 (€183,000) a year to encourage female journalists in Saudi Arabia. This unusual announcement upset some among the religious orthodoxy in the country. However, it was indirectly blessed by the government.

Despite this initiative, women in Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region are still subjected to a host of restrictions. Arguably, some of these restrictions are not condoned by the central authority but they are kept in place to satisfy a minority of religious fundamentalists. The later strive to apply what’s known as an *alshari’ah* alternative. It calls for applying the Islamic codes and instructions as directed by the Qur’an and Hadith. Some factions in Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan are strong advocates for such media restrictions. In Iran, Articles 24 and 25 of the Constitution guarantee the right of expression in publication and in the press unless it is contrary to Islamic Law and the public good. Meanwhile, a policy declaration from 1982 in Iran is still in effect, which requires newspapers to uphold Islam and oppose non-Islamic practices.

This requirement opposing non-Islamic practices is hard to identify or determine by journalists. It is a vast grey area where journalists may be trapped into foul news coverage or reports as interpreted by these extremists. Only a seasoned journalist has the ability to remain objective and truthful in the face of rage directed at them by extremists reacting to a piece of writing or a critical report. On the other hand, I personally find it difficult to understand the reasons for a political regime to force the media to engage in what amounts to the worship of the regime and its leadership. Portraits of the leaders, for example, must appear on the first page of a daily newspaper and on television screens. I always think that in following this practice, the central authority intends to add another level of intimidation for citizens.

And this is not the end of it. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), an international journalists’ advocacy group, and some Arab newspapers reported in February 2008 that the number of websites to which access is blocked in Syria has been growing steadily in January and February 2008. In all, nearly 110 websites are known to be blocked, including the video-sharing site YouTube, the blog platform Blogspot and the email service Hotmail. All are now inaccessible.

Abu Yousif, however, would have appreciated some of the developments that would appear to be progressing on the media scene in the Middle East, due in large part to current media and communication technologies such as satellites, the Internet, and blogging. Liberal, and less conservative media models have been advancing in the region. These media models can be found, with varying levels of freedom and media control, in Lebanon, Iraq,



Page from an Arabic Newspaper.

Governments of the Middle Eastern countries are aware of the importance of the media and the free flow of information. However, there still are some concerns that too much press freedom might compromise or undermine the power of the rulers. Officials could not critique media policies while in power. Khalid Al-Ajmi, the former minister of information in Kuwait voiced his dissatisfaction with the existing media and communication policies after he left his position. A number of other officials do the same, which is a good sign that a movement of reform is in progress.

I think Hajj Tabooz would appreciate the fact that this movement has made noticeable progress in some countries like Kuwait, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, Qatar, Oman, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates. Free media would enhance state-building, increase the level of public participation in political and economic

affairs, protect the public and national interests, and hold officials accountable before society and state. Only a new and open political environment would help with the process of promoting democracy and free and independent media in the region. Journalists, media participants, political reformers, and other advocates of human rights are all working diligently to create that kind of political openness. It is happening and will expand.

Some of these countries have either abolished the Minister of Information (state censor) or have been seriously trying to establish complete legal and political equality for all their citizens, including the right for free speech and expression. They seek ways to cope with the idea of deleting from their constitutions all provisions that limit freedoms, such as freedom of the press and speech, freedom to peacefully gather and demonstrate, and the freedom to express critical views may be in clear contrast with official policies. These governments also show a willingness to revise some of the constitutional regulations that appear to guarantee freedom of the press but in effect continue to limit these freedoms and rights.

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