



“Media in Lebanon: Reporting on a Nation Divided”

Report on IPI’s Fact Finding Mission to Lebanon - 8-13 December 2006

Introduction

From 8 to 13 December 2006, the International Press Institute (IPI), represented by Middle East and North Africa Coordinator Catherine Power, carried out a fact-finding mission to Lebanon to investigate how continued political instability within the country is affecting freedom of the press and to examine the impact of the recent conflict between Hezbollah and Israel on the nation’s media.

IPI met with publishers, editors and senior correspondents from a broad cross-section of the media community, as well as national and international civil society representatives. During the mission IPI strengthened dialogue and relations with the media and assessed the major challenges that exist for press freedom. Road closures and security delays have complicated travel outside the capital city in recent months and for this reason the IPI’s meetings were carried out in Beirut and Jounieh.

While in Beirut, the IPI representative attended a memorial service marking the one-year anniversary of the death of slain publisher and IPI member Gebran Tueni and took part in a “Press Under Siege” seminar hosted by the *An Nahar* newspaper and the World Association of Newspapers.

Background and Context

Lebanon has long been recognized as having one of the most open and diverse media environments in the Middle East. At times referred to as a “beacon of plurality” in a region that is home to some of the most restrictive media environments in the world, few of the “red lines” of censorship imposed on the press in neighbouring countries are applied here. Criticism of state authorities and political figures is a regular feature in most publications and broadcasts, as is discussion of religious, social and economic issues.

Lebanon was the first Arab country to permit private radio and television and there are now six independent television stations and nearly three-dozen independent radio stations operating. Dozens of newspapers and hundreds of periodicals are published and all daily newspapers are privately-owned. Political interests have a strong influence though, as most media owners are affiliated with either a political party or a religious sect and content reflects their respective ideologies.

The blurred line between media and politics in Lebanon all but disappeared following the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri on 14 February 2004. The United Nations Security Council's special investigation into the assassination has implicated senior Syrian and Lebanese officials in Hariri's death, though Syrian officials continue to deny any involvement. Tensions surrounding Syrian influence in the country, which had been a major source of unrest for several years, were greatly exacerbated by these allegations.

The assassination threw the nation into political turmoil, from which the media was in no way immune. Newspapers and radio and television stations either owned or supported by anti-Syrian groups devoted their columns and airwaves to what became known as the "Cedar Revolution." In the months that followed, many media outlets became major players in the nationwide revolts that led to Syria's withdrawal of forces in April 2005.

Journalists were to pay dearly for their role in expressing such criticism. 2005 saw a wave of appalling and deadly attacks on the press. The murders of *An-Nahar* publisher Gebran Tueni and leading columnist Samir Qassir, and the maiming of LBC TV journalist May Chidiac, all of them car bomb attacks, had a chilling effect on the nation's media and created a climate of fear and insecurity. All three journalists were outspoken critics of Syria's influence in Lebanon and the attacks have been interpreted as a warning against politically sensitive coverage. To date, none of the individuals responsible for the attacks have been identified or prosecuted. Their impunity only heightens fears that similar attacks could happen again at any time.

In the summer of 2006, Lebanese journalists faced security risks from another direction as they reported on the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah. On 14 July, Israel launched air and sea attacks on targets in Lebanon after Hezbollah conducted a raid into Israel, killing seven soldiers and capturing two others. The conflict continued for over a month with Israeli ground troops moving into Southern Lebanon in early August. The Israeli military targeted a number of transmission towers belonging to both private and state-run media outlets in the first two weeks of the conflict, injuring a number of media employees.

On 23 July, Layal Najib, a freelance photographer for the Lebanese magazine *Al-Jaras* and Agence France-Presse was killed when an Israeli missile exploded near her car as she was travelling in southern Lebanon.

A truce between Israel and Hezbollah came into effect on 14 August after 34 days of fighting. The conflict resulted in the deaths of around 1,000 Lebanese, the majority of them civilians. The damage to civilian infrastructure was wide-ranging and thousands of Lebanese were displaced. Approximately 159 Israelis, mostly soldiers, were also killed. South Lebanon and the southern suburbs of Beirut, the strongholds of Hezbollah support, bore the brunt of the Israeli offensive.

One result of the summer's conflict was the hardening of positions between two groups on opposing sides of Lebanon's political divide. Tensions between those who support Hezbollah, the Shia Muslim political and military group that is largely influenced by relations with Syria and Iran, and those aligned with the Western-backed government, led by Sunni Muslim Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and supported by anti-Syrian Druze and Christian parties have reached a high-point in recent months.

Strengthened by popular support following the conflict with Israel, Hezbollah began demanding more influence in the government, calling for a stronger role in an expanded cabinet that would effectively give the group and its allies veto power over government decisions. The government has refused to give Hezbollah and its partners the power it wants. The disagreement came to a head when the cabinet proposed approval of a UN tribunal that would try suspects in the killing of former prime minister Hariri. The Hezbollah alliance was against the proposal and six cabinet ministers from Hezbollah and the Amal movement resigned in late November over the issue.

Following the resignation of the cabinet ministers, two factors came together to bring the political tensions to a boiling point: the first was the assassination, on 22 November, of leading Christian and anti-Syrian government minister Pierre Gemayel. The second was a call from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for supporters to take to the streets in protests demanding the resignation of the government, if it does not agree to major cabinet reform. Hundreds of thousands of Hezbollah supporters converged on downtown Beirut at the beginning of December, surrounding the residence of Prime Minister Siniora where he and members of his cabinet have lived under heavy security protection since Gemayel's assassination. In mid-December, the protests have continued with many speculating that the intense political division could lead to another civil war.

IPI's Areas of Investigation

While discussing challenges to press freedom in Lebanon, IPI had four main areas of inquiry:

- The impact of politics on the media
- Threats to journalists' safety
- Censorship and restrictions on access to information
- Economic pressures

In writing this report, and to allow for confidentiality, IPI has decided not to subscribe views to individual interviewees but to provide their views as part of an overview of the above-mentioned areas.

The Impact of Politics on the Press

The escalation of tensions between opposing political factions in Lebanon has deeply polarized the country and has significantly narrowed the margin between politics and the media. While many of the interviewees IPI met with said they continue to strive towards fair and accurate coverage, most also declared an alignment with a particular political

movement, saying their content clearly supports either the ruling government led by Prime Minister Fouad Siniora and his predominantly anti-Syrian cabinet or the pro-Syrian Hezbollah political and military group.

Several editors reported that when they strive to publish or broadcast a plurality of views, in an effort to promote dialogue and provide their readers with access to a wide spectrum of opinion, they often meet with strong negative reactions from audiences. One interviewee suggested that readers have taken an “all or nothing” approach, demanding a clear position on political issues from their news media. Many editors and senior correspondents also reported that there has been a marked increase in the level of contact between the media and government representatives and political figures since the political situation started to unravel in mid-November. These politicians express heavy criticism if a media organisation has given space to their opponents or has not shown direct support for their political stance.

Several interviewees suggested that this “politicization” of the media is not new and that since the 1975-1990 civil war, when the majority of newspapers and broadcast stations were created, the media has strongly reflected the country’s pluralism and divisions. Others suggest that the current political tension has intensified the situation and is pushing journalists to more clearly express their own political identity.

One editor suggested that although public opinion over the Hezbollah raid that acted as catalyst for this summer’s war was varied, readers and journalists alike were united against Israel as a common adversary. Though content reflected differing positions on the war, journalists reported on “one Lebanon” and coverage was not as divisive as the current situation where tensions have turned inward and media organisations are pushed to represent a specific side in a nation divided.

One motivation expressed for aligning with a particular political movement was the sense that a journalist might be better protected if they were working under a “political umbrella” rather than independently. This also means, however, that journalists risk losing their credibility as independent observers. Increasingly identified in connection with a particular movement, journalists risk being targeted for attack by representatives of opposing sides.

Threats to Journalists Safety

Media representatives that IPI met with in Lebanon unanimously expressed concerns over personal safety as the strongest challenge to carrying out their professional duties. Since the 2005 assassinations of Samir Qassir and Gebran Tueni and the attempted assassination of May Chidiac, which resulted in the amputation of the TV journalist’s left arm and leg, most senior correspondents, editors and publishers say they live in fear of being the next target on the “hit list” of the still unidentified attackers.

So far, these appalling attacks have only targeted journalists who were outspoken critics of the Syrian regime, and there is a definite sense that journalists affiliated with anti-Syrian media outlets are at greater risk. However, interviewees repeatedly stressed that few journalists are immune to threats and that media practitioners affiliated with outlets across the political spectrum are at risk of violent attack. The uncertainty as to what parties were behind the wave of attacks in 2005 only heightens this climate of fear as journalists say they have no way of knowing exactly where the threat is coming from.

Several interviewees reported that they had begun taking precautionary measures to guard against the threat of assassination. These included using a different vehicle each day, regularly changing their route to and from work and ensuring that they do not repeat the same daily routine. However, while these efforts might make the journalist less easily identifiable, each interviewee expressed concerns that if a certain party was intent upon targeting them with the same sophisticated and methodical attacks that killed two of their colleagues last year, there is little a journalist can do to ensure his or her own protection.

Along with these politically motivated safety concerns, journalists who are covering events in the field are reporting an increase in the number of direct attacks against them. The summer's war with Israel created a dangerous working environment for journalists. In the first two weeks of the war, Israeli military targeted transmission towers belonging to both private and state-run broadcasters, including those used by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation (LBC), Future-TV and Tele-Liban. One technician was killed and a number of other employees were injured in these attacks.

Hezbollah's satellite news channel, Al-Manar TV, was repeatedly struck by missiles during Israeli air raids. An attack on Al-Manar headquarters on 13 July injured three employees.

On 22 July, LBC technician Suleiman Chidiac was killed when Israeli raids destroyed the station's transmission facility at Fatqa, in north-eastern Beirut. On the same day, Khaled Eid, a technician for Tele-Liban, was seriously injured in an attack on a telecommunications tower in Al Qura, northern Lebanon.

A number of journalists were also injured while reporting on developments on the ground. Three journalists working for Lebanon's New TV who were wounded when their car was struck during Israel's rocket attack on the al-Mahmoudiyeh Bridge in southern Lebanon on 13 July.

On 23 July, Loyal Najib, a freelance photographer for the Lebanese magazine *Al-Jaras* and Agence France-Presse (AFP) was killed in an Israeli attack on the town of Qana in southern Lebanon. The 23-year-old was travelling in a car on the road between Sadiqeen and Qana when she was hit by shrapnel from a missile that killed her instantly.

Several interviewees reported that since the political tension in Lebanon intensified in mid-November, journalists are facing increased attacks on the street. Many have been punched and kicked while covering the demonstrations that began in December when tens of thousands of Hezbollah supporters moved into downtown Beirut in protests calling for the resignation of the government.

Media representatives affiliated with anti-Syrian pro-government outlets also reported that their correspondents have faced increased harassment when travelling in the southern parts of the country that are strongholds for Hezbollah report. Journalists who work with outlets that have been critical of Hezbollah have faced intimidation from supporters angry with the outlet's content.

Adequate safety training for journalists is severely lacking throughout the country and further endangers those who are reporting in high-risk areas such on the border between Israel and Lebanon or at the demonstrations that continue in Beirut. None of the interviewees that IPI met with had ever undergone a safety training program and none of their media outlets provided safety training to employees.

Censorship and Restrictions on Access to Information

The Lebanese constitution provides for freedom of the press. Though certain aspects of media legislation restrict this right, press laws do not impose a high degree of direct censorship by prohibiting publication or broadcast of specific subject areas and none of the interviewees IPI met reported on direct interference from state authorities.

There is, however, a high degree of self-censorship exercised by the national media and this trend has increased since the assassination of Samir Qassir and Gebran Tueni in 2005. Many journalists reported that the media became bolder in its criticism of the government following the withdrawal of Syrian forces in April 2005. Former Prime Minister Hariri's assassination in February 2005 sent shock waves throughout Lebanese society and prompted the media to challenge further long-standing taboos against criticizing Syrian involvement in Lebanon. Syria's withdrawal created a greater level of freedom for journalists to report more openly on political developments. These gains were severely offset, however, by the attacks on anti-Syrian journalists. Although interviewees said they continue their investigative reporting and their role as a watchdog of the state, there is a sense that these duties carry a very high risk and many journalists said they are often hesitant to report on sensitive political issues.

There continue to exist a number of taboo issues that journalists say are very difficult to report on, among them Lebanon's relations with Israel. A number of senior editors suggested that presenting a moderate stance on Israel or publishing editorials that were in favour of peace talks with Israel put journalists at increased risk of attack from religious extremists. This was particularly true during the summer's war with Israel when a number of journalists reported being harassed as "traitors" or "Jewish agents" and to feeling that the likelihood of attack by certain segments of the population who were in opposition to these moderate views had increased. Several interviewees suggested that the risk of attack from religious extremists has also increased in the last five to six months as the political unrest have brought old and persistent sectarian tensions to the surface.

The summer's war also created challenges for access to information as the bombing of roads and bridges created major delays in travel throughout the country and made some areas completely inaccessible to journalists. The reconstruction of infrastructure will be a time consuming process and several interviewees expressed concerns that it will now be much harder for their correspondents to cover developments outside the capital city.

The current political tension is also creating obstacles for journalists who want to meet with key decision makers and policy implementers. Since late November, Prime Minister Siniora and many members of his cabinet have remained inside the prime minister's residence, completely blocked off from journalists and the public. The string of assassinations in recent years, and in particular the assassination of Pierre Gemayel in late November has meant that many government representatives are under heightened security threat and are not travelling or making public appearances. Although some journalists can secure interviews over the telephone, many are reliant on public statements released by politicians and are deprived the opportunity to question and interview many of the country's most senior political figures.

Economic Pressures

With almost a dozen different newspapers published daily in Lebanon, competition for readership among the relatively small population of only 3.5 million is high and the saturation of the market has meant that many publications face challenges in circulation. These difficulties have only worsened in recent years with a greater number of people turning to the Internet to access news and information.

Each of the leading daily newspapers that IPI met with reported an increase in circulation in recent months as readers turn to a wider number of sources of information to try to make sense of the destabilizing political situation. Three newspapers reported a 20% spike in circulation during the summer war with Israel and this increase was seen again following the November assassination of Pierre Gemayel and the beginning of anti-government protests in downtown Beirut in early December.

However, newspapers and television stations alike are reporting a severe decrease in advertising revenues as businesses and investors are hesitant to buy advertising space during the crisis. One newspaper reported that while its revenue is split equally between circulation and advertising, a circulation increase of 10-12% on average in the last two months does not come close to offsetting a 40% decrease in advertising revenue during the same period.

Television stations are also reporting a significant lack of advertising revenue. Some stations have been able to rely on their satellite channels, which have not been as severely affected by the political crisis, as a source of recovering the losses but the situation is far from ideal. Each of the interviewees expressed serious concern that the political crisis and instability is creating a major strain on the financial viability of their media outlets.

Conclusions

The Lebanese media has developed against the backdrop of decades of conflict within and outside the nation's borders. The media has played an imperative role in keeping audiences informed of political developments and in promoting national dialogue by giving space to a wide range of opinion and analysis. In a region where tight restrictions on press freedom is a norm of government policy, the Lebanese state has shown a greater degree of support for press freedom and freedom of expression than most neighbouring regimes. The result has been the development of a vibrant, open and pluralist media.

Lebanon's political turmoil, renewed by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the withdrawal of Syrian forces in 2005 was exacerbated by a devastating war with Israel in the summer of 2006. Still reeling from the effects of the war, attempts at power-sharing between the pro-Syrian Hezbollah group and the anti-Syrian government have failed. Talks aimed at diffusing the tension and brokering an agreement collapsed at the end of November and since then both groups have remained entrenched in their positions, polarizing the political sphere and with it, the nation.

With many publications and radio and television stations heavily influenced by political and religious groups, the intensifying political divisions are played out daily in the press with a number of media outlets promoting specific political agendas. As media outlets assert their positions on controversial issues, journalists are no longer being seen as independent

observers but as representatives of political movements that are open to attack from opposing factions.

This politicization has effected every aspect of the Lebanese media and it is has become increasingly difficult for journalists to express an opinion without being accused of misplaced loyalty. Pressure from readers has increased as has editorial interference by political representatives, both groups expecting media outlets to act as a mouthpiece for a political movement.

The greatest concern amongst journalists is born out of fear for their personal safety as they report in an increasingly volatile environment. A year has passed since the series of vicious attacks on three prominent anti-Syrian journalists took place in 2005 and to date no details into the investigation of these attacks has been made public and the perpetrators have not been identified or brought to justice. Senior editors and correspondents fear that they may meet a similar fate if they continue to report on sensitive political topics. Alongside this ominous threat to journalists' safety, the number of attacks on journalists practicing their profession has increased in the last six months due to tensions in all areas of the country.

The level of self-censorship has increased throughout the media, with journalists who have previously been outspoken critics of political and social developments now questioning how safe they are take a controversial stand on such issues. Access to information has been restricted following the destruction of transpiration infrastructure during the summer's war and is worsened by the current political crisis that has made access to senior political representatives more challenging. The crisis continues to have a negative economic impact with many media outlets reporting a sharp decrease in advertising revenue.

While the world watches to see how the crisis in Lebanon will be resolved, the media, like the nation it reports on, is in a delicate and difficult position. The highly politicized nature of the Lebanese press has meant that is deeply effected by the current unrest and the restoration of calm will be necessary for media practitioners to be able to work in a safe and secure environment.

Recommendations

Following its analysis of the current challenges to press freedom posed by the ongoing political instability in Lebanon, IPI calls for:

- Freedom of expression and press freedom to be respected by all parties throughout the country, including but not limited to the Lebanese government and Hezbollah.
- The Lebanese government to immediately take all necessary steps to investigate the murder of publisher Gebran Tueni and columnist Samir Qassir and the attempted murder of TV journalist May Chidiac and to identify and prosecute the perpetrators of these attacks.
- All killings, attacks, acts of intimidation and harassment of media practitioners to immediately cease and for those who violate the laws of Lebanon and international agreements protecting media practitioners to be identified and prosecuted.
- Freedom of expression and press freedom to be respected by all parties throughout the country, including but not limited to the Lebanese government and Hezbollah.
- The independence of the media to be respected by all parties and for media to be free from all direct and indirect pressure to carry specific messages or content.

- The independence of the media to be respected by supporters of all political movements and for supporters to desist from intimidating, threatening or attacking media practitioners for their coverage of political developments.
- Editors and journalists to continue to strive toward fair, accurate and balanced coverage and to carry out their role as neutral observers of political developments.
- Political representatives and their supporters to recognize that criticism of public figures is a cornerstone of a free press and that, particularly in times of conflict, plurality of opinion and analysis are essential elements of news coverage.
- The provision of adequate safety training for all journalists reporting in high-risk or dangerous environments.
- Lebanese media and press freedom advocates to continue to monitor, document and make public all cases of attacks on journalists and press freedom violations.

IPI would like to gratefully acknowledge the journalists and members of civil society who were prepared to spend their valuable time discussing press freedom in Lebanon for their important contributions to this report.

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