

## Media Coverage of the Gaza Conflict

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Dr. Nabil Al Khatib, Managing Director of Al Arabiya news network, said Arab television coverage of the 2009 Gaza conflict fell into three categories: state-run outlets that tended to emphasize government support of the Palestinian people, outlets sponsored by militias and political parties sought to mobilize people, and more balanced independent outlets that sought to present a variety of views. Al Khatib offered his observations at a CSIS conference on June 1, 2009. Al Khatib's comments revealed the "war behind the war" as news stations debated how to cover the violence, as well as the day-to-day technical choices that must be made reporting from a conflict zone.

Dr. Al Khatib said that state-run media outlets in the Arab world tended to employ "propaganda tools" and were more "aggressive in leading the masses towards having a position on Gaza." At the same time, these government-controlled news stations hosted guests on their programs who portrayed the government doing everything in its capacity to help the Palestinian cause. Al Khatib said that Arab governments were concerned that the Gaza violence would prompt their citizens to "protest in the streets" in outrage over the events in Gaza, and the regimes used the media as a way to "absorb the anger of the population" and help present themselves as fully committed to the Palestinian struggle. Al Khatib suggested that this fear was not without basis, recalling an instance in which Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah called for Egyptians to pressure their government to open the Gaza borders. Overall, Al Khatib judged that these outlets failed to sway government opinion because they lacked credibility with their publics.

Politically-backed outlets, such as Hezbollah's Al Manar, and Hamas's Al Aqsa and Al Quds, had more credibility, Al Khatib said, and unlike the government-controlled stations, they sought to "agitate the masses." A principal way they did so, Al Khatib said, was emphasizing the "heroic aspect" of the people of Gaza and depicting them not as victims, but rather "heroes of resistance" against the occupation. The stations also sought consistently to reinforce the views of their political leaders, Hezbollah's Nasrallah and Hamas leader Khalid Mishal.

Al Khatib said that stations such as Al Arabiya tried to include more debates in their newscasts and present a diversity of views. After Hassan Nasrallah accused Al Arabiya of conspiring with the Israelis, the station still covered Nasrallah's speeches in its broadcasting and featured analysts speaking both in favor of and against Hezbollah. Al Khatib said that Hamas's supporters criticized the balanced approach and accused the stations of abandoning the Palestinian cause. One way he sought to lower the temperature, Al Khatib said, to air representatives from humanitarian organizations who could speak objectively about events on the ground.

Al Khatib recounted the challenges of presenting accurate information, especially because erroneous reporting could cost lives. With movement in the conflict area difficult, many journalists were stuck with "long shot coverage," that showed buildings from far off rather than the people the conflict affected. He explained that both Israeli and Palestinian forces pushed media away from the war zone, for both security and strategic purposes.

Al Khatib said that coverage of the conflict required different “professional skills” than normal news coverage. At one point, Al Arabiya smuggled one of its own correspondents through a tunnel used by Hamas. Once they had close-up footage of the conflict, editors in the newsroom debated how they should use the images. Al Khatib supported using such images judiciously, as individual human tragedies can help shed light on the greater tragedy itself. He said one Al Jazeera editor had a more purposeful view, noting that images out of Vietnam helped change U.S. opinion about the war.

Al Khatib stressed the importance of nurturing apolitical coverage that includes on-the-ground coverage. He added that Palestinian viewers, in the end, preferred analysis from a broad spectrum of opinions to the polarized opportunistic coverage of governments and political parties.