



American Islamic Congress, Inc.

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American Islamic Congress Capital Hill Distinguished Speaker Series

Topic:

Media in the Muslim World: Quality Control or Censorship?

Panelists:

Omran Salman: Executive Director of Aafaq, Arab reform website

Maneeza Hossain: Senior Fellow, Hudson Institute

Richard Eisendorf: Middle East North Africa Senior Program Manager, Freedom House

Moderator:

Hussain Abdul Hussain: Washington Correspondent, Al-Rai newspaper (Kuwait)

Many regimes in the Muslim world limit media freedom: the recent death sentence given to Syed Parvez Kambakhsh, a student journalist in Afghanistan facing execution for distributing writing on women's rights, present an example of this issue. In the Arab world, Saudi Arabia and Qatar recently struck a deal to have the Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera stop attacking the Saudi regime. What is the status of the media in the Muslim world? What is allowed and what is prohibited? Who decides? And how can the US support free media to advance reform in the Muslim world.

The American Islamic Congress hosted **Omran Salman**, the executive director of the Arab reform website Aafaq, **Maneeza Hossain**, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, and **Richard Eisendorf**, the Middle East North Africa Senior Program Manager at Freedom House, on February 26, 2008 to answer these questions and comment on the issue of censorship in the Muslim World.

According to Freedom House's annual survey assessing the freedom of press, the Middle East and North Africa shows the lowest ratings of anywhere in the world, ratings that have been declining since 2006. Not a single country in the Arab world has truly free press. Only Lebanon and Kuwait are considered partially free and the remaining countries are not free.

Omran Salman explained, "Arab governments don't impose censorship on regional media per se because they own the vast majority of it, controlling them both politically and financially. If the government wishes to punish a station, it simply redirects advertising funds elsewhere."

Richard Eisendorf added, "On Internet restrictions, governments have taken steps to control it through monopolization of Internet providers, arrests of bloggers, blocking of websites, and requiring user registration removing the anonymity of the Internet which otherwise provides

protection."

A recent gathering in Cairo of Arab Ministers of Information shows the continued decline of press freedom in the Muslim world: the Ministers proposed a document with provisions for further press restrictions, including a ban on criticizing leaders such as kings and presidents over television channels. Moreover, some governments also encourage the media to criticize the United States and Israel, drawing "attention towards external issues and away from internal ones," as **Salman** notes.

Though most governments own the media, lawmakers have also instituted laws that impose additional limitations on freedom of the press. These laws are intentionally vague so the government can interpret them in their favor and prosecute whoever they want. Provisions encompassed in these laws include prohibitions on criticism of Islam, the president, the royal family, the government, or releasing information deemed harmful to the reputation of the country. Any violations of these laws as interpreted by the government may result in hefty fines or imprisonment. Clearly, government control of the media in the Muslim World creates an environment that stifles free expression and free press.

Governments, however, are not the only actors restricting free press in the Muslim World, as non-state actors are contributing as well. Non-state actors in the Muslim World are also limiting freedom of expression among the people, violating human rights and inhibiting progress in society. Both state and non-state actors suppress this freedom in order to stop reforms from occurring. In Iraq over 200 journalists have been killed, many by non-state actors. **Eisendorf** expanded on this idea stating: "The reasons for these deaths vary from journalists being considered infidels to working with international media and being accused of spying." Using the example of the Danish cartoons of the prophet Muhammad, **Maneeza Hossain** stated, "The violent reaction to the cartoons was manipulated and exaggerated by governments and non-state actors to deflect attention from their own abuses of power."

Though the idea of free press is gaining some ground, especially as the Internet is being used as a forum for activism, more action must be taken. **Mr. Eisendorf** suggests, "Encouraging each congressman to adopt a prisoner of conscience, making freedom of press a priority of the American government through diplomatic pressure and other programs, and engaging the Arab media." Another step that will aid this cause is to direct international pressure from grass-root movements, international organizations, and other governments onto governments in the Muslim World. Freedom of expression in the Muslim World will have beneficial effects that ripple globally. Therefore, the United States and other countries must support free media in the region.