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Free speech and free press in a future Palestinian U.N. state?

By Nat Hentoff

<http://www.JewishWorldReview.com> | As Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas presses for the U.N. Security Council to recognize, and therefore establish, a new Palestinian state in September, neither he -- nor the growing number of U.N. members approving this addition -- have said anything about the present state of freedom of speech and press under either the Palestinian Authority (PA) or Hamas-led Gaza. Looming is a recent draft agreement between the PA and Hamas to form a transitional unity government (Washington Post, April 27).



On the West Bank, in Ramallah, an organization very concerned with the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and press in, at last, an internationally authorized Palestinian state, is the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms (MADA). Among its goals:

"Promotion (of) a culture of freedom of opinion and expression, and working to develop legislation for these rights" as well as "contributing to human rights defense and democracy to enhance in Palestinian society" (madacenter.org, April 25).

On March 15, MADA reported that Gaza "internal security forces attacked a youth sit-in that was demanding an end to the then internal political divisions between Fatah and Hamas." A Russian TV cameraman was also beaten on the scene.

A Palestinian journalist tried to help him: "so they then began beating me with batons and sticks despite being fully aware that I am a journalist."

Ah, but that's Gaza -- a police state. What about the West Bank where the Palestinian Authority and its Fatah political party are the government? Will the U.N. voting on a Palestinian state be shown Human Rights Watch's April 6 report: "No News Is Good News: Abuses Against Journalists by Palestinian Security Forces"? Not only Gaza's.

This report documents cases in which Abbas' Palestinian Authority security also "tortured, beat and arbitrarily detained journalists, confiscated their equipment."

This authoritarian contempt for free expression is getting worse and worse. Human Rights Watch cites the Palestinian journalism watchdog, MADA, as revealing that:

"The number of physical attacks, arrests, detentions, arbitrary confiscations of equipment, and other violations of journalists' rights by Palestinian security forces increased in both Gaza and the West Bank in 2010 by 45 percent over the previous year."

I've yet to be aware of President Mahmoud Abbas acknowledging this

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harsh light on his government. Human Rights Watch continues:

"Like other Palestinian victims of abuse by the Palestinian Authority's security services, these journalists confront a virtual wall of impunity when they try to hold their abusers accountable, leaving the victims (journalists) feeling vulnerable to further harassment and abuse."

Once the Palestinian Authority and Gaza's Hamas are indeed welded into one actual Palestinian state, this new U.N. member nation's brutal enforcers of press loyalty will try to shroud themselves with total immunity for what they do to Palestinian journalists.

Therefore, Human Rights Watch "advises the United States and Europe to make any future funding decisions contingent on the Palestinian Authority taking responsibility and correcting their actions" (dailycaller.com, April 6).

This U.S. funding to the PA for security and program assistance, along with \$150 million in direct budgetary support, adds to the European Union's contribution of \$315 million for security assistance. Even without this funding, the Arab states would take up the slack.

But will the United Nations, welcoming this newborn Palestinian state into its ranks of sovereign nations, actually limit Palestinian sovereignty by mandating that it have, and protect, a free press and free speech? That would be astonishingly unprecedented!

What is most likely to happen if the state of Palestine takes a seat in the United Nations is that its suppression of free press and speech will quickly help entitle it to a seat on the U.N. Human Rights Commission, alongside such libertarian members of this shadowy authority as the People's Republic of China, Saudi Arabia and soon Syria.

Consider this if Palestine sat on this commission: On Jan. 14, a film was shown at the SOAS Palestine Society at University College London that precipitated an urgent call to the U.N. Human Rights Commission. The film's core: a prayer by a Hamas imam in Gaza:

"Oh, Allah, loosen your power and strength on the Jews. Please Allah, kill them all... And don't leave any of them alive... Please dear Allah, take revenge for our martyrs blood... Make the earth shake and destroy the pillars of the civilization." (jihadwatch.org).

This urgent sermon was protested in a letter to Navi Pillay, the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, by David G. Littman, representative to the U.N.-Geneva for the World Union of Progressive Judaism. He asked her and the U.N.-director general to "speak out strongly and condemn 'this growing culture' of Jew-hatred." I await the response.

If the United Nations does establish a Palestinian state, I expect that this Hamas imam there will not be denied his freedom of speech, nor should he be. But will this sovereign nation at least recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state? Hamas still absolutely refuses to do this.

And how free will Palestinian journalists be to voice their own criticisms of the government? If they continue to be suppressed, will this Palestinian state ever be elevated to the U.N. Security Council and be worthy of veto powers?

Next week: Will the United States recognize a new nation -- including Hamas -- that the United States has officially and previously designated as a terrorist government?

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