American Islamic Congress

Media in the Muslim world: Quality control or Censorship?

121 Cannon Building, Capitol Hill
February 26th, 12:00 PM – 1:30 PM

The American Islamic Congress (AIC) hosted a panel discussion examining what the status of the media is in the Muslim world, what is allowed and what is prohibited, who decides, and how can the U.S. support free media to help advance reform. **Omran Salman**, Executive Director of Aafaq, **Maneeza Hossain**, Senior Fellow at Hudson Institute, and **Richard Eisendorf**, Middle East North Africa Senior Program Manager at Freedom House gave remarks. **Hussain Abdul-Hussain**, Washington Correspondent for the Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Rai*, moderated the discussion.

Omran Salman began by arguing that the Arab governments now control a vast proportion of the media, both financially and politically. Financially, the government takes away advertisements from media outlets so they can't survive. Politically, the governments appoint the editor-in-chiefs and managers, who can then in turn control in a trickle down effect. Citing an example from Bahrain, in 2004 a journalist criticized the government in a policy paper and was rebuked for describing the Bahraini Constitution as the will of the King instead of the people. Most recently, Arab ministers gathered in Cairo for the Arab Summit and they decided to impose restrictions on TV media outlets. Salman sees this action as designed to prevent criticisms of Arab League members and participating Presidents. With the new ability to punish local correspondents in violation of this new act, many analysts argue that this deal is in reaction to the desire to control al-Jazeera. Salman argued that the **Arab governments do not need to undertake explicit censorship because they achieve their means by controlling the media through more subtle techniques**. He stated that while many outsiders think that this only has an impact on the local people in Middle East, that isn't true.

Maneeza Hossain argued that "**censorship has to be viewed as delicate interplay between state and society**." She introduced her case with what she called the "blatant example" of the Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammad. She feels that the violent reaction was instigated by leaders of governments who want to deflect attention from their own abuses of power. Because of her specialization in Bangladesh, the 4th largest Islamic country in the world, she highlighted the recent case of a 25-year-old cartoonist who drew a boy with a cat named Mohammad who is now in prison. Hossain argued that the military who is in currently in control of the government did so because it needed to deflect from the problems of devaluing of the Bangladeshi currency and scarcity of food. Two other cases Hossain highlighted was the case of a journalist who went to Israel even though it is illegal in Bangladesh to do so and thus was arrested, tortured and consequently released because of international coverage, and the case of Taslima Nasreen, who

wrote about male domination outside of the context of a Muslim society and now lives under house arrest in New Delhi because of the high price of her death.

Richard Eisendorf began his remarks by highlighting the fact that in 2007, the Middle Eastern & North African region had the lowest rankings in press freedom in the world. Eisendorf noted that this trend is not expected to change, and highlighted that according to the Freedom House rankings, not one Arab country is free, and only 2 are partly free (Kuwait and Lebanon). He stated that there are numerous strategies for restricting the media, including: attacks on journalists, legal restraints, and legal control of ownership. In Iraq, more than 200 journalists have been killed since the beginning of the war. In terms of restrictions on the Internet, censorship of Internet has become a huge problem. An example is the case of the Egyptian blogger who put up many images of torture conducted by the Egyptian government on Youtube, which was then blocked. Eisendorf recommended the following U.S. policy changes that could help increase media freedom in the region: encouraging Congressmen to adopt a prisoner of conscience. Eisendorf stated that "**if each Congressional office would work with one journalist, we could save so many lives**;" the U.S. government needs to prioritize the adoption of measures that support independent media through legal means, diplomatic and training support; and engaging the Arab media, like for example increasing the number of Congressmen who appear on Arab media to let their voices be heard.