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## **Beyond Western Hegemony: A Call for Middle Eastern**

### **Media Autonomy**



Image by Raghavendra V. Konkathi.

The website of a certain pan-Arab media organization seems fixated on translating, commenting, or briefing its audience on everything that US and Israeli officials say about the Middle East.

Every threat made by US President Donald Trump, every tweet by an American official, however insignificant or inconsequential, somehow becomes a ‘breaking news’ story, worthy of follow-up and heated discussions, as if what Americans say, or fail to say, is the only factor that determines outcomes in our region.

The same thing applies to Israeli officials or media: an unsubstantiated Jerusalem Post report, a mere analysis by ‘Israel Hayom’, an opinion piece by an unknown writer in Maariv,

Haaretz, or any other publication, are somehow inflated to become facts, or serve as a representation of Israeli politics and society.

Writers like Thomas Friedman, of the New York Times, whose influence within the mainstream intellectual strata in the US is nowhere near what it used to be at the start of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, remain important figures for many Arab media outlets, thus shaping their understanding of US politics. It matters little that Friedman's credibility has suffered through years of faulty analyses and that numerous other media outlets have collectively marginalized the once domineering role of America's so-called 'newspaper of record.'

This is not an ailment of a specific newspaper, TV channel, or website. It is a widespread culture that reflects the prevalent inferiority that continues to define many mainstream circles in the Arab world and the Middle East at large.

One can attribute this persistent reliance on the West for information to the lack of trust in the region's own media, and in the belief, however erroneous, that freedom in western media makes it far more reliable in terms of accuracy and objectivity, among other reasons.

Nothing could be further from the truth, however, as western reporting on Middle East issues, even decades before the devastating war on Gaza, has been sharply biased, or, at best, selective and untrustworthy.

In fact, the Gaza war, where reporting from the ground took place by Gaza's own youth, many of whom have been educated in local universities, or were even still students of journalism, shifted global public opinion on Palestine like never before in history.

This shift happened through mutual solidarity with Gaza by Arab and global youth on social media platforms, and also due to the amplification of Palestinian voices through independent media worldwide.

This fundamental change in how stories are told should inspire a seismic shift in the region's approach to media creation, where the mic is finally given to local reporters, writers, and bloggers to address their own struggles directly to the world.

Unfortunately, that transformative change is yet to happen. To the contrary, there seems to be a growing demand for western views, commentary, analysis, even entertainment, and such.

This is particularly disturbing when the Middle East itself is in a political, social, and intellectual flux: yielding new schools of thought and a fascinating array of intellectuals who are far more familiar with the region than a detached American journalist, or a European columnist.

The problem is often compounded by the near complete absence of voices from the Global South, as if Middle Eastern media are simply duplicating the western media marginalization of all voices that operate outside their political hegemony.

This is how the West's ruling class's worldview becomes the "common sense" in many non-western societies, per the logic of Antonio Gramsci, who developed the concept of cultural hegemony.

Hegemony, in that sense, is not the imposition of power through direct military or political control, but through cultural dominance. This is why Friedman continues to matter for the Arabs, far more than a Tunisian intellectual, an Emirati opinion maker, or an Egyptian journalist.

The pioneering Arab sociologist, philosopher, and historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) addressed such issues in his 'Muqaddimah' hundreds of years earlier when he linked cultural dominance to political and military powers. The ruling elites always impose their values, language, customs and cultures on subordinate groups, according to Ibn Khaldun.

Both Gramsci and Ibn Khaldun recognized the importance of 'consent' in maintaining power and discussed the process through which hegemons are undone.

As the world continues to experience massive and historical shifts towards new centers of power, the Middle East, like other regions in the global 'peripheries,' should take advantage of the ample opportunities created by the shifts to discover its own energies and reassert its relevance to the global discourse.

Our media must focus on local conversations by engaging journalists, intellectuals, academics, artists, and poets, so that, over time, authentic cultural projects can emerge, reflecting the realities of our region based on the priorities of those who live here.

We can no longer live in the shadows of others' views or outsource our opinions to those thousands of miles away, as even if genuine, they can never truly reflect, let alone address, our challenges in an authentic and meaningful way.

For this transformative experience to occur, we must start by genuinely respecting our own people and having confidence in our ability to think independently, without relying on cues from Western analysts or newspapers.

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