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## In Ibn Roshd Salon: With the Exception of Imported Technology, How Has Arab Media Changed between June 1967 and April 2003?

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During a seminar held by the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS), titled: “With the Exception of Imported Technology, How Has Arab Media Changed between June 1967 and April 2003?”, Bahey El Din Hassan, CIHRS Director linked at the beginning the June 1967 setback with April 2003. He pointed at first to the fact that the defeat of June '67 was not realized except after five days of the war; the Arab media was claiming that the Arab armies were the strongest in the Middle East, in addition to the weakness of the Zionist enemy before them, and the sure entry of Tel Aviv. Hassan stated that one of the most prominent media people at the time was Ahmad Said, the announcer in the Voice of Arabs (Saowt Al-Arab) radio station. This man continued to hail untrue victories, for the Arab public to realize afterwards that they knew nothing – they were unaware of the reality about the weakness of Arab armies and regimes, as compared to the strength of the Zionist enemy.

In April 2003, on the other hand, the Arab peoples were not preparing for an Iraqi victory over the American forces. However, still the public was prepared by both the Iraqi leadership and media for what was called Baghdad's battle. The Iraqi discourse was promoting for obliterating the American forces on the doors of Baghdad. The star at the time was the Iraqi Minister of Information, Said El-Sahhaf, who followed the same style of Ahmad Said, even if humorously. Moreover, the media misleading was also prominent on the covering of the Iraqi people's stance from Saddam Hussien, which was not disclosed except after the fall of Baghdad.

Hazem Abdul Rahman, the deputy Editor-in-Chief of Al-Ahram, that in 1967 Ahmad Said was forced to announce the communiqués, which were welcomed by the Arab public, prepared for them, then. However, with the events in Iraq, and despite the proliferation of newspapers, journalists, mass media, and satellite broadcasting, still a large sector of the Egyptians were addicted to this misinformation. In fact, when they were faced with information that Iraq will not hold before the American forces, they refused to believe so. Abdul Rahman argued that as a result, the reporters were asked to mitigate their tone, so that the reader would not be shocked, pointing to the fact that many papers followed suit and filled the reader's mind with mistaken information, which caused great frustration among the readers later on.

### **No Comparison**

The journalist Hussien Kroom, the Director of Al-Qods Al-Arabi Newspaper Office in Cairo, started by denying any similarity between the events of June 1967 and those of April 2003. To him the setback was deeper because the media was talking about sweeping Tel Aviv; however, with the modern event, no one imagined that the Iraqis will be able to defeat the Americans. In fact, he maintained that the media delusion was created by the US side through masking the main objectives of this war.

Kroom illustrated that the US from the very beginning tried to throw the responsibility of the war on the Iraqis, by blaming it on Saddam's refusal to step down from power. They were then oblivious of the statement of the Foreign Secretary Collin Powell before the American Congress maintaining that changing the Iraqi regime is but the introduction for changes in the region that accord with the American interests.

Kroom asserted that among the attempts at media deception were those trying to convince the public that the Iraqi people did not resist, despite the existence of actual struggles against this aggression. He added that some tried to compare the earlier demonstrations in Iraq to a people's uprising against the ruling regime, although as seen the numbers of those participating in them were not more a few dozens vis-à-vis the thousands who went out in other demonstrations demanding the American withdrawal from Iraq.

### **International Deception**

Tarek El-Shimi, the correspondent of Abu Dhabi Channel, pointed at the beginning to the fact that this misleading approach by the Arab media is part of a bigger system of international deception on several levels. He posed the question: what do we call the distortion of the Arab image, and the degradation of the black's image, compared to the attribution of brilliance and supremacy to the Jews?

El-Shimi confirmed that the deceiving communiqués of June 1967 were only a matter of obedience to the oppression of the state and its full control over the media, who had no other option to act otherwise. Nevertheless, what happened in April 2003 through Al-Sahhaf was flagrant lying contradicting the very well known results of the fight. The paradox, on the other hand was that inasmuch as the charisma and impact of the man captured us, particularly when he disclosed the false nature of the Americans, his sudden disappearance left many question marks and queries about how he could have been given such a grave task for supporting the spirit of resistance.

However, irrespective of Al-Sahhaf's actions, a close look at the mass media and the satellite channels is enough to show us that they have fallen into the trap. It is true that they have broadcast images of Iraqi resistance, but still they were unable to rid themselves of American pressures that imposed the use of certain terms, such "campaign" or "attack" rather than "aggression", and the hosting (satellite channels) of American-oriented Iraqis.

El-Shimi illustrated his argument by reminding of the broadcasting by Arab satellite channels of the process of tearing down Saddam Hussein's statue – for hours – in imitation of Western channels (upon the pretext of media coverage competition), as if the destruction of the statue was the main purpose of the invasion.

### **Lies**

Tarek Hassan, a reporter of Al-Ahram newspaper, talked about his experience of visiting Iraq prior to the war and the difficulties he faced in reporting the truth about events there starting with the strict procedures imposed by Iraqi officials, the censorship through the assignment of a press escort, and the reviewing of the sent reports while keeping the originals by the Iraqis.

Hassan stated that the material sent were routine news, in addition to coverage of press conferences. Those who violated these rules would have been fortunate to have been merely sent home. He asserted that the Arab media was expressing a point of view not objective truth, because his visit to Baghdad disclosed the lies propagated. In the forefront of such lies was the claim that foreign blockade was behind the poverty of the Iraqi people, this was only part of the truth; in fact, the Iraqi officials were the greater and the "more damned" cause, as this blockade rather increased their wealth and their monopolies.

The second lie is that the Iraqi people welcomed the demonstrations in the Egyptian street; he maintained that the Iraqis rather wondered about the cause of these demonstrations. Indeed, the Iraqis felt deep bitterness about the money spent by the state on hosting Arab journalists in hotels staffed by Iraqis.

Furthermore, the Iraqi regime set military mechanisms inside civil areas. Three-quarters of the reporters, during the war, were only reporting viewpoints, and possessed no information, because Al-Sahhaf monopolized the information whose message boiled down to announcing the fall of civilians without giving any data on military losses.

Mr. Hassan maintained that we had wanted to reverse the perspective, so we talked about Iraqi resistance – which was only wishful thinking. What existed was what could be called party resistance and organized resistance by some government-affiliated parties; nevertheless, had there been any resistance by the people, we would have seen the scene of the Nativity Church repeated.

He also pointed out to the fact that some Arab governments sold their standpoints to the Americans. At the same time they have sold their media in a different way. At this point, Hassan emphasized the importance of holding fast to the professional conscience in the Arab media, maintaining that in this battle many ethics were forsaken in a considerable number of newspapers.

### **Media School**

Salah Eissa, the Editor-in-chief of Al-Qahira Newspaper, maintained that for over 40 years one media school has been followed, reiterating the same lies and stories.

Eissa stated that in June 67 we have only heard Egyptian radio stations and refused to hear others. Our first reaction when we discovered the defeat was to talk about treason, to analyze the treacherous people, and to talk about the differences between the followers of Colonel Amer and those of Nasser.

He added that the Arab nation had invested its hope in Saddam, and on 1 April it was said that he betrayed us. For example, he referred to the series of articles by the deceased journalist Adel Hussein after the second Gulf War, where he talked about the Iraqi army that wore that Americans out and wasted an endless amount of their ammunition, telling a story about the American army firing missiles on donkeys (the story which Eissa compared to that of ambush dogs that was reiterated about Baghdad airport).

He stated that both the Egyptian and the Iraqi media in 1967 and 2003 were characterized by being mobilization-oriented and directed. In free media, he added, it is possible to have a degree of bias; however, it is kept to the minimum and within the boundaries of professional traditions.

In the Egyptian media, for instance, not one paper or channel was keen on inviting a member from the Iraqi opposition to interview him/her about the issue – referring this to intimidation under the pressure of certain political powers. He maintained that Al-Ahram had tried in the early days of the war to present the events neutrally, but was faced by fierce attacks.

Eissa argued as well that some nations welcome deceit, the media was brainwashing.

Bahey El Din Hassan pointed to the paradox that despite the great difference between the monophonic primitive media dominating the Arab world of 1967, and the modern, polyphonic, satellite-supported media of 2003, still the deceit persisted. The media misled the public in terms of the reality of events, in 1967 and 2003 alike

Another paradox is that of the image created for Saddam Hussein as a defender of the Palestinian cause, while in reality he has offered nothing to support it. Indeed his weapons were directed the other way, either towards Iran or Kuwait, in addition to his major contribution to the impoverishment of the Iraqis, as it was disclosed after the war that he was hiding millions of dollars.

Hassan concluded that the Arab press was fiercer in defending Saddam Hussein than his tanks, pointing that Saddam's notorious statement, "the reporter is cheaper than the tank," does not only mean that the reporter can be bought with money, but can also sell the conscience and false images.