

On The Media

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The New Israeli Barrier

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In what the Foreign Press Association has called an “[unprecedented restriction of press freedom](#),” the Israeli military has barred foreign correspondents from entering the Gaza Strip and thereby covering the war close-up. *New York Times* Jerusalem bureau chief Ethan Bronner says that in order to understand the current crackdown on media you have to think back to the summer of 2006.

BOB GARFIELD: From WNYC in New York, this is NPR’s On the Media. I’m Bob Garfield.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: And I’m Brooke Gladstone. The most recent fighting between the Israel defense forces and Hamas, now two weeks old, is like all modern wars, partly a battle of images - dead and wounded children in Gaza, military funerals and fear in Israel.

One image you haven't seen anywhere, however, is that of U.S. reporters on the ground in Gaza.

FEMALE CORRESPONDENT: Close to 300 foreign nationals were allowed out of Gaza, but no journalists were allowed in. Israel continues to reject international calls for a return to free press.

MALE CORRESPONDENT: I talked to the Vice Prime Minister about today. I said, look, why aren't you allowing journalists to go into Gaza? And he said, why do you want to go in? And I said, look, we're journalists. This is what we do. We need to report on the situation.

MALE CORRESPONDENT: They're actually surprisingly open about why they're not allowing journalists inside. They say they don't want too much information coming out of Gaza.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: The Israeli military has barred foreign correspondents from entering the Gaza Strip, despite an Israeli Supreme Court ruling mandating at least limited access for journalists.

Ethan Bronner is Jerusalem bureau chief for The New York Times. He says in order to understand the current crackdown on the press you have to go back to the summer of 2006.

ETHAN BRONNER: That's right. In 2006 in the war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Israeli and foreign media had sort of the run of the place. People were constantly talking to soldiers about their lack of good guns and decent food and enough water. There were mid-level commanders going live on radio talking about what they thought ought to happen.

And the commission that was set up by the government at the end of that war to examine what had gone wrong devoted some attention to the media policy of the army and decided that it was not good at all for the strategic objectives of the army.

So they revamped their information policy, and they've also taken away cell phones from soldiers, fearful that when they were talking in Lebanon at that time, that Hezbollah was listening.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Israel has a long-celebrated tradition of a free and vigorous press. Have average Israelis weighed in on this policy, or the Israeli media?

ETHAN BRONNER: Kind of shockingly, no. So far in this war – and it may be beginning to change now – but fundamentally for the first week or 10 days for sure, there was a strong uniformity of view in Israel that this was a vital, justified war and that those who didn't get that weren't really worth worrying about, so that when foreign journalists were complaining about not having access, people really were unimpressed.

The fact that there's a war here is part of a general sense in Israel of existential threat that is hard for outsiders to grasp.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Ethan, is your coverage at The Times significantly different than it would have been without the ban? It would have to be, right?

ETHAN BRONNER: Oh, it's enormously different. I mean, I want to say one thing, which is that we have in Gaza a full-time contract writer named Taghreed El-Khodary, a brave, serious professional, and our on-the-ground stuff is coming from her. But she is not a native English speaker and she is not a staff member of The New York Times.

For us, if we could get in to Gaza, believe me, the coverage would be bigger, better and stronger. We know that. Of course, it's a dangerous situation on the ground as well. There are places one would not be able to go instantly, but it would certainly be a much more comprehensive look, and not necessarily all to the ill of the Israel defense forces.

I mean, we would certainly be looking at people who have allowed their children to be placed in front of fighters and that sort of thing. It would be the whole range of stories.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So what do you think, then? Is the ban working the way that the Israeli government hoped it would or is it backfiring?

ETHAN BRONNER: I really don't think it's working for them. I mean, for one thing, Al-Jazeera is in Gaza, and the wires, AP, Reuters, AFP, all have cameras and Palestinian reporters on the ground, and they're all doing serious work and we're all grateful to them. It is not doing what the Israelis would think.

But I can't say that if we were to go in, they would be happier necessarily. I would say that their focus on controlling the message that way is a little bit of a false focus.

And I also think, as I said, that a lot of the issue of keeping us out has to do with the Defense Ministry's decision that they don't want reporters in their way as they, quote, unquote, "do their job."

BROOKE GLADSTONE: One last question: How complete do you think the coverage is that the Israelis themselves are getting? I know you're saying that they've been so far quite unified over the war in Gaza, but do you think they're getting an unfiltered view of the carnage?

ETHAN BRONNER: They are not. No. I mean, of course, they're watching the BBC and Sky and CNN just like anyone else, but usually enraged as they watch it, convinced that this is coverage aimed to harm them.

If you look at the Israeli papers – of course, this is going to be true, I would imagine, in any country at war – you see an enormous focus on themselves and their own forces and a kind of "by the way" focus on what may be happening to the people in Gaza.

So I am certain that they are not getting a full, unfiltered view of what's happening there. That's absolutely true.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Ethan, thank you very much.

ETHAN BRONNER: Thank you, Brooke.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Ethan Bronner is Jerusalem bureau chief for The New York Times.