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European watchdog 'concerned' by PA pressure on journalists

Ma'an News Agency

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RAMALLAH (Ma'an) -- A European press freedom group said Monday it was concerned about the Palestinian Authority's steps to put pressure on a columnist who criticized President Mahmoud Abbas' office.

The Vienna-based International Press Institute said it was joining Palestinian journalists who have raised concerns about the PA's treatment of Jihad Harb after he questioned hiring practices at Abbas' office.

Harb's article, published by Ma'an and other Palestinian news sites in August, was based on a report by the Palestinian chapter of Transparency International and included his criticisms.

"Reports that Jihad Harb has been interrogated and now faces possible prosecution for raising questions about official corruption are deeply worrying, and even more so because Harb was simply referencing the work of a transparency watchdog," said IPI press freedom manager Barbara Trionfi.

"Media play an integral role in informing the public and questioning government practices. Harb's article, which summarized the findings of an NGO and added comment, appears to have done exactly that."

In late October Harb was summoned by the public prosecutor after a complaint was filed by the president's office, according to Mada, the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms.

He is accused of a "direct insult to the employees in the Office of the President," Mada says.

Harb told Ma'an the lawsuit was baseless and aimed at intimidating Palestinian journalists.

"All senior officials in the presidency, including the advisers, are assuming public positions and should be accountable to the taxpayers," Harb said in an email defending his criticism.

"Prosecuting Palestinian writers and journalists falls under a campaign aiming to suppress freedoms and exert pressure on writers and journalists in order to stop addressing public affairs in Palestinian journalism," he said.

Meanwhile the Palestinian Journalists Syndicate says it is following Harb's case and that of Tawfik Abu Khousa, who was similarly interrogated after a lawsuit was filed by a top Fatah official.

Nabil Shaath filed a complaint against Abu Khousa over three articles he wrote in October.

Both journalists have been free as the public prosecutor considers the lawsuits.

The journalists syndicate said that regardless of the outcome, it supported the journalists' right to freedom of speech and emphasized the importance of a free press.

Israeli raids

The IPI statement on Monday also criticized Israel's raid on a TV station in February.

Watan TV was the target of a raid by Israeli soldiers who seized a transmitter and other equipment as well as documents. The station has challenged the raid in Israeli courts, but the army has not responded.

"The IDF's unwillingness to provide reasonable explanations for the raids it carried out on media houses this year has been disappointing and unacceptable," said Trionfi of IPI.

"The IDF should provide a transparent response to the High Court's request and we look forward to a decision by the Court that will uphold the rights of Palestinian media."

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