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A MINORITY REPORT FROM THE WEST BANK AND GAZA
By Michael Totten on February 2, 2009 3:43 AM

Khaled Abu Toameh is not your typical Palestinian journalist. He began his career at one of Yasser Arafat's newspapers and today he writes for the Jerusalem Post. He has produced video for European TV stations, and even blogged for a while at Commentary Magazine in New York. It's impossible to cram Toameh into a convenient ideological box, though that doesn't stop some people from trying.

I met him briefly a few weeks ago on my trip to Israel sponsored by the American Jewish Committee when he gave a talk to me and my colleagues and answered some questions at the end. I'm reproducing the entire transcript here because I think he deserves a full hearing.

Hamas, Fatah, Americans, Israelis, Europeans, Arab governments, American foreign correspondents - just about everybody involved in any way with the conflict comes under some well-deserved fire. There's something here for just about everybody to like and dislike, and I'm publishing what he said without quote-shopping or cherry-picking his words for convenience.

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Khaled Abu Toameh: When I finished high school the PLO offices hired me as a correspondent, and I worked for a PLO newspaper for seven years during which time I attended university in Jerusalem. After I graduated I had to make a decision: do I go back and work for the PLO, or do I try to become a real journalist? It took me about two seconds to make that decision. I decided to work with the international media and the Israeli media.

When I say "work with the international media," what does that mean? We have hundreds of foreign journalists who come to this part of the world - every year, every month, and sometimes every week - to cover the stories here. Now there are two stories here. There's the one that's happening inside Israel, and there's the one that's happening inside the Palestinian areas.

Fortunately for us, Israel is an open country that allows people to write whatever they want, criticize the prime minister, the defense minister, the IDF. You can write all these horrible things against Israel and still walk in downtown Jerusalem. But when it comes to covering the Palestinian territories, the story is completely different. You can't wake up in the morning as a foreign journalist and drive on your own into a Palestinian village. You can't just show up and say "Good morning, I work for the New York Times, can I speak to Hamas please." It doesn't work like that for a number of reasons. You don't know the language and need a translator. You don't know your way around. And most important, it's not safe.

So foreign journalists who want to cover stories in the Palestinian areas rely on fixers. And that's where I fit in. For the past twenty years or so I've been working as a fixer, translator, advisor - call it whatever you want - with most of the foreign media. And of course in this work with the international media I got myself a number of jobs, one of which I'm still doing. I even have colleagues here. For the past twenty years I've been working with NBC News, and I was blogging for Commentary Magazine also. I was writing for U.S. News and World Report, occasionally for the Wall Street Journal, and a number of British tabloids. In the course of this work with the international media I became a writer and analyst of Palestinian affairs and a film producer for the BBC.

About eight years ago, when the Second Intifada started, I started writing for the Jerusalem Post about Palestinian issues. And I still work with the international media. My job is to serve as the eyes and ears of the international media.

Some of you may be wondering what's going on with this guy who started working as a journalist for the PLO and ends up writing for a Jewish newspaper. Some people ask me "when did you become a Zionist? When did you become pro-Israel?" Well, I'm not pro-anything other than the facts and the truth. As a journalist I don't have any problem working for any newspaper that provides me with a platform. I don't care if it's Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or even Buddhist.

And to be honest with you, I find it ironic that as an Arab Muslim living in this part of the world that I have to work for a Jewish newspaper or for the international media in order to be able to practice any kind of real journalism.

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