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Forced Off the Air in Ramallah

By DAOUD KUTTAB

AMMAN, Jordan -- I still remember the day early in March 1997 when I was handed a piece of paper issued by the Palestinian Authority allowing us at Al Quds University's Institute of Modern Media to establish a local television station in Ramallah. With lots of energy and almost no resources we began the process of setting up Al Quds Educational Television. We wanted to build an independent TV station that was neither a government mouthpiece nor a commercial station that would live by game shows and shampoo.

It wasn't easy, but we were largely successful until this week.

Five years after launching our first broadcast - using a 40-watt transmitter to televise a goldfish in a glass bowl swimming to the sounds of Beethoven - our dreams have been shattered. Our station, which has grown in size, viewership and programming, has been closed, our equipment has been destroyed and Israeli soldiers are using our offices and studios. No order was issued for this closure. We didn't violate any law. The destruction was simply an act of unprovoked aggression.

From early on the going was tough, but our existence until this week was never in doubt. Our mission to stay

independent received only limited help. Many major international donors wanted to help the state-run television as a means to boost the Palestinian Authority. But with assistance from Palestinian foundations like the Welfare Association and international organizations like the Open Society Foundation and the Ford Foundation, we were able to create an alternative Palestinian television station that produced public service programming like that

on PBS and C-Span.

Senior leaders in the Palestinian Authority were not happy with us. When we started broadcasting live sessions of the elected Palestinian legislative council, the official Palestinian Authority TV station started jamming us. When we aired a session that dealt with corruption in the Palestinian Authority I was arrested and held in a Palestinian jail for seven days. My release, as a result of local and international pressure, helped secure our station's continuity.

Since then, and despite some programming critical of the Palestinian Authority, we have been left alone. We have dealt on the air with subjects ranging from the physical and sexual abuse of children to the problems of early marriage among young Palestinian women to the lack of respect for people with disabilities. We have tackled issues like the environment, public health and family planning. As part of the vision of the president of Al Quds University, Sari Nuseibeh, we embarked in 1997 on a groundbreaking partnership with Israeli educational television to produce a Palestinian-Israeli version of "Sesame Street." The program was produced with the aim of teaching both Israel and Palestinian children mutual respect and tolerance.

Freedom of expression and presenting diverse opinions on social, economic and political issues were our aims. We felt firmly that we were laying the blocks for a cohesive, progressive society that would be the foundation of an independent state.

None of this was easy in the face of the Israeli occupation. Yet we refused to give in to despair. When the latest Israeli incursion occurred we tried our best to keep doing our work despite the next to

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impossible mission of running an educational television station in such times. Tanks were rolling around our city, our staff were under curfew and we were cut off from each other except for telephone contact. The fact that our station was on the edge of town spared us in the early days of the incursion. We kept running our station with a mix of public service messages (for example, showing phone numbers for medical services) plus programs like a series we produced with Unicef to help parents and children deal with the trauma of violence.

Then on Tuesday, Israeli soldiers came to the four-story Medical Professions College building, where our studios are located, and began destroying what we have worked to build. Every office in this educational facility was broken into, equipment was destroyed. Our two remaining staff members manning the broadcast were arrested and held for four hours before being released.

While being held, they saw television cameras and invaluable video archives thrown from the fourth

floor, where our equipment and studio are located.

I am fortunate that my family and our staff have not been physically hurt. When our fates are compared to those of others, we must be grateful. But what happened was not just property damage, but an attempt to destroy our dream of building a useful educational TV station and helping build a viable state with healthy civic institutions.

It will not be easy to pick up the pieces after experiencing such brutality. I have no doubt that we will rebuild our television station and reclaim the hope that we had five years ago. At the same time I am confident that our people, with the support of the international community, will rise from the pain and build the foundation of a society that can live in peace with its neighbors.

Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian journalist from Jerusalem, is director of the Institute of Modern Media at Al Quds University, which owns and runs Al Quds Educational Television.