

# MONITORING THE COVERAGE OF THE 2005 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN PALESTINE

Preliminary report January 10 2005



The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy -  
MIFTAH

In cooperation with



Centre for Media Policy and Development

## **Introduction**

The participants conducted monitoring of Arabic-language media for the official campaign period of the presidential elections from 25 December to 7 January 2005 at Miftah's offices in Ramallah. The project assesses the performance of the media in its coverage during the official campaign period. There is a specific focus on the coverage of the media using normative principles including the right of access, allocation of coverage and balance in the mass media.

The team employed quantitative and qualitative methodological tools according to international standards for media monitoring. In addition the legal framework that pertains to the role of the media in covering the elections was reviewed to assess its effectiveness. The qualitative analysis and quantitative monitoring of media coverage was undertaken over the duration of the official campaign period and it was conducted by a Palestinian team under the training and supervision of an international expert, David Ward of the Centre for Media Policy and Development (UK) and Wafa' Abdel Rahman of The Palestinian Initiative for the Promotion of Global Dialogue and Democracy (MIFTAH) who initiated and organised the project and conducted the qualitative component of the monitoring.

### **Methodology for the analysis of media coverage**

The monitoring unit observed media coverage of elections in order to assess:

- whether political parties and candidates gained fair access to the media;
- whether political parties and candidates were covered in a unbiased and equitable manner;
- whether the media and the authorities abided by the rules and regulations covering their conduct during the campaign – both in terms of national legislation and international standards;
- the effectiveness of media law pertaining to the media and election coverage.

Between 25 December and 7 January 2005 the monitoring covered the public channel Palestine Television, the privately owned television channel Watan, which covers the Ramallah area and the two pan-Arab channels Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera. These channels were monitored daily in peak time between 18.00-23.00 hours throughout the official campaign period. The unit also monitored the two privately owned newspapers Al Ayyam and Al Quds as well as the state supported title Al Hayat Al Jadida. The Internet portal of Wafa, the official news agency was monitored as well as the public radio station Voice of Palestine.

The actors for the quantitative analysis were defined as the presidential candidates and the parties, where relevant to these candidates, four of which stood for election as independent candidates. This report does not classify other actors in the political process, such as parties that did not put forward a candidate for the Presidential elections or other political figures. As well as measuring the time and space allocated to political actors, parties and candidates, the media unit also measured the tone of media coverage according to a three level scale (positive, negative and neutral) in order to assess the overall tone of the media outlets towards contestants and the different political parties.

The quantitative analysis for the newspaper coverage was categorised into the following pages: business, culture, arts and entertainment, election specials, first page, foreign news pages, politics, local affairs, foreign affairs, religion, sport and others. The format of the news coverage was also categorised based on: headlines, article, editorial comment, photos, paid advertisements, cartoons, news item and news report. Positive and negative coverage was recorded only if the monitoring team unanimously agreed on judging it to be unequivocal.

Table 1: Newspapers monitored

Title	Ownership	Period
Al Ayyam	Private	25.12.04-7.1.05
Al Hayat Al Jadida	Public (financially assisted)	25.12.04-7.1.05
Al Quds	Private	25.12.04-7.1.05

Table 2: Broadcasters monitored

Channel	Ownership	Hours monitored	Period
Palestine Television	Public	18.00 – 23.00	25.12.04-7.1.05
Watan	Private	18.00 – 23.00	25.12.04-7.1.05
Al Jazeera	Private	18.00 – 23.00	25.12.04-7.1.05
Al Arabiya	Private	18.00 – 23.00	25.12.04-7.1.05
Voice of Palestine	Public	07.00-11.00	25.12.04-7.1.05
Wafa (Internet)	Public*	25.12.04-7.1.05	

\* The Internet portal of Wafa, the official public news agency in Palestine

### Media monitors

Abeer Ismail  
 Ala'a Farid Krajh  
 Eva Afghani  
 Fatima Barqawi  
 Ghada Ghareeb Khalil

Ghassan abu Eid  
 Lama Abu Sumayyah  
 Mohammad Alawi  
 Mohammad Nawahada  
 Mohammad Hameedeh

Mousa Qous  
 Reem Abed Alhamid  
 Salah Zaghloul  
 Thabet Zarra'  
 Yassin Mostafa Ali Abass

## **Preliminary Results**

### **Access to public media**

Article 57 (1) of the Election Law assigns the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) the duty to liaise with the public media to provide equal and free access to the presidential candidates. The CEC notified Palestine Television and Radio of their obligations to provide free access and an agreement was signed between the parties. The allocation of airtime was decided by lot between the candidates and slots of ten minutes for each candidate were allocated for seven nights running up to the election moratorium. This was complemented by a talk show format of duration of one hour and a half per candidate to be broadcast nightly in prime time before the party political broadcasts of the candidates. The talk show was partially funded by the CEC and sponsored by two private companies. The talk show was repeated at 22.30 on the night of the original broadcast. This was changed from the original time slot for the repeat programme in order to comply with the moratorium.

The content of the candidates' broadcasts was editorially independent. However, their content was checked prior to the broadcast of the programmes to ensure compliance with the provisions in the Press Law and the provisions against inciting racial hatred by the CEC, though it is unclear as to whether the present media law actually covers audiovisual media. There were no reported infringements. The system was very successful in granting the candidates equal airtime for these slots and is a constructive innovation. The system was widely seen as a success by all stakeholders.

The public media suggested that they had problems with fully covering the elections in their general programming that were produced by a combination of factors. They recognised that there were problems due to the priority of the local news agenda that provided greater amounts of coverage for Abu Mazen due to his administrative duties as chairperson of the mainstream Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). They cited problems of resources that were inadequate and because of the checkpoints of the Israeli armed forces hindering the movement of technical equipment around the territories, as serious obstacles in providing quality coverage of the election campaign.

The public media's regulatory status was unclear and the lack of an independent and clear mandate meant that the institution was uncertain as to its role in serving the Palestinian people. This being said, the stakeholders were divided on Palestine Television and Radio's coverage. On one hand, a number of stakeholders suggested that the stations had at least tried to remain objective and balanced and they understood that the excessive coverage granted to Abu Mazen was a result of his role in the Administration. On the other hand, there was criticism that Palestine Television and Radio simply served the FATEH party, the dominant PLO faction, and its candidate, Abu Mazen.

### **Access to private media**

One of the major issues during media coverage of the elections was paid-for political advertising on commercial television, radio and in the press. In the private channel monitored there was little coverage of the elections except for paid political advertising which was in abundance on Watan and, according to interviewees, on local commercial television outlets throughout the region. Watan did, however, broadcast a nightly programme for the candidates during prime time that was a positive contribution to the media's coverage of the campaign. Abu Mazen declined the offer to use the slot, according to Watan.

Palestine Television was not allowed to carry paid-for political advertising. What appears to be completely unregulated access to airtime on commercial television meant that paid-for political advertising was a major factor in coverage by channels such as Watan. There were no standard

rates established by the authorities for political advertising in the press or audiovisual media. A number of the offices of the candidates complained about the rates, which were far in excess of normal advertising rates in the press and in some cases prohibitively so due to the small size of some of the candidates' budgets.

Paid-for political advertising was also very prominent in the press. A very encouraging move was made by at least one newspaper to offer free advertising for some of the financially disadvantaged candidates, though in reality this achieved little in readdressing the unequal coverage of the candidates.

### **Satellite channels**

The importance of satellite television in Palestine meant that the two pan-Arab stations Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera were seen to be crucial platforms for the election coverage. This was also supported by the fact that the journalists working for pan-Arab stations enjoy a greater access and freedom of movement than their local counterparts and do not suffer from the same degree of restrictions.

Al Jazeera declined to carry paid-for political advertising from any of the candidates and Al Arabiya was the only satellite broadcaster to carry paid-for political advertisements, which were purchased by Mustafa Barghouthi and were financed through what the office of the candidate suggested, was a local donation. Both satellite broadcasters were criticised by the interviewees as to their coverage of the campaign and what they perceived to be excessive coverage of Abu Mazen. Al Jazeera provided a platform for the candidates in a spot in their 22.00 news bulletin that consisted of a combination of a presentation of the elections in general, an outline of the relevant candidate's manifesto and an interview with the candidate. The interviews varied considerably in terms of their duration with Abu Mazen enjoying the most airtime.

Al Arabiya's coverage of the elections was only really contained in news bulletins that covered the activities of Abu Mazen with some marginal coverage of Mustafa Barghouthi, Bassam Salhi and Tayseer Khaled. The source of the second most significant coverage of this channel was Mustafa Barghouthi's paid-for political advertising spots.

### **The legal framework for media and elections**

Although the technical groundwork for free and independent media is established in the Press Law a number of features of the Law suggest that there are anomalies and serious inadequacies in the Law which does not meet international standards in this field. It is also unclear to what extent the Press Law encompasses the audiovisual sector and there is confusion about what, if any, law is established to regulate the audiovisual media. In general the Law is vague, non specific and far too abstract to regulate the principles that underpin an independent media system that serves citizens and the democratic development of Palestine. It has been a major weakness in setting the parameters and obligations of the media's coverage of elections. It is especially unclear as to whether there is any law whatsoever that is relevant to the audiovisual media. It is a matter of great importance that this situation is clarified and rectified as soon as possible to ensure legal certainty and guarantee the role of the media in not only in the reporting of elections, but providing a wide range of access and programming.

### **Central Electoral Commission**

The Central Electoral Commission (CEC) was generally perceived to have a high degree of moral integrity and independence by stakeholders. It was however, criticised for not dealing with violations of the election law. Many candidates submitted complaints, usually about what they perceived to be excessive coverage of Abu Mazen on television and in the press and they felt these complaints had not been adequately processed. The Ministry of Information also stated that

it believed there had been more violations than the number which they had referred to it by the CEC.

The main concern expressed about the role of the CEC was that it simply did not enjoy the necessary instruments or powers to regulate the elections and media coverage of the elections and perceived violations continued throughout the campaign period. As one interviewee suggested 'violations just continue and the CEC is ineffective as the media do not care as there are no rules to enforce against them'. The opinion is generally representative of the views of the stakeholders interviewed: that the CEC conducted itself in an independent manner, but lacked legal and enforcement powers that reduced its potential role in regulating the election law significantly.

### **Pressures on journalists**

The movement of local journalists was restricted by the continued presence of Israeli security check points. The major media outlets circumvented this problem to some extent by the fact that they employ regional journalists that enabled them to cover the elections throughout Palestine. The big Arab satellite broadcasters were perceived to have better conditions than local media outlets and local journalists have less freedom of movement and access to candidates than their counterparts working for the pan Arab satellite broadcasters. Journalists also complained about the pressure put on them from candidates and their offices in terms of accusations of bias either for or against certain candidates.

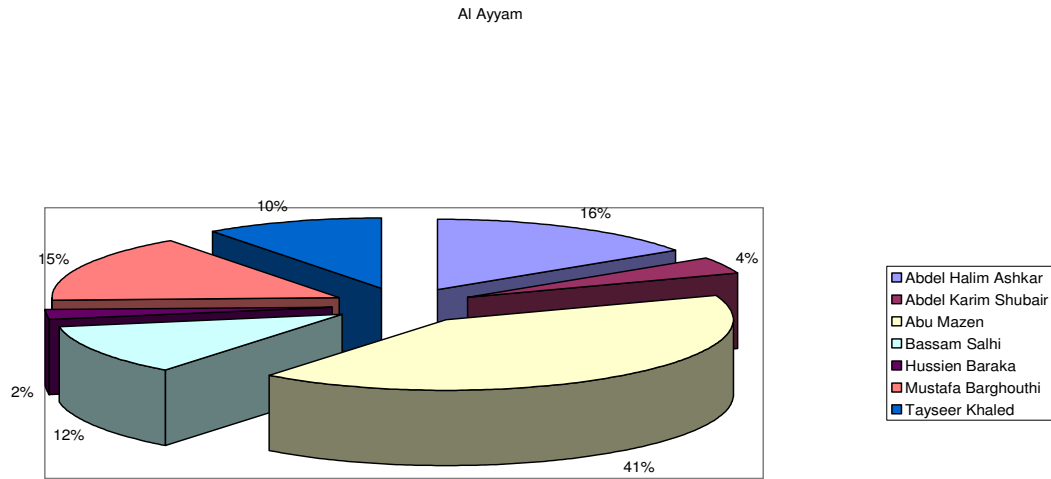
### **The moratorium**

The 24 hour moratorium was infringed by all of the newspaper titles. On 8 January all of the titles contained news and information about some of the candidates. Abu Mazen and Mustafa Barghouti both received significant coverage during the moratorium period. There were also advertisements placed in the newspapers that, although not directly pertaining to the election campaign itself, clearly aimed to promote the relevant candidate beyond the permitted threshold established by the 24 hour moratorium. None of the monitored broadcasters infringed the moratorium.

### **Print media coverage**

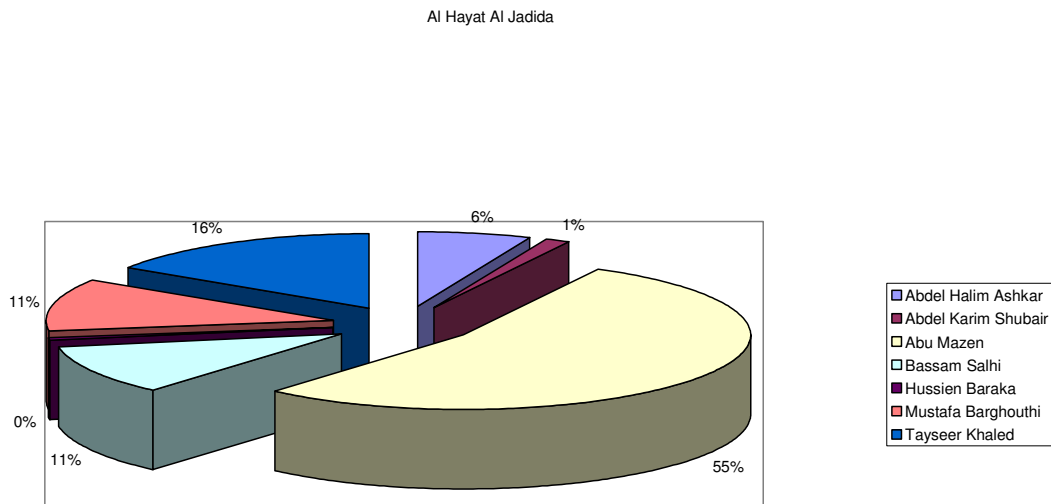
All of the daily newspapers demonstrated similar trends in their coverage of the candidates during the official election campaign period. The dominant actor in press coverage of the elections was Abu Mazen who enjoyed significantly greater coverage than any of the other candidates standing for election. Al Ayyam was the title that allocated the greatest amount of coverage to the other candidates, though Abu Mazen remained the dominant actor in its coverage. If paid-for political advertising is subtracted from the percentage of coverage, the coverage that was allocated to Abu Mazen, was even greater as a percentage of total coverage.

Chart 1: Share of coverage (space) devoted to the individual presidential candidates in Al Ayyam (includes paid advertising) (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



Al Ayyam devoted considerable coverage to Abu Mazen during the official campaign period with the candidate receiving 41 per cent of coverage over the period including paid-for political advertisements. Abdel Halim Ashkar received the second greatest coverage of 16 per cent in Al Ayyam.

Chart 2: Share of coverage (space) devoted to the individual presidential candidates in Al Hayat Al Jadida (includes paid advertising) (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



Al Hayat Al Jadida dedicated even more coverage to Abu Mazen and he received 55 per cent coverage in the reporting of the candidates and their parties including paid-for political

advertising. The coverage of Al Quds remains between the other two titles in terms of the space allocated to the candidates. In Al Quds 51 per cent of space was allocated to Abu Mazen.

Chart 3: Share of coverage (space) devoted to the individual presidential candidates in Al Quds (includes paid advertising) (25.12.04-7.01.2005)

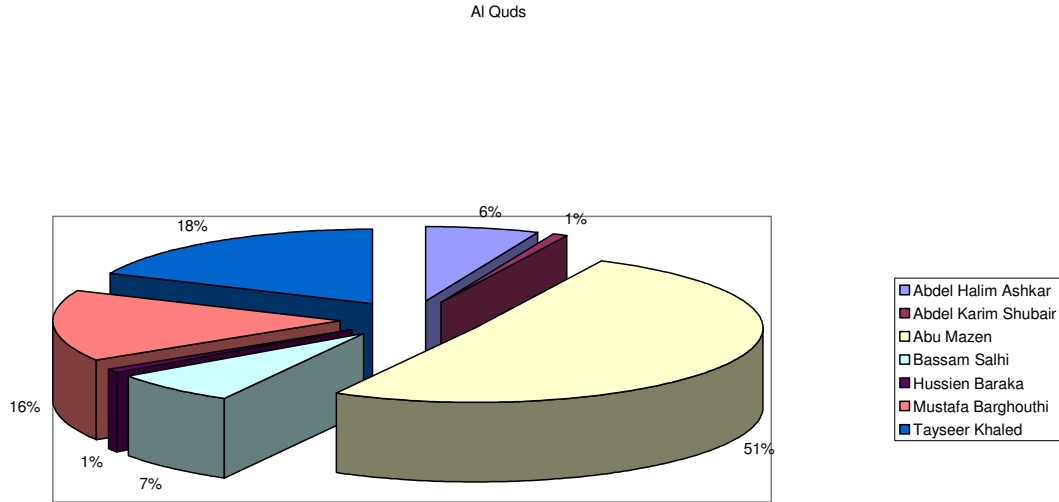
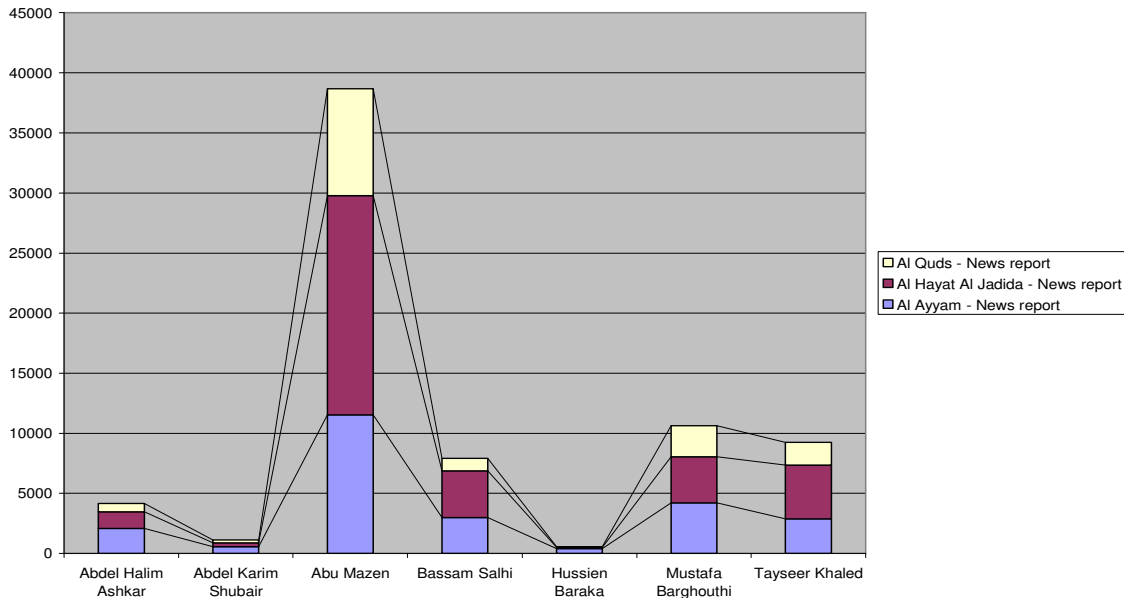


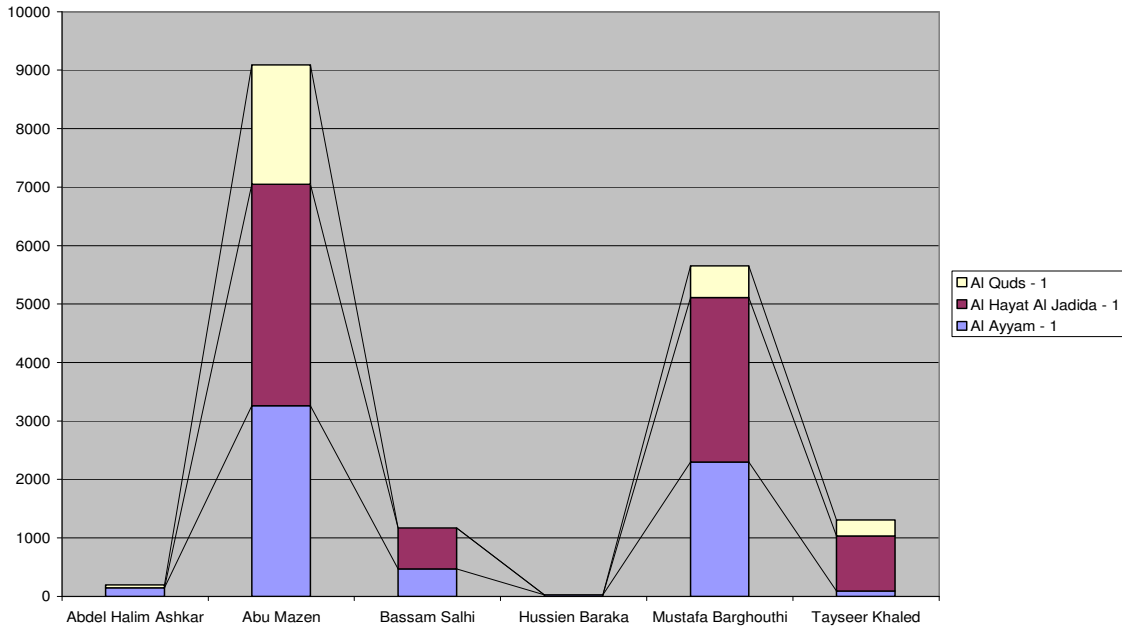
Chart 4: News report coverage in the daily press (all titles) of the presidential candidates (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



An important factor in newspaper coverage was that the administrative duties of Abu Mazen were widely reported. As chairperson of the PLO, Abu Mazen undertook certain administrative duties during the official campaign period. These events were very high in the news agenda and received wide coverage that favoured Abu Mazen's campaign considerably.



Chart 5: Share of front page of the individual candidates in the daily press (all titles) (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



Abu Mazen and to a lesser extent Mustafa Barghouthi enjoyed the majority of coverage on the front page of the newspapers both in terms of paid advertisements and news coverage. Abu Mazen was the subject of nearly all of the news reports and news items on the front pages whilst the Mustafa Barghouthi campaign relied on paid-for political advertising.

Chart 6: Share and format of front page coverage of the candidates in the daily press (all titles) (25.12.04-7.01.2005)

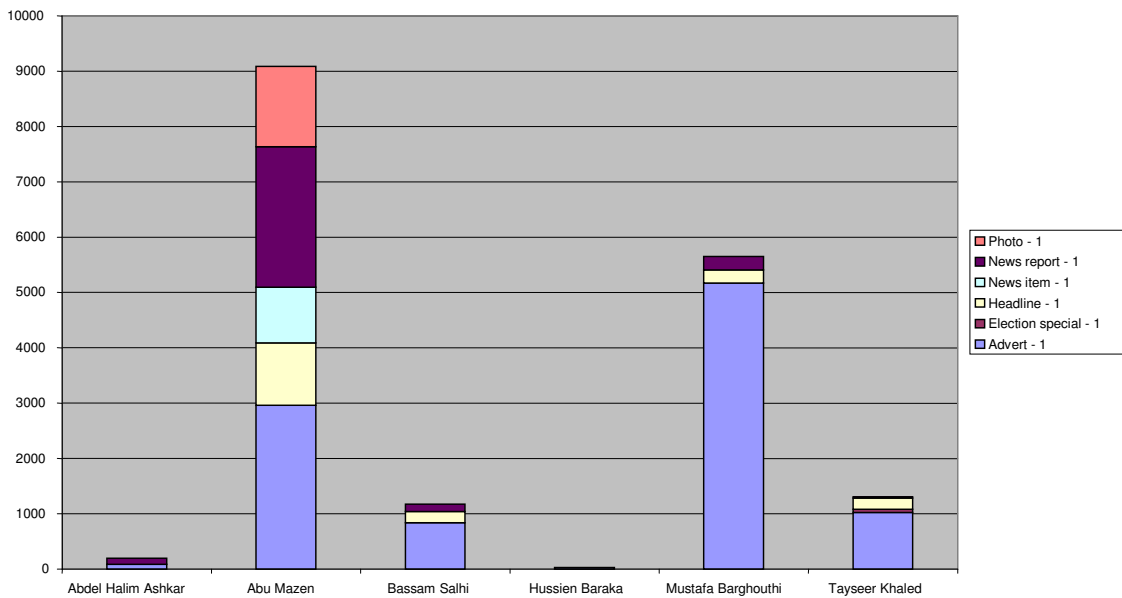


Chart 7: Share of advertising space for the candidates in the daily press (25.12.04-7.01.2005)

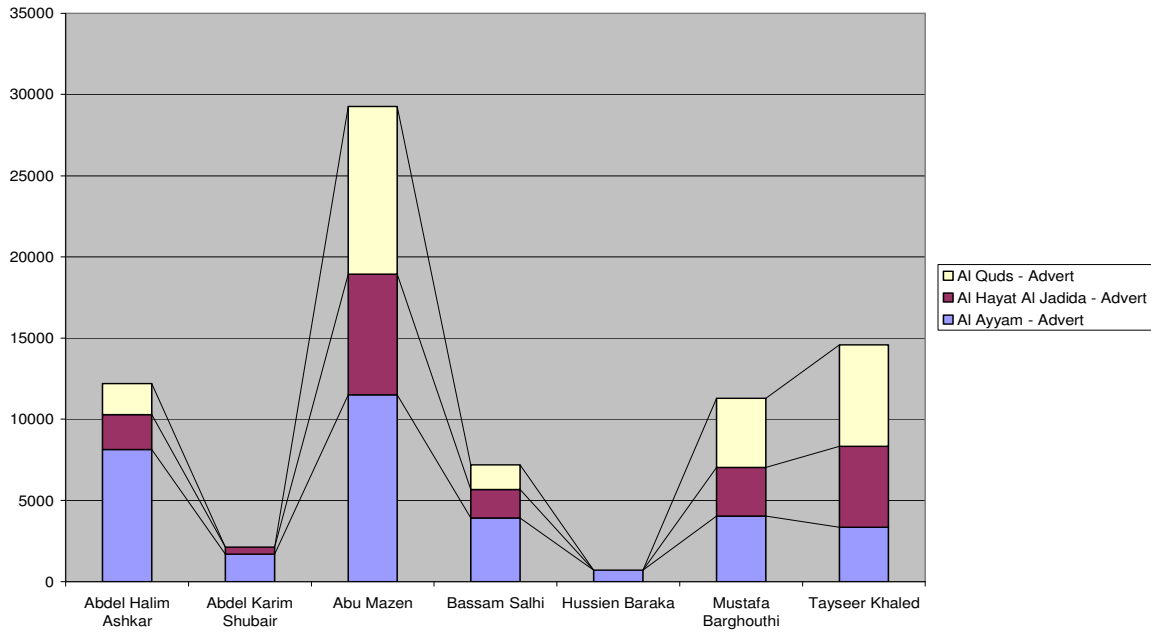
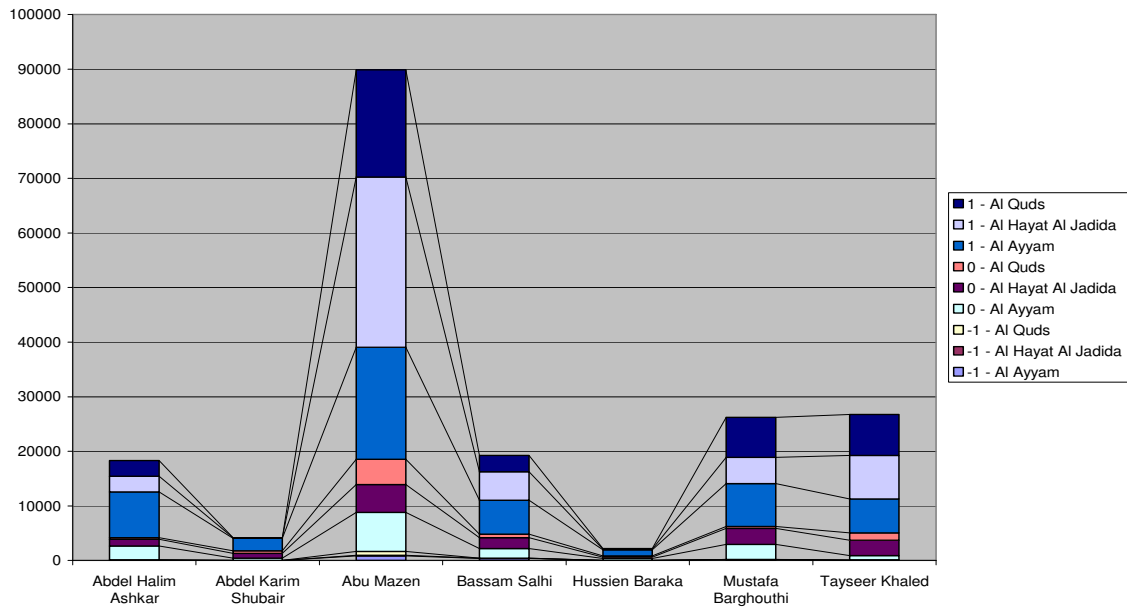


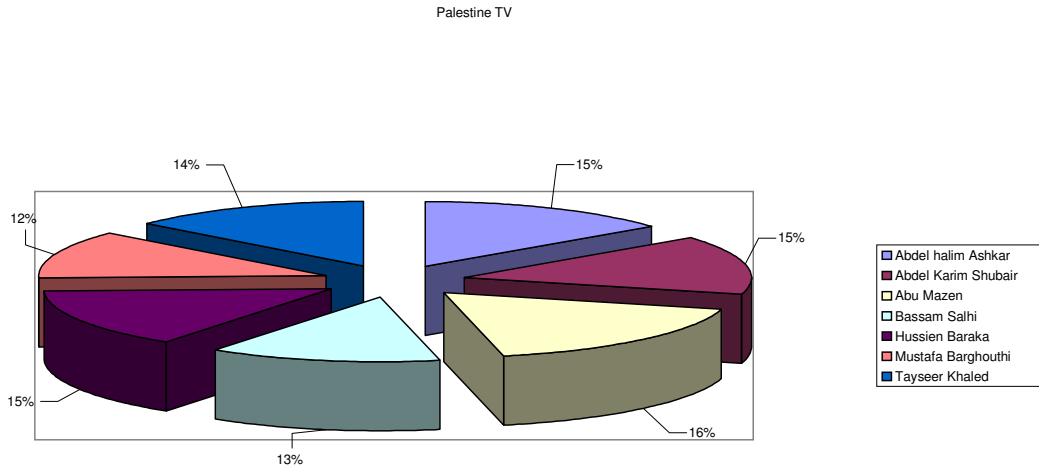
Chart 8: Tone of the election coverage and the candidates in the daily press (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



**Broadcast media coverage**

Although the news was dominated by Abu Mazen and his party and administrative duties, the presence of free airtime that was granted to the candidates on an equal basis meant that the coverage of the elections by Palestine Television was balanced overall.

Chart 9: Share of coverage (duration) devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Palestine TV (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



This balance must be understood in the context of the relatively significant free broadcast time allocated to the candidates pursuant to the Election Law. The lack of any analytical or critical coverage of the elections and the candidates during the campaign period over and beyond the free access granted to the candidates according to the Election Law resulted in the fact that only events during the campaign period that were high on the news agenda, which were essentially administrative ones of Abu Mazen, were covered. In this respect, the division between institutional (and institutional resources) and campaign activities of Abu Mazen were blurred in the news and other forms of content on Palestine Television.

Chart 10: Share of coverage (duration) in news bulletins devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Palestine TV (25.12.04-7.01.2005)

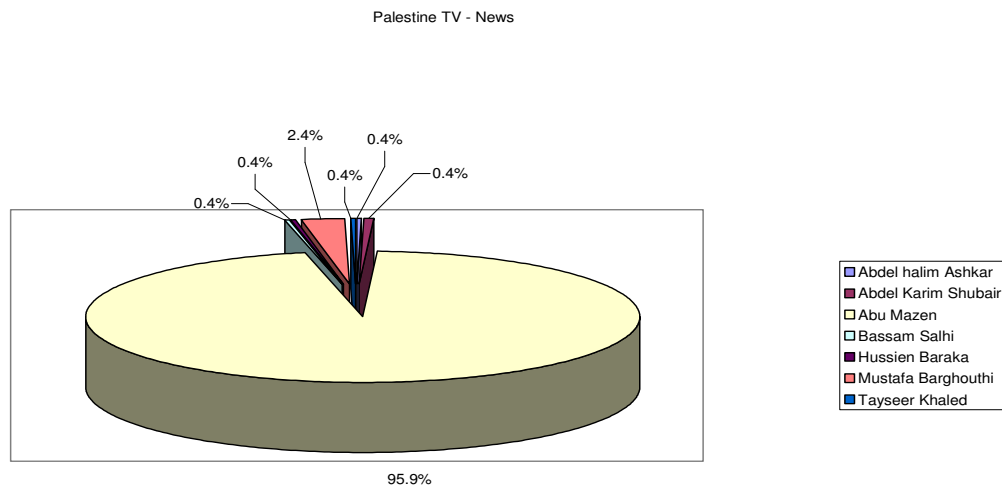
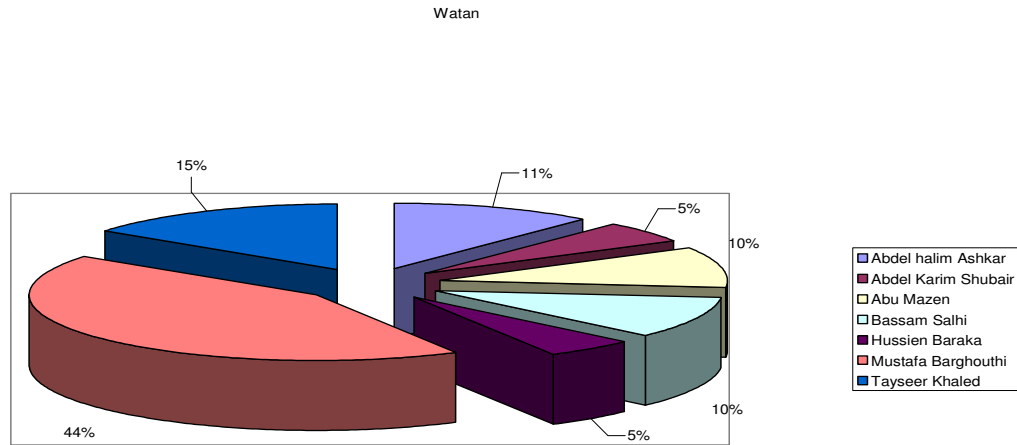
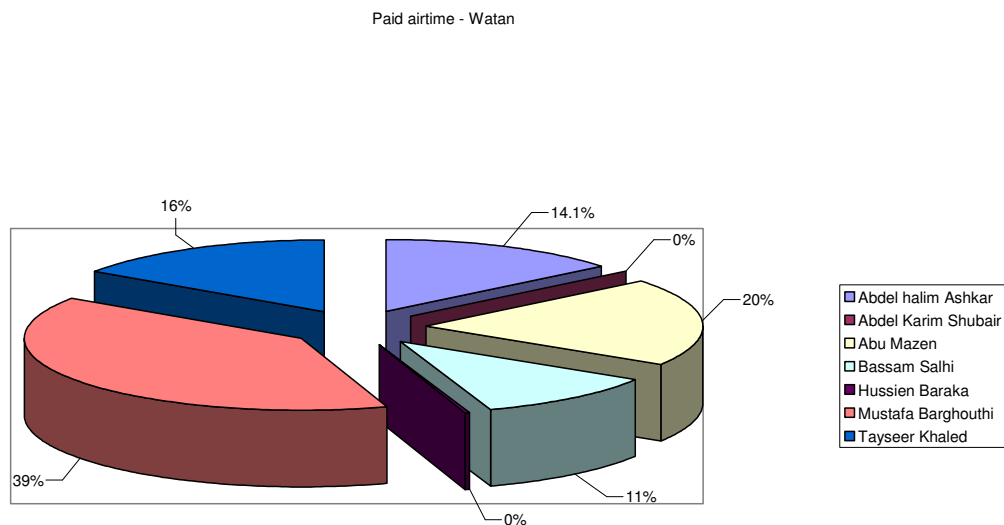


Chart 11: Share of coverage (duration) devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Watan (includes paid advertising) (25.12.04-07.01.2005)



Watan's coverage of the elections consisted of three parts. Firstly, and most abundantly there was, relatively, a huge amount of paid-for political advertising on the channel. Secondly, Watan provided airtime for the candidates in a talk show format and finally there was a marginal amount of news covered by the Al Jazeera evening news bulletin that is broadcast on Watan. The candidate Mustafa Barghouthi's free airtime that was broadcast on Palestine Television was repeated a number of times on the Watan channel and the coverage of the candidates is highly skewed in favour of Mustafa Barghouthi who received 44 per cent of coverage (including paid-for political advertising).

Chart 12: Share of paid advertising coverage (duration) devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Watan (25.12.04-07.01.2005)

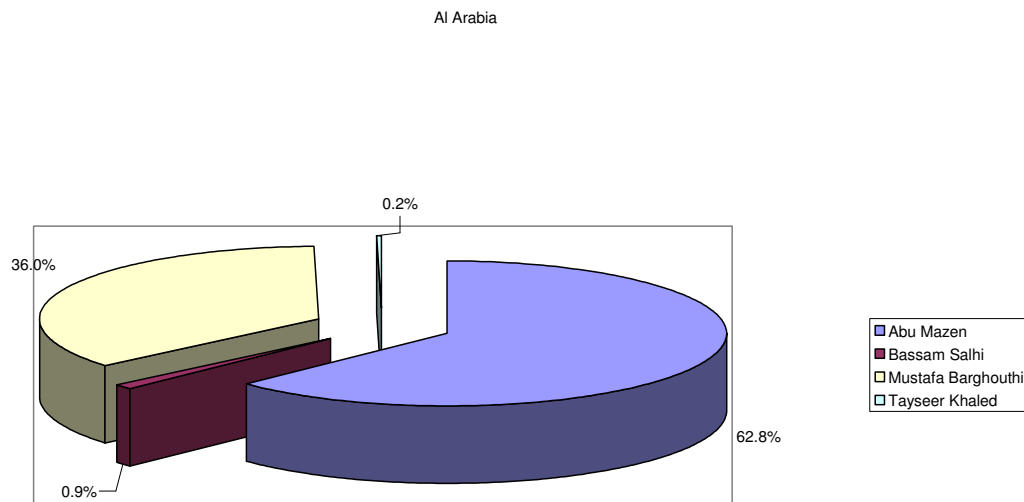


Watan's election coverage was therefore threefold: firstly, it unequivocally promoted the candidature of Mustafa Barghouthi. Secondly, it aired large amounts of paid political advertising that according to the candidates were available and accessible. Finally, it provided a platform for the candidates, although the benefits of providing this airtime were somewhat diluted by the repeated broadcasting of Mustafa Barghouthi's programme that was produced for the free airtime slot on Palestine Television, on Watan.

### Satellite channels

Given the importance placed on satellite television in Palestine the pan-Arab satellite channels were perceived to be of particular importance in the election campaign. Despite the perceived importance of these channels there was marginal coverage of the election campaign on Al Arabiya. Abu Mazen was the candidate who received the major share of coverage on Al Arabiya and a large percentage of this coverage can be attributed to the role of Abu Mazen as PLO Chairman and the interest of the Arab world in Palestinian affairs.

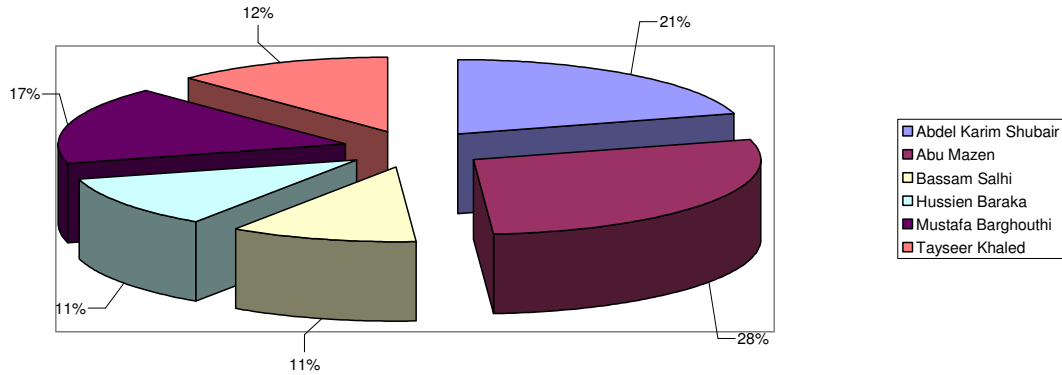
Chart 13: Share of coverage (duration) devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Al Arabiya (includes paid advertising) (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



Al Jazeera granted the elections a more prominent position in their programme schedule. The introduction of a daily slot within the evening news bulletin of Al Jazeera where the candidates' political programmes were outlined followed by an interview with each of them. This was a positive innovation and provided a public service to Palestinian citizens.

Chart 14: Share of coverage (duration) devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Al Jazeera during interviews with candidates (includes Al Jazeera analysis of political programmes)

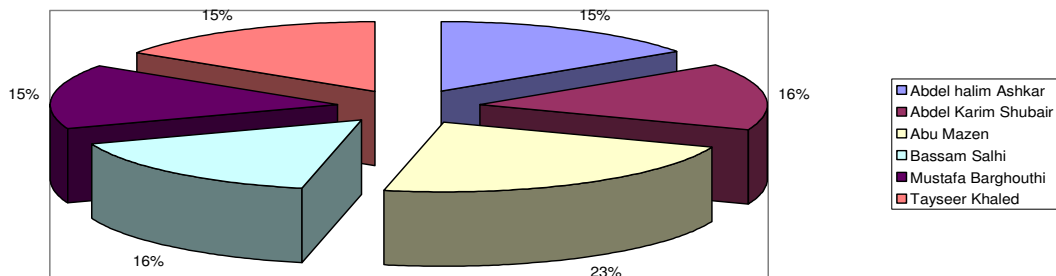
Al Jazeera - More than one opinion



The duration of these slots varied considerably with Abu Mazen enjoying significantly more airtime in terms of his own manifesto and interview than the majority of candidates. Overall, Abu Mazen remained the dominant figure covered by Al Jazeera.

Chart 15: Share of coverage (duration) devoted to the individual presidential candidates on Voice of Palestine (25.12.04-7.01.2005)

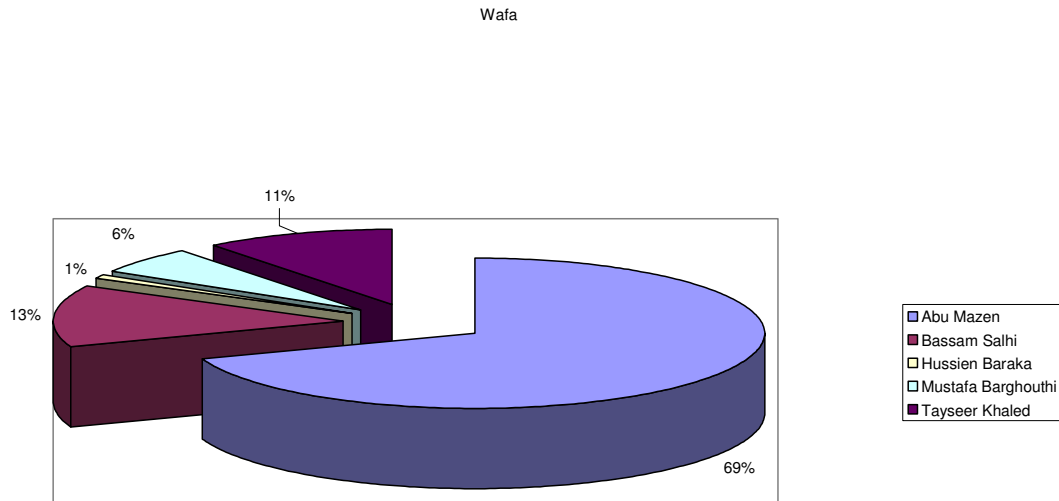
Voice of Palestine



The Voice of Palestine's coverage of the elections mainly relied upon the daily three minute slots allocated to the candidates as free airtime. One candidate did not take up the offer of free access.

The general lack of coverage on the Voice of Palestine meant that the free airtime allocated for the candidates provided balance and they remained editorially independent. The lack of any serious engagement with the elections and the almost complete absence of any analytical or informative programmes about the elections was a negative trend for the Voice of Palestine's coverage.

Chart 16: Coverage of the presidential candidates on Wafa's Internet portal (25.12.04-7.01.2005)



The information on Wafa's web portal was highly skewed towards Abu Mazen and the candidate enjoyed 69 per cent of space on the daily pages of the website. There was little sign that Wafa engaged seriously with the elections in terms of providing a balanced platform for the candidates.

### Summary conclusion

There are significant weaknesses in the current legal framework that need to be clarified. The elections were conducted in a spirit of progress and it was very much seen by the candidates as an opportunity to establish an agenda for institution building to help support the development of a political culture based on democratic elections. In this sense media coverage was perceived to be essential to enable the candidates to access voters. A major concern was campaign spending in the media and the lack of transparency in campaign financing. A second element of this factor is the establishment of advertising rates based on the lack of adequate regulation. The inflation of advertising rates during the election campaign period was seen to prohibit access to a number of candidates with limited budgets for their campaigns. The lack of regulations for paid-for political advertising in the commercial media is a source of concern and the lack of effective rules governing this area means that it is a priority to introduce legal provisions in order to provide a transparent and fair system for candidates to access paid-for space in the commercial media.

The newspapers also demonstrated some similar trends as the ones evident in the commercial broadcast media in terms of the abundance of paid-for political advertisements. In terms of editorial policy the press demonstrated a clear and unequivocal leaning in terms of its amount of space dedicated to the candidates towards Abu Mazen.

There were some welcome innovations in the media during the official campaign period. The programmes allocated to the candidates on Al Jazeera and Watan and the candidates' free

access to the public media system were a constructive component in the media's coverage of the elections. The free airtime on Palestine Television was allocated and broadcast without any areas of interference and candidates were content with the system.

The media overall did not serve balanced information about all of the candidates in terms of space. A degree of this lack of balance can be attributed to the fact that the elections were dominated by two candidates with the remaining candidates having a marginal position in public opinion polls. There remain pressures on the media in their coverage of the election campaign which are due to a combination of factors. Firstly, the coverage of the elections was a relatively new experience in Palestine and a learning experience for all of the stakeholders involved. Secondly, the lack of an adequate media law and more developed instruments setting out the role of the media during elections means that there are areas (e.g. the regulation of the broadcast media and some form of supervision of paid-for political advertising etc.) that are unclear and need to be regulated in a transparent and satisfactory manner in terms of prices and access. Thirdly, the prominent position of FATEH and the administrative duties of Abu Mazen and the priority in the news agenda to administrative affairs afforded this candidate excessive coverage in the news programmes broadcast by the public media and reported in the press. This also *de facto* enabled the Abu Mazen campaign access to administrative resources.

This being said there were very encouraging signs in the media's coverage of the elections and the campaign, especially considering the extraordinary difficulties experienced in Palestine at the time of the elections that demonstrate a degree of willingness to support the development of the media in support of the democratic process. There were weaknesses in the media's coverage of the campaign that will need to be addressed by the authorities in order to improve the legal framework for all media outlets in Palestine and provide greater legal certainty. This should be combined with clear provisions that guarantee commercial and public media provide access both for the candidates to communicate their political programmes to the public and for the public to engage critically with election issues in order that they can make an informed choice on the candidates in future elections in a transparent manner.