

Palestine Calling

The History of Radio Broadcasting in Palestine



By Wassim Abdullah
and Mashhour Abudaka



On March 30, 1936, Palestine made its first radio broadcast through a station that introduced itself as Huna al-Quds, this is Jerusalem, the home of Palestine broadcasting.

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In Palestine, radio broadcasts began on March 30, 1936, only 15 years after the first-ever news and entertainment broadcast on radio worldwide. This is Jerusalem Radio, built by the British Marconi Company, was the second radio broadcast to be established in the entire Middle East after Radio Cairo (1934).^{*} This is Jerusalem Radio covered not only Palestine but also Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, and parts of Egypt. It broadcast programs in Arabic, English, and Hebrew. Its first director was the poet Ibrahim Tuqan. The Irsal broadcast area and Irsal tower in Ramallah were among its most salient features, and it is possible to find some older radio receivers with the name Ramallah on their stations' dials. After 1948, This is Jerusalem Radio, under Jordanian control, became Near East Radio until it was stopped when Israel occupied the whole of Palestine in 1967 and overtook the medium-wave radio frequency that had been registered by the British as the frequency for the Palestinian transmitting station.

After 1967, the Palestinian leadership (PLO) made numerous attempts to operate Palestine Radio while in exile. It aimed to establish its own broadcasts outside Palestine and direct its programs towards Palestine. Some Arab countries provided one hour of broadcast from their national radios, and under the name Voice of the Palestinian Revolution, broadcasts were sent from Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Algiers, and Aden. The headquarters of the radio programs was in Beirut.

During the civil war in Lebanon that started in 1975 and throughout the various wars and invasions from Israel into Lebanon, the PLO always tried to have its own radio broadcasts free from the control of Arab governments, but the Israelis kept bombarding these stations to shut them up using frequency-guided bombs tuned to

the transmitter frequency. To avoid the total damage of the transmitters, studios, and staff, the antenna would be erected some 100 meters away from the transmitter so that the bomb would only destroy the antenna. A van with onboard transmitter and antenna made it difficult to be tracked by Israeli airplanes. In southern Lebanon, close to the border of northern Palestine, another method consisted in removing the output filter of Ham Radio Transmitters operating on 40 meters and using the lower harmonics to reach the people of northern Palestine within the medium-wave band.

After the 1982 Lebanese war and the dispersion of the Palestinian fighters and leadership, the idea of having a radio station that reaches Palestine remained a priority. An attempt was made in 1985 to get approval from the Cypriot authorities to build and operate Palestine Radio in Cyprus, just as the BBC and Radio Monte Carlo cover the whole Middle East from Cyprus, but the Cypriots adamantly refused. The prime minister of Greece at the time, Andreas Papandreou,

gave a green light to establish a Palestinian transmitter on any Greek Island of our choice that would do the job. A study of the island of Rhodes was made followed by another study of the island of Karpathos (south of Rhodes), which proved ideal, with only the sea between the island and the shores of Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon. A study of the appropriate frequency and antenna type and transmitter power was made at a specialized British consultancy company based in Brighton, and the next step was to obtain and register the selected frequency with the Greek authorities. After all this work, the project proved too large to be followed up on, and Palestine radio had to await the Oslo and Madrid accords that enabled the Palestinian leadership to return to Palestine.

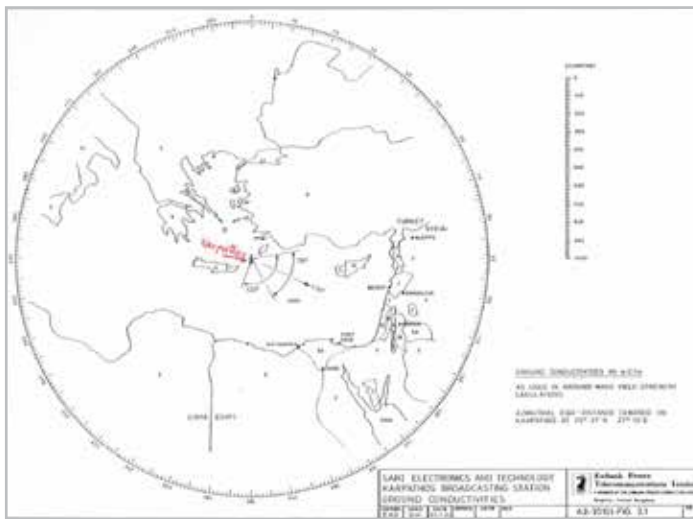
After the Oslo Agreement, broadcasts started from Gaza and Jericho. The Voice of Palestine began in Jericho on July 2, 1994, and as soon as the remaining cities of Ramallah, Hebron, Nablus, Jenin, etc. were added to the areas under PA control, Voice of Palestine moved its headquarters to Ramallah, and the same original Irsal tower was used to broadcast the programs. This was followed by the first Palestinian television station on September 2, 1994. All the TV stations were ground stations. As expected, this evolved into satellite TV and reception along with the technological developments of this field. Palestine TV now reaches all over the globe, including the Americas.

its legs and thereby destroying the output stage of the transmitter. A group of engineers from the Palestine Broadcasting Corporation and the Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology and others managed to repair the damage and get the station back on air. This did not please the Israelis, and on December 13, 2002, an Israeli military tank toppled the main historic 90-meter-high Irsal tower and destroyed the medium-wave station. Palestine lost the possibility of having one national medium-wave station to cover all its territory, and the Israelis blocked the import of a replacement medium-wave station. From then on, we had to depend on numerous FM transmitters to cover all the territory.

Although the number of broadcasters varies from one year to the next as newcomers get into this business and others leave, there are currently 67 working FM radio stations and 5 terrestrial TV stations that broadcast from the West Bank alone and a handful of FM radio stations and a couple of terrestrial TV stations that broadcast from Gaza.



Irsal tower in Ramallah, the last remaining broadcast station of Radio Palestine. Photo courtesy of Wassim Abdullah.



Greek island Karpatos showing coverage areas of the intended broadcast station that never materialized. Photo courtesy of Ewbank Preece Consulting Group.

Again, the Israelis would not leave the broadcasts alone, which culminated in the destruction and burning of the Palestinian radio and television building in Ramallah's *Um al-Sharayyet* neighborhood on January 19, 2002. Later that year, an Israeli helicopter bombarded the main three-legged inverted dipole broadcast tower in Ramallah, damaging one of

The only remaining tower that now carries the main FM transmitter for the Voice of Palestine was rehabilitated and maintained and repainted, thanks to UNDP funding, and the Voice of Palestine still broadcasts from this historical tower. But the original Marconi station and its successor, a Telefunken transmitter, are both buried under an area near the tower

where we hope a Palestine Radio Museum will be established and this history brought to life.

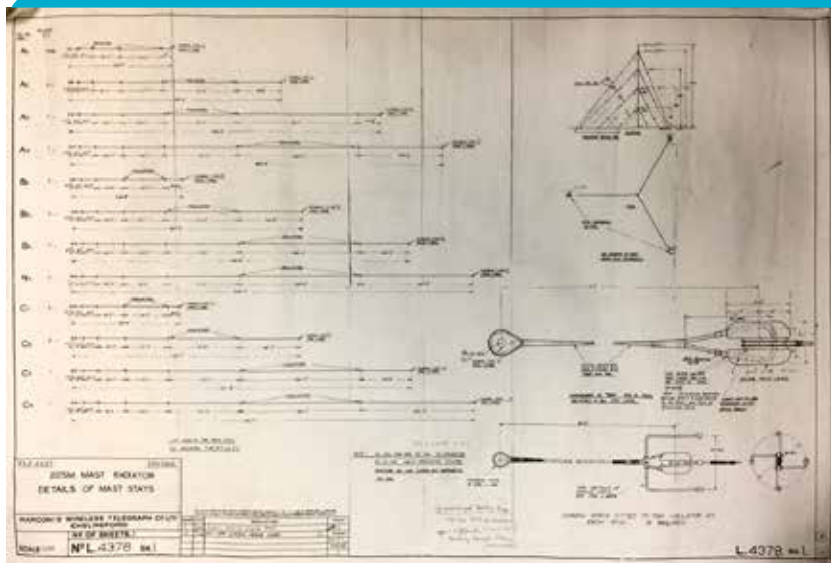
The Ministry of Telecom and Information Technology is the de facto regulator of the telecommunications spectrum. During the early days of the Palestinian Authority, and even though Article 36 of the telecommunications agreement of the Oslo Accords grants the Palestinians specific frequencies and the rights to use them, Israel barged into the premises of several local stations, destroying all their equipment and stealing some, especially the media material, under the false claim that their broadcasts affected Ben Gurion Airport's landing system.

Because the ministry was not able to defend the ability of these stations to broadcast, it could not charge them for the license fees of using a Palestinian frequency, which is considered a government asset. Therefore, the ministry started to provide what it called a No Objection License, a free license to enable as

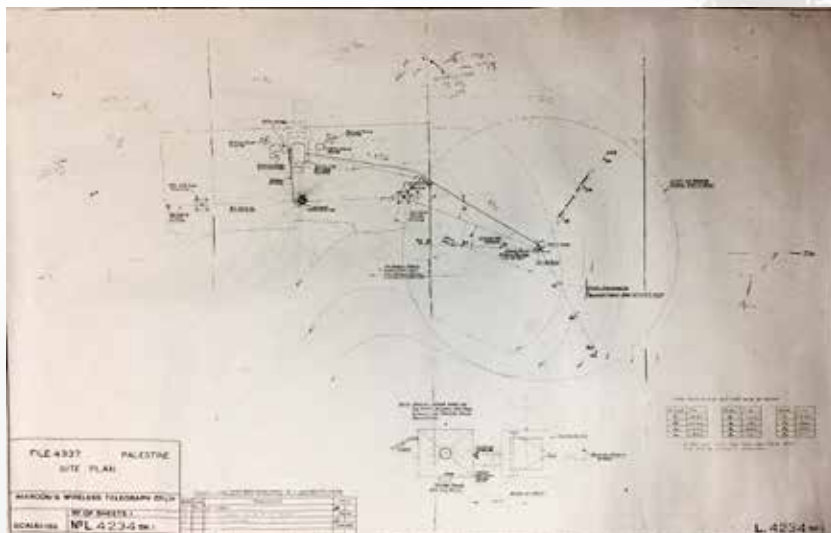
many broadcasters as the frequency spectrum allowed to erect and operate local radio and TV stations all over the country at their own risk.

Despite the intense irritation from the Israeli occupation authority, Palestine is home to numerous FM radio and several terrestrial TV stations that broadcast in both the West Bank and Gaza. Moreover, Palestinian broadcasters are resisting the Israeli settlers' attempts to take over every free frequency slot available. The Palestinian Ministry of Telecom has maintained a liberal licensing policy towards TV and radio broadcasting to resist Israeli dominance.

Palestine radios are alive and well, and the No Objection License has given a huge boost to the important specialties of radio, television, studios, editing, audio and video recording, lighting, outside broadcasting, programming, music and film and audio productions, acting, university and college courses, professional degrees and professions in the various media



Ewbank Preece Consulting Group that in the 1970s studied the suitability of Karpathos as a broadcasting station for Radio Palestine while in exile. Photo courtesy of Ewbank Preece Consulting Group.



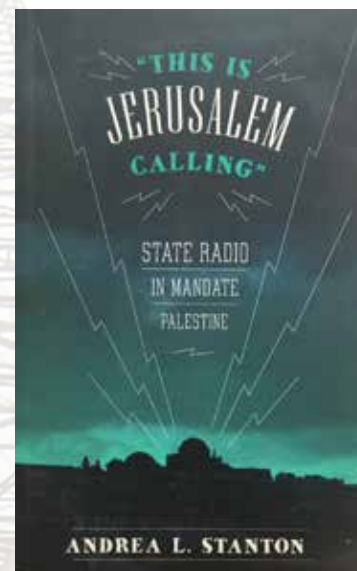
Original Marconi company earth plane and antenna design. Note the drawing title "Palestine Site Plan." Photo courtesy of Mahmoud Abdallah.

fields, etc. All these professions have kept the Palestinians a jump ahead compared to many other Arab countries where the main media is strictly under government control. In addition, with the proliferation of internet streaming for both audio and video, again, many specialties and professionals are found all over the Palestinian territories.

What is missing? One very important aspect of broadcasting or media in general can be condensed into three words: CONTENT IS KING. This is often buried under a huge barrage of overuse and an overdose of effects and lights and sounds and super-fast editing, which often become annoying and unpleasant. Good media also requires lots of research,

good education and culture, professional presentation, and proper training and pronunciation, especially when reading the news. Many reporters talk and act as if they ARE the news, not as if their job is simply to report the news.

This has been a very long, difficult, and exciting road. Having overcome many hurdles so far, no doubt the future will be even better.



Wassim Abdullah holds a BS in electronics and communications from London University and an MS in digital electronics from the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology. He has worked as a research and development engineer at Plessey Communications and at the Marconi Company in England. In addition, Wassim was the ICT consultant to a number of ministers, including two ministers of telecom and information technology and the minister of interior.



Mashhour Abudaka holds an MS in engineering from the Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, UK, and a PhD and DIC in engineering from the Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine at the University of London, UK. He has taught at Birzeit University, was executive director of the Palestinian IT Association of Companies (PITA), and served as minister of transport (2007–2009) and minister of telecom (2009–2012).

* The first-known radio news broadcast was made in 1920 in the United States. In 1922, Marconi was the first company to broadcast regular entertainment programs. In the 1970s, co-author Wassim Abdullah worked as a designer at the Marconi research and development department and learned "a hell of a lot," not to mention that he also contributed to the development of the frequency-change mechanisms on shortwave radio whereby the time to track station-frequency change was reduced from 2–8 minutes to 2–8 seconds. It then became possible to immediately track and follow a new broadcasting frequency as soon as the listener is asked to change the frequency.