

Press Freedom Index 2015
Non-state groups: tyrants of information

Besides pressure from governments, journalists also faced violent threats from non-state groups in 2014. Far from being a homogenous whole, these groups pursue various goals including expansionist, political or financial and criminal aims.

What such groups have in common, despite their differences and disparate motivations, is that they operate against, or in parallel with, established legal systems and feel bound only by whatever laws they created for themselves. Some, however, may have more or less tenuous links with government, administrative or political authorities. They share a visceral intolerance of any information that they regard as contrary to their aims. Journalists who attempt to work against this background, untangling corruption or exposing the mistreatment of civilians, find themselves caught in a storm in which violence is a certainty and the rule of law has become a distant reference.

Terror and information black holes

In some parts of Africa and the Middle East, 2014 was marked by the progression of some groups beyond the borders of their home countries with the expansionist goal of conquering populations and seizing territory. Some, such as Islamic State (IS) in **Iraq** and **Syria** and Boko Haram in **Nigeria** which has moved into **Cameroun** and **Niger**, use extreme and indiscriminate violence to cause terror.

In **Iraq** (156th) and **Syria** (177th), the Jihadi militants of IS pursue their aims by threatening, kidnapping and even murdering journalists. [No independent information emerges](#) from areas they control such as Fallujah, Ramadi, Mosul and Samarra in Iraq. Most official and independent broadcasters have ceased transmitting. Journalists have been arrested, detained and even murdered in public to serve as examples. In the space of a year, seven journalists and several citizen journalists were killed in Syria and four in Iraq.

In the course of 2014, [the Boko Haram Islamist militia](#) seized control of Borno State in north-eastern **Nigeria** (111th). Journalists do not have access to the area and news of the mistreatment of the civilian population has emerged only in dribs and drabs.

The militia destroyed the communications infrastructure, deepening the region's isolation. The group's control did not stop at the border. Numerous incursions were reported into **Niger** (47th), **Cameroun** (133rd), and even **Chad** (135th), whose armies were deployed to face the threat. The governments of Nigeria and its neighbours have attempted to quell the news of these incursions.

In Chad, journalists were accused of plunging the country into anarchy by reporting on the north-south problems. In Cameroun, the government brought in anti-terrorism legislation with the tacit aim of stifling coverage of Boko Haram, and whose provisions are a major threat to journalists' freedom to report on security issues.

Militias and paramilitaries impose their rule...

Inside their countries' borders, militias and self-proclaimed rebel groups have also been trying to extend their power against the existing authorities. Journalists who work in these areas found themselves caught in the middle and forced to choose one side or the other or stay silent.

... in national conflicts

In the **Central African Republic (CAR)** (110th), the muslim-dominated militia Séléka, which had destroyed most independent radio stations in 2013 during its advance on Bangui, continued to [impose its editorial line on the country's media, permitting no coverage of its activities](#). Despite being officially dismantled, it still retains some influence, threatening any journalist who portrays Muslims in a negative light. For their part, the Anti-balaka Christian militias do the same with those who expose abuses by its militants. Many CAR journalists have chosen exile rather than face death.

[In Libya \(154th\), journalists who try to cover the country's conflict are putting their lives at risk](#). Four have been killed by an amorphous assemblage of Islamist groups, including Ansar al-Sharia. The youngest was aged just 18. In the chaos of Libya, it is difficult for journalists to know from where the next attack will come.

Some countries not officially at war have had to face offensives by armed militias that have relentlessly gained ground. This was what happened with the [Houthis in Yemen \(168th\)](#). After they captured the capital Sanaa in October 2014, the Houthi rebels' first goal was to silence the media. In the month that followed, Reporters Without Borders recorded 52 instances of exactions against journalists or news organisations.

In **Somalia** (172nd), the Mogadishu government established in 2012 has had to contend with attacks by the al-Shabab militia. The militia was responsible for the murders of at least three journalists in bomb attacks in 2014. Several others were seriously wounded in shootings and suicide bombings.

The clear failure of the process to demobilise paramilitary groups has proved to be a genuine scourge in **Colombia** (128th), [where armed criminal gangs continue to sow terror with almost total impunity](#). The paramilitary group Aguilas Negras (Black Eagles), among the main predators of press freedom in the country, continues its efforts to intimidate journalists. Several news outlets and journalists were threatened by the group. They issued [three blacklists in less than four days](#) in early December.

... in conflicts motivated by independence ambitions

In East **Ukraine** (129th), pro-Russian independence activists, who have repudiated the central government on the grounds that it is too pro-European, proclaimed “separatist” republics in the Donbass region in the spring. Those behind the would-be states attempted to take over the existing administrative and civilian structures. Journalists were among their favourite targets and were attacked directly or prevented from accessing areas controlled by the rebels.

Since May 2014, six media workers have been killed while trying to report on the conflict, and dozens of journalists have been arrested by the rebels of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk. The growth in volunteer battalions fighting alongside the regular Ukrainian army also contributed to the establishment of arbitrary rule-by-militia in the region. When threats, the destruction of newsrooms and hostage-taking don't work, the rebel groups simply replace the bosses of a newspaper with other journalists in their pay. Faced with the impossibility of working in the region, many journalists go into exile. Those who stay behind work in an atmosphere of oppressive self-censorship.

In the separatist province of Balochistan in western **Pakistan** (159th), Baloch rebels, who have been resisting the Pakistani state since 1947, also ensure their version of events prevails on pain of death. In August 2014, [three journalists were shot dead by gunmen](#) who burst into the offices of the news agency *Online*.

Back in 2012, the agency's bureau chief, Irshad Mastoi, explained that he was caught between the Baloch insurgents, who demanded that the agency publish their statements, and threats of retaliation by Pakistani intelligence if he yielded to rebel pressure. His independence cost him his life.

Organized crime and impunity

Criminal gangs taking advantage of political patronage or exploiting the government's inability to impose its authority pose a genuine threat for investigative journalists who try to keep the public informed about corruption and the collusion that sometimes exists between the powers in place and such groups. Attacks on journalists are a source of particular concern since they are carried out in a climate of almost total impunity.

In **Mexico** (148th), the country where more journalists are killed in the course of their work than anywhere else in the Americas, it is not a good idea to talk about links between the authorities and organised crime. Two out of the three journalists killed in 2014, [Octavio Rojas Hernandez](#) in Oaxaca state, [Jorge Torres Palacio](#) in Veracruz and the netizen [María del Rosario Fuentes Rubio](#) in Tamaulipas, were all investigating such matters.

A photo of Fuentes Rubio's dead body was published on her Twitter account the day after her kidnaping, accompanied by the message: “Shut down your accounts, do not risk your families' lives as I have done. I ask your forgiveness.”

A year earlier, a \$45,000 price tag was placed on the head of the *Valor por Tamaulipas* administrator. As a result, many news organisations in Latin America have officially given up covering the illegal drugs trade for fear of reprisals.

In the **Philippines** (141st), the journalist [Nilo Baculo Sr. was killed after he published stories](#) about the involvement of public and elected officials in drug trafficking. He was shot outside his home on 9 June 2014 by private militiamen in the pay of politicians. In such a climate of fear, self-censorship is the rule.

In **Italy** (73rd), such violence is growing at an alarming rate, according to [Ossigeno per l'informazione](#), an Italian NGO that monitors freedom of information which recorded 421 threats in 2014, a 10 percent increase over 2013. Death threats are common and are usually made in the form of letters or symbols that signify death, such as a cross scratched on a journalist's car, or bullets sent through the post...

Sometimes the target's property is damaged. On 17 June, the car of Guido Scarpino, a journalist with the daily *Il Garantista*, was set on fire in Cosenza province, a stronghold of the 'Ndrangheta, which is on [the Reporters Without Borders list of "Predators of Press Freedom."](#)

To this can be added the increasing use of defamation suits by interest groups that wish to silence journalists – a practice that is perfectly legal as well as being highly effective.