



## 2019 RSF Index: Middle East's journalists deliberately targeted

Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi's murder in October 2018 shed a harsh light on the risks run by the region's journalists when they fail to either repeat the state's propaganda or remain silent. As a result of wars, persecution by authoritarian regimes, as well as the number of journalists killed, threatened, silenced, or forced into exile, most of the region's countries are ranked low in the World Press Freedom Index.

Khashoggi's shocking murder in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul inevitably affected Saudi Arabia's ranking in RSF's 2019 Index. The kingdom fell three places to 172nd position and is now one of the world's ten worst countries for journalists. Despite strong international condemnation, the opaque manner in which Khashoggi's accused murderers are being tried suggests that the highest-level officials presumably involved in his murder will go unpunished. For this reason, [RSF continues to call for an independent international investigation into the Khashoggi murder](#), as well as the release of the 30 or so journalists currently held in Saudi Arabia.

Two Syrian journalists, [Raed Fares and Hamoud Jneed](#), were murdered in late 2018 in Syria (174th), where impunity is also the rule. Civil society blamed the radical armed group Hay'at Tahrir al Sham for their deaths, but no one was brought to justice. Even if 2018 saw a slight fall in the number of journalists killed in Syria, the country continues to be extremely dangerous for media personnel. Under threat from both Bashar al-Assad's forces and the many armed rebel groups, journalists risk being sent to one of the regime's prisons. In 2018, the government officially recognized that [several journalists died in detention](#) in recent years. Imprisonment can also be fatal in Yemen (168th, -1). Two days after being released, the journalist [Anwar El Rakan](#) died of ailments resulting from mistreatment during nearly a year of detention by Houthi rebels.

The past year was also deadly for journalists in Palestine (137th, -3). Although clearly identifiable by a vest or helmet labeled "Press," two Palestinian journalists, Yaser Murtaja and Ahmed Abu Hussein, were killed by Israeli snipers while covering the "March of Return" protests at the Gaza Strip's border with Israel (88th, -3) in 2018. [RSF asked the International Criminal Court to investigate these serious incidents](#).

### Prisons full of journalists

Imprisonment is another danger that hangs over the region's media personnel, with Iran continuing to be one of the world's biggest jailers of journalists. Arrests of professional and non-professional journalists, especially those posting on social networks, increased in 2018,

contributing to Iran's fall by another six places in the Index to 170th position. February 2019 saw revelations by RSF about the extent of the [Iranian state's lies](#). On the basis of a leaked Iranian justice department file, RSF concluded that at least 860 journalists and citizen-journalists were prosecuted, arrested, imprisoned and in some cases executed in Iran between 1979 and 2009.

Dozens of journalists also languish in prison, often without trial, in Bahrain (down one at 167th), Egypt (down two at 163rd) and Saudi Arabia. Others have been jailed by military courts. They include Ismail Alexandrani, an Egyptian journalist and researcher specializing in Jihadi groups in Sinai, who was not present in court on the day [he was sentenced to ten years in prison](#). The Saudi justice system is even more opaque. At least 30 journalists are currently held in Saudi Arabia, most of them victims of waves of arrests at the end of 2017 and in the spring and summer of 2018. Three are the victims of enforced disappearance. These journalists have been [mistreated and tortured. Some have been sexually harassed](#). This list includes Eman al Nafjan, who blogged as [Saudiwoman](#). Al Nafjan was just freed provisionally after [being held for 12 months, ten of them](#) without knowing what she was charged with.

A degree of obscurity also reigns in Israel, where Palestinian journalists are kept in administrative detention for months on end without warrants and without clear charges at the time of their arrest. Reporter and columnist Lama Khater has been [held since 24 July 2018](#).

Even when journalists are not imprisoned, the judicial system and other mechanisms are readily used to harass them and obstruct their work. In Israel, Palestine, and Iraq (156th), politicians and businessmen sue journalists, have them arrested, or put pressure on the media they work for so that they are forced to censor themselves.

### **Authoritarian regimes reinforced**

The Middle East's poor showing in the 2019 Index highlights the degree to which the hopes of democratization raised by the Arab Spring are fading by the year. Countries with authoritarian regimes such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (133rd) and Syria continue to openly persecute journalists in the name of combatting "terrorism" and online "fake news," deliberately using international issues to brand and punish critical comments or reporting. The Emirati blogger Ahmed Mansoor, for example, was sentenced to [ten years in prison](#) for posting "false information on social networks" and for "sullying the status and prestige of the United Arab Emirates and its symbols."

It comes as no surprise that many of the region's countries have turned their sights on social networks. Iran, which is tackling an unprecedented wave of protests in several of its cities, has clamped down even harder on online information and is still blocking several apps such as Telegram, Facebook and Twitter.

In Iraq, [the entire Internet was disconnected](#) to limit coverage of protests in July 2018. In Egypt and the Gulf states, the websites of a very large number of newspapers are blocked. There is also blocking in Jordan (130th) and Palestine, albeit on a lesser scale. Online surveillance is allowed under cyber-crime laws and is practiced more and more, including in Lebanon (101st). Thanks to new technology the pursuit of critical journalists has reached

unprecedented levels. Recent revelations by Saudi [dissidents and journalists who have fled abroad](#), as well as leaks about the spying on journalists by other Gulf state such as the [UAE](#), have drawn attention to the way some countries are using sophisticated surveillance methods to spy on journalists, even when they are abroad.

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