

RSF 2021 Index: Covid-19, latest ailment to afflict Middle East's moribund media

While exacerbating public discontent in the Middle East, the Covid-19 pandemic has also highlighted the worrying state of its media, which are slowly being killed off by repressive policies. The region continues to have 12 countries marked in red or black on the World Press Freedom map, signalling that the situation is bad or very bad. The conspicuous absence of change in these countries is reflected in the lack of significant movement in the Index.

With massaged statistics and media outlets limited to publishing official releases, the Middle East's most authoritarian countries have used the pandemic to continue or even reinforce their existing methods for gagging the press. **Saudi Arabia** (170th), **Egypt** (166th) and **Syria** (up 1 at 173rd) already exercised almost total control over their media by means of very restrictive press freedom laws and regulators, and they reaffirmed their monopoly of news and information from the start of the pandemic.

In Egypt, where the law allows the authorities to block online media and imprison journalists for spreading "fake news," the government banned the publication of any pandemic statistics other than those provided by the health ministry, and [blocked](#) more than 30 websites and web pages at the height of the pandemic. No journalists were allowed to question the government's data. *The Guardian's* correspondent, Ruth Michaelson, was [expelled](#) in March for quoting from a study suggesting that the real number of Covid-19 cases was much higher than the official figures.

The news is also controlled in Syria, where the authorities imposed a [blackout](#) on all information about the virus right from the start of the pandemic. While neighbouring countries such as Iran and Lebanon, which have troops in Syria, were already being hit hard by the pandemic, the state media continued to maintain for weeks that there were no cases in Syria, leaving the population in a state of complete ignorance. As in Egypt, the government [decreed](#) that the official press agency *Sana* was the only source of valid information. The governmental monopoly of information in the Middle East is such that even the pro-government Saudi journalists union reported a media audience decline because the public was turning directly to official websites for information, without bothering with media outlets.

Iran (down 1 at 174th)

Pandemic brings renewed crackdown

Thanks to its constant ruthless efforts to control journalists, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been near the bottom of RSF's Index ever since the Index was established in 2002. The situation has worsened with the Covid-19 pandemic because the authorities have been determined to minimise the toll. The government talked of 80,000 Covid-19 deaths but an independent study estimated that at least 180,000 people had died from the effects of the virus. The authorities stepped up information control in both traditional media and online, interrogating, arresting and convicting both professional and citizen journalists. Furthermore, the country that has executed the highest number of journalists over the past 50 years continued the practice in 2020. Rouhollah Zam, the director of the *Amadnews* channel on Telegram, was executed on 12 November 2020 after being convicted of encouraging the protests against corruption and the economic situation in the winter of 2017-2018.

One crisis hiding another

The situation of journalists in **Lebanon** (down 5 at 107th) was a source of envy in the region for years but this is no longer necessarily the case. Covering subjects such as corruption is now increasingly dangerous, as highlighted by the [murder](#) of Lokman Slim, a journalist and political analyst who specialised in covering Shia Islam and was killed by gunfire. The resumption of street protests, which were interrupted by the pandemic lockdown, has put reporters back on the front line, with [attacks](#) on media personnel by protesters and police becoming increasingly common. All of these different elements contributed to Lebanon's five-place fall in RSF's 2021 Index, one of this year's biggest.

At the same time, the Lebanese public's mistrust of traditional media (which are often linked to political parties) and the ruling elites has been reflected in a demand for freely and independently reported information from alternative sources. Visits to the pan-Arab news website *Daraj*, which created a special section for coronavirus news, have [increased](#) by nearly 50%. This enthusiasm for independent news is a small ray of hope for the media in the "Switzerland of the Middle East," where the situation for journalists is extremely precarious as a result of an unprecedented political and economic crisis aggravated by the pandemic. Several media outlets have had to lay off personnel or to follow media such as *Future TV* and *The Daily Star*, which had already been forced to close. And many of the journalists who still have jobs have not been paid for months.

Exposing authoritarianism

The right to information has also been tested in other countries in the region, which have tried to cover up the pandemic's impact on society. Arrests of journalists and publication bans have reinforced existing restrictive measures. In **Jordan** (down 1 at 129th), two *Roya TV* representatives were briefly [jailed](#) in April 2020 for broadcasting a report showing people in a low-income district of the capital, Amman, complaining about their inability to work as a result of the coronavirus lockdown. As the pandemic continued to fuel unrest, the authorities issued [gag orders](#) in August 2020 to prevent media outlets and the public from disseminating photos and video of teachers protesting against a pay freeze.

In **Iraq** (down 1 at 163rd), media were accused of inciting rebellion and encouraging irresponsible protesting in the country's autonomous northern Kurdistan region, where a wave of anti-government protests intensified following a freeze on civil servants' pay and various restrictions on movements. The Kurdistan Regional Government banned *NRT TV* from broadcasting and persecuted independent journalists, both those covering the protests in the field and those sharing information on social media. Three journalists arrested in October 2020 were [sentenced](#) to six years in prison in February 2021 on charges on "undermining national security". One was accused of spying for Iran.

Overall most of the Middle East's governments responded to a public health, economic and political situation with increased authoritarianism in an attempt to maintain control. Instead of allowing the press to help circulate reliable information and play a watchdog role, they chose to undermine the already beleaguered media's freedom even more, with the probability that this will leave lasting scars on the media landscape.