

Middle East / North Africa

Region performs poorly, Israel nose-dives

Israel cast down by Operation Cast Lead

This is the first time that Israel (internal) is not at the head of the Middle Eastern countries in the press freedom index. By falling 47 places to 93rd position, it is now behind Kuwait (60th), United Arab Emirates (86th) and Lebanon (61st). Arrests of journalists (and not only foreign ones), their conviction and in some cases their deportation are the reasons for Israel's nose-dive. Israel's media are outspoken and investigate sensitive subjects thoroughly, but military censorship is still in force.

Like the United States, Israel has a separate ranking for activities outside its own territory. Israel (extraterritorial) also fell, to 150th position, as a result of its offensive against the Gaza Strip, Operation Cast Lead, in which the Israeli military bombarded buildings housing Palestinian news media. Foreign and Israeli media were denied access to the Gaza Strip throughout the offensive.

Iran at gates of infernal trio

Iran (172nd) now stands at the threshold of the infernal trio of countries at the very bottom of the index after a major deterioration in its press freedom situation marked by blogger **Omidreza Mirsayafi's** death in Evin prison, Iranian-American journalist **Roxana Saberi's** arrest and the crackdown in the wake of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection in June. Many journalists were arrested and a Stalinist-style show trial began in Tehran in which the most basic rights of the defendants are still being flouted.

Yemen (167th) continued to sink towards the bottom of the rankings. Journalists pay for the government's scorched-earth policies towards any form of separatism, not only in the north against the Zaydi rebels but also in the south. The Saleh government has drastically curtailed freedom of expression since May, imposing a news blackout on its military operations.

A similar downward trend continued in Syria (165th). Although there was less recourse to physical violence against journalists, the situation was very worrying, with repression steadily tightening its grip and closing off the remaining areas of freedom available to the independent and opposition media.

Although Libya (156th) rose a few positions in the rankings, its already limited tolerance of free expression suffered setbacks this year. The import of Arab and other foreign publications was permitted, but two privately-owned publications created in 2007 by Al-Ghad, a company owned by Muammar Gaddafi's son Seif Al-Islam, were nationalised and the Al-Libya TV station's bureaux were closed.

The situation of journalists in Iraq (145th) has evolved inasmuch as the problem is no longer the same. Instead of targeted threats from militias or terrorist groups, Iraqi journalists now have to cope with hostility from officials and politicians who deny the media access to certain areas. Abusive prosecutions and defamation actions against newspapers that expose corruption are now common. Even supposedly pro-government media are not spared.

The run-up to major elections was marked by greater hostility towards journalists in the Maghreb. There was an increase in prosecutions of news media in Algeria (141st) while President Ben Ali's regime stepped up its suppression of all independent journalism in Tunisia (154th).

Morocco (127th) continued the fall that it began three years ago. The royal palace has become more vigilant about the "red lines" that the press must not cross but is changing the methods used to ensure respect. As with other regimes, financial reprisals are becoming the preferred weapon for use against journalists who go too far. Exorbitant damages awards now pose more of a threat to the Moroccan media than prison sentences.

There was unfortunately little evolution in the Gulf states, where there is an almost complete absence of independent media. The ruling families have a monopoly of radio and TV and the printing and distribution of newspapers, and self-censorship is systematic.