

Middle East and North Africa - Press Freedom Index 2013

2012 -- Year Two of the new Arab world

“Arab spring” uprisings caused a lot of movement in the Press Freedom Index in 2011 and the situation was still very mixed in 2012, with countries where governments have fallen, countries where they still survive but are facing uprisings, and countries where, by dint of compromises and promises, they have managed to assuage the demands for change.

Syria and Bahrain at the bottom of the index

Syria is ranked 176th in the index, fourth from last. Of all the ranked countries, it is the one that saw the most attacks on freedom of information. Journalists are targeted by all the parties to the conflict – the regular army and the various opposition factions – who are waging an information war.

Bahrain (165th) rose eight places, after limited improvement. The government crackdown continued in 2012 but was slightly less violent than the previous year, when the country plunged 29 places. In all, Bahrain has fallen 66 places in the space of four years and is now in the bottom 20.

Fertile revolutions for freedom of information?

After the fall of dictators, the promises of media pluralism and independence are not always sufficiently translated into action.

Libya (131st, +23) rose more than 20 places. This jump was due to the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi’s 42-year regime and its positive impact on freedom of information. Libya’s ranking the year before was affected by all the violations in 2011, when Gaddafi was still clinging to power. The improvements nonetheless need to be confirmed by the inclusion of freedom of information in the constitution and the adoption of laws guaranteeing this freedom and providing real protection for journalists and safeguards for media pluralism and independence.

Two years after Ben Ali’s fall, **Tunisia** (138th) slipped three places, after jumping more than 30 places in 2011. Why? Because there was an increase in attacks on journalists in the first quarter of 2012 and because the authorities have maintained a judicial void by delaying the implementation of decree-laws regulating the media. This allowed them to arbitrarily appoint people to run the state-owned media. Furthermore, politicians often refer to journalists and news media with contempt or even hate.

Egypt (158th) rose eight places, two years after Hosni Mubarak's departure. This was a slight improvement on 2011, when violence against media personnel caused the country to plummet 39 places from 127th. Journalists and netizens continue to be the targets of physical attacks, arrests and trials and one was fatally injured in December. Shortly after winning elections, the Muslim Brotherhood appointed new executives and editors to run the state newspapers, which had a major impact on their editorial policies. The constitution adopted at the end of 2012 contains vaguely-worded provisions that clearly threaten freedoms. News media can still be closed or seized on the orders of a judge.

Yemen (171st, +2) continued to languish in the bottom ten. There have been no legislative changes in the year since Abd Rab Mansour Hadi took over as president. Journalists are still exposed to physical attacks, prosecution and even jail sentences. A bill on privately-owned broadcasts and electronic media with a number of draconian provisions, which was submitted to parliament in 2012, has not been totally abandoned.

“Arab winter” turns icy or News providers still at risk in countries spared by Arab spring

Buffeted by social and economic protests, the **Sultanate of Oman** (141st) sank 24 places, the biggest fall in the Middle East and North Africa in 2012. Some 50 netizens and bloggers were prosecuted on lèse majesté or cyber-crime charges in 2012. No fewer than 28 were convicted in December alone, in trials that trampled on defence rights. The authorities gave promises in response to demands for political, social and economic change but did not carry them out.

A retrograde royal decree in September was one of the reasons why **Jordan** (134th, -6) fell. The decree changed the press law and drastically restricted freedom of information, especially for online media, brushing aside all the reform promises that the government gave at the height of the popular unrest in 2011. Journalists are being tried before military courts, especially when they criticize the royal family.

Algeria (125th, -3) fell a few places because journalists were the targets of both physical attacks and judicial proceedings, and because of an increase in economic pressure on independent media. More than a year after parliament passed a law that is supposed to abolish the state's broadcasting monopoly, there are still no privately-owned TV stations because a regulatory authority, an essential prior condition, has still not been created. So, for the time being, the new law is nothing but window dressing.

The ranking of **Morocco** (136th, +2) is stable. Media reform was announced after Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane took office in November 2011 but his government is dragging its feet on the

promised changes, especially decriminalization of media offences. Decisions on such matters as the granting and withdrawal of accreditation are often arbitrary and lacking in transparency.

Palestine (146th) is still in the bottom quarter but it rose eight places. An improvement in relations between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas has had a positive impact on freedom of information and the working environment for journalists.

Iraq (150th) rose three places, but this followed a fall of 22 places last year. The security situation for journalists continues to be very worrying, with three killed in connection with their work in 2012 and seven killed in 2011. Journalists are constantly obstructed.

There were only slight changes in the rankings of **Saudi Arabia** (163rd, -5), **Kuwait** (77th, +1) and the **United Arab Emirates** (114th, -2).

Lebanon (101st) fell eight places, after its media became more polarized by neighbouring Syria's civil war. Its journalists are exposed to arbitrary detention and mistreatment.

The 20-place fall of **Israel** (112nd) is due to the actions of the Israel Defence Forces in the Palestinian Territories – actions that used to be given a separate ranking in the index under the label of "Israel extraterritorial". During Operation "Pillar of Defence" in November 2012, the IDF deliberately targeted journalists and buildings housing media that are affiliated to Hamas or support it. And the arbitrary arrest and detention of Palestinian journalists is still commonplace. Israeli journalists meanwhile enjoy real freedom of expression but military censorship continues to be a structural problem.

Relatives held hostage in Iran

Somalia's fall in the index due to the many deaths of journalists there in 2012 allowed **Iran** (174th) to rise one place. Its print and broadcast media and news websites are all controlled by the Ministry of Intelligence and the Revolutionary Guards. The authorities have internationalized their repression by making hostages out of the relatives of Iranian journalists who work abroad or in Iran for foreign news media. The Islamic Republic is one of the world's five biggest prisons for news and information providers.