

Press Freedom Index 2014 Middle East and North Africa

SYRIAN CRISIS IMPACTS FREEDOM OF INFORMATION IN REGION

Already the world's most dangerous country for journalists, **Syria** saw a further decline in the security situation in 2013 as the conflict became more complex. More than 110 news and information providers have been killed since the conflict began in March 2011. They are under attack from both sides: on the one hand by Bashar Al-Assad's regular army, which continues to arrest and kill those who document the conflict; and on the other by armed Islamist groups in the so-called "liberated" areas in the north, above all by Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS).

Since the spring of 2013, these Jihadi groups have been abducting journalists and installing legal committees (hay'at shar'iya) that dispense arbitrary justice. The security forces operated by the Democratic and Union Party (PYD), the dominant political group in the Kurdish regions, pose an additional obstacle to freedom of information. Under threat from all sides, Syrian news providers are fleeing the country in large numbers.

In **Lebanon**, where the media serve as the propaganda outlets of businessmen and politicians, the Syrian conflict has consolidated the existing fault line between media allied with "8 March" (the mainly Shiite movement supported by Tehran and Damascus) and media allied with "14 March" (the mainly Sunni coalition supported by Saudi Arabia against Damascus). This polarization between media that support and oppose the Syrian government has reinforced Lebanon's social and political polarization.

In **Jordan**, the Arab Spring and the Syrian conflict have led the authorities to tighten their grip on the media and, in particular, the Internet, despite an outcry from civil society. Access to around 300 news websites was blocked within Jordan in June 2013 under a new media law that drastically restricts online freedom of information.

Since 2012, **Iraq** has been sinking into a new cycle of violence that is an aftereffect of the chaos and civil war following the US-led intervention of 2003. Religious tension between Sunnis and Shiites is being exacerbated by the Syrian crisis and, like the constant obstructiveness of the authorities and security forces, is having a negative impact on the safety of journalists and the independence of the media.

Iran, a major regional actor, is playing a key role in the Syrian conflict. The Iranian authorities continue to control news coverage strictly, especially when it concerns its ally, the Assad regime, the Revolutionary Guard presence in Syria and Iran's financial aid. Any coverage of these subjects is regarded as "endangering national security." Reporting on the nuclear issue, human rights and prisoners of conscience is also censored.

At the end of 2013, Iran continued to be one of the world's biggest prisons for media personnel, with 50 journalists and netizens detained. A few prisoners of conscience were released, but President Hassan Rouhani has not kept his campaign promises to "release all political prisoners" and bring about a change "in favour of free speech and media freedom."

Syria

According to the tally kept by Reporters Without Borders:

- At least 110 news providers (including 25 professional journalists) were killed in connection with their work from March 2011 to December 2013. Seven of the professional journalists were foreign.
- At least 25 Syrian news providers fled abroad during the same period.

At the end of 2013:

- Around 20 Syrian news providers were being held by the Assad regime.
- 19 foreign journalists were detained, held hostage or missing.
- At least 20 Syrian news providers were being held hostage by Islamist armed groups

NON-STATE GROUPS WITH NO LEGITIMACY IMPOSE REIGN OF FEAR

Non-state groups are the main threat to news providers and a source of danger for everyone in several countries in the region. The Islamist armed groups responsible for threats and kidnappings in Syria since the spring of 2013 count among the latest predators of freedom of information. In Iraq, journalists are targeted by armed militias often linked to organizations that are both political and religious in nature.

In **Libya**, freedom of information is under threat from the violence that continues to rock the country. Working as journalist is still very arduous nearly three years after the February 2011 uprising against the Gaddafi regime, which used strict media control to hold on to power for more than four decades. The enthusiasm generated by the Libyan “media spring” is running out of steam.

Ruled by a provisional government, today’s “free” Libya is on the verge of anarchy with the reign of armed militias replacing the rule of law. This has had a big impact on journalists. As a result of repeated arrests, intimidation, arbitrary detention and even torture, they are censoring themselves again. All the militias have been guilty of abuses against journalists including those created summarily, those legitimized by the government – such as the Libya Shield Force, placed under the defence ministry’s nominal authority – and well-known militias such as Al-Qa’qa’a.

Yemen has enjoyed more freedom of expression since Abd Rab Mansour Hadi took over from Ali Abdullah Saleh as president in February 2012 but a range of armed groups – including those linked to Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the Houthi rebellion in the north, the secessionist movement in the south, and conservative clerics – have been responsible for an upsurge in threats and violence against the media. The political parties also play a role, as most Yemeni media are the mouthpieces of parties, and many journalists are the victims of mistrust or even hostility from the security forces.

The Freedom Foundation, a Yemeni NGO that monitors the situation of the media, reported a total of 145 attacks affecting 205 people in the first half of 2013. The Union of Yemeni Journalists reported a total of 333 attacks against journalists and media at the height of the uprising in 2011. And impunity reigns. The justice system has on the whole failed to investigate these abuses and punish those responsible. Despite the start of a national dialogue, the press and publications law has not been amended. Special courts and jail terms for journalists are still in effect.

Double penalty for Iraqi journalists

Armed groups have no compunction about killing media personnel in Iraq. Four TV journalists were gunned down in the northern city of Mosul in the space of two months in late 2013. Two cameramen employed by local stations, Alaa Edward Boutros of *Nineveh Al-Ghad* and Bashar Abdulqader Najm al-Nouaymi of *Al-Mosuliya*, were shot near their homes, the former in late November and the latter in late October. And two *Al-Sharqiya* journalists, reporter Mohamed Karim Al-Badrani and cameraman Mohamed Al-Ghanem, were gunned down while out reporting in central Mosul in early October. Impunity reigns. No one has been arrested for these murders. Instead of doing what is necessary to protect journalists, the authorities compound their problems by prosecuting them in connection with their reporting.

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

“Brotherization” of Egypt’s media under Morsi

Hosni Mubarak’s removal in February 2011 raised hopes of an improvement in respect for fundamental freedoms but they were quickly dashed after a Muslim Brotherhood government headed by Mohamed Morsi was installed in the summer of 2012.

President Morsi had a decree adopted in November 2012 that gave him special powers but backtracked in the face of an outcry. The constitution that was approved by referendum the following month lacked sufficient safeguards for freedom of expression. It did not guarantee the independence of the state-owned media and, in practice, opened the way for the Islamization of media legislation.

As soon as the Muslim Brotherhood took office, it began asserting its control over the state media. In August 2012, Morsi got the upper chamber to appoint Muslim Brotherhood supporters to run the state-owned newspapers. These appointments had a big effect on their editorial policies. At the same time, there was a big increase in lawsuits and physical attacks against journalists.

“Sisification” of Egypt’s media under Gen. Sisi

Since Morsi’s removal by the army under Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the new authorities have systematically targeted foreign and Egyptian media affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood – which has again been banned – or regarded as sympathetic to it. Five journalists were killed and at least 80 were arbitrarily detained by police or demonstrators – pro-army or pro-Morsi – in the second half of 2013. Arbitrary arrest and torture is now common. An anti-Brotherhood witchhunt is under way that targets not only Egyptian journalists but also their Turkish, Palestinian or Syrian colleagues. This persecution contrasts with the position taking by the committee that is drafting a new constitution, which has adopted an article banning the detention of journalists.

Morocco’s anti-terrorism pretext

Morocco, which has had a moderate Islamist-led coalition government since November 2011, has yet to carry out the constitutional reforms promised after a referendum in July 2011. The leading media development in 2013 was the September arrest of Ali Anouzla, the editor of the Arabic-language version of the news website *Lakome*, for posting a link to an article in the Spanish daily *El País*, which in turn had a link to a video attributed to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Released after five weeks in “preventive detention,” Anouzla continues to face a possible sentence of 10 to 30 years in prison on charges of providing “material assistance” to a terrorist organization and “defending terrorist crimes.” The case is indicative of a disturbing readiness on the part of the authorities to view journalistic work as inciting terrorism.

Tunisia: state media independence blocked

The Islamist party Ennahda’s victory in Tunisia’s first free elections has not ended the tradition of close government control of the state-owned media. Perpetuating deposed President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali’s methods, the Ennahda-led government has been making and breaking careers at the head of the state radio and TV stations. The hopes of media freedom defenders were raised when the appointment of members of the Independent High Authority for Broadcasting Communication (HAICA) was announced on 3 May but they dashed again when another wave of senior appointments in the state broadcast media were quickly unveiled in August. Three years after Ben Ali’s removal, authoritarian methods continue to short-circuit reform attempts and block state media independence.

ARABIAN PENINSULA: PRIORITIZING NEWS CONTROL

Fearing the spread of the Arab Spring, the countries of the Arabian Peninsula have reinforced surveillance and control of the media, starting with the Internet, which has come to be a place where people express themselves with a freedom not found in the traditional media. As a result, the cyber-police of the Persian Gulf monarchies are on the lookout for any online article, post or tweet critical of government policy.

In the **United Arab Emirates**, any support for the Muslim Brotherhood is crushed. Long jail sentences were passed on two netizens who tweeted about the trial of 94 Emiratis accused of membership of Al-Islah, a local party with links to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood. The authorities had banned observers and foreign reporters from the courtroom, leaving carefully selected local reporters to cover the trial. It will probably be the same for the trial of 20 Egyptians and 10 Emiratis accused of links with the Muslim Brotherhood and trying to overthrow the government, a trial that opened in November. The authorities will almost certainly scrutinize Twitter closely and punish anyone daring to violate the code of silence.

Saudi Arabia, which is on the Reporters Without Borders list of “Enemies of the Internet,” does not lag far behind. The kingdom is relentless in its censorship of the Saudi media and the Internet, and jails netizens without compunction. In 2013, the censors paid particular attention to calls for women to be allowed to drive, a popular topic online that even received a mention in some of the traditional media. *Asharq al-Awsat* columnist Tariq al-Mubarak was arrested in October on various grounds including a column criticizing the ban on women drivers.

The Saudi authorities are even stricter on matters concerning religion. In July, a sentence of seven years in prison and 600 lashes was passed on Raef Badawi, the founder of the now censored *Saudi Liberals* website, who had posted an article about St. Valentine that allegedly denigrated the religious police. The charges brought against him after his arrest in June 2012 initially included “apostasy” (abandoning one’s religious beliefs), but it was finally dropped.

In **Kuwait**, the authorities are cracking down on two sensitive subjects – the emir and religion. Two citizen-journalists, Badr al-Rashidi and Ourance al-Rashidi, were given long jail sentences for “insulting” the emir. They eventually received a royal pardon but, without reform of the law, there could be more convictions and there is no guarantee that the emir will be so benevolent with the next victims. A draconian bill was considered and then abandoned in April. It would have allowed the authorities to impose fines of up to 800,000 euros for criticizing the emir or the crown prince, and sentences of up to 10 years in prison for “insulting God, the Prophets of Islam, or the Prophet Mohamed’s wives or companions.”

In **Oman**, the sultan continues to be one of the main taboos. Anyone criticizing him is liable to feel the regime’s wrath. Netizens have been given long jail terms although some have subsequently been pardoned.

Bahrain, kingdom of disinformation

Ever since the start of a popular uprising in February 2011, the Bahraini monarchy has been a past master in the art of manipulating coverage of the street protests and the ensuing crackdown. In its efforts to protect Bahrain’s image, it has also cleverly exploited the reticence of western government to condemn it, persuading them to accept its insincere promises and superficial reforms.

As a result, Manama was designated 2012 capital of Arab culture and 2013 capital of Arab tourism. Bahrain’s latest PR coup was to persuade the Arab League to let it host the Arab Court of Human Rights, although some of its jails are overflowing with prisoners of conscience.