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Submission by: Front Line Defenders – the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders

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Front Line Defenders (www.frontlinedefenders.org) is an international NGO based in Ireland with special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). Founded in 2001, Front Line Defenders has particular expertise on the issue of security and protection of human rights defenders and works to promote the implementation of the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders) adopted by General Assembly resolution 53/144 of 9 December 1998.

The following submission has been prepared by Front Line Defenders based on research carried out by this organisation and information received from independent human rights defenders in Jordan from November 2018 to July 2023.

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Introduction

1. This submission draws attention to the difficult situation of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Jordan. Grassroots protests in Jordan since the Arab Spring in 2011, have reflected growing discontent with government corruption and wealth inequality in the country, among other issues. In response, the Jordanian authorities have chosen to continuously intimidate and curtail the freedoms of those who dissent.
2. Thus, Jordanian activists, journalists and HRDs work in an increasingly hostile environment. In 2021, Civicus downgraded its [rating](#) of Jordan's civic space from "obstructed " to "repressed." Freedom House's rates Jordan as "Not Free" in its [Global Freedom Score](#) and "Partly Free" in its [Internet Freedom Score](#).
3. Jordan's civic space has been further closing since 2019, with limitation and criminalisation of human right work, criminalisation of freedom of expression, prohibition of demonstrations, arrest of protestors, and the use of administrative detention. The authorities have exponentially increased their surveillance of activists, journalists and HRDs, and are no longer shy about arbitrarily arresting them.
4. During its last UPR cycle, Jordan received two recommendations on ensuring protection for HRDs and journalists. Although Jordan accepted both of these recommendations, the situation of HRDs has clearly deteriorated since the last UPR.

Restrictions on human right organisations in Jordan

5. In October 2015, Jordan's council of ministers implemented a [foreign funding control mechanism](#). Under this system, non governmental organisations (NGOs) are required to submit foreign funding approval requests to the Social Development Ministry, provide extensive information about projects to be supported by foreign funding and demonstrate how it accords with Jordan's national development goals. Authorities are not required to provide any justification to reject such funding.
6. The Jordanian authorities have argued that this mechanism helps them avoid duplication, but it effectively gives them the ability to control which initiatives and projects are pursued. This [prevents](#) NGOs from functioning freely and imposes disproportionate government control.
7. According to civil society organisations approvals can take months, with several different ministries involved. If any government body in the approval chain is against the project, the funding is rejected.
8. In January 2020, Jordan introduced another new mechanism and a specialised committee for foreign financing, which aimed to shorten the waiting time from several months to 30 days.
9. The committee has in practice done little to ease the *de facto* restrictions and delays. On the contrary, authorities have increasingly rejected certain human rights projects and paralysed the work of certain organisations by making it difficult for them to pay salaries.
10. As a response to these barriers and interferences, some NGOs have started to register their structures as private 'for-profit' companies rather than as non profit associations. More recently and because of new threats and closing civic space, a number of organisations, whose names we cannot disclose for security reasons, are trying to register outside the country as a way to protect themselves. This worrying trend shows that the authorities see NGOs as enemies that need to be silenced rather than as partners in improving the country's human rights situation.

'Hiraki' Human Rights Defenders in Jordan

11. The latest wave of protests driven by the Hirak movement took place in Jordan in late 2022 and early 2023 in response to increased fuel prices and the dire economic situation.¹ The Hirak movement is a popular social justice protest movement in Jordan advocating for reform and improved human rights of the Jordanian people. The Jordanian authorities have regularly arrested and detained Hiraki

¹ Protests in 2011 as part of the Arab Spring were driven partly by the Hirak, groups of youth activists not connected with traditional centers of political power in Jordan. Hiraki protests started again in June 2018 after the government introduced a plan to increase taxes and reduce subsidies, in line with the International Monetary Fund's guidelines. As a response to the general strike and protests in the Fourth Circle area of Amman called by over 30 trade unions, the government temporarily withdrew the bill. The bill was re-introduced in September 2018 with minor changes, and published in the Official Gazette in December 2018. Ensuing protests [continued](#) into 2019.

activists and HRDs and placed restrictions on their right to work and travel in order to silence all forms of dissent.

12. In November and December 2022, the authorities [arrested](#) two ‘Hiraki’ members and activists Sabry Al-Mashaala, and Sufyan Al-Khraisat, and three ‘Hiraki’ HRDs, Alaa Malkawy, Omar Abo Rasah, Abd Al-Tawahiya. Members of the Hirak’s Executive Office, Sufian Al-Tal, Omar Abo Rasah, Abd Al-Tawahiya were reportedly arrested in connection with plans to issue a response criticising the King’s speech in front of the parliament in late 2022. Their cases continue to be heard before the State Security Court on charges of "incitement against the regime" and “disturbing the public order”. All of the Hirak’s 16 Executive Office members are either imprisoned or released on bail.
13. Similar to the case of other Hirak activists, HRDs Omar Abo Rasah and Abd Al-Tawahiya have been moved to prisons in Tafilah and Karak respectively, far away from their families and lawyers. This makes it difficult for the detained HRDs’ lawyers to provide effective representation and for the detainees to receive support from their families.
14. In early 2023, lawyers and HRDs Ali Barizat, Jamal Jeet and Bishr Al- Khatib were arrested in relation to social media posts about protests in southern Jordan. They were released on bail² based on charges under the Penal Code and the Cyber Crime Law.
15. The three lawyers are part of a group called the National Forum for Defending Freedoms which voluntarily represents Hiraki activists, HRDs and prisoners of conscience. Most of the group’s members have been arrested, summoned, and threatened by the General Intelligence Department, and experienced surveillance (see below).
16. In 2022, the Jordanian government implemented [travel and work bans](#) against Hiraki HRDs. On 31 August 2022, HRDs [Ahmed Al-Neimat](#) and [Abdulrahman Shdaifat](#) were prevented from travelling from Jordan to Turkey without prior notification. Abdulrahman Shdaifat and Ahmed Al-Neimat have also faced restrictions since 2016 and 2017, violating their right to work and seek employment.
17. February and March 2022 saw a crackdown on activists to prevent potential protests with mass arrests and detention of Hiraki activists and HRDs. Under the Crime Prevention Law, governors in Jordan have the authority to arrest individuals they deem "may" commit a crime. Detainees were charged with “spreading false news” and “inciting strife.”

Crackdown on Union Freedom

18. Since 2019, the Jordanian authorities have engaged in an ongoing campaign of retaliation against the [Jordanian Teachers Syndicate \(JTS\)](#) and its members, who protest for improved wages and working conditions. This campaign has taken various forms, including the closure of the Syndicate, prosecutions of members of the Syndicate’s board, mass arrests, forced retirement of activist teachers, surveillance, and the use of “administrative detention” and other “preventative measures” to block protests.
19. In September 2019, the JTS went on [strike](#) for higher wages and improved working conditions. The government [agreed](#) a pay increase in addition to other demands, however, in April 2020, the government cancelled the pay increase citing the COVID-19 pandemic. The JTS protested against the decision, leading to increased retaliation from the government, including lawsuits against board members and an investigation aimed at dissolving and permanently closing the Syndicate. When the JTS planned a new wave of protests in July 2020, the government raided and closed the Syndicate’s headquarters, branches, and training academy and its 13 board members were arrested and detained for a month.
20. Without following due process, the Amman Prosecutor General extra-judicially³ ordered a two-year closure of the JTS along with the suspension of its board over criminal charges, and issued a comprehensive gag order preventing public discussion of the case.

² Ali Barizat was arrested during his visit to the detained HRD Sabry Al-Mashaala on 2 January 2023, and released on an exorbitant bail of JD 50,000 (Approx EUR 64,500) on 3 January 2023. Jamal Jeet was summoned for investigation, detained for four days, and also released on bail. The security forces arrested Bishr Al-Khatib from his house and released him in the evening of the next day.

³ Under Jordanian law, neither the Attorney General nor another public prosecutor is empowered to make judicial orders. The 2011 Jordan Teachers Syndicate Law states that the group’s board can only be dissolved by a vote of two-thirds of the members of its central committee or by judicial order.

21. Nevertheless, teachers protested again in July 2020. Security forces used excessive force against protesters and arrested [around 1000 teachers](#). The teachers, some of whom went on a hunger strike, were released after spending about a month in prison. On 31 December 2020, the court dissolved the JTS and ruled to sentence all JTS board members to one year in prison.
22. In August 2020, the UN human rights spokesman Rupert Colville [called](#) the actions against the JTS “emblematic of a growing pattern of suppression of public freedoms and the restriction of civic and democratic space by the Jordanian government, including against labour rights activists, HRDs, journalists and those who have peacefully criticised the government”.
23. In March 2022, more than [150 activists](#) and human rights defenders, including unionised JTS teachers, board members, and other groups, were arrested ahead of and during a sit-in in front of the Ministry of Education. The sit-in aimed to protest the restrictions placed by the government on the JTS and its members since 2020. While all those arrested were released within a few hours, this is an example of a tactic being used by the Jordanian authorities to prevent protests.
24. On 26 June 2022, the Amman Court of First Instance (acting as an appeals court) issued a severely delayed final [decision](#) to reopen the JTS. The decision approved the dissolution of the Syndicate's board while allowing the Syndicate to continue operating, and required elections for a new board. Legally⁴, in the event of dissolution, the Minister of Education is obligated to establish an interim committee to manage the Teachers' Syndicate and facilitate the election of a new board within six months. Over [one year](#) after the June 2022 decision, the Jordanian authorities have not taken any steps to reopen the Syndicate, while the government's retaliation against members of the JTS continues.

Crackdown on the National Center for Human Rights

25. The Jordanian National Centre for Human Rights (NCHR) was established in 2002 and granted 'A-status' accreditation in 2006 from the peer review process of the International Coordinating Committee of NHRIs. Since its creation, the NCHR has published many reports highlighting human rights violations in Jordan, including a 2020 report which commented on the government's use of detention to restrict freedom of expression.
26. On 18 August 2022, the public prosecutor charged the general commissioner of the National Council of Human Rights (NCHR) Ala'a Al Armouti, and three of his colleagues Rasha Nikai, Nisreen Zraeqat, and Amani Hassouneh with [criminal offences](#) related to “abuse of power, embezzlement, negligence, and waste of public funds.” The crackdown on the NCHR staff came as a result of the council speaking more strongly about growing repression in the country and denouncing ongoing arrests of peaceful protestors, hiraki activists, and JTS members. At the time of writing, the court cases against all NCHR staff are ongoing, the government has placed travel bans on them, frozen their assets, and barred them from working.

Freedom of Expression

27. Over 13 laws and regulations are being employed to suppress dissent, summon, arrest, prosecute and push journalists to self-censorship. Government agencies issue verbal warnings, and the Public Prosecutor imposes bans on reporting, leading to imprisonment or fines for violators. HRD and journalist Ahmad Hasan Al Zoubi's prolonged court procedures, beginning in May 2021, over a critical article on the security forces, exemplify the restrictions and harassment faced which include travel bans, website restrictions, and arrests based on ambiguous laws. In 2022 and 2023, independent media outlets experienced arbitrary taxes and fees, [further prosecutions](#) and closure of sites.

Surveillance

28. In January 2022, Front Line Defenders [published a report](#) finding that the phone of [Hala Ahed Deeb](#), a Jordanian lawyer and woman human rights defender, was infected with Pegasus surveillance

⁴ Per Article 27 of the 2011 Teachers' Syndicate Law Number 14.

technology in March of 2021. Hala Deeb is one of Front Line defenders laureate for the [2023 Award for HRDs at Risk](#). After checking more than 60 additional mobile phones, Front Line Defenders and Citizen Lab [found](#) that phones belonging to four other Jordanian HRDs, lawyers and journalists were hacked with NSO Group's Pegasus spyware between August 2019 and December 2021.

29. Surveillance technologies are used to target HRDs to infiltrate their networks, get access to their information and contacts, and dissuade them from continuing their human rights work. An ongoing research project led by local civil society members is uncovering the extent of spyware use against HRDs in Jordan. At the time of writing, the research has found 35 additional cases of Pegasus use in Jordan; totalling 40 documented Pegasus cases between 2019 and 2023, all targeting civil society in Jordan. The prevalence of surveillance technology has significantly contributed to a chilling effect on civil society in the country. HRDs are surveilled and silenced. Affected HRDs have exhibited post-traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms as a result of surveillance against them or their colleagues. Targeted surveillance has uniquely violent effects on women human rights defenders, as authorities exploit gendered, political and social power structures to defame, blackmail, and dox them, including by publishing private conversations and intimate photos taken from their phones.
30. National Forum for Defending Freedoms (NFDF) lawyers and journalists have particularly been targeted with surveillance. Of the 6 NFDF lawyers whose devices were tested, 5 were found to have been targeted with Pegasus, 1 attack was unsuccessful, 2 successful and 2 are still under analysis. A total of 20 journalists in Jordan have been found to be targeted with Pegasus spyware. Many of these journalists belong to the same groups and organizations.

Censorship

31. In addition to targeted surveillance of HRDs, the Jordanian authorities are limiting public access and use of online spaces. Following the protests in the south of Jordan against rising prices, the government proceeded to [censor TikTok](#) in December 2022 under the guise that the application is being misused by some and is "inciting violence and disorder." Censorship is commonly used by the state to control any form of organizing and limit public demonstrations, targeting any media coverage of human rights violations.
32. In late June 2023, satirical news site AlHudood was also [blocked](#) in Jordan following a post mocking the royal wedding in the context of deepening poverty in the country.
33. The Jordanian state continues to block access to virtual private networks (VPNs) and proxies and gag orders covering online and print media are routinely issued to limit the coverage of human rights violations.

State -sponsored attacks against LGBTQI+ HRDs and feminist groups and activists in Jordan

34. Since the beginning of 2023, the General Intelligence Directorate (GID) has questioned and interrogated many LGBTQI+ HRDs and feminists who lead local collectives and organisations. The GID has threatened to arrest and detain the HRDs, forcing some of them to relocate. The names of these HRDs cannot be stated for security reasons. Five such organizations have faced state persecution since January 2023.
35. Some organizations were forced to share every detail of grants they received and the personal information of every employee and beneficiary of the programs. The GID has asked some employees to resign from their positions within these organisations and ordered that their bank accounts be frozen. This has forced the organisations to close their structures and end their operations.
36. In mid-June 2023, thousands of social media users incited a hateful smear and defamation campaign against woman human rights defender Hala Ahed, after it was announced that she would give a training on feminist principles. The attack seemed to be coordinated by organized groups, and possibly state-sponsored. This campaign is a reprisal against the woman human rights defender's work, her position against the death penalty and work to advocate more just and equal provisions under the family law. Many called for her nationality to be revoked and for her assassination.

Recommendations

37. The Jordanian government should prioritise the protection of HRDs, and immediately and unconditionally:
- a) Cease the criminalisation of HRDs for their peaceful campaigns for justice and reform and ensure the right to peacefully assemble and protest;
 - b) Ensure an enabling environment for civil society and HRDs;
 - c) Amend and remove legal provisions which are used to criminalize HRDs, including articles in the Crime Prevention, Anti-Terrorism and Cybercrimes laws.
 - d) Repeal the foreign funding control mechanisms and ensure all civil society organisations, trade unions and HRDs are permitted to work freely;
 - e) Immediately and unconditionally release all HRDs including Sabry Al-Mashaala, Omar Abo Rasah, Abd Al-Tawahiya, Majed al Sharari and drop all charges against them;
 - f) Quash the travel ban and the work bans against HRDs Abdulrahman Shdaifat and Ahmed Al-Neimat and other defenders;
 - g) Allow elections to reinstate a board for the JTS, and allow the JTS to continue its work; Ensure that teachers are assured their right to peaceful assembly, association, expression, and protected from reprisals, threats and intimidation;
 - h) Cease all interferences in the work of the NCHR and ensure its independence;
 - i) Cease and denounce using all surveillance technologies against HRDs and journalists;
 - j) Cease all censorship of websites and applications which is used to curtail the work of HRDs;
 - k) Cease judicial and operational harassment of LGBTQI+ and feminist organisations and HRDs.