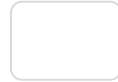


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Lebanon: End use of defamation laws to target journalists and critics

The Lebanese authorities must stop using criminal defamation laws as a weapon to harass, intimidate and attack journalists and critics who report on allegations of corruption in the country, Amnesty International said today on World Press Freedom Day.

Responding to an information request by Amnesty International, the General Directorate of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) revealed that the Cybercrimes Bureau investigated 1,684 insult and defamation cases between January 2019 and March 2024. The number of investigations decreased in 2021 and 2022 but rose again in 2023 to 321 cases, including 35 insult complaints – the highest number of insult cases investigated since 2019.

The ISF also confirmed to Amnesty International that they ask individuals to remove contentious content or sign non-repetition pledges “under judicial oversight”, undermining due process and the right to freedom of expression.

“The sheer number of individuals summoned for investigation on speech-related charges paints a bleak picture for the right to freedom of expression and media freedom in Lebanon. It is clear that authorities are shamefully resorting to misusing the justice system as a tool of harassment and intimidation against journalists, perpetuating the entrenched culture of impunity,” said Aya Majzoub, Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa.

“The Lebanese authorities must uphold their international human rights obligations and immediately end the prosecution of people and

journalists for merely expressing their opinions, reporting on allegations of corruption or allegedly offending officials with their criticism. Public prosecutors and security agencies should end the abominable show of summoning people for investigations simply for exercising their right to freedom of expression. It is also time for the parliament to repeal laws that criminalize insult and defamation and adopt a media law that meets international human rights standards.”

In 2019, the ISF’s Cybercrimes Bureau investigated 414 insult and defamation complaints. The number increased to 434 cases in 2020. This spike may be connected to the onset of the economic crisis in Lebanon and nationwide anti-government demonstrations that began in October 2019.

2021 and 2022 saw a decrease in the number of insult and defamation complaints referred to the Cybercrimes Bureau with the Bureau investigating 286 and 211 cases respectively. The number of cases increased again in 2023 with the Bureau investigating a total of 321 cases, including 35 insult complaints. The Bureau had investigated 18 defamation cases in 2024 by March.

The statistics provided by the ISF do not represent all the insult and defamation investigations in the country, as other security agencies, including the General Security’s Information Branch, State Security, and Military Intelligence, also investigate such complaints. While most of these cases never reach trial, these investigations by security agencies, the unlawful pledges, and the threat of criminal trials are themselves forms of harassment and intimidation that have a chilling effect on the right to freedom of expression and media freedom.

‘Malicious charges’

In 2024, Amnesty International documented the cases of four individuals, including three journalists, who were summoned over their work by high-ranking officials. The criminal complaints against them seem retaliatory, targeting speech protected under international human rights law, rather than addressing actual harm caused. In three instances, the summoned parties were not informed of the allegations prior to their hearings, violating their due process rights. Two individuals remain uncertain if charges against them have been dropped.

On 18 January 2024, journalist Riad Tawk was summoned for questioning by the ISF’s Criminal Investigations Office in response to an online video in which he criticized Public Prosecutor Sabbouh Sleiman for suspending an arrest warrant against former Public Works Minister, Youssef Fenianos, who had been charged with homicide and criminal negligence related to the Beirut blast investigation.

During the hearing, Sabbouh Sleiman, the claimant in the defamation case, entered the room and attempted to participate in Tawk's questioning, creating a conflict of interest.

In a separate case, a criminal court summoned Gina al-Chammas, president of Lebanon Certified Anti-Corruption Managers, for a hearing on 16 January 2024 without detailing the reasons, violating her due process rights. At the hearing, her lawyer learned the summons was due to a defamation complaint by the caretaker prime minister, Najib Mikati, in response to corruption allegations she made against him in the media.

The case is ongoing. Last year, Gina al-Chammas faced another defamation lawsuit from former minister and parliamentarian, Nouhad al-Machnouk, also over corruption allegations.

"The prosecution is always very quick in responding to defamation complaints filed by powerful individuals against me, but they are never prompt with investigating the corruption claims. They did not act as swiftly when I filed a complaint against a powerful individual who threatened me in a live radio interview last year," she told Amnesty International.

Also in January 2024, authorities filed a lawsuit against Lebanese TV channel LBCI. They requested the suspension of weekly TV sitcom "Marhaba Dawle" for "denigrating the Lebanese state and its institutions" by "insulting national symbols, the Lebanese flag and the national anthem". The judge dismissed the case, which was then referred to a criminal court. In March 2024, the ISF's Intelligence branch summoned Firas Hatoum, the producer of the show, who learned that the new case is in relation to the use of army uniforms and [fake] weapons in the show, based on article 144 of the Military Code of Justice that criminalizes "identity theft". Hatoum's lawyer has since requested that the case be referred to the Publications Court.

"Producers in the filming industry have always used uniforms and dummy weapons in shows for acting purposes and with no objection from the authorities. I do believe that article 144 does not apply to TV shows, but when the authorities selectively initiate such malicious charges, it becomes obvious that they are not enforcing the law, they are merely suppressing freedom of expression," Firas Hatoum told Amnesty International.

On 14 March 2024, the ISF summoned Oussama al-Qadri, journalist and editor in chief of digital news platform Manashir, for allegedly "insulting the judiciary" in an article about a lawsuit involving a politician. Oussama al-Qadri has argued that such questioning should be under the jurisdiction of the Publications Court. He has not yet received an update on the status of the case.

"These cases starkly illustrate how the judiciary is wielded as a tool to protect the powerful, revealing a troubling pattern of selective prosecutions and judicial bias. Instead of serving the public interest, our courts are being used to settle political scores, perpetuating a cycle where only those with influence are shielded, while voices of dissent are systematically silenced," said Aya Majzoub.

Background

Lebanon's defamation provisions, which carry criminal penalties of up to three years in prison, fail to meet international human rights standards and unduly restrict the right to freedom of expression.

In August 2023, Amnesty International launched a campaign [#MyOpinionIsNotACrime](#) calling on the Lebanese authorities to abolish articles in the Penal Code, the Publications Law and the Military Code of Justice that criminalize insults and to replace defamation articles with new civil provisions.

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